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MANHUNT

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JANUARY, 1964

50 CENTS

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MANHUNT VOLUME 12, NUMBER 1, January, 1964. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions, \$3.00 for 6 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$4.00 (in U.S. Funds) for 6 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017 Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at New York, N. Y., and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1964 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

The heat was on. Nobody would touch him. So he ran . . . far and fast. And in the end he decided he would have been better off dead.

"HOT"

BY
DON LOWRY

YOU'RE a good kid—solid and you've a lot of guts, Tommy," Frank Nita smiled across the desk in his swank resort office, "but we can't help you. We have troubles of our own with the law and using, aiding or sheltering a lamster would only bring us more of the kind of heat we're trying to avoid."

It was the second brushoff for me in a week. I'd stopped in to see Manny Korfu on the Mannheim Strip in Chicago and he wouldn't even let me check in at one of his suburban motels.

"You guys are all the same, Frank," I complained. "In Atlanta we were cell buddies when you and Manny were shaking those income tax raps. Now you're back in the rackets and you don't know me. I should . . ."

"You should do what I tell you,

"HOT"



Tommy," Frank Nita snarled as he interrupted me. "Get out of the country. I can send you to some friends in Mexico who'll be able to use you. Here—you'd only bring heat on us. We've enough now from Uncle Whiskers. I got nothing for you, Tommy."

"Can't you use a hit man?" I asked. "You import torpedoes from New York, Detroit and even from Dallas. Can't you use a juice man? You people control the loan shark rackets in this town? You say you know I'm solid. How many other people working for you right now are you sure of?"

"We can't use a hit man or a juice man that's on the FBI's Top Ten hit parade. If you'd come to see me when you sprung from Atlanta, Tommy, I might have been able to set you up some place along the line. You wanted to make a big hit. So you heisted a bank and now you have all the law in the country on your trail. Your picture's in newspapers, magazines and on TV. Just last Saturday, I heard a rundown about you on the radio. You can't last sixty days in this country and when you fall you're not going to take any of us with you. Wouldn't Uncle Whiskers love to nail me on a harboring charge! If you're short of dough, I'll help you. Other than that, Tommy, I can't touch you. Keep away from me and keep going.. Don't telephone and don't come back. If you can make it to Tijuana, get in

touch with Carlos Hernandez. Anybody along Avenida de Revolution can tell you where to find him. I own a piece of a spot at Rosarito Beach and he looks after things down there for me. Tell him to call me. He'll know how to get in touch. One last tip, Tommy—if you make it down there, don't come back."

I took the bills Frank Nita tossed on the desk and walked out without thanking him. I'd been on the run for seven months and it had taken me that long to go through my end of the bank score—13 grand. Everything had a double price for a lamster. I'd changed cars three times. I'd changed hotels every day. I'd changed cities two or three times a week. I'd done nothing but run—and run out of money.

I spotted an FBI agent talking to the desk clerk at the Hotel President in Uptown Manhattan and cut out of the lobby without going back for my luggage. I couldn't take a chance that he had been talking about me.

I paid a Newark radio shop operator five hundred to put in a car radio on which I could pick up police calls. Before I crossed the New Jersey line, I picked up a description of my car and myself and had to abandon the car and move on by bus. I thought of going back to get the stool pigeon radio shop rat but realized the law would probably be waiting for me there.

I bought a second hand sedan in

Washington, D.C. and saw its license listed on a dash board memo pad of a Baltimore police cruiser the next day. I didn't know if it got on the hot list because some of the new bills were listed as having come from the bank heist or if the license had been listed before I bought the sedan. Again, I couldn't take a chance and left it on a Baltimore lot when I flew to New Orleans.

I watched the States-Item for a late model car advertised for sale by a private owner and made sure no hot bills were used when I paid for it. In Houston, I paid a connection a grand for a blurred photostat copy of the current FBI report in circulation on me. Stamped in one inch letters diagonally across its first page was the word, SPECIAL. At that time I wasn't on the top ten list but, from what I read, I knew I soon would be. Part of my modus operandi included traveling by car from city to city and I had to dump the New Orleans car and avoid highways from then on.

The FBI had meticulously listed habits that even I had never noticed. In its investigation, agents must have talked with a lot of people who knew me. It stated my favorite drink was bourbon and Seven Up. I changed to gin. It revealed my liking for dice tables and I never walked into another gambling joint. It accurately stated I habitually wore brown suits and shoes, but never wore a hat. I dis-

carded my wardrobe and began to wear gray flannels and sports jackets—with a hat. It showed my preference for city hotels. I switched to motels. It gave the prescription for my bifocal glasses. I threw them away. From haircut to hats and bar preferences to barflies, the report pegged me to the point. I tried to change every habit attributed to me. Some former "friends" and relatives had sung to the tune played by the FBI and prison dossiers had been thoroughly prepared, listing my friends and relatives. I realized there were a lot of people on whom I could never call again.

I took a bus to Little Rock and spent a couple days waiting for a tailor to deliver clothes. When my picture appeared in the *Gazette*, I left without picking up the clothes. I felt the Arkansas city was too small for me with my mug in its paper. At the bus station a drunk occupied the attention of two detectives that might have spotted me and I slipped past them in the confusion.

I left the bus in Oklahoma City before it reached the downtown station and paid a motel operator in advance as I explained my car had broken down. While waiting for off-the-rack clothes to be altered I walked into the Post Office and casually read the flyer on Thomas Canto, wanted for bank robbery and for flight to avoid lawful prosecution. I got a train out that night for St. Louis.

In St. Louis, I rented an apartment a block from the Bolivar Strip and knew I'd only get a few days or a week's use of it in return for the month's rent. But I had to get a rest. I didn't. In the Blue Moon on the strip, I picked up a dancer from one of the strip joints that liked to be entertained after her act of entertaining others. We lived it up for two weeks and parted when she argued possessively and jealously.

"Why can't you come down to watch my acts? You running with some other girl when I'm working, Tommy?"

I explained I didn't want to go into the club where she was dancing because I didn't get along with one of its bartenders. I didn't tell her I knew it was a hangout for local hoodlums which meant the law and stool pigeons would also hang out there.

"What's his name," she insisted. "I'll get him fired."

I took a cab to East St. Louis and caught a Chicago-bound bus at a suburban stop, re-digesting what I had already learned that a lamster has no lovelife—for long.

When I left Frank Nita's Lake Michigan resort, I took a cab back to Manny Korfu's spot on Mannheim Road. I planned to make one more try to tie in with the Chicago mobs.

"You might be able to find Mr. Korfu at André's down in the three thousand block," the desk clerk at

the motel told me when I explained it was important and used the nickname, "Mister Kantor," one used only by insiders close to Manny Korfu.

I walked into the lounge at André's and couldn't find Manny in the midnight crowd. At a corner table I nursed a drink, watching for him. I caught the eye of Lydia, one of the hostesses I'd met when there before.

"Manny around tonight, Lydia?" I asked.

"I'll ask," she replied diplomatically without pausing to talk.

I could feel the heat in the lounge and was on the verge of leaving when she returned to my table.

"Mister Korfu asks if you'll meet him out on the parking lot—blue Cadillac in the far corner."

I left a bill on the table and walked slowly through the lounge and down the driveway to the parking lot. I moved between a row of cars and had spotted the blue convertible when I saw a movement ahead of me. I circled behind the next car and took a .38 from my pocket. My guess was right. A goon was standing with blackjack-in-hand waiting for me.

"Don't raise your voice and drop that sap," I whispered as I pressed the .38 into his back.

He dropped it.

"Give me some answers—real quick—or you get it, right here," I shot at him in a low voice. "Who sent you?"

He didn't have an opportunity to answer. I felt the pressure of a hard, small object in my own back and heard the voice of Manny Korfu.

"I did, Tommy. Drop that piece and put your hands on the roof of that car," Manny ordered. "And you," he told the embarrassed blackjack goon, "get the hell out of here and don't come back."

Manny frisked me and kicked my legs back and apart before he bent down to pick up my .38.

"Only the fact that you out-smarted that punk saved you from a going-over, Tommy," Manny Korfu said when we reached his car. "Get in," he ordered as he nodded to two other men in the next car.

As we pulled out of the lot I looked back to see the other car with its two men following us.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Two of my boys who were part of your welcoming committee, Tommy," Manny answered. "You got out of the lounge too fast for them or you would have to have taken all three of them. You're lucky you were up against only one."

"I wanted to see you, Manny," I shrugged. "You give an old friend a poor welcome."

"You saw Frank Nita this afternoon and he gave you a grand to get out of town. You don't play games with us," Manny Korfu snarled at me.

"By the way that boy of your muscle mob performed back there

at André's, Manny, you can use me."

"The only goddam way we can use you is to get a one-way ticket to Leavenworth or Atlanta," Manny stormed. "I thought Frank spelled it out to you. We don't want you around. Sure, we were good friends in Atlanta. That's all the more reason why you should keep the hell away from us. You know the score. You bring heat with you. You talk about what friends should do for each other! What kind of a friend are you—trying to put us in jail? You run up and down Mannheim Road like you're a visiting fireman. We got so much heat out here now that the law is taking pictures of everyone that pulls into our motels—for action or for a romp on the sheets. You get your picture taken pulling into one of my spots and I'll be held on a harboring charge whether they nail you or not."

Manny Korfu braked his car suddenly and ran down the ramp of an apartment building's garage, followed by the tailing sedan with his two men.

"What's here?" I asked.

"It's no hot-sheet motel, Tommy," he shot back at me. "We're finished playing hide and seek with you. You want to work for us. I've got you a job the punk who was supposed to work you over was supposed to do. And I've got the helpers to back you up—or work on you—if you miss."

He switched off his lights and lit a cigar. The lights of the sedan that had followed us into the basement garage glowed and faded out. Manny just sat. It was quiet and the only light was from a dim series of blue guide lights along the wall leading to a door into the apartment building. Manny flicked on the dash light and looked at the clock. He turned it off and smoked his cigar.

"In half an hour," Manny spoke in a lowered voice, "Phil Scarno will drive down that ramp. He's nominated for a hit and you're the hit man. You can't get him in his car. It has bullet-proof glass and an armored body. When he parks here, he has some kind of gaff in his car which he uses to signal his apartment. One of his boys comes down through that door, which leads to an elevator, and checks out the basement and every car in it. Then and only then will Phil get out of his car. You get his boy when he walks out of the elevator door. And you'll have to get him before he gets you. Then you get Phil with this."

From a compartment opening on the top of his dash he removed a four-by-six inch rectangular package.

"Phil Scarno will hit the floor of his car as soon as you let go at his boy," Manny explained. "He'll depend on his armored car for protection. This thing is set to go off in sixty seconds, after which it will

blow this whole basement garage to hell and gone. If you don't make it back up that ramp in sixty seconds you'll blow with it. You want to work for us—you got yourself a job, Tommy. You get paid now—three grand in cash."

"He slapped a package of bills into my lap and looked at the dash clock again."

"I want to be back at André's when the fireworks starts. I'll be number one on the pickup list when Scarno gets it and I intend to have a roomful of witnesses that I'm quietly sipping a nightcap fifteen minutes from now. Just in case you have any ideas of running out on this play, Tommy," Manny Korfu continued, "my two boys will be parked at the head of the ramp. Make it on time—after the bomb goes off—and they'll pick you up and put you on a private plane at O'Hare. It will put you down in Phoenix from where you can head to any place except the State of Illinois. If you try to get up that ramp before you make this double hit, they'll roll you back down filled with slugs. If you're slow getting out of this basement garage, you'll go to hell with Phil Scarno. Got it?"

"I got it, Manny," I replied, "but I haven't got any alternative."

"You had your alternative when you walked out of Frank Nita's place with good advice," he snapped at me. "Only capricious chance in the form of that stupid

muscleman of mine back at André's parking lot has provided you with this much of a break. Otherwise you were marked for a hit, Tommy. You hung around after we told you to get out. This is your break—make these two hits and we get you out."

He pressed the starter button and handed me my .38 and the heavy black box.

"Hope you're a good sprinter, Tommy. It's a steep ramp."

"What if I don't make it?" I stupidly asked.

"You'll be dead if you don't. But you were dead anyway, Tommy. Now you got a running chance."

He backed up the ramp with squealing rubber and the sedan backed out slowly after him with its lights out.

I moved to a car parked near the elevator door and slouched low in its seat after leaving its door cracked sufficiently to provide vision and firing room when the door to the elevator opened.

As I waited I thought of the *break* Manny Korfu had provided—that of becoming a double murderer and acquiring sixty seconds to run up a ramp from what would certainly be an inferno of flying car parts in shrapnel form.

I waited, crouched on the car's floor, checking the .38 and listening for the approach of Scarno's car on the ramp. I wondered if Manny's boys would wait. I wondered if they would dump me when I made

the dual hit. I wondered if I'd ever get out of the basement garage alive. I was contemplating escape up the apartment's elevator when the lights of a large sedan flooded the basement garage with harsh rays. I crouched lower and kept my eyes on the elevator door.

The car's lights went out. I had no way of knowing if it was Phil Scarno, a syndicate bookie whom the dons wanted out of the way for some reason which Manny had not felt obliged to inform me. All I could do was wait and watch that elevator door. If the wrong person came through it to get one of the basement garage's cars, an innocent tenant or departing guest would be murdered.

When no one left the car, my pulse quickened and I could feel my heart beating heavily. It was Scarno.

In a minute or so—which seemed an hour—the sound of the elevator stopping came through the basement silence. I watched the door.

It cracked open slowly and someone flashed a light through the crack. Whoever it was turned out the elevator light before opening the door its entire width.

Scarno's boy was smart and careful, I thought as I waited and fumbled for the switch for the lights of the car in which I was hidden. When I saw him step out of the door with flashlight playing on cars in front of him, I switched on the lights and blasted at the same time.

He got two wild shots away at me before the flashlight and gun fell from his hands.

I ran to Scarno's car; released the trip spring on the black box as I slid it under the darkened sedan. I bolted across the basement garage floor and up the ramp.

As I crossed the sidewalk and hurled myself into the open door of the sedan blocking the ramp entrance from the street, the blast of a bomb concussion blew me the rest of the way into the sedan's back seat. Its driver gunned away with screaming tires and roaring motor as if powered by the bomb I'd planted in the basement.

By the time I'd picked myself up and grasped an arm rest as the sedan took a corner on two wheels, the driver braked to a halt in a two-car garage.

"Get in the back of that pickup," one of the Korfu men ordered. "We're changing heaps."

The drive to O'Hara Field was made slowly and within all traffic laws. I pulled the clip from my .38 and re-loaded it again—just in case. The truck pulled inside a private hangar.

"Here's your passenger, Gerry," one of the Korfu men said in way of introduction.

A tall young man in a business suit came from the Cessna Powermatic towards us and pointed back at the plane. "Better get aboard, Mister, I've already filed my flight plan."

I kept my hand on the .38 and waited for him. I was unable to hear the brief conversation he had with the two men but I did hear the words of the driver as they walked away, "That's one hit man out of sight. No local heat on this one."

Apparently the hit and run dual slaying was routine.

I listened to the pilot's jargon with the control tower and watched the ground traffic, half expecting to see police cars come rushing down the landing strip on to which the pilot had taxied for his takeoff. When we were in the air, I realized I still had the butt of the .38 clutched in my hand. I relaxed and fingered my sweating palm. I felt inside my coat pocket to see if I had dropped the packet of bills Manny Korfu had paid me. I counted them and put them with the grand Frank Nita had given me earlier yesterday. I looked out at the night sky and laughed aloud as I realized the efficient manner in which hit men were transported from the Chicago area. I had discovered why there were so many unsolved gangland slayings.

The pilot looked back curiously to see if his passenger was becoming hysterical.

"Just thought of something funny," I explained.

Those five words were the extent of our conversation. He made one landing, at Wichita for gas, and continued his flight. I slept.

At an unmarked field outside Phoenix, the pilot taxied to a highway. "The city's west, that way," he pointed as he opened the door.

As I walked to the highway, I noticed signs that the field had been used recently by planes and that the ground was cleared of fences and obstacles. The mob had its own western terminal point. I watched him take off and walked down the road. I was a hitchhiker—a top ten hitchhiker—in an unknown part of the country, with a bankroll and a .38 that could tie me to a murder rap. I walked off the road and buried the .38 a foot deep in the sand.

"You're not dressed for hiking," the rancher commented when he stopped to pick me up.

"Guess not," was the only explanation I offered.

When he let me out at the Phoenix warehouse at which he stopped, I thanked him and offered to pay for the ride. He waved the bill back at me and laughed, "Never know what to expect from you Easterners." I was happy to accept the eccentric role in which he placed me.

I bought some clothes and a bus ticket to Los Angeles while waiting for them to be altered. Under the safety of steaming barber towels, I smiled as I heard the barber say to another customer in his shop, "They call this the wild west. Read about the new gang war in Chicago. Those hoods are blowing each other up again. I'm glad they keep those bastards out of Phoenix"

I didn't watch the scenery on the bus to L.A. I fell asleep and dozed until I heard another passenger say, "We'll soon be in Pasadena."

I left with the Pasadena passengers rather than risk the city bus terminal and took a cab into L.A. I had no record on the West Coast and recalled the FBI report which listed my haunts as the East Coast and the Midwest. But I could still see no reason to relax and kept moving by cab—to Long Beach—in another cab to Laguna Beach—and from there to San Diego.

I'd been in the international zone of Mexico before at Matamoras, across from Brownsville, Texas and knew how casually travelers could enter Mexico at its northern border points. I left the San Diego cab at San Ysidro and walked to the Mexican Immigration building.

"Born in Los Angeles—coming back tomorrow," were the only explanations I had to offer. I gave a boy a few coins to carry my bag and the Mexican Customs officer didn't even look at its contents when I said, "personal clothing."

I walked on Avenida de Revolution's crowded sidewalk, pushing my way through *turistas*, pimps and merrymakers. I was too damn tired to test any of the neon jungle booze traps or sexpot cribs on the edge of town. I walked into a pharmacy, whose neon sign, "Drugs," meant exactly what it said, bought a bottle of grain-and-a-half Nembutal caps, and checked into the

Caesar Hotel. I knocked myself out with Nembutal and slept the clock around twice.

I realized I wasn't in Mexico but rather in an area belonging to Mexico commonly regarded as a quasi legal *international zone* by law enforcement agencies on each side of the border. If I were a Mafia type on narcotics business I'd receive protection from the local vice syndicate. As a lamster heistman, I'd be handed over to American authorities without any legal formality. I had no protection other than my wits—and the .45 I bought as soon as I left the hotel.

At the Fronton Palacio, Tijuana's *jai alai* arena, I found Carlos Hernandez.

"You want to see me?" he asked, thinking I was just one more *turista* sucker seeking action other than that on Avenida de Revolucion.

"Yes," I replied. "Frank Nita sent me. Said to ask if you'd call him in Chicago."

Carlos Hernandez looked at me with a more penetrating glance and excused himself from the group.

"Come with me," was his only comment as he led me to a plush, carpeted and paneled office.

He put through a call to Chicago and spoke briefly to whom I assumed was Frank Nita. He listened for a longer period of time and responded with a mixture of smiles and frowns as he looked across the desk at me. His bland stare told me

nothing of his reaction to my appearance or what Frank Nita had said.

"Frank says to tell you he's glad you took his advice and now to take mine," Carlos Hernandez smiled.

"And what's that?" I asked in the same matter-of-fact manner.

"I'll get you papers and put you aboard a boat at Rosarito Beach. Baja California is no place for you. Maybe Chiapas in one of its vil-lages like Zinacantan or Chamula. You can last down there. But never here."

"Can't you find a spot for me at Rosarito Beach?" I asked. "Frank has a piece of the action there and I'm his friend."

"From what he told me just now, you're an embarrassing friend, Senor Canto," Hernandez smiled. "He said you were too hot to handle in Chicago. And I say, Senor Canto, you're too hot to handle down here. I think you should heed what I have to say."

Whether it was from a Nembutal-tequila hangover or from a mixed feeling of relief in being out of the States and an after-murder shock reaction from the two hits in Chicago, I agreed and replied, "You call the shot and I'll go along with your advice, Carlos."

I spent the night sampling questionable delights of Tijuana's bistros and, the following afternoon, left with Carlos Hernandez for Rosarito Beach. Neither of us made

any effort at conversation as he drove like a Tijuana cab driver rather than like a motorist who wanted to live for another day.

I sailed from Rosarito Beach in a schooner named, "Chi Baby," the name causing me to conjecture on the extent of the Chicago mob's extensive transportation facilities—from plane to schooners anchored off the Mexican coast. After ten days traveling southward by boat, train, car, an antique bus that had seen service in the twenties—without care normally given to antiques—by jeep and on foot, I was led by a Chiapan guide into the isolated village of Zinacantan.

At first I admired its natural beauty. My cottage provided a view across a jungle valley of a high ridge that had all the scenery of a travel brochure. As the weeks passed, I arrived at the conclusion the village was also a natural prison.

With my four grand bankroll I'll be able to live a 19th century form

of luxury for the rest of my life. Standards of living in this jungle village haven't changed for three centuries. There's no road out and the hike over the ridge is impossible without an Indian guide. So far, I haven't mastered the local dialect which is a mixture of Indian and Spanish—mostly Indian. The nearest village is Chamula, eight miles over the ridge. Its people speak a different dialect. If I could get through the jungle and over to the ridge to Chamula, I'd get no help there. From the ease with which Carlos Hernandez arranged for my shelter in the village, I know the long arms of the Mafia reach all the way down here into the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. As we parted at Rosarito Beach, his final words were, "Don't try to come back, Senor Canto."

If I'd been just a little slower getting up that ramp from the Chicago basement garage, I might have enjoyed a swifter, less lingering and boring, death.





He had wounded the buffalo. And the animal lay in wait now in the dense airless thicket, full of agony and hate. He had to go in there . . . It was a question of honor.



THE GRASS CAGE

BY ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

I AM HALFWAY through my third cigarette. I smoked the first two in ten minutes. That was four minutes ago. I can't stall any longer—Haney would consider it 'bad form.' When I finish this smoke we'll go in.

We are standing in a little spread of acacia trees; Haney, the white hunter, Jim Cass, my partner, Bilali, Nagool, Bopa, the gun bearers, and Kuku and Hose Nose, the two trackers. Rising on our left is a scrub hill, rising to timber along the ridge. Eastward the plain stretches out for fifteen miles, dotted with little mounds of orchard bush. The far mountain is almost purple because of the distance, but I don't know its name.

And in front of us is the thicket. It is big and it is dense and a man would have to be insane to go in there. Thin reaching reed and tall wavering grass; so tall I can tell from here that it will tower over our heads. We won't be able to see the sky, we'll probably have to crawl, there won't be enough air to breathe, and our visibility will be limited to one yard.

And that damn gut-shot meaner-than-Satan Cape buffalo had to run in there to hide.

It was my fault. It was my shot and I snafu-ed the detail. Haney and Cass had been working along the hill coming south to the acacia stand. I had dropped over the ridge, working down to the swale of tall grass, with Hose Nose and Bopa. Hose Nose was in the lead, and as he approached a giant thorn tree he motioned me down with an urgent demand of his hand.

"*Nyati*," he hissed at me in Swahili.

My mind fumbled off on a frantic memory excursion through the Swahili-English book Haney had given me at the beginning of the safari. Drawing a blank I looked at Bopa. He had my .308 Winchester; I had the Remington. He set the rifle across his knees and hooked his forefingers, put them to his temples and made pop-eyes at me.

Buffalo.

I crawled over to Hose Nose and the thorn tree. He grinned at me and I noticed that his lips trembled.

Maybe it was just excitement, anticipation, but it didn't help me any.

"*Doumi sana*," he whispered. Fine bull.

I nodded and raised my head.

It wasn't just any old buffalo; it was the African Black Cape.

I don't know why, but when I looked out and saw him standing there sixty yards off—squat, barrel-bodied, bluish-black, nearly hairless, the great black horns curving downward - backward - forward-upward and inward—I suddenly sensed the loss of something I'd always unconsciously held as invulnerable; nothing physical, just the quality man recognizes in himself as his manhood. Cape buffalo—intelligent, quick, powerful; considered by many to be the world's most dangerous game. I wet my lips and glanced at Hose Nose.

When he grinned his upper lip punched under the overhang of that ample snout, looking for a moment as though the teeth meant to snap the nose-ball. "*Piga!*" he hissed. Shoot. Hit. Kill.

I looked back at the Caper, raised the .30-06 Remington and slipped the safety. I rose slowly, bringing the butt to my shoulder. The Cape was barrel-rump on to me but angling leisurely as he browsed muzzle-down in the weed, swinging his starboard into my sights.

And suddenly it was all right again and I had my manhood back. I could feel it burning through me

like a double shot of whiskey and I knew I had him cold. One second after I squeezed the trigger the world's most dangerous game would be down and kicking, dying.

I started the slow squeeze. And then those rotten little buffalo birds hit the air and the jig was up. The Caper snorted, swinging his head high, all mad right now and looking for someone to take it out on. He spooked forward and I jerked the trigger.

We all heard the whack of the slug, saw him stumble, but he hitch-kicked, plowing the swale grass like a tank and he was on his way.

"*Piga! Piga!*" those two damn fools were screeching, and from the north I could hear Cass bellowing something, and through it all the tone but not the sense of Haney's voice shouting instructions, and the Caper swung off his furrowing course and lammed for the thicket, and me losing my control like a homicidal maniac and jerking . . . *Blam! Blam-blam-blam!* and seeing the marsh pools spray up beyond the buffalo as the high powered slugs spanked them, and Bopa and Hose Nose rushing downgrade still screeching, Bopa with my Winchester, me bellowing at him to bring it back, stumbling after them, fumble-fingering shells into the furshlugginer clip, and last the reeds and grass swallowing up the Cape buffalo like Moses in the bul-

rushes, and then nothing—only eight men standing panting in the short grass under the shadowy spread of acacias.

And all Haney could say was, "Well, we'll have to go in and finish him."

It is very warm now, and if you step from under the green shade of the acacias the sun is straight up and it presses down on you until you feel like a rubber ball being squeezed in a prizefighter's hand.

Bopa and Nagool are standing off a little by themselves. They don't look happy. Neither does Haney but he tries to cover it. He takes long hard drags at his cigarette, glances speculatively at the thicket, letting smoke dwindle out his nostrils, then glances at Cass, and then at me. He knows. I think they all do. I can't help it. I've lost it again—for good, I think. I don't want to go in there.

No, God, I really don't.

I could let Haney carry the show alone; let him go in there for the sake of 'good form.' It's what Cass and I are paying him for. I could, if I could find some way of living with myself after that. But there isn't any way, there just isn't. And suddenly I hate Haney, because if he wasn't here I could just turn my back on the thicket and the wounded buffalo and walk off. No, I couldn't either. There are the boys and there is Cass, and I am a coward to the point that I am scared to death of appearing cowardly.

So we'll go in and try to finish the damn gut-shot Cape buffalo.

He's hiding in there somewhere with a gut like red pulp, and every-time he breathes the pain rips through him like he'd swallowed barbed wire, and he's waiting with his pig-eyes all bright with hate and he's concentrating his libido on one purpose. Us. He's going to charge when we're right on top of him and we won't see him until it's too late and he's going to use his bone helmet-head as a battering ram and he's going to use his horns to do the things to our guts that I've done to his and it's going to be hell on a pogo stick.

And I saved my money for six years to make this buggy safari: busted my back for six long years to come halfway across the world to die in this lousy, airless, skyless thicket; and I wouldn't marry the girl I loved because at the last moment she might have said No, and what can you say to a pretty young wife who says No? and I'm glad now I didn't marry her because she might have said Yes, and in an hour from now she'd be a widow and I never did carry enough insurance.

So we'll go in and try to finish the damn gut-shot Cape buffalo.

In a minute we will.

I wipe at my mouth. My hand is trembling as if I'd been working a pneumatic drill. Haney is still showing us how to exhale smoke through the nostrils. And Cass is

doing everything an embarrassed man can do who wants to speak and not offend, and doing them all wrong.

"Look, Joe—" he starts. "No reason why I shouldn't tag along in there. I mean, we're in this thing together and—"

I shake my head. "No, this is my scene. I botched the damn thing and I've got to put it right. Haney knows that."

Haney drops his cig-butt and places his boot on it carefully. We both watch him do it. Then he speaks to the ground.

"That's right, Mr. Cass. Four of us is too many in there as it is."

"Well, I know, but still—"

"Get off it, will you, Jim?" I say a little sharper than I should.

Now we're all embarrassed and no one says anything. We look at the cig-butt mashed in the dirt.

"Hose Nose will track," Haney says abruptly. "I'll tag him with the Weatherby and you can back me up with Bopa—"

I shake my head. I'm childishly stubborn about my questionable manhood. "No. I'll tag Hose Nose. *You* back me."

Haney says, "Well—" and the word sags into a little silence-pit and sits there stupidly. Then he kicks it aside and gets down to business. "Don't put your sights on his head. That horn-base of his is just like the steel pots we used in the war. Maybe tougher. If he charges it'll be with his neck and head

straight out. Whack him right down the snout. Or square in the chest is good too. Then—”

“All right. I’ve got it. For crysake let’s not gab about it all day.” I mash out my cigarette and take the Remington from Bopa. All the blue sheen is out of his face, replaced by gray suspense. I wonder what mine looks like.

Cass does a pretty good job on a grin.

“Show the big slob who’s boss, Joe.”

I let him see that I can make a ghastly grin also.

“Sure. Right down the snout. Be back in a bit.”

I look at Haney. “Ready?”

He says, “Let’s ramble.”

Hose Nose is waiting at the edge of the thicket. He’s down on one knee holding his spear like an antenna, inspecting the blood spoor in the grass. He’s looking good too, just like a man who has received the word from a somber-eyed doctor: “No, Mr. Hose Nose, I’m afraid you don’t have the three-day flu. It’s leukemia.”

He looks at Haney and then points into the grass. Haney nods.

It’s a green wall. It must be ten foot tall and as thick as stacked bricks. But there’s a little doorway, a passage where the buffalo lammed for cover. We start in; Hose Nose pushing ahead, rotten egg-stepping; me with the Remington; Haney with the Weatherby; Bopa in the rear with the Spring-

field he doesn’t know how to use.

Here, there, skip a couple of yards, then again the splatterings of blood, still bright in the limpid centers, just starting to congeal at the edges. A fair spoor. No sweat. Should lead us right up face to face with Bingo. Only it’s going to be blam-o with the bone-hard head, and hook-o with the giant size horns, and then guts-o all over the lousy grass . . .

Stop it, for God’s sake, stop it, I order myself. But why did it have to be a rotten gut-shot? Why couldn’t I hit the big slob clean? Why did I have to work and save and not marry for six years just to come all the way over here to fritz-up the furshlugginer shot?

I look at Hose Nose’s naked back ahead of me, wobbling slowly from side to side like a deaf-mute without equilibrium, all slick mahogany except for an old blue-ridged scar under the right shoulderblade, where once upon a time he must have been mighty lucky.

I look down at the Remington, feeling its heft and grip in my damp hands, liking the feeling . . . and see that the stupid safety is off. I ease it on, hoping that Haney doesn’t notice. Then I ask myself a bright question: Did I reload after I went crazy on the ridge? For a vivid moment everything suspends in me, threatening to drop. But no—no for crysake. Of course I reloaded. Take it easy. Try to take it easy, will you? Sure. I’m all right.

But I'm not. There is no sky overhead. The grass keeps whipping back in my face, powdering me with salty dust. The air is punk. The damn Moses reed is getting thicker, taller. The passageway is becoming a tunnel. The blood spoor is sparse now and other tunnels are criss-crossing us, passages burrowed by other beasts—maybe rhinos. Oh nice! Swell thought, Joe. Keep it up. How about a nice lion? Hey, that's the ticket, Joe-boy! With claws like meathooks and teeth like straight-edge razors.

I want out. I'm bugged bad and I want out. I'm wired for the heeby-jeebies. I glance back at Haney. He looks at me questioningly. *Are you all right?* I nod and look ahead. *Sure . . . sure*, except that the lousy tunnel is closing down. Sure, except that there are so many tributary passages now that Hose Nose has gotten himself lost. He's standing there in waiting bewilderment, blinking around at the green cage.

We all stand, looking, listening. Nothing. Nothing, except that I want a smoke; except that the shoving shoulder of claustrophobia is starting to crowd me. Then Hose Nose picks it up again. He points at a little drying dab of blood and mutters something in Swahili.

But there's a rub. The tunnel has narrowed. It's no longer possible to walk upright. We'll have to continue at a crouch, maybe on hands and knees. I look at Haney, catching a glimmer of Bopa's head be-

yond his shoulder. The gun bearer's face looks like a pan of old gray dough that's been left out in the rain.

Haney is whispering to me. "If he charges (*why must the man always start out with 'If he charges?'* *He knows damn well the big gut-shot slob is going to charge*), don't worry about Hose Nose. It's his job to get clear. just start pumping at that nose—the Cape's, I mean. If you can't break him down, jump to the side, whack him in the shoulder as he goes by. I'll bop him in the snout. All right?"

I nod looking down at the peaty earth under our boots. Why, I wonder, do men hunt? For the fun? Oh my God! The thrill of danger? Well, buster, there's plenty of that, and anyone who cares to crawl in here and ask for my share can have it.

Haney is trying to un-funk me. He's smiling and it looks as though it must hurt his cheeks like frost-bite. "This could be worse," he says. "Wait until next Monday when we go after simba."

There's that damn lion again. Yeah . . . yeah, I'll wait. I can see myself crawling through a blind trap like this shagging a wounded lion. Oh yeah, I'll definitely wait.

So we start on again on the crouch this time, me tagging Hose Nose's rump instead of his back. And it gets worse, and the claustrophobia is sweltering and it is airless and dust-gagging and I

know Hose Nose can't see a yard beyond his face and to top it all off he has to drop to his hands and knees to penetrate the thicket and I like a damn fool have to follow him and if something big comes at us now we'll go down like nine-pins on a chain reaction to smash-o.

I feel like a skin diver, feel a frightening kinship with the men who fin into the nothingness of underwater to meet the quarry on its own home ground. The hunter may have his high powered rifle, the skin diver his CO₂ gun, but the edge is still with the quarry—it was born there. It can breath where there isn't air; it can see where the visibility is void; it can run, jump, cut, or charge where the hunter is hamstrung in the thickets and the skin diver in the water pressure. And perhaps that's why we hunt, because there is something in us—something perversely stupid I'm beginning to think—that craves for a gamble where the odds are on the other fellow's side.

I don't know. I know it's not like Mallory's mountain; we don't do it simply because it's there to be done. It's deeper than that—if anything *can* be deeper than that. I don't know. Whatever it is I've lost it. I want out.

I look back at Haney, his head inches from my beam. He gives a short blank nod, whispers, "It'll widen in a moment."

I look forward at Hose Nose's hunched body, at the green wall

shoving in front of him, and I think of Haney, the Bwana M'kub-wa. Somewhere I read, or was told, that the average life of a white hunter after he adopts his trade is from six to seven years. And I'm thinking of Haney who is forty if he's a day and who told me himself that he came out here in his early twenties. So he's had a long run of luck. So he's had his share and enough for a couple of other Bwanas as well. So maybe today is the end of his run. Maybe when the sun rose this morning it rose on Haney's day of non-luck.

Something takes off overhead with a wild *flat-a-flat-a-flatter* and I jump as if Haney had pronged my prat with his hunting knife. Hose Nose is cowering before me, his muddy eyes fright-big and angling up and over his shoulder, gawping at the green roof above. Everything about him makes me feel just like hell.

"Wood-pigeons," Haney murmures.

I twist a look at him. "Buffalo birds?" I suggest.

He shrugs. "Goose Hose Nose along," he orders.

We push on, listening very closely now.

The tunnel opens abruptly like a cave-mouth. We file out into a passageway where we can actually stand. Overhead we can even see a few scratchy little traces of turquoise sky. It's much better. I feel a hell of a lot better . . . but if I

could just have a cigarette. Hose Nose is contemplating the spoor again. He has three forks to choose from. From where we stand they all appear to run into blind alleys. He says something to himself and points straight ahead.

I start to follow him when my foot snags in a root and for a split-second I'm all over myself to keep from falling and making a smash of noise. But Haney has me under an armpit with his free hand and I lurch to balanced footing. It's nothing. A slight accident and no damage done. But Hose Nose hasn't observed it and it's given him time to work himself some yards ahead of me.

As I look forward I see him stepping through a loose screen of undulating grass. I start after him to catch up . . . and right now we hear the full-chested snort.

I stop dead, Haney slamming into me. There is a rush of something and a scream that magically turns the passageway into a shimmering green ball that instantly destroys equilibrium, and there is a clean *whaam!* of sound and I know death is coming like a flying wedge and out of the green hurtles Hose Nose. He's coming ankles over appetite, as helpless as a black ragbag struck by an open bucket of red paint, and something that must be a black locomotive is thundering right after him, and somebody—has to be Haney—is screaming "*Shoot!* You damn—" and I see the

outstretched square head and the slick glistening-like-silver muzzle and the great low-slung bat-ears and the black horns and . . .

Something triggers in me like a spring gun and I hit the reed wall in a blind fury of smashing, plowing, boot-lashing, hand-clawing, head-butting insanity. I dump the trick right in Haney's lap and I'm out of there.

The noise is all rolled into a ball; break it down and it is the smash of the thicket, the bellow of the Cape buffalo, Bopa's scream, and the *car-room!* of Haney's Weatherby. And I don't care. I want to care, should care, but I can't. I've got to get out. The animal instinct has awakened in me, is leading me, dragging me to safety. The unconscious vortex of self-preservation is snatching me out of danger as though I were a ball on a string. It is inexorable.

I run.

If you can call it that: crashing, lunging, hand-pulling along, falling . . . I am on the ground. It is damp, porous, unwholesome with hundreds of little crawling things. I am gasping for my breath, looking around, listening.

The Cape buffalo is snorting somewhere, far off. But there was only the one shot. Then Haney missed . . . and what's become of him? I remember Haney's non-luck day and say, *So I called the shot.* But I can't settle for that, because to man the death of a close

friend or loved one is incongruous. We can believe in the death of a stranger, that's easy, but not when it happens to someone we know.

"Haney!" I shout.

There is nothing. Now even the Caper is quiet.

I've got to get out of here. I start crawling, crawl into a tunnel and follow it. What if I run smack into the buffalo? I'm unarmed. I've lost the damn Remington. Never mind about that. Can't be helped. You've got to take your chances and hope for the best. Anyway, you were unarmed even when you had the gun. The man who has a gun and can't use it has no advantage over a man who is unarmed. All right, I was gutless. All right, goddam it. We'll talk about it later. When I get out of here.

If I get out.

Crawly things on me, in everything, everywhere, slip-sliding in my sweat. Bugs. Bugs all over the furshlugginer place; on me, in the grass, around my head, buzzing high-frequency in my ears. Grass and reed—like worming through a ton of barbed wire. No air to breathe. Just bugs. Bugs to breathe. It's enough to drive a man . . .

Something is coming at me, coming down the tunnel my way. I rear back in a panic. Nowhere to turn. Nowhere to run. *My God—*

It is a young hyena, the common striped brown. We meet face to face, the mammal all eyes, ears high and wide open, me with my

hands out half-clawed, ready to fight. When he suddenly laughs his fear he is a ventriloquist; it comes from the wrong direction. In a wink he makes his decision: hunkers in on himself, pivots—seemingly turning inside out—shows me his drooping hindquarters and is gone.

I crawl on with the shakes.

In a minute I enter a larger passage, a familiar one. Our boot marks are visible in the soggy earth. This is the way the four of us came to track the Cape buffalo.

For a delicious moment the world is a beautiful place. All I have to do is backtrack to the acacia grove. Then I'll be out of it. Then I'll tell Cass that Haney, Hose Nose and Bopa had their non-luck day; that the buffalo won; that he, Cass, can come to hell in here if he wants, but that I'm through.

That's what I think in the first moment. Then I think of the hyena—the way he turned himself tail-over-teeth to escape me. I must have looked that way when I saw the buffalo coming at me. I must have looked like a scared witless animal. That isn't the nicest picture in the world for a man.

And Haney?

I look along our track. Haney's down there somewhere. Dead?

Maybe today's hunter is merely a throwback to the dim ancestor who once left his cave with a club in hand to face a saber-toothed tiger. Maybe we think we owe that an-

cestor something. Maybe we have an unconscious urge to prove to his memory that in spite of our tranquilized, TV-ed civilization we still have something in us that goes deeper than muscle, bone and blood. Maybe.

But you don't walk out on Haney without knowing whether he's alive or dead. That's one thing you don't do. You may run—run long and hard, but in the end you come back.

All right dammit. So we go back.

I come to the opening where we met the Cape buffalo head-on. It is larger now because the walls have been smashed back all around. Hose Nose is near my feet. He is a dead man. *Kufa*. The Cape's cannon ball head took care of Hose Nose. The Weatherby is lying a few yards beyond. I go and pick it up, eject the expended shell and slide in a new one. Then I see Haney.

He's on his back in the grass, his left leg drawn up and cocked over his outstretched right as though he is preparing to run. But his eyes are closed and there is a ragged rent across his jacket, starting near the stomach and ripping up to his left shoulder. I bend down to him and see that the exposed flesh of his chest is bluish-black. Hooked and hit by the Cape's off horn. But the skin is still in one piece—purple and swollen but no blood.

I take his pulse and feel better. It was not his non-luck day.

I look around. "Bopa?" I say softly.

There is a new passageway opening across the aisle. The Winchester is at the threshold and I can see that it has been trampled.

It is only guesswork, but the conclusion is that with Hose Nose knocked galley west, with me out of the way, the buffalo tried to ram or hook Haney as he fired, clipped him aside and then charged on after Bopa. And Bopa—God love him—must have ran just as I did, must have made his own panic-passage through the reed.

I look down at the Weatherby, feeling its heft and grip in my hands, liking it. Then I start tracking the buffalo.

It is a long way down the passage and it must be working from center outward because the grass is shorter and there is sky overhead, but though I am aware of it I don't dare look up. I ease my way steadily through the trampled, shoved-aside reed, and I seem to be walking down the road that thirty years ago I was born for the express purpose of finding, that I might walk down it and meet someone who will be waiting at the far end for me, and when I meet the someone I will know that the thirty years have been for nothing and that they are finished and that it never really mattered to the scheme of things anyway.

And there is the Cape buffalo.

He is standing in a small grass

chamber. His head is down, his eyes blinking with sickness, and I see the scarlet blotch on his under-slung belly where I first started this whole damn mess. I don't see Bopa and that is something at least.

I pull in my breath and raise the Weatherby. And the Cape buffalo turns his head and looks at me. Something clicks out of whack inside me and the little monitor of my mind slips into limbo as though edging me into suicide and I stall.

You and me now, Cape, I say to him. *Come and get it.*

And then I'm all right and I know it. Even as his head and neck stretch out and his hoofs get under-way, I feel it. And the rifle goes *caa-lam!* But I've jerked the witch. Bone fragments splinter off his head like shrapnel and he's flying at me like the mainspring from a nightmare and I jerk *caa-lam! caa-lam!* and the head and horns are jumping and spitting bone chips, and that glistening-like-black-silver muzzle is reaching right for me, and the two round hate-eyes see me and only me in all this world, and saliva like mercury streams straight back from his muzzle, and the Weatherby goes *caa-lam!* right down his snout as he knocks the barrel flying and his head yanks up and rearward and his bulky body skitters around off course and I leap clear as his snout sprays the air with blood and matter-clots, and he's down, legs kicking, body

trying to roll sideways, not making it, head still yanking away from body as if trying to shake loose from the .300 slug that's made mush of his brain, and I step in and lower the rifle and blast his spine and that's all.

Over. I feel weird. I feel like my stomach wants to say goodbye to breakfast. I hold onto the rifle hard and let the shakes take care of the rest of me. I . . .

What does it matter? There's nothing to be said. I walk on out of there.

Haney's all right. We have him propped against an acacia tree and Cass has just finished wrapping his chest with everything he could find in the first aid box. He says: "I'm going back to the wagon and fetch the bottle. This calls for a drink. Right?"

Haney puts a cigarette in his mouth and nods. "Good idea. Better feed Bopa one, too—a short one. He needs it."

Bopa's all right. He'd made his way out of the thicket and had gone to fetch Cass and the others while I was finishing the Cape.

Haney looks at me and smiles. "Well, you got him," he says.

"Yes—finally. The second time."

Haney says nothing. I think he knows but he isn't going to bring it up. I've got to.

"When he charged and I leaped into the reed—I was running. I ran to hell out of there. Pure funk."

Haney looks at the thicket. "Important thing is that you got him," he says. He scrouges into a more comfortable position, but he still doesn't look at me.

"Look—there's no reason why you have to rush into this simba business come Monday. What we encountered today can unnerve a man. I know. And lion hunting isn't child's play. Why don't we re-schedule the lions until later? Or, if Cass objects to that, I'll go out with him. You can shook kudu."

He's embarrassing himself trying to make it easy for me.

"Don't get the idea anyone will

look down on you if you decide to wait on the lions. Not after what you've been through today."

I say nothing. I think of how the rifle felt in my hands, remember how it felt slamming out shots as that four-legged locomotive charged me. Maybe hunters aren't complex. Give a man a rifle and he simply likes the feel of it. Perhaps we are like Mallory and his mountain after all.

Cass is back with the jug and three tin cups. I take mine, smile at Haney, and give the toast:

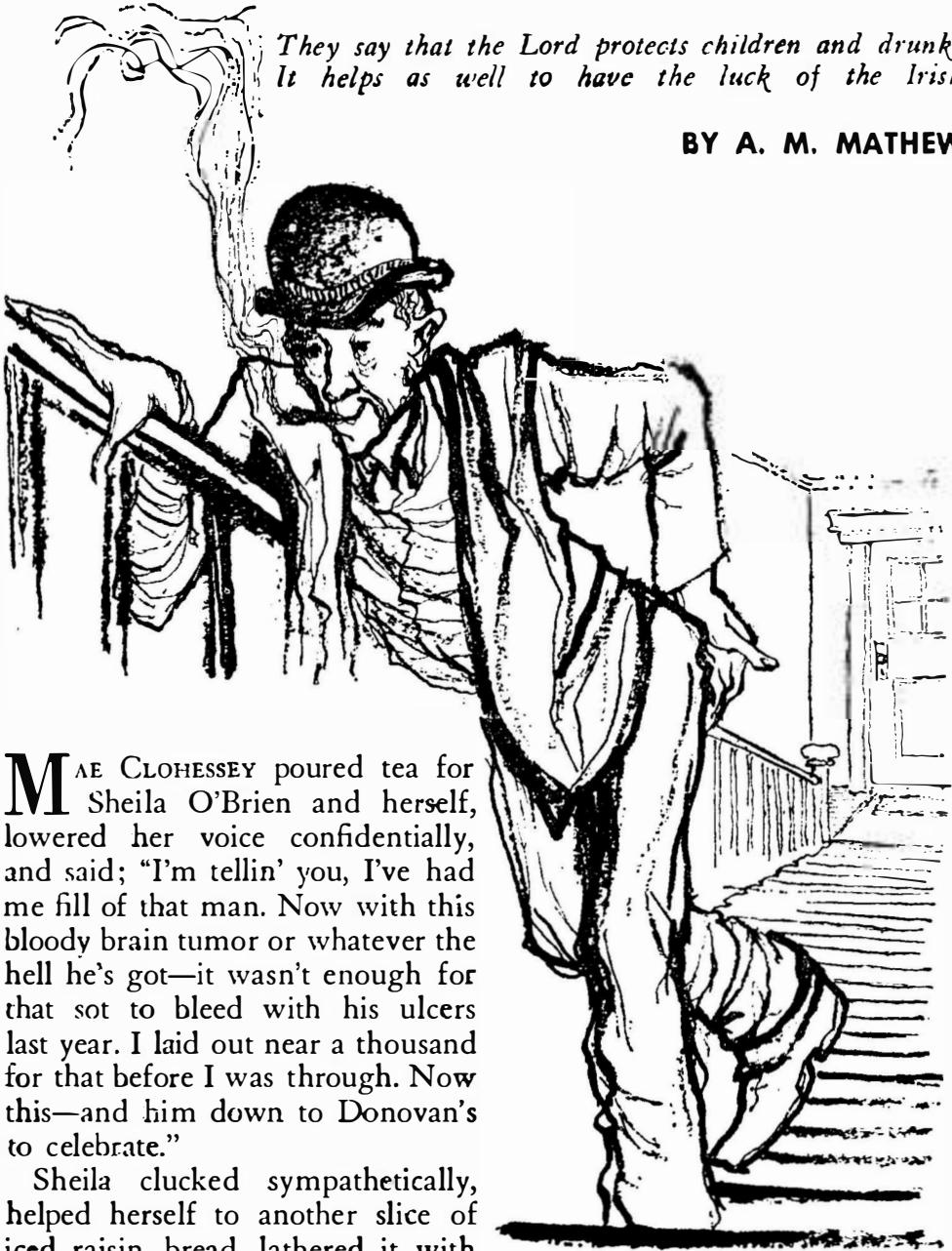
"Here's to the three of us come Monday," I say.



ACCIDENT PRONE

*They say that the Lord protects children and drunks.
It helps as well to have the luck of the Irish.*

BY A. M. MATHEWS



MAE CLOHESSEY poured tea for Sheila O'Brien and herself, lowered her voice confidentially, and said; "I'm tellin' you, I've had me fill of that man. Now with this bloody brain tumor or whatever the hell he's got—it wasn't enough for that sot to bleed with his ulcers last year. I laid out near a thousand for that before I was through. Now this—and him down to Donovan's to celebrate."

Sheila clucked sympathetically, helped herself to another slice of iced raisin bread, lathered it with butter, and said around a mouthful;

"Umm—well Mae, it's more than a thousand will come out of the pocketbook this time, unless you plead hardship. And they check"; she added with a wagging finger. "When them doctors get through workin' on Pat's head, you'll be in debt til you're under the sod."

Mae drew her thin lips apart in a yellow sneer, exposing long, uneven front teeth. "And him so drunk he wouldn't know the difference was he alive or dead."

Sheila nodded in agreement. "O'Brien said just t'other night, he said; 'Pat Clohessey will be found dead at the bottom o' them stairs one o' these mornin's, if he don't take it easy on the drink."

"I wish that morning would come, before I'm on the street, peniless"; Mae muttered. Ignoring Sheila's disapproving frown, she went on; "Ahh, he's been climbing them stairs these twenty-three years, drunk more nights than not, and never a stumble."

"The good Lord watches over little ones, fools and drunks"; Sheila pointed out, cramming another piece of bread into her willing mouth.

"Well, I wish He'd look the other way some night soon", Mae grumbled, jabbing her spoon down into her tea.

"Oh shame, Mae Clohessey"; Sheila said. "Why is it you've been wishin' por Pat dead for as long as I can remember? You'd be lost without him. He's a dear—sober."

"And when was he last sober?" Mae asked in disgust.

Sheila chewed thoughtfully, then shook her head and noisily sipped her tea.

When the plate held only the heel of the loaf of raisin bread, and there was just a cold film left in the teapot, Sheila stood up, smoothing her cotton housedress over ample hips.

"Well dearie, I'm sorry for the trouble you're havin', and I'll be lightin' a candle for the success o' Pat's operation."

"Don't bother"; Mae mumbled, brushing the table with the palm of her hand.

Following her landlady out into the hall, Mae watched Sheila make her way heavily down the steep flight of the three family apartment house, of which the top floor was vacant.

"These stairs are the devil's own, Mae. O'Brien's a pretty good drinker himself, and I'd hate t' see him attempt these night after night, with a snootful. I wonder how Pat's done it all these years." She laughed, then waved a flabby arm in Mae's direction.

"Sheila O'Brien can laugh—she's not the one that'd had to put up with the old sot"; Mae muttered as she cleared away the remains of the snack.

After the kitchen had been tidied to her satisfaction, Mae stepped into the diningroom, and taking a small key out of her apron pocket, she opened the glass doors of the high-

ly polished china closet. After removing the bankbook from its hiding place behind the imitation crystal butter dish, she seated herself at the lace covered table and examined it closely, to see if it had changed figures since she'd last looked at it a week before. "Two thousand, four hundred, and sixty-five dollars and eighty-seven cents", she muttered. "If it wasn't for that bedamned ulcer, there'd be near a thousand more."

Clamping her teeth over her lower lip, Mae shook her head in dismay. "Now a rotten brain tumor—like as not brought on by the drink. And when I pay for that, like as not, I'll be out of a night scrubbing office buildings to keep bread in me mouth, and him dead to boot."

With a savage gesture, Mae snatched up the passbook and hid it again behind the butter dish. "I'll lie in me grave before I'll throw good money after bad. Why don't he die?" She stopped to think for a minute, her hand pausing in its return to her apron pocket with the key. Her eyes narrowed, her mouth hung slack, the slightly bluish lips wet.

Later, as she set out her meagre supper of leftover beef and boiled potatoes, Mae still had that same thoughtful expression on her face. She put her husband's plate into the oven to keep it warm. "Like as not he'll be too damn drunk to eat a bite", she mumbled, giving the plate a shove.

Rattling dishes in the deep, old fashioned sink, Mae broke a cup and snarled, "Ahh the old sot." When the supper things had been dried and put away, Mae walked through the dimness of the apartment, passing the bedroom she hadn't shared with Pat in years. She gave the chenile bedspread a vicious tug, kicked Pat's slippers far under the bed and continued on her way to the livingroom.

When the television had begun to blare, Mae propped her swollen ankles on a footstool and eased off her house shoes with a grunt of relief. She watched western after legal play without a flicker of emotion crossing her face. Finally, when that little old winemaker appeared and mocked her with a lifted glass, Mae spoke into the gloom; "Night after night with more whiskey than blood in his veins, and never a stumble. Didn't Sheila O'Brien herself tell me it was a miracle he hasn't fallen long before this?"

Far into the night Mae sat, thinking evil thoughts about Pat. It was one-fifteen in the morning when Mae rose, peered at the mantel clock, and started to shiver.

She walked quickly through the rooms, whispering as she went; "Donovan's will be closing right about now. Well, have one for the road, Pat. It's a long way to hell."

Slipping out into the hall, Mae switched off the overhead light with a badly trembling hand. With

an oath of impatience, she flicked it on again, then picked up the faded yellow dustpan, and set it down carefully on the top step, so that it stuck out over the edge.

Grey beads of sweat stood out on her forehead, and suddenly cold, Mae hurried inside and adjusted the gas heater. She got into her nightgown, then turned down the covers on the double bed, thinking it might look funny if they were to come in to tell her Pat was dead and find her sleeping on the sofa bed. To Mae's way of thinking, it was one thing to deny her husband a warm bed, but quite another for people to know about it.

Lying quietly, Mae heard the loud beating of her heart, and felt the shallow breath in her throat. It was making her slightly dizzy. She took a deep, painful breath, then with a curse, got up to pad out to the hall and turn off the light again.

Back in bed, Mae strained to hear the street door open—but the noisy throbbing of her heart almost drowned out the faint sounds from downstairs.

Her bony fingers each clutching an opposite shoulder, teeth clamped over her lower lip, Mae waited in an agony of anticipation for the crash which would set her and her bankbook free. The pounding in her ears was making her dizzy again, then with a gasp of disbelief, Mae felt the bedsprings creak under her husband's weight. She all but flew over his head in her hasty re-

treat to the safety of her sofa. Pat emitted a loud snore and settled down for the night, as Mae removed the cushions and straightened her bed.

"That stewed prune" she mumbled. "Damn him and his luck to hell." She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling faint from the evening's activities, then rose and tiptoed out to the hall, laid the undisturbed dustpan by the stair railing, turned on the overhead light. She heard a board creak and whirled around to face the sound, her heart hammering wildly in her breast. "Ahh looney—there's no one there": she chided herself. "Shh—what for? Sheila O'Brien would sleep if I exploded a keg o' dynamite underneath her bed, and O'Brien himself's no better." With this thought to comfort her, Mae crept back into the apartment, stifled a yell as her toe came into contact with the leg of a chair, and as she passed her husband's bed, she restrained herself from delivering a smack to his wide-open, smelly mouth.

The next day, Mae felt shaky and ill. Nevertheless, she swept her floors vigorously, cursing Pat all the while. "It's a wonder he's even held the job this long, showing up morning upon morning bleary-eyed and full o' gas". Mae shook her head in disgust, then eyed the broom.

Well after midnight, Mae slipped out into the hall, and laid the broom across the top stair, propping it against the wall so that it

formed the obstruction she had in mind. A few minutes later, Mae was tucked in her husband's bed, covers pulled up to her chin, and still she shivered. When the street door creaked its warning, Mae took her hand from where she had pressed it against her thumping heart, and clapped both hands over her ears, to shut out the sound of her Pat's demise. She lay perfectly still, holding her breath, and eyes staring at the ceiling. Before she realized which way the shamrocks were growing, she was caught in Pat's drunken embrace. "Thas' a nice gil", he whispered, coating her face with a not-so-fine spray of strong smelling saliva.

"Ye damned sot—why don't ye pass out the way ye always do?" Mae shrilled, leaping out of bed. Pat flopped back against his pillow, with a loud belch of defeat.

Clohessey spent the next day at Donovan's, to celebrate his going into the hospital the day after. Mae spent the day and evening in front of a vacant television, her red rimmed eyes staring straight ahead.

At midnight, Mae stood pressed to the wall in the blackness of the hall. At half past the hour she rubbed one aching foot against the other, and wished she dared bring out a chair to sit on. Another twenty minutes passed in silence, and Mae yawned and shook her head, wrapping her nightgown closer around her body.

Jumping a foot at the sound of

her own voice, Mae pressed her aching chest and listened. "You'll burn in the everlasting fires of hell for all eternity after this murder is done, and the twenty-five hundred saved won't go far to paying your way out of the flames."

She shivered violently, and whispered back; "Ahh, don't be an ass—the man's got both his great toes in the grave, and that's with no help from me." She snorted in derision. "Murder indeed. It's a fine murder, if you ask me."

Scratching her skinny arms angrily, Mae tried to drive away the ugly question. "Are you about to push your husband down them stairs to his death?" With a grunt of righteous indignation, Mae muttered heatedly; "No one said a damn thing about pushin' him down the stairs. So shu your blatherin'."

She shifted her position again in an attempt to ease the terrible ache in her body, and her heart started its painful thumping as she heard her own unbidden whisper. "What in hell are you doin' here then, if it's not to push Pat and give him a present of a broken neck?"

The long, uneven front teeth bit into the bluish white lower lip as Mae gave her noisy conscience a final retort. "Ahh, let your wind out in another direction, will ye please? I'm not about to commit murder. I won't blacken me soul for the likes of that sot."

She listened intently for an an-

swer, and when it remained silent, her lips curled in a smile at the thought of fooling her conscience. Now she concentrated on her own discomfort. She could feel the beat, beat, beat of her heart through the cotton of her nightgown and her breath seemed hard in coming.

When the street door opened, a flame licked at Mae's insides, and she struggled harder to catch her breath.

"There—he's fumbling with the key to the hall door", she whispered. "How in the name o' God can a man fallin' down drunk manipulate a key?" she asked in disgust. Her knees began to knock together, adding to the torture.

The hall door finished its moaning protest at being disturbed, and then he was weaving down the carpeted hallway. Up the stairs he came, slowly, swaying from mewling bannister to the lumpy wall.

The tongue of fire in Mae's breast took on new heat—her insides churned and she felt dizziness rising. He was so close—just one more step. She smelled the whiskey stench, heard the hoarse breath. Leaping forward, Mae shouted with all her breath: "Well Clohessey, and it's a fine time o' night to be comin' home."

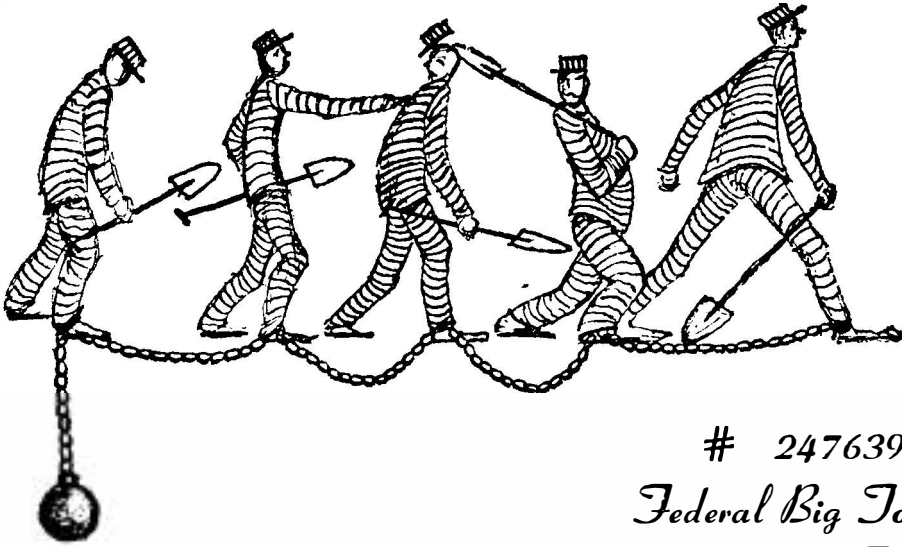
The O'Briens slept on, as Pat went rolling down the stairs, bump, thump, crash. "Jesus God" he swore. Looking up the stairs, he could see nothing, and shouted: "That's one bloody hell of a way to greet a man—like a God damned banshee." He picked himself up gingerly and stumbled up the stairs again, still swearing.

"Why the hell ye ain't in your bed this time o' night beats the hell out o' me". He peered ahead, trying to bring Mae into his line of vision that kept changing, and swore at the lack of a light, then tripped over a prone, white clad figure at the top of the stairs.

Backwards and down he went once more, careening from bannister to wall, landing in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, his neck at an unnatural angle to his shoulders.

After Sheila O'Brien found them the next morning, she commented through her tears; "Sure O'Brien, for all her talk, she loved old Pat, drunk or no. Seen him dead down there and died herself—of a broken heart. Well, anyway, they're together, for all eternity, thank the good Lord." O'Brien wiped his mouth with the back of his hand; "Aye—I imagine so—that's the way it was."





2476398
Federal Big Top
Tuscaloosa, Fla.

Dear Brother-in-law,

I'ma learna read English ina this place. I'ma read a fine magazine called Manhunt. It tella me all about bigga wise guys like you. I'ma find out you ain't no income tax collector . . . after I'ma paying you my tax for three years. Whaddya think . . . I'ma stupid? I'ma report you to the F.B.I. They put you ina the empty bed nexa to me.

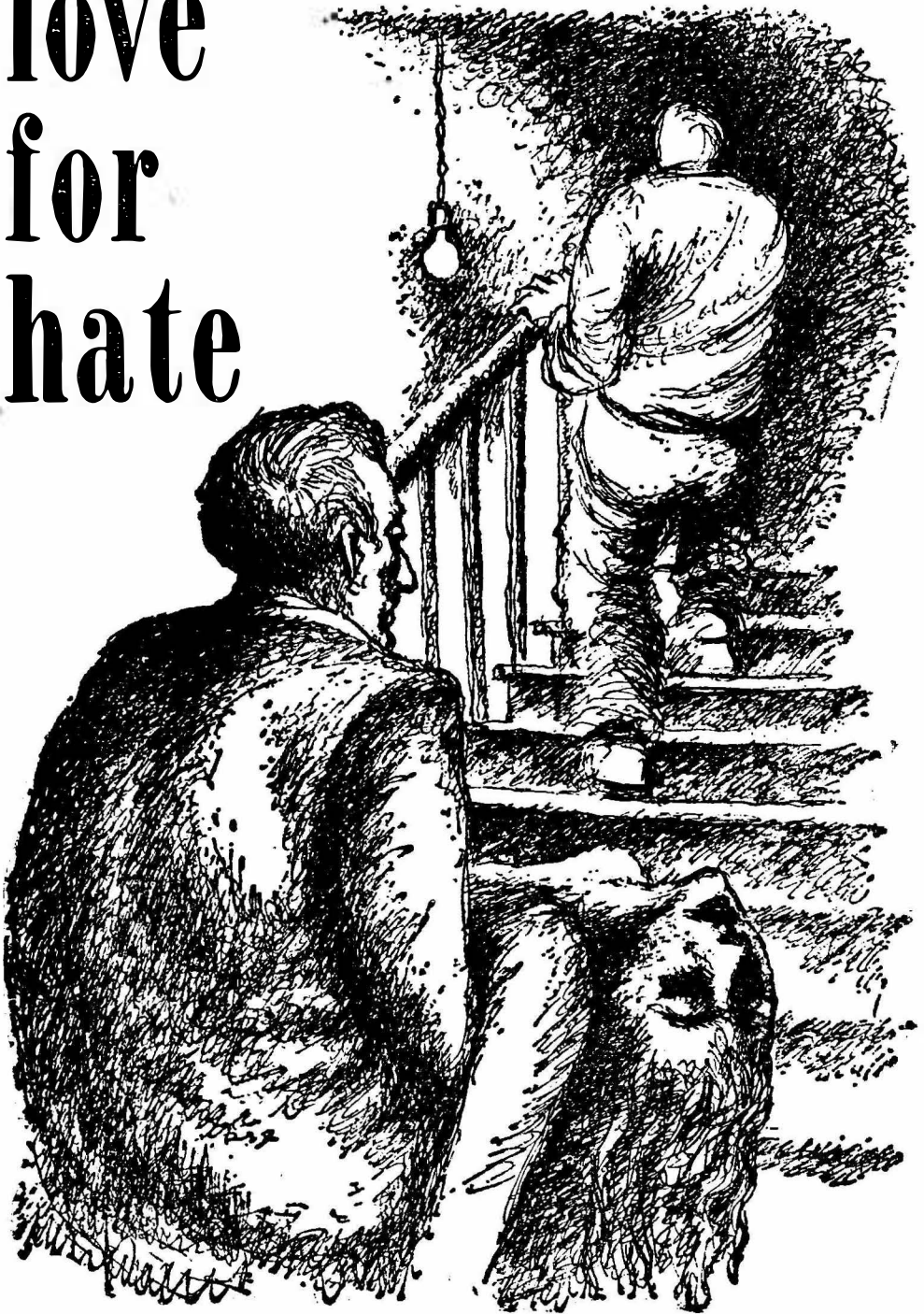
Giva bigga kiss for me to my wife and your sister. Hopa you both drop dead.

*You bigga wise guy,
Antonio*

P.S.

See back cover

love for hate



BY XAVIER SAN LUIS REY

Suave and handsome, Jamie Caballero was an expert with women . . . and he hated them.

PAUSING in the doorway leading to Lefty Clark's gambling casino in the Cabaret Tropicana, Jaimie Caballero touched his tie, smoothed his sleek black hair, passed thumb and index finger over his mustache, shrugged his shoulders to settle the jacket of his drill cien suit, narrowed his eyes almost till they were oriental slits of hate, and set forth to make another conquest.

His victim, a young exotic-looking creature with shapely legs, was sitting at the bar listening to the Afro-Cuban music being played by the stringed trio on the small stage above the bar.

The Señorita was beautiful. Dark, with her soft blond hair arraigned in an Italian boy style, she wore a black lowcut dress that revealed the perfumed slopes of her firmly pointed breasts. Her nose was cutely small and turned up slightly at the tip, while her eyes were large and bright and enhanced by the longest eyelashes Jaimie had ever seen. She was smoking a cigarette from a long ivory holder.

As he passed her, looking slick and shiny and immaculate as al-

ways, their eyes met and Jaimie winked and she tilted her head a little to one side and looked him up and down. Then her tongue darted from her mouth, like a cobra might do Jaimie thought, and moistened her lips.

"This Señorita," Jaimie thought slyly, "has just elected herself to share my bed tonight." Had he been a fox coming upon a chicken at that moment he might have chuckled.

Selecting a stool beside her Jaimie summoned the bartender with a brisk snap of his fingers and ordered a martini, very dry, and turned and smiled at the Señorita, flashing his teeth like a shark confronting a defenseless fish, and passed some trivial comment. When she answered him, rather indifferently and with a smart toss of the head, he invited her to a drink and she, again indifferently, accepted.

"Are you a Habañera by any chance?" Jaimie asked politely when the cantinero served the drinks.

"Oh, no," the Señorita said, smiling wryly. "I'm merely visiting the

city of Habana. Originally I'm from the moon. My space ship is the third one from the left as you enter the parking lot." She blinked her eyelashes. "I'm sure you must have noticed it. It's painted the most scandalous pink."

Jaimie slapped his knee. "Ah, but of course!" He pointed a finger at her. "You're a turista." He leaned forward. "I'll bet you're visiting the earth on one of those good-will tours."

The Señorita nodded. "Yes, you could call it that."

"If I may say so, Señorita," Jaimie said, "you speak perfect Spanish for a tourist. So much so, in fact, and with just the proper shade of accent that one might be inclined to guess you were from the province of Oriente, Cuba, rather than the moon."

"Moon-maids come well equipped," the Señorita said. "We are taught to speak all the languages of the earth, including the universal language of love."

"That happens to be my favorite language," Jaimie said. He extended his hand. "My name is Caballero. Jaimie Caballero."

The Señorita looked down at Jaimie's hand for a moment. Then she gave him her index finger and when he squeezed it she curled it up and made a slight scratching movement at his palm. "My name is Lola," she said, and stuck her tongue in her cheek and looked at him seductively and smiled.

The back of Jaimie's neck tingled and he could have sworn the hairs stiffened like reeds in a swamp when she offered him the erotic counter-sign. Very rarely did he meet a woman who could arouse any emotional effect in him at all. "This woman is obviously a shameless harlot," Jaimie thought. "Only a puta would have resorted to such a disgusting stratagem. Yes, wicked and shameless and utterly corrupted. She deserves everything I plan to do to her."

Abruptly the exciting strains of an overture invaded the casino and the garden theatre just outside the salon went dark. As the rhythmic patter of bongos set the beat, chorus girls in scanty attire were spotlighted on the stage and on the hidden cat-walks in the trees. Jamie flashed his teeth again. "The cabaret is featuring a beautiful Rodney production tonight," he said. "It's called voodoo something or other. Would you care to join me at a table as my guest?"

The Señorita shrugged her shoulders. "I've seen the show several times," she said, picking up an ermine stole, "but if you insist. . . ."

Later, as they sat under the stars at a table lit by a chinese lantern, Jaimie commenced to put his usual scheme into operation. Surreptitiously and with quick deft movements he began to drop small amounts of a potent sleeping powder in each of the daiquiris the Señorita ordered. Meanwhile, she

watched the show with a quiet contemplation, offering nothing by way of conversation and lighting cigarette after cigarette, and Jaimie watched her, awaiting the drugs reaction.

When the show ended and a dance band began to play they chatted and Jaimie inflated her ego with a host of carefully chosen compliments. Oh, how gullible, how impossibly stupid she was. Her conversation was dull and trite and coated with ice. She didn't seem to have any spirit or warmth in her shapely bones. She turned out to be a horrible dancer, too. The clumsy ass practically ruined his new patent leather shoes, she stepped on them so much. But she was strong. God, he'd fed her enough of the powder by that time to bring an elephant to its knees.

When she ordered her seventh daiquiri Jaimie became annoyed and threw caution to the winds and slipped a triple amount of the drug in her glass. At the rate she was drinking daiquiris, if he didn't dispatch her quickly, the tab for the drinks alone would consume the single twenty dollar bill he had in his pocket.

Soon, and much to his relief, Lola began to complain of a deep and overwhelming drowsiness, and Jaimie, pleased by her discomfort, chivalrously offered to take her home.

The Señorita protested, weakly, of course, but Jaimie had antici-

pated as much. Most of her kind, he knew, preferred to leave their extramarital escapades and romances at the door when the excitement of the evening was over, like the car placed in the garage at the end of the day. Stalling for time, Jaimie fussed over her until she grew so tired and groggy that she didn't have the strength to argue when he insisted.

"Rest your fears, Señorita," he told her. "Soon I'll have you safely home." And she said, "Very well, but please, please don't accompany me to the door. My family . . . they would not understand."

"Have no fear on that account," Jaimie said. He flashed his teeth. "You see, that beautiful wedding ring on your finger. It proves you are expensively married. Therefore, I will be perfectly discreet."

"My head," the Señorita moaned. "What is happening to it? It is going round and round and round."

"We are in your space-ship," Jaimie said, chuckling softly to himself. "We are on our way to your place of origin on the moon."

"Oh, my head," the Señorita groaned again. "Please, take me out of this terrible place. I beg you." Her hands flew to her temples and she fell back in her chair and looked at him dazedly with eyes that seemed to be bursting from their sockets. "As you wish, Señorita," Jaimie said, and rose to his feet and dropped the twenty dollar

bill on the table and offered her his hand.

Somehow Jaimie managed to guide her stumbling figure through the maze of tables, nodding apologetic smiles at waiters and whispering excuses to those people who paused to stare. In the parking lot he got her into his car and she slumped over on the seat and fell asleep.

To test the depth of her unconsciousness Jaimie squeezed her breast and kissed her several times. He even shoved his hand under her skirt and pinched her thighs, but she didn't stir or moan or flutter an eyelash. Were it not for her breathing he would have sworn she was dead.

Pressing the starter, the motor came to life and Jaimie maneuvered the car out of the parking lot, passed naked maidens in the fountain that shone ochre, blue and white, and soon was speeding along the boulevard.

Jaimie Caballero, or so people said, had been born with a forked tongue and horns protruding from his forehead. He didn't carry a pitchfork or wear a tail because he was by nature fastidious and conservative and didn't like to weigh down his appearance with non-essentials. While he could hardly be considered Habana's most eligible bachelor, he was easily its most disreputable citizen. His police rec-

ord alone was longer than the atlantic cable. If he was a scoundrel he didn't have any weaknesses and was a man sufficiently well-groomed and educated and cultured to pass himself off in social circles as a caballero of impeccable background and tastes. He had many, many dislikes; he had a grudge against the world and swore it owed him a living. Jaimie hated a lot of things, but paramount amongst his grievances he particularly hated women. Oh, how he despised them! Ever since he could remember his life had been malignantly influenced by them. No more diabolical creature, he felt, walked the face of the earth. They lied and plotted and cheated and made life miserable for men from the cradle to the grave. There was his first wife, for example. A blond. Well, not blond, really, but a peroxide one as they say; and as artificial as the color of her hair. A greedy female, too. All she ever knew how to say was give me, give me, give me, all the time. Was never satisfied. Not even in bed. Oh, she was a regular nympho allright. He'd been selling dope that year. Earning good money, too. Over a hundred pesos a week. But his income hadn't been enough. Not for a slut like that, anyway. God, how that broad could drink. A day hadn't passed that she didn't down at least two fifths of Pedro Domeque. Had he really loved her passionately, madly, as he'd thought?

But love or more infatuation, perverse habit or masochistic caprice, whatever he felt for her had left him feeling sick inside, where it mattered most. Yet he'd always felt he couldn't live without her. Then she began threatening him. If he didn't get more money she told him. Imagine that. Fear. Untranquillizing and desperate fear. So he'd begun to steal. He began burglarizing private homes in Marianao, an exclusive suburb just outside Habana. But it was only natural that he make a mistake and get caught one night. After all, he'd been working outside his profession. Some men were born to be thieves, but he'd been fashioned to wear white tie and tails. He'd never been a caballero with champagne tastes and a canned beer pocket.

Dragged before a judge, he'd been tried and convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. Confined in that grim fortress-like place called the Principi he'd felt like a blue-blood persian cat locked in a cage with a bunch of common alley cats. And of course Elena hadn't waited. Never wrote him either; though he received news of her from time to time from new arrivals, men who had looked upon her stunning body and been graced by her sensual smile in that world beyond the towering grey walls.

Then, one day, he received the staggering news that she had become a prostitute and acquired a

pimp. What a blow that had been! What a terrible degradation of the goddess he had placed on a pedestal. Her betrayal left him feeling as if she had thrown his soul in a garbage can. The bitterness of her betrayal remained with him long after the sweetness of her embrace had been forgotten.

Then, years later, vengeance.

He caught her as she came out of a cheap boarding house in the old section of Habana and started to cross the street. He'd been trying to find her for the longest time. He could still remember that terrified look on her face, almost comical with surprise, when she heard the sudden roar of the motor and saw the car bearing down on her with reckless speed. She had thrown her hands to her face and screamed hysterically. The car, he thought, had lurched a little and bounced when it passed over her body. He often suspected he had heard the sound of a squashed pumpkin might make when the wheels of the car crushed her skull. The moment of her death marked the most thrilling, most euphoric event in his life. He still trembled with emotion whenever he recalled the incident.

His second wife. How odd he had learned nothing from his first mistake. Nereida was a shy, timid little girl with the saddest eyes he had ever seen. Whenever he spoke to her she would look at him as if she were being scolded and was about to cry. Strange as hell, she

was. Seemed scared of people and awed by life. Never spoke much, either. He often wondered if he hadn't married her out of pity more than anything else. Oh, and she was religious too. Went to church every Sunday without fail and never climbed in bed without saying some devout prayer at night. On Saturdays she went to confession; though he could never imagine what a dried prune like Nerida had to confess about.

But with time he'd learned, by God. The little slut had never gone to confess at all. She had visited the confessional so often because she had been trying to corrupt the priest. Hadn't she run off with his best friend? Yeah, and after he had befriended the penniless pig and taken him to his own home to live, too. That was gratitude for you. Oh, the gall of them! How dare they desecrate his home, his castle, his very own bed, with their illicit, disgusting passion? It was a good thing he had never seen them again. But he would get his revenge someday. He was saving a bottle of nitric acid for the occasion. Kept it in the glove apartment of his car because he knew their next meeting would take place in the street. She wouldn't be beautiful any more when the acid did its work. She'd be ugly. Hideously ugly and maybe even blind. Yes, he would get his revenge someday. He just had to be patient, that was all.

His mother. Just another kook

like all the rest of the filthy females that had played a part in the sordid drama that was his life. A harsh, unbelievably cruel woman. For some psychological reason he could never revive her memory without visualizing an old woman with a horribly wrinkled face, like an Egyptian mummy's, who had a black cat with yellow eyes perched on top of her head. A fiend, really. As a child she had burned his hands by holding them over the flames of the stove because she had caught him stealing pennies from her purse. Not a mother, but a monster. That's what she was.

One night, scandalously drunk and seeking a tardy revenge, he had visited Colon Cemetery and urinated on her grave. Oh, what delightful satisfaction the act had given him! What an original way to express his contempt of her.

His Aunt. The perfectly demented type. Suffered epileptic fits and called them spiritual trances. A horrible person, really. Practiced sorcery and claimed to be in constant touch with the devil. Sometimes, she told him once, beelzebub came to share her bed. Finally ended up in an insane asylum when her husband, driven out of his mind by the devilry she thrust on him, committed suicide by dousing himself with alcohol and striking a fatal match. She herself died a few years later in a padded cell in Mazorra, the crazy house, when she was eighty eight years old.

There had been many, many women in Jaimie's life; scores, battalions, whole armies of women; perfumed entities who tried to scratch him with their claws, only to have him conquer, exploit, deflower, ravish them instead.

There was Blanquita, for instance. He'd had to drug her and shave all the hair off her head, right down to the scalp, and brand her breasts with cigarettes before he was able to discourage her from chasing him. Later, she had undergone an abortion to rid herself of his child and died on the kitchen table the abortionist had used for the operation. Her body, he learned from the newspapers, had been found in the city dump.

Jaimie's hatred of women was like a thick fog that came up from his stomach to chill his heart each time he embraced a woman; a hate much like terror. Oh, how he despised them! All women, he cynically observed on one occasion, were putas, including his madre, and when a man was foolish enough to marry one of them he did nothing more than legalize their racket. Throughout the years there had been many, many conquests and he had violated many, many women, some virgin, but mostly those that had been used a thousand times.

He would never forget the American woman, a school teacher and old maid who had never been erotically initiated. He'd taken thou-

sands of dollars from her before he finally brought their relationship to a dramatic end. But she hadn't escaped his special touch entirely, even though she had paid the price. The photographs he'd taken of her in the nude were works of art. He gloated over what her father, a college professor who taught anatomy in some mid-western university, must have thought when he received the photographs in the mail.

Matilda Slaten was not a pretty woman, he remembered. She was too skinny and too plain and too old fashioned for that. She was so skinny, in fact, that her dressmaker must have used a micrometer to measure her waist. Her feet, on the other hand, could have been measured only with a yard-stick. Still, she was not wholly without attraction, even though she wore glasses and was one of those vulgar women who permitted the hair to grow under her armpits. How could he concern himself with her physical appearance, wretched as it was, when her bankbook was filled with such attractive figures?

He had introduced himself to Matilda while she lounged by the pool in a deck-chair at the Rosita Hornedo hotel. What a handsome figure he'd cut in his McGregor shorts, matching beach jacket, Hollywood sandals and French sunglasses. His latin charm, good looks and easy wit, abetted by her own deep feelings of loneliness and boredom had quickly won her con-

fidence. "You're so handsome," she told him when they became friends. "You know, I'd say you're good-looking enough to be a movie star."

"The Señorita is most gracious with her compliments," Jaimie replied. He smiled, flashing his white even teeth. "Most women are not so generous, so, how do you say it?" He snapped his fingers. "Yes, now I have it. Flattering. That is the word. Not where Jamie is concerned, anyway."

Matilda lowered her sunglasses to the tip of her nose. "You're being modest, of course," she said, looking at him curiously.

"No, I am not being modest," Jaimie said. He began drawing circles in the sand. "For some reason I have never been able to fathom why women do not like me. Actually I'm a chivalrous person. I mean a gentleman." He looked up at Matilda. "I always try to act like a gentleman where women are concerned. I mean I would never think of befriending a woman on account of any, well, you know. Sex and that sort of thing." He sat up suddenly. "Why, do you know what a woman had the nerve to tell me once?" He slapped his knee. "She said I reminded her of a villain she had seen in one of those silent pictures. She said that I was tall and thin, just like the villain, and that I had the same mysterious aspect. She said that all I needed to complete the impression was a top hat and a

flowing black cape and a graveyard to slink about in. Can you imagine that?"

Matilda laughed. "Oh, my. Oh, you poor dear boy." Her hand was to her mouth. "Obviously prejudiced." She began to laugh again and Jamie watched her, pleased by her reaction. "The woman was definitely prejudiced," Matilda said again, and extended her hand and patted Jaimie's cheek. Regaining her composure she rose from her chair and stood on her feet and Jaimie saw that she was wearing one of those two piece swim suits with ruffled panties. Because her legs were long and thin and the panties were all puffed out the idea occurred to Jaimie that she looked like an ostrich. To make her even less attractive she had freckles all over her back and arms and legs. "I didn't mean to laugh," she said. "I hope you'll forgive me. Would you like to buy me a drink?"

"It would be a pleasure," Jaimie said, and rose to his feet and offered her his arm. "If you find it agreeable, I think we should go and have ourselves a ball. I am a very entertaining fellow when accompanied by a person I like."

Matilda took his elbow. "Fine. I haven't had any fun in such a long, long time I'm beginning to feel like a penance." They began to walk arm in arm towards the lobby of the hotel.

That night he'd taken her to dine at the Miami restaurant on the

Prado. Later they gambled a bit at the Sans Souci and still later they visited the Sierra Cabaret and danced to the rhythms of Benny More. When he took her to an infamous establishment in the Barrio de la Victoria without bothering to explain that it featured pornographic motion pictures and they sat in the small theatre to watch the show Matilda made no comment. She fidgeted nervously once or twice and said, "Oh, my." or "Oh, my goodness," when the scenes were extra ribald and disgustingly vulgar, but otherwise she sat bravely through the whole thing and at the end offered Jamie no criticism or reproach. At four thirty in the morning he took a tired and weary Matilda to her hotel.

"Oh, but I've had a wonderful evening, Jaimie," she told him as they paused at the entrance to the Capri Hotel. Trembling with ecstasy she looked towards the sky and closed her eyes. "Simply, simply wonderful. Oh, that music. The food. Havana. Oh, I wish I could remain here all my life."

"Cuba is a fascinating place, Señorita," Jaimie said. "May I see you tomorrow?"

Matilda blinked her eyes. "Tomorrow? What do you mean tomorrow?" She winked at him and shoved him in the chest. "You're not getting rid of me that easily, buster. You're going to see more of me tonight." She winked again. "I'm inviting you, my handsome

friend, to a nitecap. In my room."

Jaimie lowered his eyes and looked uncomfortable. "Does the Señorita feel . . . I mean . . ."

"You silly boy. You think I'm drunk, don't you?" She pouted.

"Well, I'm not. If I feel anything at all it's daring. Hear that? I said daring." She shoved him in the chest again. "Even a little wicked." She turned suddenly and started up the steps of the hotel. "Come along, buster."

Jaimie shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever you say, Señorita."

Jaimie would never forget the special scene they played in the intimate surroundings of Matilda's luxurious apartment. The ham had been brought out in him and, caught under the magic spell of the moment, he had almost been able to imagine a motion picture camera squatting on a caved-in tripod on the floor with its crew behind it, the director and script girl standing to one side, the mike boom hanging over their heads and other technicians quietly standing by watching the action.

"Do you feel at ease, Señorita?"

Matilda looked up at him, a curious expression on her face, and placed her highball on the cocktail table. Rhumba music played softly in the background. "Yes, of course. Shouldn't I?"

"You do not feel afraid to be alone with me?"

"On the contrary. You're pleasant company." She turned to the

window and looked out over the Malecon drive where the lights from passing cars were strung out like luminous beads of pearls. In the distance the beacon from the Morro Castle threw a shaft of light through the darkness and just as quickly cut it off again.

"I have a theory about woman," Jaimie said, his face a somber mask of seriousness.

"Most men do," Matilda said. "Do you suppose you have discovered something new?"

"Yes. I think most women suffer periods of heat, like dogs."

Matilda turned and faced him. "That's not a very flattering idea, is it?"

"No, I suppose not. Nevertheless I have found this to be true. I think a man is instinctively made aware of a woman's desire to be loved. It does not have anything to do with odors exactly, but with a certain indefinable feeling almost too strong to resist. A kind of electrifying current is transmitted by the woman to the man. Not exactly of her own volition, but perhaps due to some chemical reaction in her body, which grips the man's will and bends him to a task which he might normally deem wrong and utterly impossible. The man does not necessarily have to know the woman intimately to experience this peculiar urge. It can come upon him in a sudden flood of passion, like blood rushing to the head, with a woman he has met

for the first time or met occasionally, but now encounters under favorable circumstances. She could be the housewife living next door coming to borrow an egg or a spoon of sugar, or the sales-girl selling cosmetics from door to door. Suddenly the man feels that he can take liberties with the woman facing him without suffering any embarrassing consequences, or he assumes as much. Not with the mind or reasoning powers, but with the senses. So he makes some move to take her, or perhaps he doesn't. But if he does and the woman screams and calls for the police or merely gets offended and slaps his face the spell will be broken. It will go away and never return again; at least not with the same woman. This urge, mind you, has nothing to do with lust or any savage inclination on the man's part to rape or mistreat the woman. It is a feeling that one knows is right and compatible to the woman's wishes even while resisting it. There is a meeting of the subconscious minds, so to speak, and a male and female face each other on a common and unrestricted level. The man makes his move and the woman pales and stands as if hypnotized, trembling under his touch. When she is thus she cannot listen to the admonishments of her conscience. She surrenders her body to her lover for one divine and absolute moment of pleasure, a moment that is memorably spent."

Jaimie came up to her and looked into her eyes and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Do you understand, Señorita?"

"Hardly," Matilda said, and turned and stared out the window again. "But I will say this much for your theory: aside from its being rather long-winded it stands on a par with Einstein's theory of relativity. I daresay I could never hope to unravel what you've been talking about."

Jaimie turned her about gently and lifted her chin and kissed her tenderly on the mouth while she stared into his eyes and made no move to stop him. When he drew his face away she said: "I suppose you're entertaining the idea that I'm in heat now, like some ordinary bitch? Tell me something, Mr. Caballero. How many volts am I generating now?"

"More than enough to inspire me to lead you to the nuptial couch."

Matilda pushed him away from her. "Don't take too much for granted, Mr. Caballero." There was a note of warning in her voice.

"I never do where women are concerned," he said and took a step forward and wrapped his arms about her waist and kissed her again, suddenly and forcibly, but she quickly broke away from him and slapped his face. "I warned you," she said, avoiding his eyes.

Jaimie touched his cheek and smiled. He knew Matilda hadn't

wanted to slap him. The effort had obviously left her flustered. "You seem to be out of practice," he said.

Matilda blinked her eyes. "Practice? What do you mean?"

"The art of slapping a man's face," Jaimie said. "Obviously you don't get a chance to do it very often. Still, I should have anticipated such a reaction. It is a specialty in women of your type. I mean all prudish women react the same under these circumstances. But while they slap the man's face they hope desperately that he will not retire his advances and will continue the attack so they can surrender decorously, seemingly vanquished by brute force and therefore maintaining their honor in tact. This is a favorite strategem of women. Especially when they feel any sort of attraction for a man."

"You seem to be full of theories," Matilda said.

"I've managed to learn a little something about women."

"Perhaps, but you've made a terrible mistake with me."

"Have I, Señorita?" He stepped closer. "Why don't you let me love you the way you want to be loved, the way all women need to be loved?"

Matilda fidgeted nervously on her feet. "You're being perfectly ridiculous, Mr. Caballero. Whether you realize it or not I'm old enough to be your mother." She wrung her hands. "I think you had better leave."

"I don't believe you want me to leave, Señorita."

Matilda turned on him furiously. "What on earth are you imagining now?" Suddenly she forced a smile. "Oh, what an awful comedy," she said, and brought her hand to her forehead and shook her head.

Jaimie stepped up to her in a rush and took her in his arms again. He began to kiss her about the neck, the shoulders. "Don't, Jaimie, please," she whimpered. She tried to push him away, but when he found her mouth she went limp and then, abruptly, her arms rose in the air and flew about his neck and she clung to him, a moan escaping from her throat.

She was resting quietly in the sweetness of the moment when Jaimie pushed her away and lit a cigarette.

Quickly turning her back on him, feeling shame and chagrin, she fought to regain her composure, breathing heavily. Finally she faced him. "Well, now that you've proven a point . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Jaimie shrugged. "What do you suggest, Señorita?"

Her eyes flared. "Dam you! You're trying to make a fool of me!" She clenched her fists. "Just who do you think you are?"

"You're making a fool of yourself," Jaimie said.

"You're not going to kiss me again . . . or anything?"

"If you want me to, yes."

Matilda bowed her head. "You'd like to hear me beg, wouldn't you?"

"It would be easier on my conscience that way."

She went up to him and leaned on his chest. "Oh, please, Jaimie. If you're going to do anything at all please do so now. Don't torment me this way." She gasped and buried her face in his shoulder. "I can't help myself anymore. It's shameless of me, I know, but suddenly I can't fight. . . . I feel . . . so desperate." She looked imploringly into his eyes. "Don't think badly of me, Jaimie, please." Her arms crept slowly about his neck and she closed her eyes. "Kiss me darling. Oh, it's true. I need love so terribly, terribly much. Please take me, Jaimie. Please. Oh, God." She began to sob.

Jaimie wrapped his arms about her. "Let's go to the bedroom," he said, and led her gently away.

The following night was a repetition of the night before, but with certain innovations. He wined and dined her and of course he called Navarro. The camera was ready and so was the room, the autopsy room he called it, that he normally used for these occasions. He would have given anything to have seen her face, the expression on her ugly spinster's face, when Matilda awoke in the morning and found

herself alone in bed, her head throbbing from the narcotic and the photos in an envelope leaning against the lamp on the nite table.

Jaimie had posed her unconscious body in a number of vulgar positions on the bed, and when he examined the negatives later he felt that he had given his camera work the perfect macabre, if not actually revolting, touch.

The next day they met in a bar called the El Zorro y El Cuervo, in the Vedado, and he acquainted her with his demands. She hadn't wanted to come, but finally agreed when he muttered threats. There were tears and accusations and more threats when they began to talk. Finally, Matilda snatched up her hand-bag and slapped his face and ran from the bar, crying and acting like an utterly bewildered person until she managed to hail a cab and disappear.

Jaimie had given her the negatives, but in exchange she had given him four thousand dollars in cash. That same night Jaimie had packed his bags and left for Varadero Beach. He took a couple of girls along and of course he had a truly marvelous time indeed.

Jaimie stopped the car before a small hotel in Marianao. The section was a rural one and completely deserted at this time of night. The desk clerk, Navarro, had been advised of his coming and they

greeted one another when Jaimie entered the door with his conquest in his arms. Then the clerk picked up a camera and case from behind the desk and took a key off the rack and led the way up the stairs.

In the room Jaimie dumped the unconscious woman on the bed and immediately relieved her of all her jewelry, which he stuffed in his pocket. The money he found in her purse, a little over a hundred pesos, was equally divided between himself and the clerk. As the latter started to leave Jaimie called to him. "This puta," he said. "She will not wake up for hours. As you can see she is very beautiful. Should you care to, you may enjoy her yourself for a bit when I am gone."

The clerk nodded eagerly. He was a short stocky fellow who wore glasses and had a pimply face.

"What about the marijuana, Jaimie?"

"I will leave the customary package in her purse, mixed with her cigarettes. Please don't get tempted and smoke one. Remember, you have to have your wits about you when this puta confronts you tomorrow morning. Am I understood?"

"Sure, Jaimie. Don't worry about a thing. You can trust me. I've never failed you yet, have I?" He smiled, displaying bad yellowed teeth. "After a while, and with so much practice a man becomes an expert at this sort of thing."

"Good," Jaimie said. "Now close the door." He began to take off his jacket. "I have lots of work to do."

"I'll see you later," the clerk said, craning his neck to look at the woman lying on the bed. "She has very beautiful thighs." He passed his tongue over his lips. "Will you be long, Jaimie?"

"Goodnight, Pepe."

"Allright, goodnight, Jaimie."

As the clerk closed the door Jaimie bent over the woman and started to remove her clothes.

In the morning the woman would wake up, startled to find herself in a strange bed in a strange hotel. If she was wise and reacted like most the others she would dress quickly (her clothing would be foul with the pungent odor of rum because Jaimie always sprinkled his victim's clothing a bit), and slink away without asking any questions.

But if she complained to the clerk (and some did occasionally), about her missing valuables, he would shrug and point to the legend on the wall advising guests that the hotel was not responsible for personal articles unchecked at the desk. If she insisted on questioning him he would inform her that she had arrived at the hotel accompanied by a man, a rather elderly looking fellow, very distinguished looking, who was grey at the temples and wore glasses (Jai-

mie was tall, thin, wore a mustache). No, he didn't know him. He had never seen the gentleman before. Yes, both appeared to be quite drunk. "You were in a very gay and festive mood, Señorita," the clerk would tell her. "But if I may say so, Señorita, you should not, well, I am not one who pokes his nose into another's affairs, but those cigarettes, Señorita. You should be more careful. You should never smoke them publicly. I mean the police. Perhaps they might not be so broadminded. I hope you understand."

"Cigarettes? What on earth are you talking about?"

"The cigarettes in your purse, Señorita." The clerk would look left and right to see if he could be overheard. "Marijuana I believe you call them. You showed one of them to me and offered it. As a matter of fact, Señorita, you began to light one before your escort stopped you."

The woman would fall back, hand to throat. "Marijuana?"

"Si, Señorita," the clerk would tell her, avoiding her eyes.

A quick, fumbling search would follow. The victims always reacted the same. Then the damaging evidence would be discovered and finally the shocked, bewildered, embarrassed, guilty looks accompanied by a flood of apologies and weak explanations. Later the hurried exit. She would feel grateful for the chance to get away and dis-

appear. There was nothing else she could do, for Jaimie was a very thorough fellow whenever he made a conquest.

Approximately two hours from the time he entered the hotel Jaimie came down the stairs. He looked tired and disheveled. His shirt was opened at the neck and he wore no tie. His suit jacket was slung over his arm. As he walked up to the desk Pepe laid his newspaper aside and smiled.

"Everything go allright, Jaimie?"

"As well as could be expected under the circumstances," he said, and placed his camera on the desk. "Put that in a safe place."

"Is the Señorita still asleep?"

"Very much so."

"There's no chance of her waking up all of a sudden, is there?"

"None at all. There's enough narcotics in her to keep her unconscious for hours yet. She'll probably wake up around noon, but that doesn't mean you're going to take advantage of the situation, Pepe. When you visit her I suggest that you finish quickly. Once you leave her room you're not to return. If you fool around you could invite trouble."

"Oh, I'll finish quickly, Jaimie. I'll be in and out in no time at all, and I won't go back for seconds, either."

"See that you don't. Any slip-ups now and it will be your neck and

your neck alone that will be placed in the noose." He started to put on his jacket. "Another thing, Pepe. You're not to touch anything in the room. Leave everything just as it is. Is that clear?"

"Sure, Jaimie. I understand."

"You'd better."

"Are you coming by tomorrow?"

"No. I'm leaving for Santiago for a few days. I need a rest."

"How about the jewelry?"

"I hope to sell it this afternoon."

"You gonna bring my share of the money to me?"

"No. I'll send you a check by mail."

"You won't forget, will you?"

Jaimie turned abruptly and headed for the door. "I'll call you as soon as I get back from Santiago. In the meanwhile, try to stay out of trouble."

"Ok., Jaimie."

"So long, Pepe."

"So long, Jaimie. Have a nice time, hear?"

"You too, amigo." The door closed behind him.

In the car, Jaimie started the motor, shifted gears, and sped away from the curb. Driving at his usual reckless speed he soon left the suburbs behind, entered the city, and cruised down Infanta street. On the corner of Reina he paused for a stoplight and reached in his pocket for the package of marijuana cigarettes he always carried. He was feeling listless and needed a "reefer" to give him a lift. When he dis-

covered the pack was empty he cursed and crumpled it up and flung it angrily through the window. Then he stepped heavily on the accelerator and the car shot forward as he swung the steering wheel violently. The tires screeched as he made the u-turn and headed for Chinatown.

When he reached the "barrio de los chinos" he parked the car before a gloomy, decrepit building on Zanja street, which was deserted at this time of the morning, and went inside. Climbing three flights of stairs he finally paused at a door and listened for a moment. Then he knocked softly.

It took him a long time to rouse the "pusher" out of bed. Finally the door opened a little and a swarthy face illuminated by a kerosene lamp appeared.

"Yeah?"

"It's me, Pacheco. Jaimie."

"Jaimie?"

"Yeah. You know, Caballero. What's the matter, don't you recognize your friends?"

The door opened wider. "I wouldn't recognize my own mother the way I feel," the pusher said. He was dressed only in shorts. "Jesus, what a head."

"Do you have any stuff?"

"I always got stuff."

"Fine. Give me two packs."

"Why didn't you come around early for your stuff?"

"I don't want no lecture, just two packs of stuff."

The pusher scratched his crotch. "Everybody else comes around early, but you got to come around at three o'clock in the morning. What's the matter, don't you have any consideration for people?"

"Look, are you gonna give me the stuff or not? I'm in a hurry."

"You're always in a hurry." He scratched his behind. "Ok., I'll give you the stuff. How much you want?"

"Two packs."

"At this time of the morning the price is double."

"To hell with that. Get the stuff."

"Ok., I'll get it, but just so's you know."

"I know. Now shake a leg and get it."

It took the pusher several minutes to complete his errand. When he next appeared he stuck his hand through the crack of the door and said, "That'll be ten bucks," and Jaimie gave him the money and took the marijuana. Then he said, "So long, you bastard," and turned and started through the darkness of the hall. "I hope you break your neck on the stairs," the pusher called out, and slammed his door.

Reaching the stairs, Jaimie lit a reefer and started to descend. At the bottom he paused to finish the cigarette. Then, his spirits soaring from the stimulating effects of the drug, he started down the lengthy hall that led to the street.

Since all the bulbs that normally lighted the building had been bro-

ken or blown out a long time ago and never replaced the hall was in complete darkness and he could see nothing in front of him. So he lit a match and moved very slowly and very carefully, testing with his foot for objects that might lie in his path like a blind man with his cane.

Halfway through the hall the match went out and he decided to continue the rest of the way without any light, only to collide with a garbage can and send its metal cover falling to the concrete floor with a loud gyrating sound. In the same instant a cat that had been foraging in the refuse howled and leaped over his shoulder in a panicky flight to escape.

"Me cago en la leche!" he swore.

Bending down quickly to rub the bruise on his shin, which was throbbing with pain, he suddenly became aware of stealthy footsteps behind him and he instinctively straightened up like a shot and started to whirl about, only to feel a blow strike him heavily on the back.

"Eh? Pero . . . pero que es esto?"

The force of the blow knocked the wind out of him and caused his knees to buckle, but he recovered quickly and whirled about, his groping hands contacting a shadowy form.

"Hijo de puta!" he cursed. He grabbed his assailant. "Who are you? What is this?"

Powerful hands broke his grip

and shoved him roughly away and another blow struck him in the shoulder, slamming him against the wall. In a flash it occurred to him that something had been thrust in and pulled out of his flesh; an instrument long and sharp and pointed. With sudden horror he realized it was a knife and that he had been mortally stabbed.

"Dios mio!" he thought in a panic. "I am being murdered!"

Throwing himself on his assailant in a frenzy he struggled with him for a moment, only to sense a second assailant come up from behind and throw an arm around his neck. Then, another blow struck him in the stomach. Driven in low the knife was plunged to the hilt and jerked upwards, tearing the flesh. Then a fist crashed into his face and rockets burst in his brain and he went limp. When his assailants released him he sank to his knees.

"Cobardes," he moaned. "Cowards." Kicked suddenly from behind he was thrown forward in a rush and his head smashed against the wall.

Helpless, he was only vaguely conscious of quick, fumbling hands searching his pockets. In their haste to rob him the thieves jerked and tore his clothing. "Hijo de putas," he cursed, and felt his head pulled back by the hair and another fist smash his face and blood gush from his nose. He was only dimly aware of the sound of running feet

when his assailants fled and slammed the hallway door.

Lying there, his body racked by pain and his brain swelling with a mounting fever, Jaimie shivered. He knew he was dying. An artery on his neck had been slashed and was squirting blood like a leak in a garden hose. He could feel the blood soaking his shirt and underclothing. He had never imagined the feel of his own blood could be so loathsome.

Now, Jaimie began to tremble convulsively. No part of his body lay idle. His hands, knees, legs, feet, shook in a hideous fashion. Then, from the appalling darkness and loneliness that surrounded him, a faint aura of light appeared and a shadow loomed and he cried out:

"Please . . . help." His voice was feeble and guttural.

The shadow stirred.

"What are you mumbling about, hoodlum?"

"Please . . ."

The old woman with the kerosene lamp studied the muchacho lying at her feet. She was drunk and feeling irritable about it. On her way to empty a bucket of excrement in the toilet she had almost tripped over the prostrate body. "Speak up, hoodlum. What are you mumbling about?"

Jaimie whimpered and the old woman cocked her ear to listen. Then a sour look crossed her face. She thought he was drunk.

She bent down and peered into his face. "Allright, speak." She shook him. "What is the matter with you? Are you sick?" Now she recognized him. "Oh, so it is you, that worthless chulo the putas call Caballero" She straightened up, snorting with disgust. "Well, you'll get no sympathy from me." She pulled her foot away in a hurry when Jaimie's hand touched her shoe. "Keep your ugly hands off me, you devil," she said, and threw a kick at him.

"Dios mio," Jaimie moaned.

"Swine! Marijuanero! May the devil eat your wretched soul!"

The old woman threw another kick at him. "Get up! Come on, up! Get out of this house!" She kicked him again. "Come on, out!"

Jaimie whimpered. Then, mustering all the strength he could, he raised his head from the floor and looked up at the old woman. His face grimaced pain and he trembled under his effort.

"You . . . you filthy . . . puta!"

The old woman snatched up her bucket. "Put a you say?" She raised the bucket over Jaimie's head. "This is what you deserve, pig!" She crammed the bucket over Jaimie's head. "There!"

Jaimie did not move as the anciana, screaming with laughter, continued down the hall. Soon a door slammed and silence came again to the darkened hallway, broken only by the sound of a cricket that began to squeak.

PUT all your valuables on the counter except your handkerchief and comb."

Harold set the brown paper sack containing his shorts, socks, toilet articles, and Ellen's letters on the waist-high counter. He shoved them past the brass grillwork toward the Desk Captain before emptying his pockets of wallet, change and keys.

"The watch, mister!" Com-manded the guard who had brought him from the receiving bull pen across the yard to the Dep's Office. Harold had forgotten the cheap wrist watch he had purchased six months before when he was first released. He removed the watch and tossed it on the counter

before he stepped back and raised his arms for the shake-down.

The young guard patted him expertly while the Captain counted his money twice before issuing a receipt. Driver's licence and social security card were removed from the nearly new wallet before it was tossed back. "You gotta send the watch home, or else donate it to the Vocational School."

"Send it to the school."

"O.K. Take him to the clothing room and dress him in."

"Yes sir. Should I leave him there and report back here?" The guard displayed all the characteristics of a trainee; a new hack.

The Captain frowned at the phone ringing behind him. He

Who'd believe an ex-con? He was a made-to-order patsy.

BY JAMES L. LITTLE

BUM RAP

snapped. "Yeah, leave him there and report back here. We'll probably get the Cuyahoga County load in by then. A runner can take him over to the Hospital Receiving."

Harold felt the old familiar knot tighten in the pit of his stomach. The routine had started all over again; just like it had seven years before when he had been sentenced for Armed Robbery.

He dreaded the trip across the yard, and all the wise remarks. He knew the "Welcome Home!—What's the matter Harold, you get hungry?—How much you get tagged for this time?" were born out of the thinly disguised animosity that was felt by the old friends he passed. He sensed that his failure was a blow to their hopes and dreams. His 'doin' time' mask had slipped into place before he reached the clothing room. He gave the last guy who hollered the finger.

The new guard left him with, "Take it easy, Mister. When you get your gear together, a runner will pick you up." The guard stopped and laughed self-consciously. "You know the routine better than I."

Harold watched the trainee tuck his club awkwardly under his arm and march away. He turned back to the counter and addressed his remark to the skinny, gray faced lifer behind the counter. "You hear that?"

"Yeah man! Haven't you got the word? The Administration is hir-

ing college-bred punks to keep us in line. They gonna rehabilitate us."

Harold stripped without being told and put on the blue denim pants and hickory striped shirt. He slipped on his loafers after his number had been stamped into the right instep.

A runner wearing a garrison cap with a bright red top rolled the bundle of clothes and handed them to Harold. "Come on man. I'll run you over to Receiving."

The Hospital Receiving; a bed with clean sheets, a haircut, and a chance to shave with hot water were real comforts after a month in the County Jail.

Another red-hatted runner was shouting Harold's name before the barber was finished with his close trim. He slapped the hair from his neck and followed the group back across the yard to the Admission Office. One of the new 'fish' smiled and asked, "You been here before man?"

Harold nodded and igned the ex-beatnick who looked more scared than hep. Little Smitty, a lifer with the fastest hunt-and-peck system in the joint called his name, "Harold W. Johnson."

Harold took the seat beside the desk and nodded to Smitty's "What say man." Little Smitty continued to look at the keyboard of the typewriter he had been assigned to some ten years before, as he rapped out, "Weight—Color—Descent—

Occupation on the Streets—Birthplace—Education—Been in the Service—Any other numbers—Birthplace—Social Security Number?”

Harold answered in a flat tone while he stared at the off-yellowed colored wall. “160—White—Scotch—Bookkeeper—Nashville, Tennessee—two years college—single—Navy—no—none—I don’t remember.”

The clacking stopped. Smitty continued to stare at the keyboard like he was looking for a commute or something. He asked in a quiet, almost toneless voice, “You back straight P. V. man, or you bring back a new number?”

“P.V.” Harold answered.

“Drinkin’?”

“No.”

“A broad?”

“No.” Harold squirmed as the tight hand clutched hard at his stomach. “My employer claimed I swung with his payroll.”

Smitty hit the linespace lever and jacked the Admission slip out of the machine. “You lucky to be straight P.V.”

“Crap!”

Smitty ducked his head closer to the keyboard to hide a lop-sided smile. “Bum rap?”

Harold waited for the hard veneer of his own grin to set before he answered, “Yeah.”

A blood test, an x-ray, a doctor’s examination, a new mug shot, and three days later Harold was trans-

ferred to the big block to lay idle until the Classification Committee got around to re-classifying him.

Two days after the transfer he received a white ‘Priority’ visiting pass. He slipped off the hickory striped shirt and put on the plain blue shirt used for Sunday’s and visits.

“Come on. It’s a screen visit. No need to pretty up.”

Harold stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and slowly lit it while he gave the old-line guard a flat stare. He was surprised to see Mr. Wallace his ex-parole officer sitting on the other side of the screen. He watched him hunch forward on the straight backed chair and stare through at him. He waited and wondered at the tired lines around Wallace’s eyes.

“Harold I came down on some other business. But I got the Warden to let me see you.”

Harold waited and wondered what the P.O. really had in mind. He was sure it concerned the ‘bust’, but how? He knew he ought to say something but he let the apathy wash over him while he watched Mr. Wallace fumble a cigarette to life.

“Harold I still can’t believe it. You were doing so well. I would have bet my job on your making it.” The tired lines etched deeper as Wallace took a drag on his cigarette. “I almost did when I talked the prosecutor into letting me send you back without a new charge.”

Harold shifted on the hard bench. A point that had been bothering him was clear. Wallace had stuck his neck out; stuck it way out. It figured. He was that kind of guy. So, no new beef. That figured too, what with no more than they had to go on. But what was Wallace's point in a visit now?

Harold waited. He leaned back from the screen as Wallace brushed it impatiently with his hand.

"Harold, tell me one thing—just one simple thing. Why? Tell me why you went on the dummy with me?"

Harold continued to wait in silence. He gnawed the inside of his cheek to insure silence.

"Look, I don't want to know the details. Screw the money! Just give me one good, human reason why you dummied-up on me? We were friends—man, we still are. I'm here, ain't I?"

"Yeah! So am I." It came out flat and hard, like an indictment.

"Harold listen to me. You think I wanted to run you back?"

Harold stared; his lips pulled flat and tight.

"Be fair! You know I had no other choice, the minute the money came up missing." Wallace stamped on his cigarette. "Damn it man! You gave me no other choice. You clam up on me—on Ellen—on everyone."

Harold pushed at the screen separating them. His hand was shaking. "I spill my guts to you—to

anybody. You think the word of an ex-con is good with anyone?"

Wallace leaned back. "Your word has always been good with me." He frowned. "It's damn sure good with Ellen. She's so crazy in love with you she knows you didn't do it."

Wallace watched the tightness begin to crack. He saw Harold grip his thigh and fight for control.

Harold leaned forward, and whispered, "Wallace, I didn't take the money!"

Wallace's eyes tightened from the pain. A voice of reason inside of him screamed, "No! No, don't go for it. He's guilty as hell."

The parole officer stared into Harold's eyes and read only hopelessness, and resignation. Something inside Wallace forced a flood of hot blood to his face. He felt the blush of shame as the possibility of his having made a stupid blunder exploded in his mind.

He remembered the unjust haste he had acted in to get Harold back as a violator. Sure, he had done it with the best of motives. His boy was in a spot; a bad jam that could mean a new sentence for him and another failure to mark down in the conscience book.

He thought of how quick the police department and the prosecutor's office had been to cooperate. At the time he had been dimly aware that they never had a case without the money, but then he had expected them to find the

money—on Harold, or in his apartment. Harold had not confessed, and all anyone really had was the simple fact that an ex-con had been working at a company where the payroll had come up missing. Still, the forty thousand was missing, and Harold my prize rehabilitated convict *didn't do it!*

Wallace moaned. "Why? Why then—you stupid son-of-a-bitch did you go on the dummy?"

"Would you have believed me with everyone screaming for my blood?" asked Harold.

Wallace shifted in his chair. "The fact is I didn't give you a chance—give myself a chance to believe you."

Silence hung heavy in the air and mixed with the disinfectant funk of the Penitentiary. A guard tapped Wallace on the shoulder. "Time."

The parole officer shrugged off the hand in annoyance. "Yeah. O.K. Just a second." He put his mouth to the dusty screen. "Harold, I believe you. Gimmie something to go on. Christ, anything. Do you know anything at all about it? Who pulled the score?"

Harold shrugged, and spread his hands, palms out. "I don't know. Who knows a score was pulled?"

The guard stepped between them. Wallace shouted, "What the hell. Listen Harold, be good I'll get in . . ."

Harold went back to his cell. Three days later he received the following letter:

Dear Harold,

I was in a daze when I left you at the prison. You were right about nobody believing you. I'm sorry for my part in this whole stupid mess. All I can say in defense is I did what I thought was right at the time. I was honestly trying to help you when I rushed you back as a violator. But I realize now I should have had more simple faith in you, and in my own judgment.

I believe now, after our talk, that you are innocent. I somehow know you didn't take the money. So many facts point to this simple truth. Your work habits, the plans you and Ellen had—and I sincerely hope, still have. Everything about the deal was just too pat. A payroll vanishes while an ex-convict is working at a company was damn convenient for someone. They had a perfect patsy.

Harold I am sorry! Keep your chin up, and don't let our shame be yours. We are moving on this thing. You remember Lt. Henderson of the Robbery Squad? He was the Junior Grade Detective who arrested you seven years ago when you pulled that filling station robbery. Well, he's a big wheel in the P.D. now. I had a long talk with him and he agrees with me that there is something missing in this case. Something smells, as he puts it. After I finished talking to him, he admitted (grudgingly, ha) that you might be riding a bum rap. He also agreed to continue the investi-

gation. Believe me Harold he's one helluva fine guy to have in your corner. None better in his field.

We are going to clear this thing up. The money is the key to this whole blunder, and incidently the *key* to your freedom. Be patient with us. The 'System' is big, awkward, oftentimes slow organization—sometimes we are wrong, but all the time we want to do the best we can for you or any other guy riding a bum beef. Sitting where you are, I can well imagine this is hard to believe. But take my word, the word of your friend, it's true.

By the way you big lunk-head, Ellen called and she is just about out of her mind. Please answer her letters. I got nothing else to say on that matter, except to remind you she was the only one who never had a minutes doubt about you.

Keep a good record, and we will try to have this cleared up before you go to the Parole Board for a violation hearing.

Best Regards,
Wally

P.S. Lt. Henderson has a hunch the money never left the building!

Harold tore the letter into small bits and flushed it down the commode. He turned to face the wall to avoid any questions or comments his cell partners might care to make about his having received a letter from a parole officer.

Two weeks later Harold received a 'pink' pass. His silence

was complete as he dressed out and walked past the shocked faces of his fellow convicts. The lop-sided grin on his face was the only evidence that the 'System' had made a blunder, admitted it, and was now making amends.

The same rookie guard at the Dep's office wore a big smile as he tucked his club under his arm, and said, "Come on Harold. If you can't make it to the gate, hop on I'll carry you piggy-back." His smile widened as the guys on the yard crew shouted, "Good luck Harold—You gonna make it man—First bum beef I ever seen cut loose."

The guard said, "This sure has taught me a lesson. Next guy I hear hollering bum beef, I'm gonna listen."

The rookie forced a path through the crowd of guards, inmates, and officials who had gathered in front of the main gate bull pen to watch the P.V. with the bum rap being turned back out on parole. Every man there, inmates, guards, and officials alike, knew a mile-stone had been passed. Hope was bright in every eager face.

Harold waved as the electric gate swung shut behind him. He kept his silence as gate after gate snapped shut behind him. He saw Wallace sitting on the edge of the hard institutional bench in the waiting room.

Harold extended his hand. His protective mask; his 'doin' time'

grin vanished into a smile that lit his face. "Mr. Wallace, it's good to see you." He gripped the hand firmly, and added, "Thanks!"

Parole Officer Wallace took the sheath of report papers out of Harold's other hand. "Me and you! We'll fill them out together—every last one of them." He swatted Harold on the shoulder of his new 'going home' suit, and added, "Come on boy, I got a million things to tell you." Wallace stopped talking but his nervous hands kept emphasizing the pent up words. "I got a million things to tell you and I don't know where to start. Most of it you can guess. The money was found in the back of your ex-boss's filing cabinet. As a matter of fact Mr. Wilson found it himself after Lt. Henderson had a talk with him. Henderson thinks your boss was trying to pull an insurance swifty and used you for the patsy. You were right, no robbery had been committed."

Wallace stepped ahead of Harold and stopped him with his hand on his shoulder. "Hold up a minute before we get to the car." The parole officer shifted from one foot to the other in awkward embarrassment. "Ellen's in the car." He paused, and asked, "O.K.?"

"Yeah. Sure Mr. Wallace. It'll be good to see her again."

"Well I wasn't sure how it was with you. You clammed up and never answered any of her letters."

Wallace opened the back door of

the black state car. Harold ducked and entered. He saw Ellen sitting on the far side; her eyes big with a mixture of fear and questioning wonder. She tried on a nervous smile, then broke into tears as she reached for Harold.

Harold slid into the seat and took her awkwardly in his arms. She clung to him and sobbed, "Oh Harold! I prayed for this day. I knew it had to come." She dabbed at her eyes, "I'm sorry. I must be a mess."

Wallace slammed the front door, and said, "Where to kids?" He turned to face them. "Her place or yours? Incidentally Harold we managed to get your old apartment back. We had a time trying to explain to your landlady you were innocent. She kept wanting to know why you were in prison if you were innocent. Boy was my face red. And then after we did get through to her, she liked to have bugged me about when 'they' were going to turn her boy loose." Wallace's grin widened. "Ellen, Lt. Henderson and I had to force her to take a months rent in advance. She was willing to hold the apartment open till her boy got there. Another friend, Harold! You got clear sailing ahead. I'll have a job lined up for you before the week's out."

"Make it my place," suggested Ellen. "I have his clothes there." She smiled and hugged Harold close. "Steak and french fries for supper." She laughed. "You're not

going to get away this time.”

“Fine with me.” Harold paused and frowned. “Say, would either of you mind too much if I were to drop off down town for a while? I can’t believe this is true. I’d like to walk around and get used to the idea, and maybe take care of a little business matter.”

Wallace cut Ellen’s protest short. “Sure, I understand. Walk around a little bit. Get used to the feeling of being free. I’ll drop Ellen off and you can walk over to her place or catch a cab if you get tired. Need any money, boy?”

“No, I’m alright. Drop me here.” Harold slammed the door; waved at the disappearing car, and walked down town. He walked aimlessly looking in at the plush displays and then he headed for the business district. He waited across the street from his old place of employment until the last employee left for home.

Harold opened the door to his ex-boss’s office and quickly stepped inside. Mr. Wilson looked up from his half-acre of desk with an annoyed frown. The frown changed to surprise, then to a questioning wonder, and finally to alarm as Harold continued to stand in silence just inside the door.

“What do you want?”

“Mr. Wilson, you know why I’m here,” said Harold quietly.

The pudgy man leaned back in

his Executive chair. His hands darted around the top of his desk before finally coming to rest on the very edge. His voice came out high, forced, “You’re not going to do anything stupid; like hurting me, are you?”

“No. You know why I’m here.”

“You’ll never get away with it.”

“Why not Mr. Wilson. If you were to scream robbery, you’d be laughed right out of this town. You might even land in jail.” Harold smiled. The corners of his mouth crooked. “You are in an impossible situation.”

“You can’t do it. Think of the people who believed in you—who fought for your release. What about them?”

“They are the very reason I can and will do it.”

“Yes, I guess you can. You know where the money is. Take it and get out of here.”

Harold moved around the desk to the private safe. He pulled the canvas money sack out of the round door and hefted it before he turned to leave.

Mr. Wilson asked, “Harold we both know a venture as complex as this must have taken some time to plan. When did you first get the idea to hide the payroll; play the martyr; and box me up tight with a ‘cry wolf’ routine?”

Harold turned at the door, and answered, “Five years ago!”



HUGHIE BROOKS fingered the three dimes while the sweat ran cold in his palms. His eyelids blinked like a wounded vet who'd been left too long in the mud waiting for a medic. He glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of the metallic grey eyes that had him pinpointed for a price.

The drizzle left a soft stain in his custom made blue pinstripe suit. Hughie tried to keep close to the walls of the newly constructed East Side buildings. The finished concrete chalked against his cuff. Hughie cursed the nameless contractor.

The corners came hurriedly, and he crossed each one more quickly

than the previous one. He darted through a restaurant door and exited through the side. Looking about, he knew he had not skipped the tracer. The grey eyes caught him coming out the exit before the door had closed. He could see his obituary written in those eyes.

A yellow checked cab pulled alongside the curb and Hughie hailed him down, jumping in before the door was halfway open.

"Where to, buddy?"

"Just keep drivin' till I tell you to quit."

The cabbie nodded. Hughie sucked in his breath through a stomach just short of fitting comfortably. He turned to peer out the

last dime

BY CHARLES MIRON

He'd done all he could. No one could help him. There was no place to go and no one else to call. But he had one more dime.



rear window and saw a cab slowly easing up behind him.

"Lose the cabbie behind us. It's worth a double saw buck," Hughie shot through his even teeth.

The cabbie shot around a corner, then doubled back. The other cab missed the point and went into the night. Hughie sighed in relief.

"Okay, number 136792," said Hughie, handing over the promised tenner, "now beat it over Fifty Third and Madison, and don't hold your breath."

The cabbie didn't have to be told twice. Just before they reached the lighted corner of Madison Avenue, Hughie told the driver to let him out. The cab came to a quick halt. Hughie threw the fare and a buck extra into the calloused hand that collected fares.

The high rent apartment was fifty steps from the curb. The setback gave it a try at elegance. The admiral of a doorman tipped the braid.

"Good evening, Mister Brooks."

"Vikki Dolman in?"

The doorman tried to ease a smile off. It checked somewhere near his back molars.

"She . . . er . . . checked out this morning."

Hughie played a trick card.

"Did she use the beige luggage I gave her?"

"Yes, I believe so, sir. In fact, I'm sure."

Hughie grabbed him by the collar, twisting the gold braid clear in-

to his Adam's apple. The doorman choked sharply.

"All right, flunky, one more lie and I'm make you cough up your lunch."

The doorman could only nod his head. Hughie eased the hold.

"Now, buster, the truth. In one lump."

The doorman tried to steady the tremble in his temples by touching them lightly.

"Mister Brooks, there are two gentlemen up in Miss Dolman's apartment."

Hughie knew the door John was caught in a squeeze. He needed to know one thing.

"One of them wearing a grey fedora?"

"Both of them."

Hughie let go and turned his heel out the front door. Vikki had sold him short to the 'boys'. The town must be kicking over with guys in grey felt hats looking for him. They had him boxed in from corner to corner. He began to sprint up the block. A figure in a black trench coat loomed up ahead. Hughie put the brakes on. He hadn't lost the man with the grey eyes, only the two with the hats. The drizzle turned heavier. His suit took on a steamy weight.

Hughie hugged the wall. The trench coat moved toward him. He leaped over a garbage can, crossed an alley, turned high tail over a fence, then sat tight as a duck at bay. The high fence nail left a bad

tear along his sleeve. After the longest moment of the day, Hughie edged out from his hiding place. He picked up his step as he crossed Fifth Avenue, making sure to keep clear of the telltale overhead light. A passing couple noted his odd pattern of zig zagging across the street. A speeding car missed him by inches as he turned to look behind him.

"Hey, jerk, watch where you're going?"

High with fury, Hughie cursed the driver. But, he didn't wait to take it up with the slowed down driver. His legs began to throb with pain. He had been on the run for half a day. The darkness was his only out for a situation with no exit. He had a mark on him and tonight was to be his tag out. His blonde hair stuck to his clammy forehead. His eyes took the sweat badly. He frantically rubbed the beady lids dry. To the left of him stood a building he had once spent the night in. The lawyer had been out of town but his wife had been open for callers. Hughie recalled all too well. The lawyer hadn't forgotten either, even though he'd played dumb to Hughie when they'd met again. Not looking ahead of him, Hughie stepped in a puddle that splashed up to his knee.

"Dammit," he cursed, feeling the slime run through to his kneecap.

He kicked out frantically, hoping to draw the wetness from rolling

down to his ankle. Then, he saw the trench coat bob up from behind a florist's neon greeting. Hughie stepped over the next puddle and darted along the side street. Two blocks later, he caught his breath. The dimes stuck to his palm. They were his last chance.

"There's gotta be a booth on Sixth," he prayed.

Hughie tore open the Windsor knot from his hand knitted tie. The jockey on his tie clip broke in two. Hughie flapped the tie into his lapel pocket. He reached Sixth Avenue in short order. He crossed over, doubled back, cut through the anticipated lobby of a half finished office building, then entered the drug store that seemed as unobtrusive as a hired killer would choose to look into.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm using the phone."

"Go right ahead, sir. To the rear. On your left."

Hughie didn't waste a second. The empty phone booth seemed clammy, and the stink of a child's wetness hung high. The stool felt good to his aching body. He tried to ice the nausea that came suddenly over him. He tried the small overhead fan. It did not move an inch.

"Graftin' bums," he muttered heavily.

The first dime dropped down into the deposit slot and Hughie waited. The buzzing held close to his ear. He hung up. Twenty sec-

onds later he redialed. The busy signal cut him dead. He looked out the door. He could see no one except the griddle man, a lone woman of no description, and the aging pharmacist.

He tried the number again. The answer came quickly this time.

"Hello."

"Ginny, it's Hughie."

"Hughie who?"

"Mc. Hughie Brooks."

The pause at the other end chilled him.

"Oh."

"Ginny, I need a little help."

He could hear her laugh all too clearly.

"He says he needs a LITTLE help."

Hughie wondered who the man was who returned her laugh.

"I mean it, Ginny. My life's on the line."

"So?"

"You got to help me."

The next pause told him the whole story.

"Ralph, you think I GOTTA help him?"

Hughie knew the name without being introduced. The second in command was an all too familiar face. Always at the war councils Ralph Marino voted for a 'hit'.

"Tell Ralph it was all a mistake."

"I can't hear you."

"I said tell Ralph it was all a goof. Tell him . . . look, baby, for old time's sake."

She laughed again.

"You still love me, Hughie boy?"

It was an opening. Hughie put the fuzz into his voice.

"Never more. I swear. On my mother's grave. Honest to God, Ginny. You believe me, don't you, Ginny doll?"

The next voice that answered was not Ginny's.

"I love you too, Hughie baby. Till death do us part."

Ralph laughed his cold laugh, and Hughie could hear Ginny join him. Hughie hung up before the call could be traced. The two dimes lay on the phone pad. Hughie tapped the top of one of them. His silk shirt ran through with cold sweat. His head beat against the side of his ears. He thought a moment, then dropped the second dime in. His answer came almost too quickly.

"Club Mandingo."

"Charlie?"

"Who is this?"

"Hughie Brooks."

The phone went dead for a moment.

"Charlie, can you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Tell Marty I got to talk to him."

The voice on the other end tried not to play sides.

"It's late, Hughie. He goes to sleep."

"Two minutes. That's all. Please Charlie. Try."

Hughie heard the receiver drop. He waited, all the while pulling close to the side of the phone

booth wall. Nothing changed outside the booth.

"Hello."

Hughie crossed his heart with his fingers.

"Marty?"

"Be brief."

"Get him off me, Marty. The gun. I can explain."

"So explain. You got thirty seconds."

Hughie tried to play it down. His nerves were not holding too well, but he tried not to betray them.

"It was Ginny's idea. She said the take was too good to get a little piece of. She was greedy."

Marty cut his plea down.

"Bad manners talkin' a lady down."

"She said put a gun to the collector's head. From the back. I must have been out of my head. But, I can give you at least half back. Tonight."

"Kid, I could tell you it was a bad connection and hang up. Instead, I tell you the truth. I hear you good."

"Then you'll help me?"

Hughie knew the answer before it came.

"You was voted down. Unanimous."

The sharp click told him all there was to tell. His sponsor had given it to him clean. Now, he was on his own. And, his own wasn't good enough anymore.

He could see the old druggist putting the pill boxes back where

he'd put them a thousand times before. The kid was pushing a broom around in his black hands. The griddle had been shut off. The lady had left a tip that was more than she could afford.

Hughie closed his eyes for a second. The world seemed to stop beating in that instant. Then, he opened his eyes. The paper back rack told him what was coming up next. The man in the trench coat pretended to be absorbed in a class book by a Norwegian who had been long out of print in hardback.

Jabbing his fingers against the tip of his ears, Hughie quieted the noise that was deafening him. The last dime sat atop the pad. Hughie lost all color to his face. Then, he dropped the dime into the endless slot.

"Manhattan and Bronx information."

Hughie tried to remember what it was he was about to ask the mellow voice. He recalled the date on the dime. It was a year less in circulation than he had been. Suddenly, every dime that had ever been minted in the depression year of nineteen thirty seven came marching at him double time.

He murmured an almost forgotten name and address. The information came back to him. He dialed it.

The buzzing held six times. Hughie was about to put the receiver down. Then, a sleepy voice picked up.

"Hello."

"Leatrice?"

"Yes."

Hughie wondered if she'd remember him.

"This is Hughie Brooks."

She murmured a sleepy apology but said she couldn't connect up the name.

"From P.S. 67. Remember?"

It had been a long time. But, somehow, she remembered.

"You sat next to me from the fourth to the sixth grade."

He tried to smile. But, the face outside wouldn't let him.

"That's right."

"Whatever made you call me, Hughie?"

He joked about the old school tie and the hokey school motto, something that ran like 'friendship above all else', and he heard the sweet sound of her laughter.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Hughie?"

He feigned a reply that sounded like he'd made it big out of town as a shoe importer. She asked him if he carried a certain chic woman's

brand. He said he could get it for her wholesale.

"You married, Leatrice?"

"No."

"Me neither."

He made it sound so casual. She invited him over for dinner if he cared to come. Her old girl friend, Betty Soref, who was married and had two kids, could join them with her husband whom Hughie vaguely remembered as a fat boy who's father owned a soft goods store.

"I'd like that, Leatrice."

Hughie could remember the long black hair that was braided down to her waist. And, the olive skin. And, the green of her eyes.

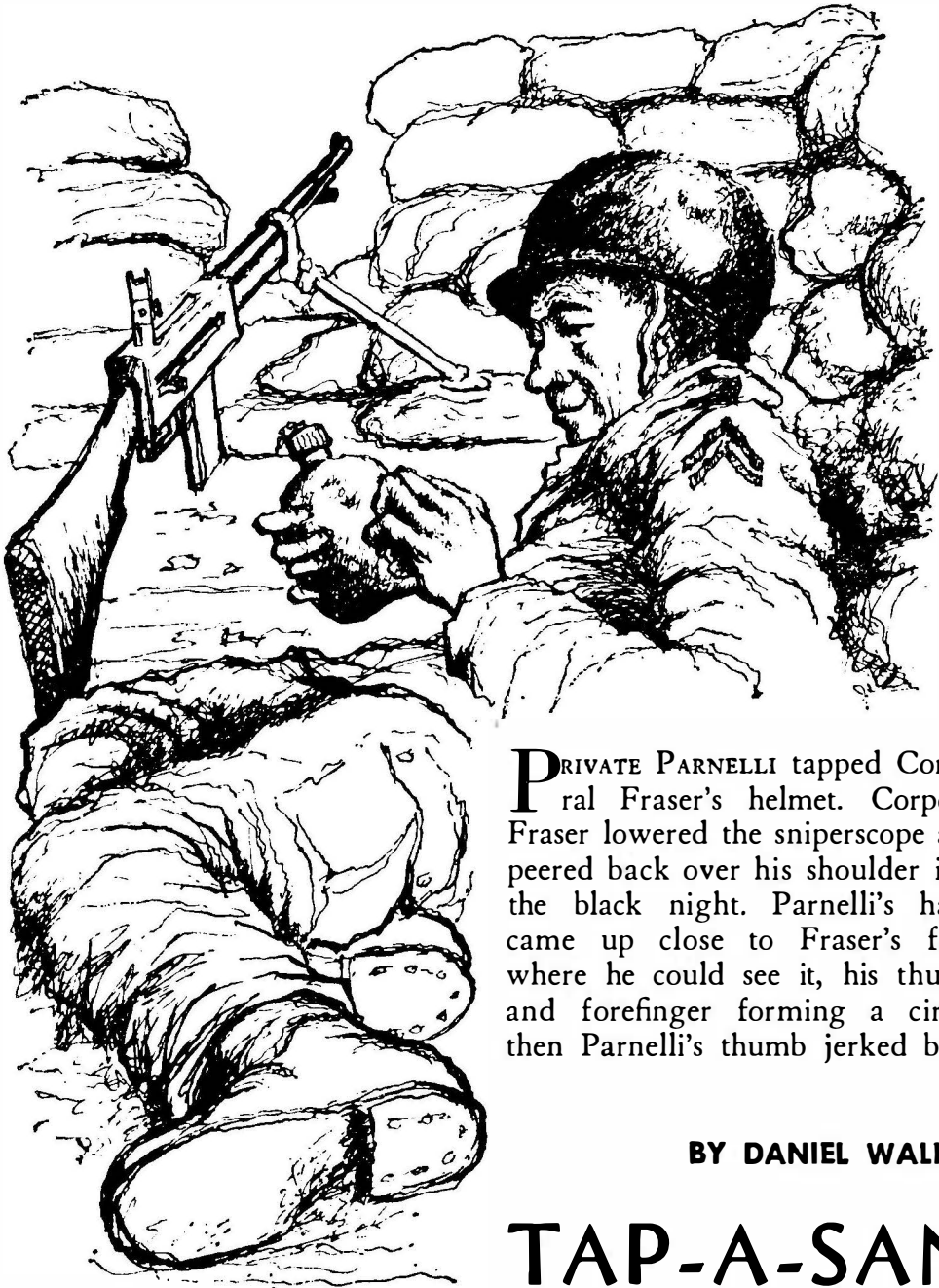
She asked him if his pug nose still gave him that baby face look.

The three gun shots cut through the booth before he could answer.

"Hughie . . . Hughie . . .?"

The receiver hung suspended like a puppet with his pants off. The old druggist screamed for the cops. While the blood began to mess the crease of Hughie Brooks' new pin stripe suit.





PPRIVATE PARNELLI tapped Corporal Fraser's helmet. Corporal Fraser lowered the sniperscope and peered back over his shoulder into the black night. Parnelli's hand came up close to Fraser's face, where he could see it, his thumb and forefinger forming a circle, then Parnelli's thumb jerked back

BY DANIEL WALKER

TAP-A-SAN

Fraser watched for almost a full minute the spot across no-man's-land where the hat had disappeared. "The crazy gook must've been waving good-bye."

in the direction of the squad bunker. Corporal Fraser nodded. With that Private Parnelli silently slid out of the listening post bunker into the wiggly, shallow trench leading toward the squad bunker. Parnelli's M-1 rifle was loaded, the safety off, and the bayonet fixed and probing into the night shrouded trench ahead.

Corporal Fraser's attention again focused on the field of darkness spread out before the bunker and he picked up the field telephone, cupped his free hand around the mouthpiece, and blew hard into it.

Instantly a voice crackled, "Nesbett Blue."

"Nesbett White," Corporal Fraser whispered, "Parnelli's coming in."

"Roger, Nesbett White." Corporal Fraser recognized the voice as belonging to Johnny Jankowski, the baby of the outfit. Barely eighteen, often times bothersome, constantly full of questions and always ready with a laugh, and strictly "RA" all the way. "Nesbett Red's got five Chinks moving from sector Annie A through the barb-wire. Anything goin' on your way?"

"Negative, and out." Corporal Fraser propped the field phone on a sandbag at shoulder level, positioned exactly so, where he could shout into it while firing if necessary. Unconsciously he turned his BAR a few degrees to the left, in the general direction of Nesbett Red outpost and the five roving Chinese soldiers. Fraser's concern for the

five enemy soldiers was slight as his BAR—Browning Automatic Rifle—spit cruel death nine hundred times a minute. The Corporal was a pro and knew the odds were against the Red soldiers moving as far down the valley as his listening post, they would instead turn in toward the MLR—Main Line of Resistance—and probe the new trench being dug there.

Corporal Fraser sat alone, two hundred yards out in front of the front line trenches in Korea, in a sandbag bunker straddling a narrow finger-like ridge sweeping out from a higher American held hill into the valley of No Man's Land and murdered rice patties. The bunker was simply three sides and a roof of sandbags which offered protection from raining mortars and Chinese 122's, with a six foot picture window slot providing a clear view of the valley and a clear range of fire for his Browning Automatic Rifle, and in front of the bunker was a sloping lawn of barbed wire and mines preventing friend or foe from crawling up to the window and delivering a gift wrapped hand grenade. The perfect spot to spend a quiet night, and yet, Corporal Bob Fraser never knew exactly when the quiet Korean night might explode with death for him and the men behind him who manned the thin line of resistance.

The five Communist soldiers Nesbett Red, the next listening post, reported could be but an innocent

patrol making an inspection sweep through No Man's Land, then again they might be a diversionary patrol. Creating a sham path of wire cutting and purposeful sounds as smaller, quiet groups approached listening posts to silently kill the listening men on guard so that a stronger force might sweep across No Man's Land in surprise attack on the main trenches.

Across the valley, a mere ninety yards in front of Corporal Fraser's bunker, another high point of land nudged its way in among the dead rice patties like a pointing finger at the heart of No Man's Land. Deep in a protective foxhole on that sweep of high ground from Communist held Sniper's Ridge huddled another soldier, a Chinese soldier, listening for American troops moving across the unowned patties of No Man's Land, guarding the Chinese and North Korean trenches from surprise attack.

A faint whistle came through the field telephone and Corporal Fraser whispered into the phone, "Nesbett White."

"Nesbett Red reports all five gooks movin' back through the wire into sector Annie A."

"Roger, and out." Corporal Fraser relaxed, the edge was off. The Communist patrol was withdrawing. The night's action was over. In less than an hour dawn would peek up and over Old Papa-san, the huge hill on the Communist side of the valley, and Corporal Fraser would

crawl back along the one hundred and fifty yards of trench and into his waiting sleeping bag in the squad bunker. One more night on listening post and his squad would pull back into reserve behind the MLR and be replaced by a squad from Charlie Company.

Corporal Fraser quietly eased his canteen from his web belt, wrapped his hands around it and warmed his chilly fingers. He had purposely filled the canteen with scalding hot coffee at the squad bunker before crawling up to the listening bunker at two A.M. Gripping the canteen between his knees, Bob Fraser slowly twisted the cap off and held it firmly in his free hand to guard against its banging on the side of the metal canteen. He tilted the canteen and let the luke warm coffee roll down his throat. The coffee rolled down the wrong pipe. Suddenly the quiet night exploded with Corporal Fraser's hacking, choking coughing. Fraser slapped his hand over his mouth, trying to choke off the coughing, but his throat rebelled. A trickle of coffee spurted out of his nose and his cough became a strangling gag.

Two minutes silently ticked by after his outburst, and yet, Fraser's throat tickled with the nagging demand for just one more throat clearing cough. When he could hold it no longer, Bob Fraser coughed. Just once. Suddenly, from ninety yards across No Man's Land, someone else coughed. Just once in

sympathy or perhaps the cough was in jest or a desire to tell Fraser someone had heard him but understood. The Communist soldier's cough was as contagious as a yawn, and before he realized what he was doing Corporal Fraser barked again. From the Chinese side of the valley a strange cough again echoed back.

Fraser, compelled by an urge perhaps nothing more than a throw-back to daring youth, reached out and picked up a rock from the pile kept in the bunker. He tapped hard against the side of his canteen. Just once. Nothing happened for several seconds, as long as it might take a man's hand to fumble around and find a rock in the dark, then an answering tap of a rock struck on a rifle butt plate floated back across No Man's Land. Bob Fraser tapped twice. Three taps answered his two.

Warmth crept inside Corporal Fraser, pushing out the damp chill of night and war, and suddenly he found a common meeting ground with the enemy. But then, the man across the valley, the one with the rock, was no longer just the enemy with a gun and the desire to kill Corporal Fraser. He was a man reaching out. With first his cough and now the rock the unknown Red soldier displayed human traits—mirrored his loneliness and expressed humor and bundled his many secret emotions, but Bob Fraser heard and understood the other man perfectly. One spoke Chinese

and the other English, but a cough and the tap of a rock knew no limiting language barriers.

After the exchange of a few more taps it was time for both men to withdraw, especially Corporal Fraser. For if Fraser lingered precious minutes after dawn he would be helplessly trapped by Communist sharpshooters on Sniper's Ridge to the right of his position.

Corporal Fraser tattooed a curt good-bye of taps on the side of his canteen, then picked up the field phone and whistled into it with a loud and cheerful note.

"Nesbett Blue," crackled Jankowski's voice from the squad bunker.

"Nesbett White here. Fraser's comin' in, Kid."

"Roger, Daddy . . ."

Fraser smiled, feeling friendly and ten feet tall, and added, "Make sure my sleeping bag's shook out and the coffee's hot, Boy."

Corporal Fraser rang-off and was just pulling his BAR off its sandbag mount in front of the window when something caught his eye. Automatically his hand knocked off the safety and closed on the trigger, then, in the breaking glow of dawn he made out what it was. The enemy soldier across the valley had tied his hat, with the white snow-side turned out, on the end of his rifle and was waving it. Fraser's hand slipped off the trigger, and for a moment he actually considered sticking his head out the bunker window. Finally, Corporal Fraser

picked up another rock and tapped a series of taps on the side of his canteen. The hat and gun paused for a split second, then frantically wagged back and forth and was gone. Fraser watched for almost a full minute the spot where the hat disappeared, and then decided, "The crazy gook must've been waving good-bye."

Gathering up his BAR and field phone, Corporal Fraser slid into the trench and crawled with haste toward the bunker a hundred and fifty yards away. In several places the trench widened into a dangerous open hole where direct hits had been scored by Red 122's; and the protective two foot sides of the trench were blasted away. Corporal Fraser lunged across these opening, praying the Red Snipers on the ridge above were still rubbing sleep out of their eyes. His luck held, he made it to the squad bunker without drawing a single shot. Selfishly, without telling anyone what had happened, Corporal Fraser drank his coffee, joked with Jankowski and Parnelli, and then crawled into his sleeping bag.

That night Corporal Fraser drew an earlier watch on the listening post, the ten until two watch instead of the two until dawn. Five minutes after he was alone on the listening post the silence became too much for Fraser. "Wonder if old Tap-a-san is out there," he thought. Fraser had decided on the name Tap-a-san for his unknown enemy

friend before going to sleep that morning. "Well, there's one way of finding out." Corporal Fraser's fingers carefully selected a large, smooth rock, and he rapped it hard against his canteen once.

Nothing happened. The seconds ticked by and no answer came from the Communist side of the valley, then just as Corporal Fraser decided his tap had passed unnoticed the Reds answered.

WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOMP! A pattern of mortar shells walked their way across the valley floor. WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOMP! WHOMP! They climbed the slope in front of Fraser's bunker. WHOMP! And the eighth round exploded twenty yards behind the listening post bunker.

Corporal Fraser hugged the floor of his bunker, his cheek pressed hard against the sandbag wall, and sand from a split bag in the bunker's roof built a pile in the middle of his back. "That damn gook's sure off his rice and egg foey-gooey tonight," Fraser announced outloud, finding comfort in the sound of his own voice. "It'll be a rainy day in Pusan before I ever tap 'hello' to that slant eye creep again."

The mortar barrage died as suddenly as its birth. The acid smell of the exploded shell behind the bunker drifted off in the night breeze and Corporal Fraser slowly, reluctantly pushed himself up and brushed off his armored vest. Fraser's eyes stared into the shroud of

blackness between his bunker and the Chinese outpost across the narrow valley, his hand caressing the wooden stock of his BAR found a tiny sliver of shrapnel.

"It's a damn good thing I like you Tap-a-san, buddie," Fraser thought as his finger dug at the sharp piece of shrapnel in the rifle's stock. "I shoulda by rights sat here with my cheek pressed against this rifle stock pumping 30 calibers at your position, gook, for calling those mortars out on me. And if I had then this piece of shrapnel would be in my neck instead of the wood. Thanks, pal . . . thanks for nothing."

Corporal Fraser sat there, silently watching and listening, smarting that his new found enemy-friend Tap-a-san had forgotten and changed so quickly over night. Finally, at two A.M., Private Parnelli crawled up the trench and relieved Corporal Fraser at the listening post. Neither man spoke, the transfer being made with hand signals. Then, just as Fraser eased into the slot of the trench and Parnelli was about to whisper his departure into the field phone, a faint click of metal against metal rang from across the valley. Parnelli instantly blew hard into the phone, automatically prepared to call for mortars and raking machine gun fire, but Corporal Fraser scurried back into the bunker and grabbed the field phone.

"Nesbett White," Corporal Fraser whispered into the phone, "Fraser's not coming in just yet."

"Roger, Nesbett White, and out."

Handing the phone back to the confused Private Parnelli, Corporal Fraser grabbed a rock and before the astonished private fully realized what he was about to do or could stop him struck it hard against the barrel of the BAR. Tap-tap floated back from Tap-a-san. Fraser beat out a shave and a haircut on an ammo can.

"What the hell?" Parnelli said outloud.

Fraser smiled, whispering, "That's my buddie, Tap-a-san."

"But there ain't suppose to be any patrol out there!"

"That isn't a patrol, stupid! That's Tap-a-san, the Chink on the listening post across the valley."

"Tap-a-who?"

Fraser ignored Parnelli as he tapped again in answer to Tap-a-san's tap-tap. Throwing the cardinal rule of silence at a listening post aside, Corporal Fraser hurriedly explained in whispers to Parnelli about Tap-a-san. Minutes later Parnelli also joined the Tap-a-san fan club.

"Y'know, Fraser, it makes better sense poundin' this rock at that damn Chink than shootin' at 'em."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Fraser said thoughtfully. Then, in an excited whisper, "Hey, that chump didn't call those mortars out on me. He must've just come on watch when you did, Parnelli. Them damn Chinks stand regular watches just like we do!"

The three men suddenly had even more in common, for the two American soldiers pictured the man across the valley as a typical soldier just like they were. Rolled out of his warm sleeping bag by a Chinese or North Korean sergeant for his nightly guard duty. Fraser decided Tap-a-san must be a draftee, too. Parnelli knew Tap-a-san spent his lonely nights in the outpost listening around dreams of a girl back home, hungry for her and for a meal of something other than army chow, and thirsty for a good drunk. Tap-a-san was the type of soldier, in their minds, who followed orders, but grumbled to himself, hated the stupid officers and their mis-managed army and war. Fraser and Parnelli echoed Tap-a-san's every thought in agreement with their own, and the three and a half hours at the outpost passed with the ease and quickness of snapped fingers.

As the new day boldly climbed up and over the Communist held hill Old Papa-san and invaded Khumwa Valley, Corporal Fraser and Private Parnelli prepared to pull back inside their own lines. Tap-a-san again tied his hat to his rifle and waved. This time Fraser was ready to return the gesture. His hand slid inside his armored vest and came out with the pair of orange panties that once had graced the squad's favorite whore back in Yong-Dong-Po. Headi had presented them to Corporal Fraser so he would always remember Headi and come

back to Headi, and in his case she meant it. But the panties actually belonged to every man in the squad, just as the woman who once wore them and kicked so coyly out of them had. Every man had many times held the panties at arms length, smiling as his thoughts raced back over the woman's remembered charms, and then, when no one was looking, stole a quick sniff.

"Feast your slanted eyes on these, Tap-a-san." Fraser poked Headi's orange panties through the bunker window and waved them.

Tap-a-san waved back, then across the valley came a cry. "Marine-son-a-bitchees . . . Marine-son-a-bitchees . . . Marine-son-a-bitchee."

Parnelli exchanged puzzled looks with Fraser, saying, "The poor gook slob doesn't even know we're not Marines. I wonder how you say 'We was drafted in the Army' in Chinese?"

Corporal Fraser stuck his head up to the gun window, cupped his hands, with Headi's panties still clutched in one, and shouted, "You stink. Chink!" Then as second thought, "Screw the Chinese Marines!"

Tap-a-san shouted something in Chinese, gave a final wave of his hat, and fell silent. Corporal Fraser and Private Parnelli grabbed their gear and hurried down the trench to the safety of the squad bunker and to share their night with the rest of the squad.

Later, that afternoon when the second squad from Charlie Company moved into the bunker and relieved their squad, Corporal Fraser and Private Parnelli passed on the information about Tap-a-san, extracting a promise that no mortars or machine gun fire would be called in on the Chinese soldier should he tap a greeting.

Within the course of the next month Tap-a-san became a figure of importance and warmth for all the squads posting the listening bunker. Tap-a-san was there every night from two A.M. until dawn with his friendly taps, strange words of Chinese, and then waved his hat 'good-bye' before withdrawing to his line each morning. The secret was an open one among the enlisted men, but carefully guarded from the officers, although some lower ranking officers most certainly knew of Tap-a-san. This unacknowledged awareness explained why no American patrols worked in close to Tap-a-san's position, no mortars were ever called into his area, nothing was ever directed toward the Communist soldier but taps of friendship and jest. Each morning Tap-a-san would yell: "Marine-son-a-bitchees" and something unknown in Chinese, and the men on the listening post, for lack of knowing any Chinese, would hurl obscene remarks back at Tap-a-san. Neither knew what the other was shouting so the remarks fell meaningless on ears listening only for

one human voice reaching across the battle field to greet another.

The fifth week after Tap-a-san first sprang into life he disappeared. Each time a tap came from Nesbett White outpost it was answered not with a tap but either machine gun fire or mortars. And yet, each night the men posting that lonely outpost refused to be silent, they tapped a 'hello' to their friend Tap-a-san, and worried for him as they were forced to hug the bunker floor to dodge whining Communist machine gun slugs or mortar shrapnel. Then, as suddenly as he had disappeared, Tap-a-san was back. Tap-tap, here I am. Tap-tap-tap, are you there?

Corporal Fraser and his squad came back up on line the seventh week and immediately volunteered to man the forward listening post. For once there was no problem for the squad Sergeant in selecting someone to stand the two until dawn watch. The men drew lots. Private Jankowski won, but the Sergeant refused to allow the youngster to go alone, and announced they would draw lots again. Private Parnelli won.

When Tap-a-san announced his presence across the frog-croaking rice paddies that night Private Jankowski went wild. The eighteen year old soldier was transformed into Gene Krupa, and was as hip as a cat could possibly get with a rock and a canteen.

"Take it easy, Kid, or you'll have

the whole Chink Army runnin' over here," Parnelli cautioned him.

"Man, how can you be so—so . . . Well just so? That's the fabulous Tap-a-san over there—listen to him!"

Private Jankowski's night was complete. His first night on a listening post in front of the line, and now he was actually talking tap-tap talk with a Chinese soldier. For weeks the boy had scurried from bunker to bunker, from tent to tent, listening hungrily as the older and more experienced combat men talked about Tap-a-san, building the Red soldier into a legendary figure. A hero.

Before the game of tap-tap could wear thin, dawn was showing her ugly self atop the brown Communist held hills. In the daylight there was no doubt to whether a hill was Communist held or not—if it was brown, with all the green trees, grass and vegetation gone and nothing but turned up subsoil it was Chinese. Suddenly the brown landscape at the foot of Sniper's Ridge was broken by a flash of white, the pure white insides of Tap-a-san's snow uniform jacket.

"Why that crazy gook's got his jacket tied to his rifle! Look at 'em!" Parnelli pulled the BAR out of the window so they could both crowd up to it.

Instead of crowding in Jankowski abruptly turned away and started out of the bunker.

"Where the hell you goin', Kid?"

"Outside, where he can see me." Jankowski's tone added no importance to what he was about to do, and yet, he was the first man who seriously dared to.

Parnelli recognized it would be hopeless to stop him, so he said calmly, "Yeah, well stay on the far side of the bunker. Keep it between you and Sniper's Ridge."

"No sweat, man, no sweat."

Parnelli eased the BAR back into the window, pushed the safety off, and sighted along its barrel until he had the empty space above Tap-a-san's position lined up perfectly in the sights. Suddenly the space lost its emptiness. There, in perfect alignment with his sights was a man. A Chinese soldier wearing a floppy-eared hat, a red star pinned in the center of its quilted front. The Communist soldier was holding a rifle with a jacket tied on it at his side, then the Red soldier raised the rifle. Parnelli's finger automatically closed on the trigger but then relaxed. Tap-a-san was waving his rifle.

Grabbing the field glasses, Parnelli yelled, "Y'see 'em, Johnny? Y'see 'em standin' there waving?"

Jankowski never answered Parnelli, he was too busy jumping up and down, frantically waving and yelling to Tap-a-san. "Hey, man! Over here! Here I am Tap-a-san-baby!"

With the glasses Parnelli could see Tap-a-san jumping up and down on the mound of dirt in front of his

foxhole and waving back. Strange shouts of Chinese came rolling across No Man's Land like waves of laughter. The Chinese soldier looked exactly like the men had pictured him, small, slanted slits for eyes, shining black hair chopped off squarely and hanging down over his forehead, and two large front teeth, one capped in gold. Around Tap-a-san's neck and hanging next to his bare chest was a divided cloth bandoleer with his daily rice ration. Parnelli could easily count Tap-a-san's ribs under his yellow skin. On his left shoulder was an old and dirty blood-stained bandage, accounting for his brief absence from the line.

A sharp whistle came through the field phone, followed by another shriller whistle. Parnelli instantly knew what was wrong. He snatched up the field phone. "Nesbett White."

"Get your ass in here, Parnelli, it's daylight!"

There was no argument, the voice was the Sergeant's. Parnelli jerked the BAR off the window ledge and yanked the field phone free of its wire connection with his other hand. "C'mon, Kid, we gotta run for it. It's too light. And remem—"

Private Jankowski screamed, clutching his stomach as he fell down into the trench at Parnelli's feet. The rifle shot echoed through the valley as Jankowski drew his legs up and doubled with pain. The boy had been coming around the

corner of the bunker in answer to Parnelli's call. Five short steps in the open. but the bullet won the race. Jankowski was gut shot.

"Don't leave me, please don't leave me here, Parnelli." The Kid's voice was close to a scream.

"Fat chance of me leavin' you—you owe me money you clumsy jerk." Parnelli tossed the BAR and phone in the corner of the bunker, and crawled into the trench with Jankowski. He refused to look at the spreading area of blood soaking Jankowski's fatigues, but instead slipped his webb belt across the boy's chest and under his arms.

"You just had to be a hero your first time up, huh. Combat pay wasn't enough for you. No-no, not you. You had to win yourself a purple heart for a flesh wound, didn't you?" Parnelli's tone failed.

Jankowski fought him, but Parnelli gripped the webb belt and began crawling up the trench, dragging the boy. Parnelli's feet dug into the side of the trench, kicking dirt and small rocks back over Jankowski. The wounded boy never noticed, he was in shock, screaming for his mother, begging. Pleading for his mother to help him.

Parnelli took twenty long, torturing minutes to crawl and claw the seventy yards to the first opening in the trench's protective walls. He paused, trying to catch his breath and hoping the Chinese were asleep and still watching the bunker.

"You okay, Kid?" Parnelli knew

the question was a foolish one, but he had to say something to Jankowski.

"It hurts, Wop . . . My God it hurts. Can't you do something?"

"Yeah, Kid, I can do something. Hang on."

Parnelli lunged into the open shell hole dragging Jankowski and scrambled for the protection of the trench fifteen yards away. Bullets from Sniper's Ridge instantly sprang around the two men, kicking up sprouts of dirt and whining off in crazy melodies. Then a single bullet found its mark. Jankowski rolled away from Parnelli, tearing the webb belt out of the man's helping hand, as the new bullet slammed into his chest and ripped out of his back. Jankowski whimpered once, then passed out.

Falling to his knees, Parnelli grabbed the belt with his right hand, looping it around his wrist with a twist. Parnelli pushed to his feet and leaned forward into the first step, then stopped, straightened up and twisted backwards like a high diver coming off a board and fell over Jankowski. The Communist bullet had entered the side of his neck, tore a path down into his chest, through a lung, and carried half his liver out a hole over his hip.

For the next forty-five minutes the men in Parnelli's and Jankowski's squad squirmed and died a hundred deaths as they helplessly listened to Jankowski's screams for help. Begging for his mother to

help him. Pleading. Lying there pinned beneath Parnelli's dead body, the morning sun breaking over the valley, birds singing, and bleeding to death. Eighteen years old, away from home for the first time, a man because he has a gun and schooled in how to use it, and because he knew women—a whore in Anniston, Alabama, another in Pusan, and Headi in Yong-Dong-Po—and yet, in death he was like all men, a frightened child.

Finally, in typical Army fashion, Baker Company's Captain reached Battalion Headquarters by phone, Battalion's Major called Division HQ, Division's Colonel issued an order to the 388th Chemical Smoke Company commander and the Chemical Smoke Company's Captain ordered his smoke generators into action. Ten minutes later a wall of smoke slowly drifted between Sniper's Ridge and the listening outpost, covering the squad and medics as they rushed out to Jankowski and Parnelli. They were both dead.

For the living the Korean War went on. At two A.M. that night Corporal Fraser silently slipped into the listening post and relieved one of the new replacements. Fraser was tired, on edge. He had moodily withdrawn from the other men of the squad and spent the entire day rolling around in his sleeping bag, wrestling with thoughts and memories of Jankowski and Parnelli and his feeling of guilt for their deaths.

Tap-a-san was his discovery, Fraser had reasoned, he brought the Chinese soldier to life and acquainted him to Parnelli, and then to the rest of the squad. Fraser relived that night over and over where he grabbed the telephone from Parnelli. "If I'd only let Parnelli call out the fifties that night. Tap-a-san would've never gone on. It wasn't like he'd been killed. The gook had a hole to duck in. Only he wouldn't've trapped the Wop and the Kid."

Fraser made his usual motions, first checking the BAR to be certain it was loaded and ready, then he made a slow and careful inspection with the sniper scope of the unclaimed land spread in front of his bunker. Once satisfied, Fraser settled back, resting his back against the sandbag wall, and fell captive to his thoughts. "Their number was up that's all. It was their time to go. Cripes, Tap-a-san didn't kill 'em. He could've been shot just as easy by some trigger happy guy on our side. Besides, Parnelli was on post too many times not to know how important it was to pull back before daylight . . . Wonder if Tap-a-san knows they got it? Bet he does. Ten to one he's blaming himself. Maybe his commanding—"

TAP-TAP! The metallic ring swept over Corporal Fraser's thoughts like a wave, washing them clean. Fraser pushed away from the sandbag wall, falling naturally in position behind the automatic rifle.

His finger found the trigger, his cheek pressed hard against the stock, and his eye lined up the sights with where he imagined Tap-a-san's position was.

"I'll kill the gook!" he thought. "I'll fix him for killing Parnelli and the Kid!" Fraser's finger closed on the trigger, as his thoughts closed to reason, squeezing hard. Nothing happened. The weapon refused to fire. In his flash of anger Fraser forgot the safety.

With the same abruptness with which he had found the trigger, Fraser suddenly scooped up a rock and slapped an ammo can once hard. Tap-tap-tap came Tap-a-san's answer. Tap-tap-tap returned Fraser's. The simple beat slowly wove itself into complexing patterns, each man attempting to trick the other into an extra beat or a missed tap.

Fraser's thoughts became more complexing and foolish, also. "Maybe that gook's trying to set up a trap for me. Trying to set me up for his sharp shooting buddies up there on the ridge. Naw, Tap-a-san's exactly like me. Just another soldier pulling his watch and passing the hours tapping with me. Wait a minute! That crazy gook could be filling this valley with tap-talk while some of his pals creep up on me to slit my throat. That's what he's doing! Sure that—Naw, if Tap-a-san was up to that he wouldn't've tapped all these weeks. Boy! What a nut I'm getting to be."

With a flurry of rock beats Corporal Fraser vented his anger with his thoughts. "What the hell's wrong with me? Tap-a-san's just another slob like me—trapped in a stinkin' war he doesn't know or care the first thing about. Probably some Chinese draft board grabbed him, too. Shoved a gun in his hand, told him he hated me and to kill me and all the me's like me. Cripes! I don't hate him! I like him. He's friendly. He's the only Chink I've ever known at all—if a rock and some crazy taps can get you to know him. Who knows, if he spoke English and I could walk over there and sit down with him and talk to him we both might walk right out of this war. It ain't our war—never was! Don't even know why, for sure, I'm suppose to be mad at him or hate him."

The first rays of dawn brought forth Fraser's usual ringing beat of a shave and a hair cut on the side of an ammo can. Tap-a-san answered with his three-two-four-one signing off taps. Corporal Fraser thrust Headi's orange panties through the bunker window and waved. Then, there in the dim first light of day, Fraser watched a Chinese soldier deliberately climb out of the foxhole that was Tap-a-san's. He was waving a rifle with a hat tied to it.

Headi's panties dropped to the

bunker floor as Fraser brought the BAR stock up against his shoulder, his hand kicking the safety off. The automatic rifle turned a degree to the left on its bipod and Fraser saw in its sights the quilted front of Tap-a-san's uniform jacket. There was a tear in the material.

Tap-a-san waved his rifle again, yelling, "Marine-son-a-bitchees . . . Marine-son-a-bitchees . . . Marine-son-a-bitchees."

Fraser's finger slowly closed on the trigger sending aimed death racing through the valley. When the magazine was at last empty and the pounding echo of the exploding 30 caliber shells faded far down the valley his finger opened. Fraser slumped back against the wall and closed his eyes.

"Hey, Fraser! Fraser! Fraser come in! Fraser!"

Slowly, in zombie like motions, Corporal Fraser straightened up and picked up the squawking field phone. "Nesbett White . . . Fraser here."

"What's wrong, Fraser? What's all that firing up there?"

"Nothing's wrong, Sergeant. I just won the war. I killed Tap-a-san, but don't ask me why—I don't know why."

The phone fell from Corporal Fraser's hand, and with it tears from his eyes and from his heart.





BY
CHARLES DILLY

THE EIGHT BALL

*Arnie was losing his touch. But he had a plan . . .
he just needed a pigeon. He found a real eight-ball.*

ARNIE was still a couple of months this side of thirty-five, but as a top-notch billiards player he was just a shadow away from being completely washed up. He'd never been a champion or anything like that, but he *had* always been cool. Now he was getting shaky, temperamental. Another year and his hands would start trembling and that would end it. You just can't hustle pool with unsteady hands.

His eyes weren't what they used

to be either. He had to always carry a bottle of aspirin for the headaches, and if it was a really big money game—the kind where Georgie would lock the pool room doors and draw the curtains—he too often found himself cramping up with fatigue along about day-break, and he would start missing the easy ones, and everybody would know for sure that his stamina was shot.

Arnie still made money, but he made it strictly in brilliant flashes,

occasional nights when he might run four racks without a pass. But those nights came at increasingly long intervals, and tonight definitely was not one of them. He hadn't run a string over ten all night.

Little Phil from New Orleans, his opponent for the evening, dropped a beautiful two cushion combination and signalled for a rack. Arnie tossed a hundred dollar bill onto the green felt table-top.

Little Phil said, "You want to rest for a while?" He pocketed the cash.

Arnie lit a cigarette and sprinkled a little powder into the palm of one hand. He said, "No. Go on."

Little Phil was one of the vultures, one of the young, not-really-good stickmen who made a living off the guys who were losing their touch. They went after the big names, after the guys who still bet like champs, but who could no longer produce. Little Phil had stayed in town an extra day just to play Arnie, and some guys might think that a compliment. To Arnie, it was just further proof that his time was almost up.

Arnie chalked his cue and let Little Phil plot a string of six easy ducks. Then Arnie bent over the table and automatically set about plotting his own sequence. He thought about The Insurance, and when he did, it relaxed him. He made his first shot and came out of it with good position.

The Insurance was a good thing. At least, when he did quit, he wouldn't be out in the cold. He'd just have to get lost for a little while, then use another name when he opened up his business. It wouldn't be the best, but it was better than trying to live off of his wife's salary. Gladys might not even be able to get a job after all this time.

The Insurance was named Milton, and Arnie had spotted him in a pool hall not far from this very one about three months ago. Arnie had missed a straight drop-in shot and had groaned audibly. He glanced around apologetically at the few strangers who were watching the game . . . and he looked right at Milton.

Milton was a tall stringy kid—maybe twenty—with long black hair and a face that was all nose and chin. His eyes were jet black, and he didn't smile. He was one of those people who merged into crowds, invisible people who just didn't get noticed. Except for one thing—he looked almost exactly like Arnie.

Arnie played down that first meeting, though even then his mind was racing ahead to the different possibilities. He played it casual, and let the student-teacher bit take it from there. Now both Milton and Arnie were ready, and, in about another two or three hours, Arnie was going to kill Milton.

Milton was a drifter, a kid on the loose with no one to bother him, and also no one to ask questions if one day he just didn't show up any more. After two or three meetings where Arnie successfully awed the youth with anecdotes about his big games with Fats O'Toole, Charlie Quick, and other champs, he invited Milton out to his house for dinner and to meet Gladys.

Arnie had a comfortable house on Lake Romaine about ten miles out of town. He drove a new car and had a moderately priced boat that he kept on his private pier. He didn't live like a king, but he was comfortable. Gladys hadn't worked in ten years, and she didn't look forward to starting again. That's what Arnie had said when he first proposed murdering Milton.

"But, Arnie, he's just a kid," Gladys argued.

"He's my size. He looks like me. If he was twenty pounds heavier, if his skin wasn't so smooth and his hair thinned out on top, he'd look like my brother."

"But he walks different. He talks different."

"Gladys, honey, for what I have in mind, he won't be talking."

Over the years, Arnie had accumulated a number of accident and life insurance policies that now totaled out to almost sixty thousand dollars. Like everything about Arnie, it wasn't spectacular, but it was better than average. Now if they

could just find somebody—let's say, like Milton—plant a couple of identifying objects on him, and arrange an accident that would leave him in a way that wasn't so easily recognizable—then Gladys could collect sixty thousand dollars. After a reasonable delay, she could meet him at a pre-arranged spot, and they could start out fresh.

"Maybe," Arnie suggested, "we could open our own pool hall."

Slowly, reluctantly, Gladys had agreed. "All right," she said. "What do I do?"

Arnie chalked his cue and waited for the balls to be racked. He came out of his reverie long enough to notice that Little Phil was considerably paler than he had been during their last conversation. Two one-hundred-dollar bills graced the corner of the pool table. Casually Arnie picked them up and put them into his pocket. He glanced at the large, open faced clock suspended from the ceiling. He said, "Little Phil, I'm calling it a night."

"What? Are you crazy? You just ran two racks without a pass. For the first time tonight, you're shoot-in' like yourself. . . ."

Arnie broke down his stick, and placed it carefully into a velvet lined case. "I'm sorry, Little Phil, but I'm going fishing."

"Fishin'?"

"Yeah. You have to get out on the lake before dawn if you want to catch any of the big ones." He chuckled agreeably at Little Phil's

confusion. He said, "You're ahead, aren't you?"

"Sure. Maybe four hundred, but. . . ."

Arnie said, "Don't forget 10% for Georgie." He waved a cheery good-night, pushed the green night curtain aside, and slipped out of the pool hall.

He drove quickly through town and out onto the highway. He thought about Milton and hoped that he wouldn't be a lot of trouble. For the last three weeks, Milton had been living, rent free, in Arnie's guest room.

Every day it was the same routine. Up early in the morning to meet Arnie when he came home from the pool hall; then out on the lake for some fishing; back in to eat and practice on the pool table while Arnie slept. Then to bed in the spare room when Arnie left for town.

That was part of the deal. Arnie was teacher and trainer. When he said to practice a shot, Milton practiced. In return for this discipline, Milton got his room and board free. Later, when he was really good, Arnie would promote and manage his matches for 20% of the winnings.

That was the story—the pitch—the fantastic lie that kept Milton from wandering off somewhere, instead of sitting in Arnie's kitchen like a muscular sitting duck, just begging to be The Insurance.

He'd had three solid weeks of

free loading and fishing and fumbling around on Arnie's personalized pool table. The kid, Arnie knew, simply was not professional material. Granted, he was better than the average run-of-the-mill punk who hung around on a street corner. But, if he ever got into a money game with a real pro, he'd lose his shirt.

His lack of talent was not recognized by Milton himself. Milton, on the contrary, was firmly convinced that, under Arnie's direction, he was becoming a champion. He could *feel* it, he claimed, and it wasn't going to be long before he was a champ and they'd all be rich.

Arnie kept his judgment of Milton's abilities as his own private joke, but sometimes it was hard. One night Milton ran a string of ten balls without a miss, and he virtually demanded that they open a bottle of wine to celebrate. Milton related each shot in detail to Gladys and swelled out his chest as if he expected her to pet it or something. He didn't mention, of course, that the streak ended because he flubbed a simple one-cushion bank that missed by a full two inches. Gladys acted out her part perfectly though. She widened her eyes, rounded her lips wonderfully, and said, "Oooo, is he really that good, Arnie?"

"There is absolutely no one like him," Arnie replied with a straight face. Then he went up to the bath-

room and laughed so hard that his ribs hurt.

Arnie had to drive almost a mile off the highway, down a dirt road devoid of houses, to reach his home. When he pulled the car into his driveway he noted with satisfaction that a light was on in the kitchen.

Milton sat at the kitchen table dressed in a pair of khakis and a tight fitting tee shirt. His thick black hair was mussed slightly as if he hadn't been up for long. Gladys, wearing a loose housecoat, poured coffee from a ten-cup pot.

"Hello, honey." Arnie kissed her lightly and drew a chair up to the table. "Hello, Milton."

"Hi, Arnie."

"Goin' fishing this morning?"

Milton nodded. "I thought I might go out for an hour or so. They were bitin' pretty good yesterday."

"Well, good luck," Arnie answered. He caught Gladys looking his way and gave her a big reassuring wink. He said to Milton, "Did you practice that shot I showed you yesterday?"

Milton nodded, "For about an hour. I think I've just about got it."

"Practice it again today. Make *sure* you've got it."

Arnie motioned quickly to Gladys when Milton was not looking. He said, "I better go wash up." He climbed up the stairs to the bathroom, threw some cold water in his face, and swallowed two as-

pirins. The headache was back, and he wished he could have a drink to thin it down a little. But a drink now would be something unusual, something other than the daily routine he had been following ever since Milton moved in. It might—it just might—arouse suspicions, so he would just have to do without.

Gladys came up the steps and smiled nervously.

He pulled her close to him and whispered, "Is everything going all right?"

She nodded but continued to look at the floor.

He whispered louder, "Did you do everything just like I told you to do? Have you been flirting with him again?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"And how's it working? How's he taking it? Never mind, I saw the way he was looking at you when I came home tonight. Now listen. I'm going to go over your part just once more, and then we're going to do it. You understand?"

Arnie crept over to the head of the stair to make sure that Milton was out of earshot. He said, "We'll go back to the kitchen. I'll drink another cup of coffee like always, then I'll say that I'm going to hit the sack. But instead, I'll really slip out the side door and go down to the boat shed. In another hour, Milton will go fishing. Chances are that he'll take the boat and, anyway, he'll have to come to the shed

for the fishing gear. When he walks into the shed, I'll club him with a wrench, and that will do it. If, for any reason at all, he decides that he *doesn't* want to go fishing, or that he *doesn't* want to go into the boat shed, then it's your job to coax him into doing it. If you been flirtin' with him all week like I said, it won't come as any surprise to him. I don't care *how* you do it, but make sure he walks through that boat shed door."

Gladys nodded, but her brow furrowed. "Arnie, Milton looks a lot like you used to look, but even after gettin' hit with a wrench, people are going to see that he isn't you."

Arnie smiled and tapped her playfully on the chin. Gladys was still a damn good looking woman. "Don't you worry about that, honey. I got it all figured."

"Tell me, Arnie."

He glanced once more at the top of the stair, then shrugged heavily. He said, "At last count, I had four cans of gasoline in the boat shed. Today one of those cans is going to explode . . . maybe even all four of them."

Gladys involuntarily put her hand to her mouth.

Arnie said, "It's the only way. When he comes through that door, I'll clobber him. Then I'll dress him in my clothes, put my wallet in his pocket, my keys, my card case. . . . Just a clincher, I'll put my wedding ring on his finger, and in

another week, you'll be the prettiest rich widow in town. You'll tell the insurance people that I left to go fishing and the boat needed gas. I must have dropped a cigarette."

Suddenly Gladys threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was a long kiss like he hadn't had for maybe a month, and for a minute Arnie thought that maybe he could murder Milton some other day. Finally though, he pushed her gently away from him. "Come on," he whispered, and started for the stair.

The boat shed did not really house a boat. Arnie kept the boat tied up on the pier. But the boat shed contained just about everything *but* a boat. The cans of gasoline, naturally, the fishing gear, oars, bait, some old furniture, his tools—it was a big, uneven board structure that Arnie had built himself about five years ago.

Arnie pressed his face up close to the rough boards. He peered through a crack in the boards at the path leading away from the beach to the house. He had been waiting for nearly an hour. Had anything gone wrong? Where was Milton?

For the hundredth time, he removed the heavy wrench from his pocket. He went through another practice swing in slow motion, making sure there was nothing to stall or snag the death blow. He was dying for a cigarette, but he

didn't dare light up now. Already the sky was becoming a pale grey color, a prelude to dawn.

Suddenly he heard muted voices. He pressed his eye to the crack and saw, happily, that Milton was walking slowly down the path from the house. Gladys was walking with him. So it *had* been necessary to use Gladys. Arnie silently congratulated himself on his foresight, and watched them approach the shed. When they reached a point just outside the door, Milton suddenly stopped, spun Gladys quickly around and kissed her violently on the mouth. Arnie tightened his grip on the wrench and bit his tongue to keep from moving. It was a long, grinding kiss and, when it was over Gladys was angry and breathing hard. But she said, "Let's go inside, Milt."

Arnie flattened himself against the wall as the door swung outward.

He heard Milton say, "You first."

"No. You go ahead."

Milton insisted. "After you."

"All right," Gladys sighed. She looked into the dark shed and said loudly, "I'll go in first."

In the darkness, Arnie silently nodded at the warning. He held the wrench back against the wall.

With a clatter of high heels, Gladys stepped into the shed. She turned past Arnie and couldn't resist taking a quick look at him. Arnie grinned, winked, and raised the wrench. Then Milton came in

and Arnie started his swing, but all of a sudden it was like he was paralyzed. The wrench came forward in jerky little spurts and, when it was just about in front of him, he saw that he wasn't paralyzed at all, but that Gladys was holding onto his wrist with both hands. Just about then, Milton's fist came skyrocketing out of the darkness and smashed into Arnie's right eye.

He was probably only unconscious for a minute or two, but when he woke up, his hands were tied, a gag was in his mouth, and he was soaking wet.

Gladys was standing in the doorway of the shed looking at him. When he moved, he saw her nod and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Milton uncap another of the gasoline cans and tip it over. He felt the liquid seeping into his clothes, and the smell made him cough into the gag.

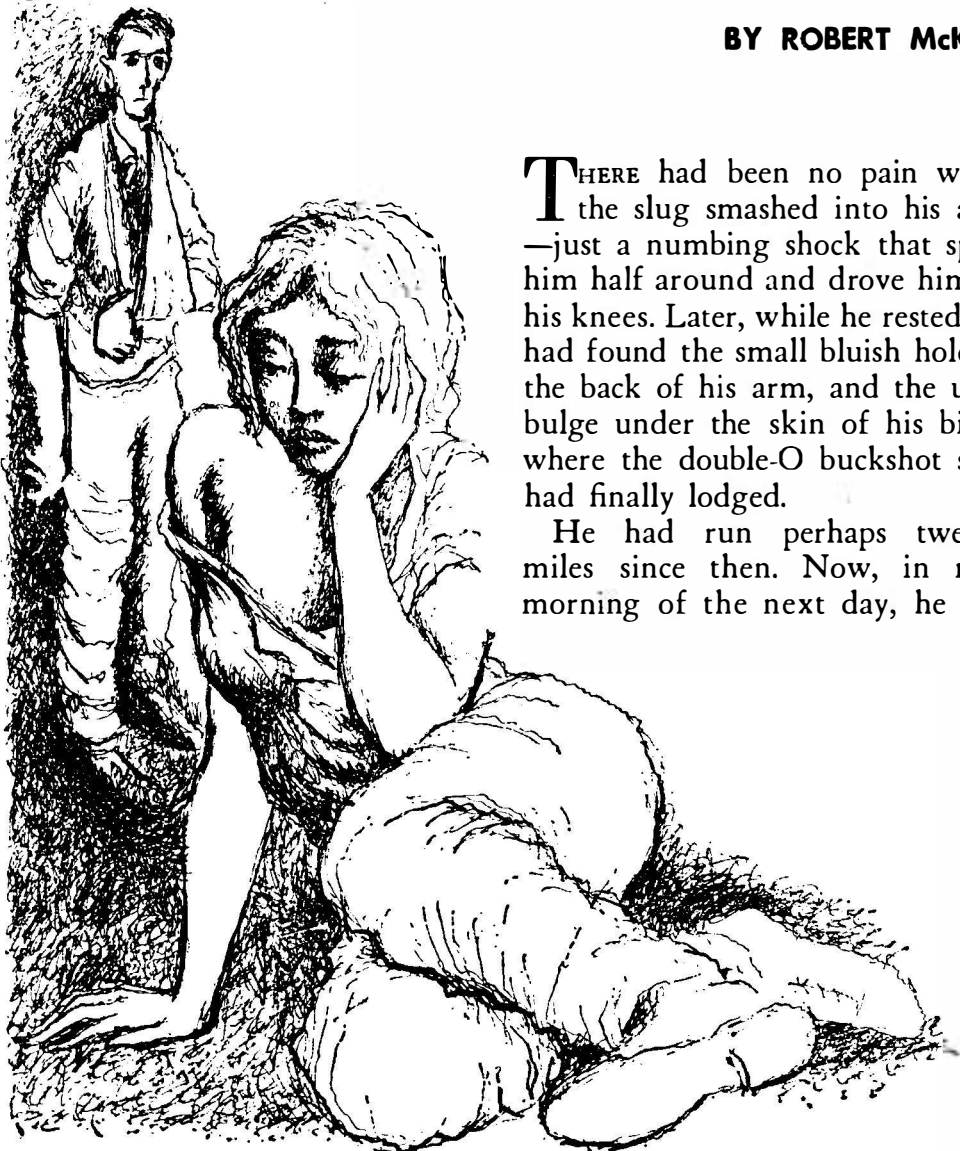
Gladys looked awfully sad. She dabbed at her eyes with a small white handkerchief. She said. "I hope you understand, Arnie. It isn't every girl gets a chance to really start over. I mean, Milton is almost exactly like you, Arnie, and of course he's a lot younger now." She smiled tentatively at Milton and added proudly, "Someday he's going to be a real champion."

If things had been different Arnie would have laughed, but he had the gag in his mouth and, anyway, just then Gladys struck a match.

That's what she was doing way out in nowhere . . . painting pictures of birds. She loved birds. And that's what he was . . . a jailbird shot in flight.

FUGITIVE

BY ROBERT MCKAY



THERE had been no pain when the slug smashed into his arm—just a numbing shock that spun him half around and drove him to his knees. Later, while he rested, he had found the small bluish hole in the back of his arm, and the ugly bulge under the skin of his bicep where the double-O buckshot slug had finally lodged.

He had run perhaps twenty miles since then. Now, in mid morning of the next day, he felt

safe for the moment; but he was hungry and very tired and his arm throbbed with heavy, brutal pulses of pain.

He tried to ignore the arm as he lay full-length in the patch of knee-high palmettoes and watched the lonely little house on the river bank. A square cottage with overhanging eaves and white paint flaking in the Florida sun; a neat white privy in back, and in front a crumbling mossy dock leaning into the river.

Five miles from a road, on his way across one of the sandy areas of scrub palmetto that fringe the northern edge of the Everglades, he hadn't expected a house for another couple of hours. This was a fishing camp, and it could be the answer to everything. It could be the end of everything, too—because the boat tied to the crumbling dock was not a fisherman's boat. It was a speedboat, mahogany and brass gleaming in the sun as it rode low and sleek in the quiet river.

The back door of the cottage opened and a girl came out. She wore slim gray slacks and a white shirt and he thought she was a boy—until she moved. Then through the pain and tiredness he felt a hot surge of the hunger that had been building in him for three womanless years.

On her way back to the house, the girl stood for a moment in the sandy yard, turning her body as she looked widely around. He flattened

himself in the palmettoes, burying his face in the warm coarse sand. He couldn't be sure she hadn't seen him. And he couldn't be sure there was a man in the cottage, either, but the odds were a hundred to one against her being out here alone.

He lay in the palmettoes until the sun blazed straight down, waiting to get a look at the man. The sun hammered through the skimpy leaves, driving thirst up in his throat, turning his tongue to leather. His head felt puffed and light and when he shifted his eyes quickly, the scene jumped out of focus.

He reached in his pocket with his left hand and brought out the bone-handled jackknife. Opening the blade with his teeth, he got up and started a head-down, dragging run toward the cottage. He felt that he had no chance, but he jerked the screen door open anyway and stepped inside, the knife in front of him, almost blind in the unexpected darkness.

"Don't move!" he shouted, his voice hoarse and wild in his own ears. He could see the dim figure of the girl seated at a table. Frantically his eyes swept the shadows. The cottage was all one room and much larger than it had seemed from outside. But he and the girl were alone.

He could see her better now. The table was a drawing board, tilted to the light near the window. Perched on a high stool, she twisted to look at him, a brush motionless in her hand, her eyes perfectly round.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"I don't want anything, blondy," he said, trying to smile. "Except clothes and food and money and your boat."

"All right," she said. "But please—you don't need that knife."

"I'll keep the knife out just in case you get frisky."

She took a deep breath, almost a sob, and closed her eyes, biting her trembling lower lip. "I . . . I won't get frisky."

The portable radio caught his eye. "You know who I am?"

She nodded, opening her eyes and gazing at him hypnotized.

"Well, don't believe everything you hear on the radio."

She nodded again, pulling her eyes away from his. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want a drink of water first and then I want some breakfast."

She slid off the stool and worked the handle of the old-fashioned suction pump. The pump looked strange hanging over the gleaming enamel sink. And the water tasted of sulphur but it was cold and wonderful in his throat. The girl opened the door of the small white refrigerator.

"How come you've got electricity in a Godforsaken place like this?"

"Daddy wanted it," she said, her voice still shaking, as she clumsily piled eggs and milk and oranges on a large, round, solidly built table. He sat down, sweat cold on his

face. His arm looked very bad now. Although it seemed to have stopped swelling, the color was worse—the purple streaks were bigger—and it ached. Jesus, how it ached!

The girl put a big plate of fried eggs and bacon on the table. She poured steaming coffee into a heavy china mug. "You sit over there," he said, indicating the chair opposite him, the rich greasy smell of the eggs making his stomach jump. He forced a grin and closed the jack-knife and put it in his pocket.

"What are you doing alone out here?" he asked, strength and confidence flowing back into him with the food and the strong hot coffee.

She swallowed. "I'm sketching birds. This is a marvelous place for birds."

He looked at her curiously and for the first time he really saw her. She was a few years younger than he, maybe twenty-three. Her face was triangular, with a high serene forehead and a small, rather pointed and stubborn chin. She had a wide, sharply cut mouth; and her lips, though not especially full, had a tender ripe look that made him frown. She was very slender, the fine bones in her wrists plainly visible, and through the open collar of her shirt he could see the delicate line of her collar bone.

Her small breasts made two sharp points against the thin cotton shirt. He realized with quick excitement that she wore no brassiere. Raising his eyes to her face, he saw

that she was blushing and full of fear again.

"Got any cigarettes?" he asked.

She motioned toward the drawing board. He lit one with her lighter and inhaled deeply.

"May I have one?" she asked in a small voice.

He handed her the cigarettes and lighter and went back to look at the sketch tacked to the drawing board. It was a blue heron, caught perfectly in a few pencil strokes. She had been just starting to lay on the water color when he interrupted her. He saw then the other pictures propped along the wall under the window. An egret, startled and snowy against marsh grass—a crane—an ibis—a big, flame-colored bird he couldn't name.

"The pictures are fine," he said, surprised.

She smiled for the first time. "Why, thank you."

He shook his head. "Now look. Let's make this easy for both of us."

The smile went away and her lips started to tremble again.

"First of all, I want to know if you've got a gun in here."

Her eyes flickered. She sat frozen.

"Look, blondy. I'll find it if it's here. Don't make it hard for me."

"All right. Yes, there's a .22 pistol in that drawer."

He jerked the drawer open, exulting at the sight of the long-barreled Colt Woodsman. Ah! Now things were evening up a little.

"How much money you got?"

"I think about twenty dollars. In my purse—there. . . ." He saw the big, soft leather purse on the pine dresser between the two narrow beds. But new tiredness came down on him like bars of lead piling on his shoulders. The money could wait. Maybe he'd feel better if he washed and got into some clean clothes.

Clothes were a problem. The girl rummaged through the dresser drawers and finally came up with a pair of faded, too-short khaki pants and an old, too-small poplin jacket.

"Now you sit over there while I take a bath in your sink."

She walked quickly across the room, not looking at him, and sat down with her face to the wall.

He stripped, glad to be rid of the filthy, torn, convict pants. The cold water from the pump cleared his head and brought a tingle of well-being to his body. Except the right arm. The arm was on fire now and the water couldn't cool it. The arm would have to be fixed.

He found a razor in the medicine cabinet and shaved in water heated on the stove. After washing the sweat and mud out of his short curly black hair, he inspected himself in the mirror over the sink. His eyes looked back at him as coldly blue as always. Except for a burning flush his lean heavy-browed face showed few signs of the past twenty hours.

"You can turn around now," he said.

Facing him, she seemed calmer. "What's your name?" he asked. He knew he could never make her *want* to help him. It would be enough if she stopped being terrified.

"Frances. . . . Frances Wylie. You're Boyd Kimbrough, aren't you?" "Yeah," he said, smiling. "But not exactly the Boyd Kimbrough you heard about on the radio."

Frowning, she studied his face. "You know they'll catch you sooner or later. You're still young. Why don't you stop running now before it's too late?"

He laughed. "Too late? It was too late the day they gave me double life. I'd rather get it over with, one way or the other, out here where I can fight back."

He felt suddenly dizzy and leaned on the table to steady himself. "I've got to do something about this arm. I want you to help me." He held her blue, questioning eyes with his. "I want you to take the bullet out of my arm."

"No! I couldn't! I'd never be able to—"

"I'll show you what to do," he said softly. "It's right there under the skin. There's nothing to it."

She stared at him, horrified. "No! Please don't make me—"

"Now, now. Take it easy. I'm not going to make you do anything." In the medicine cabinet he found tape, iodine, bandages—even sulfa powder. A single-edge razor blade

would have to do for the scalpel. "Got any whisky?" he asked. She shook her head blankly. He found a pair of tweezers and bent them to open the space between the points. He dropped the blade and the tweezers in a pan of water and set it on the stove to boil.

Frances Wylie sat at the drawing board and watched him. He unrolled some of the bandages and made thick gauze pads. He got towels and a bed sheet out of the dresser and slit the sheet at one end—a hole big enough to stick his arm through. He took the pan off the stove, poured the water in the sink, and put the pan with razor blade and tweezers in it on the table.

"OK, Frances," he said, turning to the girl with what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

"I'll never be able to do it. I can't stand blood. I . . ."

He poured iodine on his upper arm, making a dark streak over the slug, lost now in the swelling. "Come on now," he said, turning toward her and finding her at his elbow, already pulling the other chair around next to him. She was very pale. But her eyes had lost their dazed helplessness.

"Quickly—before I lose my nerve," she said.

He pointed at the streak on his bicep. "Just push the razor blade down, hard, and pull it to you about an inch. Push *hard* and do it in one motion."

The girl picked up the blade. She held her breath, glanced at him with an expression almost of exaltation, and pushed the blade into his arm. The shock of sudden nausea caught him unprepared. He felt the blade move through his flesh and despite his concentrated effort at control he groaned and jerked his arm back.

A thick gout of blood geysered between him and the girl.

"I forgot the tourniquet!" The words burst despairingly from him. He saw the girl's hands and arms darkly red with the spouting blood. She made a high moaning sound in her throat as she grabbed frantically for the towels.

He reached with his left hand to put pressure on the arm above the spurting wound. And as he did, the girl and the walls of the room moved rapidly away from him. He felt as though a silent explosion within him was blasting everything outward and away. . . .

He opened his eyes and saw only a dim ceiling, shadowy in warm yellow light. For a frightening moment he was lost, and he lay tensely still, remembering the snarled growth of willows where the chain-gang squad had been clearing right-of-way. The sting in his hands when the bush-ax hit a solid root. The walking-boss's nasal whine; and the constant, enraging menace of the slouch-hatted shotgun guards.

Cautiously he twisted his head and looked straight into the eyes of Frances Wylie. The held breath burst out of him in an amazed grunt. He struggled to sit up and discovered that he was lying on the floor, covered with blankets.

His upper arm was wrapped neatly in clean white bandage. And he was astonished to see that the rest of his arm, below the elbow, had lost the hot puffy look of infection.

"Did you—did you take the bullet out?" He felt strangely shy with her.

She nodded, smiling a proud self-deprecating little smile.

"What time is it?"

She glanced at her watch. "Ten after two."

"Ten after *two!*" He couldn't absorb it. "You mean I've been out for twelve hours?"

She smiled again, her eyes amused and somehow tender. "Feel your whiskers." He touched his chin. The beard was rough. It didn't make sense. . . .

"*Two days!* I've been out for two days?"

"A day and a half," she said, continuing to smile. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," he said, pushing the blanket away and starting to get to his feet. He pulled the blanket back quickly. Except for the bandage on his arm he was stone naked. "What the hell!" He looked at the girl in complete surprise.

She returned his gaze, blushing, her small chin set stubbornly. "I had to," she said. "You were delirious most of yesterday. I tried to get you into bed but I just couldn't lift you."

He stared at her. "You're not a nurse, are you?"

She shook her head, her eyes bright.

"Can I have my pants?"

She handed him the khakis, freshly washed and pressed, and turned her back while he got into them. He stood up carefully, the worn floor boards solid and good under his bare feet. He looked around the room for the gun. It was nowhere in sight.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, still facing the other way.

"Yeah, but I'm thirsty first." He started for the pump.

She whirled. "Now you sit down! Just sit quiet and get your strength back while I fix you something to eat." She brought him a glass of water from the pump. "The milk's all gone. Would you like some eggs and beans?"

He could only nod, and then watch her at the stove. Her ash blond hair was piled on top of her head, with fragile wisps curling down the back of her slender neck. She had high, narrow shoulders and a tiny waist and sweetly rounded hips. She turned once and gave him a pensive, solemn look.

When he had finished the beans and accepted one of her cigarettes,

he put his elbows on the table and asked the question that had been buzzing in his mind.

"Why have you done this for me?"

Her translucent eyelids drooped. "I'm not sure," she said, her face expressionless. "I'm not sure I did it for you. Perhaps I did it for myself.

"I paint birds," she went on, her voice oddly flat. "My father thinks it's silly. Most of my friends think I'm a nut. . . . But you see, I've never *done* anything. Maybe I just wanted to *do* something for once in my life."

She raised her eyelids and the cool brilliance of her eyes startled him. "Oh, I almost ran away. When you fainted I jumped up and ran right out to the dock. But then I came back inside and put a tourniquet on your arm. When the bleeding stopped I got up to leave again, but you looked so white . . . and broken, lying there.

"So I got the tweezers and found the bullet right away. But then you started to bleed again and you became very feverish and somehow I was beginning to feel responsible for you. You talked to me, too—but you thought I was someone else. You called me Lila."

Lila! Coming from her lips so unexpectedly the name ripped open a wound that hadn't bothered him for a long time.

His eyes bored into hers. She flinched. "I'm sorry," she said. She hesitated and then she continued

as though the words were being forced out of her mouth. "She hurt you terribly, didn't she?"

He stared at her, feeling the black hate rise in him, feeling his eyes burn with the violence of his gaze, feeling his jaw crack as he bit viciously down on the metallic taste of rage.

"Let's leave that," he said through his teeth.

"No." Frances Wylie shook her head. Her eyes were enormous in her small triangular face. They were shining brightly blue and they reached inside his skull like electric probes.

"You've been wallowing in self-pity all this time." Her words were bitterly scornful. The abrupt shift from concern to contempt shocked him. "You stupid fool! You let this . . . this *Lila* make a coward out of you and you've been a coward ever since!"

He slapped her with the full strength of his left hand. The blow caught her above the ear and knocked her off the chair. Slowly she pulled her knees under her and twisted, crouching, looking up at him—her huge eyes full of tears and . . . not fear. No. She looked at him with scorn. And perhaps with pity.

He bit clear through the iron bar of hate. And when he did, it was gone and there was nothing to sustain him. Tearing his gaze from the unbearable sympathy in her eyes, he was instantly alone and

helpless. He felt the cool of the table against his forehead. He couldn't lift his head. He closed his eyes very tightly.

And then he felt her hand touch his hair. A touch so light he wasn't sure. He held his breath. Tight. Tight. His whole being tight and absolutely still. And her hand moved. Gently. Stroking his hair gently.

His breath came in a deep shuddering gasp. The girl's hand rested on his head and her fingers moved against his scalp, more confidently now, gentling him. The jagged lump in his throat swelled and he heard the harsh sob and knew without understanding that it was he who had sobbed. Astonished, he felt his throat constrict again. He felt the burning tears squeeze through his clamped eyelids.

And through it he felt the girl's arm go around his shoulders, holding him close. And heard her light voice say, "Go ahead. Cry. Maybe a man doesn't really grow up until he learns to cry again."

When it was over he raised his head, ashamed of having cried, but feeling strange and new. She met his look with a tentative smile, her brows arched in uncertainty.

"I'm sorry I hit you."

"You had to hit somebody," she said.

His lips were stiff and again it was hard to speak. "Well, I . . . You saved my life. You didn't turn me in. . . ."

She smiled sadly "I might have, though, if you hadn't started talking." She stood up and wandered around the room, touching and straightening things. "You weren't a criminal before . . . before she did what she did; were you?"

"What difference does it make? I've got two life sentences now and that takes care of everything."

"Oh, no!" she cried with desperate earnestness. "You can be *paroled*. I can help you. My father can help you."

"No!" he said, impatient and angry. "They'll never parole me. They've got me pegged for a killer. Remember?"

"But you didn't kill those men!" She looked at him imploringly.

And then all that had been for so long impossible became at once possible and believable and probable. The emptiness within him was filled instantly with the warmth and beauty of her. He felt all of himself reaching out to her. Not to take, but to give. He stood up and made the smallest motion with his left arm and she flew to him, a high whimpering sound in her throat.

Her lips were tender. He felt the fragile bones of her back, the arching curve of her body, the sweet hot pressure of her thighs. He kissed her long and deep, and as the bright spring of passion coiled inside him he broke the kiss and laid his cheek against her hair, holding her, feeling her arms around him, listening to the rush of her breath.

"Oh, my darling!" Her voice trembled, but there was no doubt in it.

Holding her, he opened his eyes and looked squarely at what lay ahead for them—and he was suddenly cold. He saw the slow years dragging by. The one-Sunday-a-month visits. He saw himself trying to talk to her while a tobacco-chewing guard listened avidly to every word of love.

Why, it was impossible! She didn't even know him. She pitied him, that's all. She'd feel the same way toward an injured animal she had nursed back to health.

She was murmuring, her lips moving deliciously against the bare skin of his chest. "I never knew what love was, Boyd. I just never knew—"

He grabbed her shoulder with his left hand, pushing her away. "Stop it," he said harshly. "We're kidding ourselves. Christ! For a minute I almost went for it."

"Boyd! Please!" Her eyes were as uncomprehending as a child's.

He grinned, but not at her. "We'll both be walking with canes before they turn me loose again."

"No! A parole—"

"Forget it, blondy." He felt the thinness of his smile. "I'm paroling myself right now. That's the only parole I'm interested in."

She moaned wordlessly and as her knees sagged he grabbed her shoulder again and pushed her down into the chair. He crossed

the room to the dresser where he had found the .22 Colt. The drawer was empty. He jerked open other drawers. "Where's the gun?"

She stared at him blankly.

When she didn't answer he leaped in cold fury to her side and shook her violently. Her head snapped back and forth like a dead bird's. Feeling sick, he released her. She stared up at him in agony. Then tears flooded the dry blue of her eyes and she put her head in her hands and wept.

Hurriedly he searched the other dresser. One of the drawers held her underwear. He pawed through the fragrant nylon, aware of the aching emptiness inside him. Savagely he ripped the dresser drawers out and dumped them on the floor. Her underwear, shirts, slacks, a nightgown. Then sheets, towels, blankets. He littered the floor with things that belonged to her.

Contemptuously he opened her purse, dumped its contents on the bed. Lipstick, mirror, a crumpled handkerchief, comb, keys, checkbook, billfold. The billfold held two tens and three ones. He stuffed the money in his pocket. She sat as before, hunched in misery, not looking at him. He threw the purse in a corner. The gun—he had to have the gun.

He peeled the mattress back from the nearest bed and there was the gun, shining blue black in the dim light. He reached for it painfully with his right hand and managed

to pick it up. Red impatience surged through him as he shifted the gun to his left hand. He aimed at the floor and pulled the trigger.

Ka-bam! The .22 blasted sharply in the closed room. Shoving the gun in his belt, he picked up the keys that had spilled from her purse. "Are these the keys to the speedboat?"

She sat rigid unanswering.

"Come on, blondy! Snap out of it. You made a bad guess, that's all. It ain't the end of the world."

Her face changed. She stood up holding out both hands to him. "Boyd, you can't do this." Her face was wet with tears and her mouth contorted in her effort to still its tremor. "This isn't you, Boyd. I know it isn't."

"That's where you're wrong, blondy. This *is* me." A dark part of him stirred eagerly. "Do you really want to know what kind of a guy I am?"

He reached inside her outstretched hands and hooked his left hand in the open collar of her shirt. With hate in his heart he jerked his hand downward. Her shirt tore from collar to shoulder and the whole right side of it came away in his hand. Her small perfect pink-tipped breast burned his eyes. The delicate cage of her ribs was like bones breaking in his own body.

And she looked at him without fear and said, "No. I don't believe you."

He hit her with his closed fist. The punch landed high on her forehead, knocked her spinning across the room. She crashed into the drawing board and fell sprawling in a welter of bird pictures and brushes and tubes of water color.

"You'll believe me now!" he shouted over the vast hurting distance that separated him from Frances Wylie.

Whirling, he snatched his shoes and jacket and dove into the night. Outside the door he stopped and put on the heavy brogans. The night was moonless and so dark he had to grope blindly for the dock. It must be after four o'clock, he thought. Be daylight soon. Three hours, four at the outside, and that boat could take him all the way to Fort Meyers.

Providing Frances Wylie didn't get to a telephone first. He crouched on the dock, shivering as the fresh night breeze chilled his sweaty body. The thing to do was to tie the girl up and leave her in the cottage.

Yes, he could tie her up. He saw himself putting ropes around the fragile ankles, her eyes watching him as he stuck the gag in her tender mouth.

Yes. That was what he would have to. He remembered the terror in her face when he had first stepped into the cottage. Her slim straight back as she stood at the stove cooking for him. The look in her eyes after he slapped her. And

what had she said to him?—"You had to hit somebody."

The gun gouged his stomach as he shifted position to ease the cramp in his knees. Well, it was too bad; but he might as well get it over with.

He stood up and turned toward the cottage and saw her slight form silhouetted in the lighted door. It was not going to be easy. He remembered the touch of her hand on his hair and her arm around his shoulder while he cried. And the strange newness that had pervaded him afterward. For a moment there it had been all through him, strong and bright and full of hope.

He cast his mind ahead to what lay waiting for him down the river. On the run—but free. Free to move through the world—but alone. With a gun in his hand. And Frances Wylie lying here in the cottage with a red bruise on her forehead where he had hit her.

Yes.

Carefully he made his way back the length of the crumbling dock. Up the graveled path, slowly, his eyes fixed on the slim figure in the doorway. As he reached the door he was astounded to see that she still wore the torn shirt. He felt that he had been away a long time.

She moved back to let him in. The light hurt his eyes. He took the gun out of his belt and laid it on the table.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice thick in his throat. He put the keys

and the twenty-three dollars down beside the gun. He risked an instant's contact with her eyes. They were serenely blue. She seemed emotionless, detached.

He walked to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I've been running long enough," he said. "I'm going to give myself up."

"You might as well wait until it's light."

He was afraid to look at her now. He was breaking apart inside and he was afraid—

"Boyd?"

Stiffly, with great effort, he turned.

"Sit down now while I make some coffee."

He took a step toward her. She blushed and clutched her tattered shirt. Scampering across the room, she picked up one of the shirts he had dumped on the floor, and with her back to him she changed to the new shirt.

She turned to him smiling, still blushing. "That was silly, wasn't it?"

He shook his head. When she came into his arms he had the feeling of newness again. But the strangeness was gone. He felt brand new and he was no longer afraid of anything in the world.



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I *Vetter! Who was he? Where did he come from? What did he want? He was a devil, and he came from hell . . . and he wanted vengeance!*

CAME

BY MICKEY SPILLANE

TO

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KILL

I HANDED the guy the note and shivered a little bit because the guy was as big as they come, and even though he had a belly you couldn't get your arms around, you wouldn't want to be the one who figured you could sink your fist in it. The belly was as hard as the rest of him, but not quite as hard as his face.

Then I knew how hard the back of his hand was because he smashed it across my jaw and I could taste the blood where my teeth bit into my cheek.

Maybe the guy holding my arm

YOU

knew I couldn't talk because he said, "A guy give him a fin to bring it, boss. He said that."

"Who, kid?"

I spit the blood out easy so it dribbled down my chin instead of going on the floor. "Gee, Mr. Renzo . . ."

His hand made a dull, soggy crack on my skin. The buzz got louder in my ears and there was a jagged, pounding pain in my skull.

"Maybe you didn't hear me the first time, kid. I said who."

The hand let go my arm and I slumped to the floor. I didn't want to, but I had to. There were no legs under me any more. My eyes were open, conscious of only the movement of ponderous things that got closer. Things that moved quickly and seemed to dent my side without causing any feeling at all.

That other voice said, "He's out, boss. He ain't saying a thing."

"I'll make him talk."

"Won't help none. So a guy gives him a fin to bring the note. He's not going into a song and dance with it. To the kid a fin's a lot of dough. He watches the fin, not the guy."

"You're getting too damn bright," Renzo said.

"That's what you pay me for being, boss."

"Then act bright. You think a guy hands a note like this to some kid? Any kid at all? You think a kid's gonna bull in here to deliver it when he can chuck it down a drain and take off with the fin?"

"So the kid's got morals."

"So the kid knows the guy or the guy knows him. He ain't letting no kid get away with his fin." The feet moved away from me, propped themselves against the dark blur of the desk. "You read this thing?" Renzo asked.

"No."

"Listen then. 'Cooley is dead. Now my fine fat louse, I'm going to spill your guts all over your own floor.'" Renzo's voice droned to a stop. He sucked hard on the cigar and said, "It's signed, *Vetter*."

You could hear the unspoken words in the silence. That hush that comes when the name was mentioned and the other's half-whispered "Son of a bitch they were buddies, boss?"

"Who cares? If that crumb shows his face around here, I'll break his lousy back. *Vetter*, *Vetter*, *Vetter*. Everyplace you go that crumb's name you hear."

"Boss, look. You don't want to tangle with that guy. He's killed plenty of guys. He's. . . ."

"He's different from me? You think he's a hard guy?"

"You ask around, boss. They'll tell you. That guy don't give a damn for nobody. He'll kill you for looking at him."

"Maybe in his own back yard he will. Not here, Johnny, not here. This is my city and my back yard. Here things go my way and *Vetter*'ll get what Cooley got." He sucked on the cigar again and I began to smell

the smoke. "Guys what pull a fastie on me get killed. Now Cooley don't work my tables for no more smart plays. Pretty soon the cops can take Vetter off their list because he won't be around no more either."

"You going to take him, boss?" Johnny said.

"What do you think?"

"Anything you say, boss. I'll pass the word around. Somebody'll know what he looks like and'll finger him." He paused, then, "What about the kid?"

"He's our finger, Johnny."

"Him?"

"You ain't so bright as I thought. You should get your ears to the ground more. You should hear things about Vetter. He pays off for favors. The errand was worth a fin, but he's gonna look in to make sure the letter got here. Then he spots the kid for his busted up face. First time he makes contact we got him. You know what, Johnnie? To Vetter I'm going to do things slow. When they find him the cops get all excited but they don't do nothing. They're glad to see Vetter dead. But other places the word gets around, see? Anybody can bump Vetter gets to be pretty big and nobody pulls any more smart ones. You understand, Johnny?"

"Sure, boss. I get it. You're going to do it yourself?"

"Just me, kid, just me. Like Helen says I got a passion to do something myself and I just got to do it. Vetter's for me. He better be plenty

big, plenty fast and ready to start shooting the second we meet up."

It was like when Pop used to say he'd do something and we knew he'd do it sure. You look at him with your face showing the awe a kid gets when he knows fear and respect at the same time and that's how Johnny must have been looking at Renzo. I knew it because it was in his voice when he said, "You'll do it, boss. You'll own this town, lock, stock and gun butt yet."

"I own it now, Johnny. Never forget it. Now wake that kid up."

This time I had feeling and it hurt. The hand that slapped the full vision back to my eyes started the blood running in my mouth again and I could feel my lungs choking on a sob.

"What was he like, kid?" The hand came down again and this time Renzo took a step forward. His fingers grabbed my coat and jerked me to the floor.

"You got asked a question. What was he like?"

"He was . . . big," I said. The damn slob choked me again and I wanted to break something over his head.

"How big?"

"Like you. Bigger'n six. Heavy."

Renzo's mouth twisted into a sneer and he grinned at me. "More. What was his face like?"

"I don't know. It was dark. I couldn't see him good."

He threw me. Right across the room he threw me and my back

smashed the wall and twisted and I could feel the tears rolling down my face from the pain.

"You don't lie to Renzo, kid. If you was older and bigger I'd break you up into little pieces until you talked. It ain't worth a fin. Now you start telling me what I want to hear and maybe I'll slip you something."

"I . . . I don't know. Honest, I . . . if I saw him again it'd be different." The pain caught me again and I had to gag back my voice.

"You'd know him again?"

"Yes."

Johnny said, "What's your name, kid?"

"Joe . . . Boyle."

"Where do you live?" It was Renzo this time.

"Gidney Street," I told him. "Number three."

"You work?"

"Gordon's. I . . . push."

"What'd he say?" Renzo's voice had a nasty tone to it.

"Gordon's a junkie," Johnny said for me. "Has a place on River Street. The kid pushes a cart for him collecting metal scraps."

"Check on it," Renzo said, "then stick with him. You know what to do."

"He won't get away, boss. He'll be around whenever we want him. You think Vetter will do what you say?"

"Don't things always happen like I say? Now get him out of here. Go over him again so he'll know we

mean what we say. That was a lousy fin he worked for."

After things hurt so much they begin to stop hurting completely. I could feel the way I went through the air, knew my foot hit the railing and could taste the cinders that ground in my mouth. I lay there like I was passed out, waiting for the pain to come swelling back, making sounds I didn't want to make. My stomach wanted to break loose but couldn't find the strength and I just lay there cursing guys like Renzo who could do anything they wanted and get away with it.

Then the darkness came, went away briefly and came back again. When it lost itself in the dawn of agony there were hands brushing the dirt from my face and the smell of flowers from the softness that was a woman who held me and said, "You poor kid, you poor kid."

My eyes opened and looked at her. It was like something you dream about because she was the kind of woman you always stare at, knowing you can't have. She was beautiful, with yellow hair that tumbled down her neck like a torch that lit up her whole body. Her name was Helen Troy and I wanted to say, "Hello, Helen," but couldn't get the words out of my mouth.

Know her? Sure, everybody knew her. She was Renzo's feature attraction at his Hideaway Club. But I never thought I'd live to have my head in her lap.

There were feet coming up the path that turned into one of the men from the stop at the gate and Helen said, "Give me a hand, Finney. Something happened to the kid."

The guy she called Finney stood there with his hands on his hips shaking his head. "Something'll happen to you if you don't leave him be. The boss gives orders."

She tightened up all over, her fingers biting into my shoulder. It hurt but I didn't care a bit. "Renzo? The pig!" She spat it out with a hiss. She turned her head slowly and looked at me. "Did he do this, kid?"

I nodded. It was all I could do.

"Finney," she said, "go get my car. I'm taking the kid to a doctor."

"Helen, I'm telling you . . ."

"Suppose I told the cops . . . no, not the cops, the feds in this town that you have holes in your arms?"

I thought Finney was going to smack her. He reached down with his hand back but he stopped. When a dame looks at you that way you don't do anything except what she tells you to.

"I'll get the car," he said.

She got me on my feet and I had to lean on her to stay there. She was just as big as I was. Stronger at the moment. Faces as bad off as mine weren't new to her, so she smiled and I tried to smile back and we started off down the path.

We said it was a fight and the doctor did what he had to do. He

laid on the tape and told me to rest a week then come back. I saw my face in his mirror, shuddered and turned away. No matter what I did I hurt all over and when I thought of Renzo all I could think of was that I hoped somebody would kill him. I hoped they'd kill him while I watched and I hoped it would take a long, long time for him to die.

Helen got me out to the car, closed the door after me and slid in behind the wheel. I told her where I lived and she drove up to the house. The garbage cans had been spilled all over the sidewalk and it stank.

She looked at me curiously. "Here?"

"That's right," I told her. "Thanks for everything."

Then she saw the sign on the door. It read, ROOMS. "Your family live here too?"

"I don't have a family. It's a rooming house."

For a second I saw her teeth, white and even, as she pulled her mouth tight. "I can't leave you here. Somebody has to look after you."

"Lady, if . . ."

"Ease off, kid. What did you say your name was?"

"Joe."

"Okay, Joe. Let me do things my way. I'm not much good for anything but every once in awhile I come in handy for something decent."

"Gee, lady . . ."

"Helen."

"Well, you're the nicest person I've ever known."

I said she was beautiful. She had the beauty of the flashiest tramp you could find. That kind of beauty. She was like the dames in the big shows who are always tall and sleepy looking and who you'd always look at but wouldn't marry or take home to your folks. That's the kind of beauty she had. But for a long couple of seconds she seemed to grow a new kind of beauty that was entirely different and she smiled at me.

"Joe . . ." and her voice was warm and husky, "that's the nicest thing said in the nicest way I've heard in a very long time."

My mouth still hurt too much to smile back so I did it with my eyes. Then something happened to her face. It got all strange and curious, a little bit puzzled and she leaned forward and I could smell the flowers again as that impossible something happened when she barely touched her mouth to mine before drawing back with that searching movement of her eyes.

"You're a funny kid, Joe."

She shoved the car into gear and let it roll away from the curb. I tried to sit upright, my hand on the door latch. "Look, I got to get out."

"I can't leave you here."

"Then where . . ."

"You're going back to my place. Damn it, Renzo did this to you and I feel partly responsible."

"That's all right. You only work for him."

"It doesn't matter. You can't stay there."

"You're going to get in trouble, Helen."

She turned and flashed me a smile. "I'm always in trouble."

"Not with him."

"I can handle that guy."

She must have felt the shudder that went through me.

"You'd be surprised how I can handle that fat slob," she said. Then added in an undertone I wasn't supposed to hear, "Sometimes."

It was a place that belonged to her like flowers belong in a rock garden. It was the top floor of an apartment hotel where the wheels all stayed in the best part of town with a private lawn twelve stories up where you could look out over the city and watch the lights wink back at you.

She made me take all my clothes off and while I soaked in a warm bath full of suds she scrounged up a decent suit that was a size too big, but still the cleanest thing I had worn in a long while. I put it on and came out in the living room feeling good and sat down in the big chair while she brought in tea.

Helen of Troy, I thought. So this is what she looked like. Somebody it would take a million bucks and a million years to get close to . . . and here I was with nothing in no time at all.

"Feel better, Joe?"

"A little."

"Want to talk? You don't have to if you don't want to."

"There's not much to say. He worked me over."

"How old are you, Joe?"

I didn't want to go too high. "Twenty-one," I said.

There it was again, that same curious expression. I was glad of the bandages across my face so she couldn't be sure if I was lying or not.

I said, "How old are you?" and grinned at her.

"Almost thirty, Joe. That's pretty old, isn't it?"

"Not so old."

She sipped at the tea in her hand. "How did you happen to cross Renzo?"

It hurt to think about it. "Tonight," I said, "it had just gotten dark. A guy asked me if I'd run a message to somebody for five bucks and I said I would. It was for Mr. Renzo and he told me to take it to the Hideaway Club.

"At first the guy at the gate wouldn't let me in, then he called down that other one, Johnny. He took me in, all right."

"Yes?"

"Renzo started giving it to me."

"Remember what the message said?"

Remember? I'd never forget it. I'd hope from now until I died that the guy who wrote it did everything he said he'd do.

"Somebody called Vetter said he'd kill Renzo," I told her.

Her smile was distant, hard.

"He'll have to be a pretty tough guy," she said. What she said next was almost under her breath and she was staring into the night when she said it. "A guy like that I could go for."

"What?"

"Nothing, Joe." The hardness left her smile until she was a soft thing. "What else happened?"

Inside my chest my heart beat so fast it felt like it was going to smash my ribs loose. "I . . . heard them say . . . I would have to finger the man for them."

"You?"

I nodded, my hand feeling the soreness across my jaw.

She stood up slowly, the way a cat would. She was all mad and tense but you couldn't tell unless you saw her eyes. They were the same eyes that made the Finney guy jump. "Vetter," she said. "I've heard the name before."

"The note said something about a guy named Cooley who's dead."

I was watching her back and I saw the shock of the name make the muscles across her shoulders dance in the light. The tightness went down her body until she stood there stiff-legged, the flowing curves of her chest the only things that moved at all.

"Vetter," she said. "He was Cooley's friend."

"You knew Cooley?"

Her shoulders relaxed and she picked a cigarette out of a box and lit it. She turned around, smiling,

the beauty I had seen in the car there again.

"Yes," Helen said softly, "I knew Cooley."

"Gee."

She wasn't talking to me any more. She was speaking to somebody who wasn't there and each word stabbed her deeper until her eyes were wet. "I knew Cooley very well. He was . . . nice. He was a big man, broad in the shoulders with hands that could squeeze a woman . . ." She paused and took a slow pull on the cigarette. "His voice could make you laugh or cry. Sometimes both. He was an engineer with a quick mind. He figured how he could make money from Renzo's tables and did it. He even laughed at Renzo and told him crooked wheels could be taken by anybody who knew how."

The tears started in the corners of her eyes but didn't fall. They stayed there, held back by pride maybe.

"We met one night. I had never met anyone like him before. It was wonderful, but we were never meant for each other. It was one of those things. Cooley was engaged to a girl in town, a very prominent girl."

The smoke of the cigarette in her hand swirled up and blurred her face.

"But I loved him," she said. With a sudden flick of her fingers she snapped the butt on the rug and ground it out with her shoe. "I hope he kills him! I hope he kills him!"

Her eyes drew a line up the floor until they were on mine. They were clear again, steady, curious for another moment, then steady again. I said, "You don't . . . like Renzo very much?"

"How well do you know people, Joe?"

I didn't say anything.

"You know them too, don't you? You don't live in the nice section of town. You know the dirt and how people are underneath. In a way you're lucky. You know it now, not when you're too old. Look at me, Joe. You've seen women like me before? I'm not much good. I look like a million but I'm not worth a cent. A lot of names fit me and they belong. I didn't get that way because I wanted to. He did it, Renzo. I was doing fine until I met him.

"Sure, some young kids might think I'm on top, but they never get to peek behind the curtain. They never see what I'm forced into and the kind of people I have to know because others don't want to know me. If they do they don't want anybody to know about it."

"Don't say those things, Helen."

"Kid, in ten years I've met two decent people. Cooley was the first." She grinned and the hate left her face. "You're the other one. You don't give a hang what I'm like, do you?"

"I never met anybody like you before."

"Tell me more." Her grin got bigger.

"Well, you're beautiful. I mean real beautiful. And nice. You sure are built . . ."

"Good enough," she said and let the laugh come out. It was a deep, happy laugh and sounded just right for her. "Finish your tea."

I had almost forgotten about it. I drained it down, the heat of it biting into the cuts along my cheek. "Helen . . . I ought to go home. If Mr. Renzo finds out about this, he's going to burn up."

"He won't touch me, Joe."

I let out a grunt.

"You either. There's a bed in there. Crawl into it. You've had enough talk for the night."

I woke up before she did. My back hurt too much to sleep and the blood pounded in my head too hard to keep it on the pillow. The clock beside the bed said it was seven-twenty and I kicked off the covers and dragged my clothes on.

The telephone was in the living room and I took it off the cradle quietly. When I dialed the number I waited, said hello as softly as I could and asked for Nick.

He came on in a minute with a coarse, "Yeah?"

"This is Joe, Nick."

"Hey, where are you, boy? I been scrounging all over the dump for you. Gordon'll kick your tail if you don't get down here. Two other guys didn't show . . ."

"Shut up and listen. I'm in a spot."

"You ain't kidding. Gordon said. . . ."

"Not that, jerk. You see anybody around the house this morning?"

I could almost hear him think. Finally he said, "Car parked across the street. Think there was a guy in it." Then, "Yeah, yeah, wait up. Somebody was giving the old lady some lip this morning. Guess I was still half asleep. Heard your name mentioned."

"Brother!"

"What's up, pal?"

"I can't tell you now. You tell Gordon I'm sick or something, okay?"

"Nuts. I'll tell him you're in the clink. He's tired of that sick business. You ain't been there long enough to get sick yet."

"Tell him what you please. Just tell him. I'll call you tonight." I slipped the phone back and turned around. I hadn't been as quiet as I thought I'd been. Helen was standing there in the doorway of her bedroom, a lovely golden girl, a bright morning flower wrapped in a black stem like a bud ready to pop.

"What is it, Joe?"

There wasn't any use hiding things from her. "Somebody's watching the house. They were looking for me this morning."

"Scared, Joe?"

"Darn right I'm scared! I don't want to get laid out in some swamp with my neck broken. That guy Renzo is nuts. He'll do anything when he gets mad."

"I know," Helen said quietly. Her hand made an unconscious movement across her mouth. "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

We found out who Vetter was that morning. At least Helen found out. She didn't cut corners or make sly inquiries. She did an impossible thing and drove me into town, parked the car and took a cab to a big brownstone building that didn't look a bit different from any other building like it in the country. Across the door it said, PRECINCT NO. 4 and the cop at the desk said the captain would be more than pleased to see us.

The captain was more than pleased, all right. It started his day off right when she came in and he almost offered me a cigar. The nameplate said his name was Gerot and if I had to pick a cop out to talk to, I'd pick him. He was in his late thirties with a build like a wrestler and I'd hate to be in the guy's shoes who tried to bribe him.

It took him a minute to settle down. A gorgeous blonde in a dark green gabardine suit blossoming with curves didn't walk in every day. And when he did settle down, it was to look at me and say, "What can I do for you?" but looking like he already knew what happened.

Helen surprised him. "I'd like to know something about a man," she said. "His name is Vetter."

The scowl started in the middle of

his forehead and spread to his hairline.

"Why?"

She surprised him again. "Because he promised to kill Mark Renzo."

You could watch his face change, see it grow intense, sharpen, notice the beginning of a caustic smile twitch at his lips. "Lady, do you know what you're talking about?"

"I think so."

"You think?"

"Look at me," she said. Captain Gerot's eyes met hers, narrowed and stayed that way. "What do you see, Captain?"

"Somebody who's been around. You know the answers, don't you?"

"All of them, Captain. The questions, too."

I was forgotten. I was something that didn't matter and I was happy about it.

Helen said, "What do you think about Renzo, Captain?"

"He stinks. He operates outside city limits where the police have no jurisdiction and he has the county police sewed up. I think he has some of my men sewed up too. I can't be sure but I wish I were. He's got a record in two states, he's clean here. I'd like to pin a few jobs on that guy. There's no evidence, yet he pulled them. I know this . . . if I start investigating I'm going to have some wheels on my neck."

Helen nodded. "I could add more. It really doesn't matter. You know what happened to Jack Cooley?"

Gerot's face looked mean. "I know

I've had the papers and the state attorney climb me for it."

"I don't mean that."

The captain dropped his face in his hands resignedly, wiped his eyes and looked up again. "His car was found with bullet holes in it. The quantity of blood in the car indicated that nobody could have spilled that much and kept on living. We never found the body."

"You know why he died?"

"Who knows? I can guess from what I heard. He crossed Renzo, some said. I even picked up some info that said he was in the narcotics racket. He had plenty of cash and no place to show where it came from."

"Even so, Captain, if it was murder, and Renzo's behind it, you'd like it to be paid for."

The light blue of Gerot's eyes softened dangerously. "One way or another . . . if you must know."

"It could happen. Who is Vetter?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his neck. "I could show you reams of copy written about that guy. I could show you transcripts of statements we've taken down and copies that the police in other cities have sent out. I could show you all that but I can't pull out a picture and I can't drop in a print number on the guy. The people who got to know him and who finally saw him, all seem to be dead."

My voice didn't sound right. "Dead?"

Gerot's hands came down and flattened on the desk. "The guy's a killer. He's wanted every place I could think of. Word has it that he's the one who bumped Tony Briggs in Chicago. When Birdie Cullen was going to sing to the grand jury, somebody was paid fifty thousand to cool him off and Vetter collected from the syndicate. Vetter was paid another ten to knock off the guy who paid him the first time so somebody could move into his spot."

"So far he's only a name, Captain?"

"Not quite. We have a few details on him but we can't give them out. That much you understand, of course."

"Of course. But I'm still interested."

"He's tough. He seems to know things and do things nobody else would touch. He's a professional gunman in the worst sense of the word and he'll sell that gun as long as the price is right."

Helen crossed her legs with a motion that brought her whole body into play. "Supposing, Captain, that this Vetter was a friend of Jack Cooley? Supposing he got mad at the thought of his friend being killed and wanted to do something about it?"

Gerot said, "Go on."

"What would you do, Captain?"

The smile went up one side of his face. "Most likely nothing." He sat back again. "Nothing at all . . . until it happened."

"Two birds with one stone, Captain? Let Vetter get Renzo . . . and you get Vetter?"

"The papers would like that," he mused.

"No doubt." Helen seemed to uncoil from the chair. I stood up too and that's when I found out just how shrewd the captain was. He didn't bother to look at Helen at all. His blue eyes were all on me and being very, very sleepy.

"Where do you come in, kid?" he asked me.

Helen said it for me. "Vetter gave him a warning note to hand to Renzo."

Gerot smiled silently and you could see that he had the whole picture in his mind. He had our faces, he knew who she was and all about her, he was thinking of me and wanted to know all about me. He would. He was that kind of cop. You could tell.

We stood on the steps of the building and the cops coming in gave her the kind of look every man on the street gave her. Appreciative. It made me feel good just to be with her. I said, "He's a smart cop."

"They're all smart. Some are just smarter than others." A look of impatience crossed her face. "He said something . . ."

"Reams of copy?" I suggested.

I was easy for her to smile at. She didn't have to look up or down. Just a turn of her head. "Bright boy."

She took my hand and this time

I led the way. I took her to the street I knew. It was off the main drag and the people on it had a look in their eyes you don't see uptown. It was a place where the dames walked at night and followed you into bars if they thought you had an extra buck to pass out.

They're little joints, most of them. They don't have neon lights and padded stools, but when a guy talks he says something and doesn't play games. There's excitement there and always that feeling that something is going to happen.

One of those places was called *The Clipper* and the boys from the *News* made it their hangout. Cagey boys with the big think under their hats. Fast boys with a buck and always ready to pay off on something hot. Guys who took you like you were and didn't ask too many questions.

My kind of people.

Bucky Edwards was at his usual stool getting a little bit potted because it was his day off. I got the big stare and the exaggerated wink when he saw the blonde which meant I'd finally made good about dragging one in with me. I didn't feel like bragging, though. I brought Helen over, went to introduce her, but Bucky said, "Hi, Helen. Never thought I'd see you out in the daylight," before I could pass on her name.

"Okay, so you caught a show at the Hideaway," I said. "We have something to ask you."

"Come on, Joe. Let the lady ask me alone."

"Lay off. We want to know about Vetter."

The long eyebrows settled down low. He looked at me, then Helen, then back at me again. "You're making big sounds, boy."

I didn't want anyone else in on it. I leaned forward and said, "He's in town, Bucky. He's after Renzo."

He let out a long whistle. "Who else knows about it?"

"Gerot. Renzo. Us."

"There's going to be trouble, sure."

Helen said, "Only for Renzo."

Bucky's head made a slow negative. "You don't know. The rackets boys'll flip their lids at this. If Vetter moves in here there's going to be some mighty big trouble."

My face started working under the bandages. "Renzo's top dog, isn't he?"

Bucky's tongue made a swipe at his lips. "One of 'em. There's a few more. They're not going to like Renzo pulling in trouble like Vetter." For the first time Bucky seemed to really look at us hard. "Vetter is poison. He'll cut into everything and they'll pay off. Sure as shooting, if he sticks around they'll be piling the cabbage in his lap."

"Then everybody'll be after Vetter," I said.

Bucky's face furrowed in a frown. "Uh-uh. I wasn't thinking that." He polished off his drink and set the

empty on the bar. "If Vetter's here after Renzo they'll do better nailing Renzo's hide to the wall. Maybe they can stop it before it starts."

It was trouble, all right. The kind I wasn't feeling too bad about.

Bucky stared into his empty glass and said, "They'll bury Renzo or he'll come out of it bigger than ever."

The bartender came down and filled his glass again. I shook my head when he wanted to know what we'd have. "Good story," Bucky said, "if it happens." Then he threw the drink down and Bucky was all finished. His eyes got frosty and he sat there grinning at himself in the mirror with his mind saying things to itself. I knew him too well to say anything else so I nudged Helen and we walked out.

Some days go fast and this was one of them. She was nice to be with and nice to talk to. I wasn't important enough to hide anything from so for one day she opened her life up and fed me pieces of it. She seemed to grow younger as the day wore on and when we reached her apartment the sun was gilding her hair with golden reddish streaks and I was gone, all gone. For one day I was king and there wasn't any trouble. The laughter poured out of us and people stopped to look and laugh back. It was a day to remember when all the days are done with and you're on your last.

I was tired, dead tired. I didn't try to refuse when she told me to

come up and I didn't want to. She let me open the door for her and I followed her inside. She had almost started for the kitchen to cook up the bacon and eggs we had talked about when she stopped by the arch leading to the living room.

The voice from the chair said, "Come on in, sugar pie. You too, kid."

And there was Johnny, a nasty smile on his mouth, leering at us.

"How did you get in here?"

He laughed at her. "I do tricks with locks, remember?" His head moved with a short jerk. "Get in here!" There was a flat, nasal tone in his voice.

I moved in beside Helen. My hands kept opening and closing at my side and my breath was coming a little fast in my throat.

"You like kids now, Helen?"

"Shut up, you louse," she said.

His lips peeled back showing his teeth. "The mother type. Old fashioned type, you know." He leered again like it was funny. My chest started to hurt from the breathing. "Too big for a bottle, so . . ."

I grabbed the lamp and let it fly and if the cord hadn't caught in the wall it would have taken his head off. I was all set to go into him but all he had to do to stop me was bring his hand up. The rod was one of those Banker's Specials that were deadly as hell at close range and Johnny looked too much like he wanted to use it for me to move.

He said, "The boss don't like

your little arrangement, Helen. It didn't take him long to catch on. Come over here, kid."

I took a half step.

"Closer."

"Now listen carefully, kid. You go home, see. Go home and do what you feel like doing, but stay home and away from this place. You do that and you'll pick up a few bucks from Mr. Renzo. Now after you had it so nice here, you might not want to go home, so just in case you don't, I'm going to show you what's going to happen to you."

I heard Helen's breath suck in with a harsh gasp and my own sounded the same way. You could see what Johnny was setting himself to do and he was letting me know all about it and there wasn't a thing I could do. The gun was pointing right at my belly even while he jammed his elbows into the arms of the chair to get the leverage for the kick that was going to maim me the rest of my life. His shoe was hard and pointed, a deadly weight that swung like a gentle pendulum.

I saw it coming and thought there might be a chance even yet but I didn't have to take it. From the side of the room Helen said, "Don't move, Johnny. I've got a gun in my hand."

And she had.

The ugly grimace on Johnny's face turned into a snarl when he knew how stupid he'd been in taking his eyes off her to enjoy what he was doing to me.

"Make him drop it, Helen."

"You heard the kid, Johnny."

Johnny dropped the gun. It lay there on the floor and I hooked it with my toe. I picked it up, punched the shells out of the chambers and tossed them under the sofa. The gun followed them.

"Come here, Helen," I said.

I felt her come up behind me and reached around for the .25 automatic in her hand. For a second Johnny's face turned pale and when it did I grinned at him.

Then I threw the .25 under the sofa too.

They look funny when you do things like that. Their little brains don't get it right away and it stuns them or something. I let him get right in the middle of that surprised look before I slammed my fist into his face and felt his teeth rip loose under my knuckles.

Helen went down on her knees for the gun and I yelled for her to let it alone, then Johnny was on me. He thought he was on me. I had his arm over my shoulder, laid him into a hip roll and tumbled him easy.

I walked up. I took my time. He started to get up and I chopped down on his neck and watched his head bob. I got him twice more in the same place and Johnny simply fell back. His eyes were seeing, his brain thinking and feeling but he couldn't move. While he lay there, I chopped twice again and Johnny's face became blotched and swollen while his eyes screamed in agony.

I put him in a cab downstairs. I told the driver he was drunk and fell and gave him a ten spot from Johnny's own wallet with instructions to take him out to the Hide-away and deliver same to Mr. Renzo. The driver was very sympathetic and took him away.

Then I went back for Helen. She was sitting on the couch waiting for me, the strangeness back in her eyes. She said, "When he finished with you, he would have started on me."

"I know."

"Joe, you did pretty good for a kid."

"I was brought up tough."

"I've seen Johnny take some pretty big guys. He's awfully strong."

"You know what I do for a living, Helen? I push a junk car, loaded with iron. There's competition and pretty soon you learn things. Those iron loaders are strong gees too. If they can tumble you, they lift your pay."

"You had a gun, Joe," she reminded me.

And her eyes mellowed into a strange softness that sent chills right through me. They were eyes that called me closer and I couldn't say no to them. I stood there looking at her, wondering what she saw under the bandages.

"Renzo's going after us for that," I said.

"That's right, Joe."

"We'll have to get out of here. You, anyway."

"Later we'll think about it."

"Now, damn it."

Her face seemed to laugh at me. A curious laugh. A strange laugh. A bewildered laugh. There was a sparkling dance to her eyes she kept half veiled and her mouth parted just a little bit. Her tongue touched the tip of her teeth, withdrew and she said, "Now is for something else, Joe. Now is for a woman going back a long time who sees somebody she could have loved then."

I looked at her and held my breath. She was so completely beautiful I ached and I didn't want to make a fool of myself. Not yet.

"Now is for you to kiss me, Joe," she said.

I tasted her.

Chapter II

I waited until midnight before I left. I looked in her room and saw her bathed in moonlight, her features softly relaxed into the faintest trace of a smile, a soft, golden halo around her head.

They should take your picture like you are now. Helen, I thought. It wouldn't need a retoucher and there would never be a man who saw it who would forget it. You're beautiful, baby. You're lovely as a woman could ever be and you don't know it. You've had it so rough you can't think of anything else and thinking of it puts the lines

in your face and that chiseled granite in your eyes. But you've been around and so have I. There have been dozens of dames I've thought things about but not things like I'm thinking now. You don't care what or who a guy is; you just give him part of yourself as a favor and and for nothing back.

Sorry, Helen, you have to take something back. Or at least keep what you have. For you I'll let Renzo push me around. For you I'll let him make me finger a guy. Maybe at the end I'll have a chance to make a break. Maybe not. At least it's for you and you'll know that much. If I stay around, Renzo'll squeeze you and do it so hard you'll never be the same. I'll leave, beautiful. I'm not much. You're not much either. It was a wonderful day.

I lay the note by the lamp on the night table where she couldn't miss it. I leaned over and blew a kiss into her hair, then turned and got out of there.

Nobody had to tell me to be careful. I made sure nobody saw me leave the building and double-checked on it when I got to the corner. The trip over the back fences wasn't easy, but it was quiet and dark and if anybody so much as breathed near me I would have heard it. Then when I stood in the shadows of the store at the intersection I was glad I had made the trip the hard way. Buried between the parked cars along the curb was

a police cruiser. There were no markings. Just a trunk aerial and the red glow of a cigarette behind the wheel.

Captain Gerot wasn't taking any chances. It made me feel a little better. Upstairs there Helen could go on sleeping and always be sure of waking up. I waited a few minutes longer then drifted back into the shadows toward the rooming house.

That's where they were waiting for me. I knew it a long time before I got there because I had seen them wait for other guys before. Things like that you don't miss when you live around the factories and near the waterfronts. Things like that you watch and remember so that when it happens to you, it's no surprise and you figure things out beforehand.

They saw me and as long as I kept on going in the right direction they didn't say anything. I knew they were where I couldn't see them and even if I made a break for it, it wouldn't do me any good at all.

You get a funny feeling after a while. Like a rabbit walking between rows of guns wondering which one is going to go off. Hoping that if it does you don't get to see it or feel it. Your stomach seems to get all loose inside you and your heart makes too much noise against your ribs. You try not to, but you sweat and the little muscles in your hands and thighs start to jump and

twitch and all the while there's no sound at all, just a deep, startling silence with a voice that's there just the same. A statue, laughing with its mouth open. No sound, but you can hear the voice. You keep walking, and the breathing keeps time with your footsteps, sometimes trying to get ahead of them. You find yourself chewing on your lips because you already know the horrible impact of a fist against your flesh and the uncontrollable spasms that come after a pointed shoe bites into the muscle and bone of your side.

So much so that when you're almost there and a hand grabs your arm you don't do anything except look at the face above it and wait until it says, "Where you been, kid?"

I felt the hand tighten with a gentle pressure, pulling me in close. "Lay off me, I'm minding my own . . ."

"I said something, sonny."

"So I was out. What's it to you?"

His expression said he didn't give a hang at all. "Somebody wants to know. Feel like taking a little ride?"

"You asking?"

"I'm telling." The hand tightened again. "The car's over there, bud. Let's go get in it, huh?"

For a second I wondered if I could take him or not and knew I couldn't. He was too big and too relaxed. He'd known trouble all his life, from little guys to big guys and

he didn't fool easily. You can tell after you've seen a lot of them. They knew that some day they'd wind up holding their hands over a bullet hole or screaming through the bars of a cell, but until then they were trouble and too big to buck.

I got in the car and sat next to the guy in the back seat. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes open and when we started to head the wrong way, I looked at the guy next to me. "Where we going?"

He grinned on one side of his face and looked out the window again.

"Come on, come on, quit messing around! Where we going?"

"Shut up."

"Nuts, brother. If I'm getting knocked off I'm doing a lot of yelling first, starting right now. Where . . ."

"Shut up. You ain't getting knocked off." He rolled the window down, flipped the dead cigar butt out and cranked it back up again. He said it too easily not to mean it and the jumps in my hands quieted down a little.

No, they weren't going to bump me. Not with all the trouble they went to in finding me. You don't put a couple dozen men on a mug like me if all you wanted was a simple kill. One hopped up punk would do that for a week's supply of snow...

We went back through town, turned west into the suburbs and

kept right on going to where the suburbs turned into estates and when we came to the right one the car turned into a surfaced driveway that wound past a dozen flashy heaps parked bumper to bumper and stopped in front of the field-stone mansion.

The guy beside me got out first. He jerked his head at me and stayed at my back when I got out too. The driver grinned, but it was the kind of face a dog makes when he sees you with a chunk of meat in your fist.

A flunky met us at the door. He didn't look comfortable in his monkey suit and his face had scar tissue it took a lot of leather-covered punches to produce. He waved us in, shut the door and led the way down the hall to a room cloudy with smoke, rumbling with the voices of a dozen men.

When we came in the rumble stopped and I could feel the eyes crawl over me. The guy who drove the car looked across the room at the one in the tux, said, "Here he is, boss," and gave me a gentle push into the middle of the room.

"Hi, kid." He finished pouring out of the decanter, stopped it and picked up his glass. He wasn't an inch bigger than me, but he had the walk of a cat and the eyes of something dead. He got up close to me, faked a smile and held out the glass. "In case the boys had you worried."

"I'm not worried."

He shrugged and sipped the top off the drink himself. "Sit down, kid. You're among friends here." He looked over my shoulder. "Haul a chair up, Rocco."

All over the room the others settled down and shifted into position. A chair seat hit the back of my legs and I sat. When I looked around everybody was sitting, which was the way the little guy wanted it. He didn't like to have to look up to anybody.

He made it real casual. He introduced the boys when they didn't have to be introduced because they were always in the papers and the kind of guys people point out when they go by in their cars. You heard their names mentioned even in the junk business and among the punks in the streets. These were the big boys. Top dogs. Fat fingers. Big rings. The little guy was biggest of all. He was Phil Carboy and he ran the West Side the way he wanted it run.

When everything quieted down just right, Carboy leaned on the back of a chair and said, "In case you're wondering why you're here, kid, I'm going to tell you."

"I got my own ideas," I said.

"Fine. That's just fine. Let's check your ideas with mine, okay? Now we hear a lot of things around here. Things like that note you delivered to Renzo and who gave it to you and what Renzo did to you." He finished his drink and smiled. "Like what you did to

Johnny, too. That's all straight now, isn't it?"

"So far."

"Swell. Tell you what I want now. I want to give you a job. How'd you like to make a cool hundred a week, kid?"

"Peanuts."

Somebody grunted. Carboy smiled again, a little thinner. "The kid's in the know," he said. "That's what I like. Okay, kid. We'll make it five hundred per for a month. If it don't run a month you get it anyway. That's better than having Renzo slap you around, right?"

"Anything's better than that." My voice started getting chalky.

Carboy held out his hand and said, "Rocco . . ." Another hand slid a sheaf of bills into his. He counted it out, reached two thousand and tossed it into my lap. "Yours, kid."

"For what?"

His lips were a narrow gash between his cheekbones. "For a guy named Vetter. The guy who gave you a note. Describe him."

"Tall," I said. "Big shoulders. I didn't see his face. Deep voice that sounded tough. He had on a trench coat and a hat."

"That's not enough."

"A funny way of standing," I told him. "I saw Sling Herman when I was a kid before the cops got him. He stood like that. Always ready to go for something in his pocket the cops said."

"You saw more than that, kid."

The room was too quiet now. They were all hanging on, waiting for the word. They were sitting there without smoking, beady little eyes waiting for the finger to swing until it stopped and I was the one who could stop it.

My throat squeezed out the words. I went back into the night to remember a guy and drag up the little things that would bring him into the light. I said, "I'd know him again. He was a guy to be scared of. When he talks you get a cold feeling and you know what he's like." My tongue ran over my lips and I lifted my eyes up to Carboy. "I wouldn't want to mess with a guy like that. Nobody's ever going to be tougher."

"You'll know him again. You're sure?"

"I'm sure." I looked around the room at the faces. Any one of them a guy who could say a word and have me dead the next day. "He's tougher than any of you."

Carboy grinned and let his tiny white teeth show through. "Nobody's that tough, kid."

"He'll kill me," I said. "Maybe you too. I don't like this."

"You don't have to like it. You just do it. In a way you're lucky. I'm paying you cash. If I wanted I could just tell you and you'd do it. You know that?"

I nodded.

"Tonight starts it. From now on you'll have somebody close by, see? In one pocket you'll carry a white

handkerchief. If you gotta blow, use it. In the other one there'll be a red wiper. When you see him blow into that."

"That's all?"

"Just duck about then, kid," Phil Carboy said softly, "and maybe you'll get to spend that two grand. Try to use it for run-out money and you won't get past the bus station." He stared into his glass, looked up at Rocco expectantly and held it out for a refill. "Kid, let me tell you something. I'm an old hand in this racket. I can tell what a guy or a dame is like from a block away. You've been around. I can tell that. I'm giving you a break because you're the type who knows the score and will play on the right side. I don't have to warn you about anything, do I?"

"No. I got the pitch."

"Any questions?"

"Just one," I said. "Renzo wants me to finger Vetter too. He isn't putting out any two grand for it. He just wants it, see? Suppose he catches up with me? What then?"

Carboy shouldn't've hesitated. He shouldn't have let that momentary look come into his eyes because it told me everything I wanted to know. Renzo was higher than the whole pack of them and they got the jumps just thinking about it. All by himself he held a fifty-one percent interest and they were moving slowly when they bucked him. The little guy threw down the fresh drink with a quick

motion of his hand and brought the smile back again. *In that second he had done a lot of thinking and spilled the answer straight out.* "We'll take care of Mark Renzo," he said. "Rocco, you and Lou take the kid home."

So I went out to the car and we drove back to the slums again. In the rear the reflections from the headlights of another car showed and the killers in it would be waiting for me to show the red handkerchief Carboy had handed me. I didn't know them and unless I was on the ball every minute I'd never get to know them. But they'd always be there, shadows that had no substance until the red showed, then the ground would get sticky with an even brighter red and maybe some of it would be mine.

They let me out two blocks away. The other car didn't show at all and I didn't look for it. My feet made hollow sounds on the sidewalk, going faster and faster until I was running up the steps of the house and when I was inside I slammed the door and leaned against it, trying hard to stop the pain in my chest.

Three-fifteen, the clock said. It ticked monotonously in the stillness, trailing me upstairs to my room. I eased inside, shut the door and locked it, standing there in the darkness until my eyes could see things. Outside a truck clashed its gears as it pulled up the hill and off in the distance a horn sounded.

I listened to them; familiar sounds, my face tightening as a not-so-familiar sound echoed behind them. It was a soft thing, a whisper that came at regular intervals in a choked-up way. Then I knew it was a sob coming from the other room and I went back to the hall and knocked on Nick's door.

His feet hit the floor, stayed there and I could hear his breathing coming hard. "It's Joe—open up."

I heard the wheeze his breath made as he let it out. The bed-springs creaked, he fell once getting to the door and the bolt snapped back. I looked at the purple blotches on his face and the open cuts over his eyes and grabbed him before he fell again. "Nick! What happened to you?"

"I'm . . . okay." He steadied himself on me and I led him back to the bed. "You got . . . some friends, pal."

"Cut it out. What happened? Who ran you through? Damn it, who did it?"

Nick managed to show a smile. It wasn't much and it hurt, but he made it. "You . . . in pretty big trouble, Joe."

"Pretty big."

"I didn't say nothing. They were here . . . asking questions. They didn't . . . believe what I told them, I guess. They sure laced me."

"The miserable slob! You recognized them?"

His smile got sort of twisted and he nodded his head. "Sure, Joe . . . I know 'em. The fat one sat in . . . the car while they did it." His mouth clamped together hard. "It hurt . . . brother, it hurt!"

"Look," I said. "We're . . ."

"Nothing doing. I got enough. I don't want no more. Maybe they figured it's enough. That Renzo feller . . . he got hard boys around. See what they did, Joe? One . . . used a gun on me. You shoulda stood with Gordon, Joe. What the hell got into you to mess with them guys?"

"It wasn't me, Nick. Something came up. We can square it. I'll nail that fat slob if it's the last thing I do."

"It'll be the last thing. They gimme a message for you, pal. You're to stick around, see? You get seen with any other big boys in this town . . . and that's all. You know?"

"I know. Renzo told me that himself. He didn't have to go through you."

"Joe . . ."

"Yeah?"

"He said for you to take a good look . . . at me. I'm an example. A little one. He says to do what he told you."

"He knows what he can do."

"Joe . . . for me. Lay off, huh? I don't feel so good. Now I can't work for a while."

I patted his arm, fished a hundred buck bill out of my pocket

and squeezed it into his hand. "Don't worry about it," I told him.

He looked at the bill unbelievably, then at me.

"Dough can't pay for . . . this, Joe. Kind of . . . stay away from me . . . for awhile anyway, okay?" He smiled again, lamely this time. "Thanks for the C anyway. We been pretty good buddies, huh?"

"Sure, Nick."

"Later we'll be again. Lemme knock off now. You take it easy." His hands came up to his face and covered it. I could hear the sobs starting again and cursed the whole damn system up and down and Renzo in particular. I swore at the filth men like to wade in and the things they do to other men. When I was done I got up off the bed and walked to the door.

Behind me Nick said, "Joey . . ."

"Right here."

"Something's crazy in this town. Stories are going around . . . there's gonna be a lot of trouble. Everybody is after . . . you. You'll . . . be careful?"

"Sure." I opened the door, shut it softly and went back to my room. I stripped off my clothes and lay down in the bed, my mind turning over fast until I had it straightened out, then I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

My landlady waited until a quarter to twelve before she gave it the business on my door. She didn't do

it like she usually did it. No jarring smashes against the panels, just a light tapping that grew louder until I said, "Yeah?"

"Mrs. Stacey, Joe. You think you should get up? A man is downstairs to see you."

"What kind of a man?"

This time the knob twisted slowly and the door opened a crack. Her voice was a harsh whisper that sounded nervous. "He's got on old clothes and a city water truck is parked outside. He didn't come to look at my water."

I grinned at that one. "I'll be right down," I said. I splashed water over my face, shaved it close and worked the adhesive off the bridge of my nose. It was swollen on one side, the blue running down to my mouth. One eye was smudged with purple.

Before I pulled on my jacket I stuffed the wad of dough into the lining through the tear in the sleeve, then I took a look in Nick's room. There were traces of blood on his pillow and the place was pretty upset, but Nick had managed to get out somehow for a day's work.

The guy in the chair sitting by the window was short and wiry looking. There was dirt under his fingernails and a stubble on his chin. He had a couple of small wrenches in a leather holster on his belt that bulged his coat out but the stuff was pure camouflage. There was a gun further back and I saw

the same thing Mrs. Stacey saw. The guy was pure copper with badges for eyes.

He looked at me, nodded and said, "Joe Boyle?"

"Suppose I said no?" I sat down opposite him with a grin that said I knew all about it and though I knew he got it nothing registered at all.

"Captain Gerot tells me you'll cooperate. That true?"

There was a laugh in his eyes, an attitude of being deliberately polite when he didn't have to be. "Why?" I asked him. "Everybody seems to think I'm pretty hot stuff all of a sudden."

"You are, junior, you are. You're the only guy who can put his finger on a million dollar baby that we want bad. So you'll cooperate."

"Like a good citizen?" I made it sound the same as he did. "How much rides on Vetter and how much do I get?"

The sarcasm in his eyes turned to a nasty sneer. "Thousands ride, junior . . . and you don't get any. You just cooperate. Too many cops have worked too damn long on Vetter to let a crummy kid cut into the cake. *Now I'll tell you why you'll cooperate. There's a dame, see? Helen Troy. There's ways of slapping that tomato with a fat conviction for various reasons and unless you want to see her slapped, you'll cooperate. Catch now?*"

I called him something that fitted him right down to his shoes.

He didn't lose a bit of that grin at all. "Catch something else," he said. "Get smart and I'll make your other playmates look like school kids. I like tough guys. I have fun working 'em over because that's what they understand. What there is to know I know. Take last night for instance. The boys paid you off for a finger job. Mark Renzo pays but in his own way. Now I'm setting up a deal. Hell, you don't have to take it . . . you can do what you please. Three people are dickering for what you know. I'm the only one who can hit where it really hurts.

"Think it over, Joey boy. Think hard but do it fast. I'll be waiting for a call from you and wherever you are, I'll know about it. I get impatient sometimes, so let's hear from you soon. Maybe if you take too long I'll prod you a little bit." He got up, stretched and wiped his eyes like he was tired. "Just ask for Detective Sergeant Gonzales," he said. "That's me."

The cop patted the tools on his belt and stood by the door. I said, "It's stinking to be a little man, isn't it? You got to keep making up for it."

There was pure, cold hate in his eyes for an answer. He gave me a long look that a snake would give a rabbit when he isn't too hungry yet. A look that said wait a little while, feller. Wait until I'm real hungry.

I watched the truck pull away,

then sat there at the window looking at the street. I had to wait almost an hour before I spotted the first, then picked up the second one ten minutes later. If there were more I didn't see them. I went back to the kitchen and took a look through the curtains at the blank behinds of the warehouses across the alley. Mrs. Stacey didn't say anything. She sat there with her coffee, making clicking noises with her false teeth.

I said, "Somebody washed the windows upstairs in the wholesale house."

"A man. Early this morning."

"They haven't been washed since I've been here."

"Not for two years."

I turned around and she was looking at me as if something had scared her to death. "*How much are they paying you?*" I said.

She couldn't keep that greedy look out of her face even with all the phony indignation she tried to put on. Her mouth opened to say something when the phone rang and gave her the chance to cover up. She came back a few seconds later and said, "It's for you. Some man."

Then she stood there by the door where she always stood whenever somebody was on the phone. I said, "Joe Boyle speaking," and that was all. I let the other one speak his few words and when he was done I hung up.

I felt it starting to burn in me. A

nasty feeling that makes you want to slam something. Nobody asked me . . . they just told and I was supposed to jump. I was the low man on the totem pole, a lousy kid who happened to fit into things . . . just the right size to get pushed around.

Vetter, I kept saying to myself. They were all scared to death of Vetter. The guy had something they couldn't touch. He was tough. He was smart. He was moving in for a kill and if ever one was needed it was needed now. They were all after him and no matter how many people who didn't belong there stood in the way their bullets would go right through them to reach Vetter. Yeah, they wanted him bad. So bad they'd kill each other to make sure he died too.

Well, the whole pack of 'em knew what they could do.

I pulled my jacket on and got outside. I went up the corner, grabbed a downtown bus and sat there without bothering to look around. At Third and Main I hopped off, ducked into a cafeteria and had a combination lunch. I let Mrs. Stacey get her calls in, gave them time to keep me well under cover, then flagged down a roving cab and gave the driver Helen's address. On the way over I looked out the back window for the second time and the light blue Chevy was still in place, two cars behind and trailing steadily. In a way it didn't bother me if the boys inside

were smart enough to check the black Caddie that rode behind it again.

I tapped the cabbie a block away, told him to let me out on the corner and paid him off. There wasn't a parking place along the street so the laddies in the cars were either going to cruise or double park, but it would keep them moving around so I could see what they were like anyway.

When I punched the bell I had to wait a full minute before the lobby door clicked open. I went up the stairs, jolted the apartment door a few times and walked right into those beautiful eyes that were even prettier than the last time because they were worried first, then relieved when they saw me. She grabbed my arm and gave me that quick grin then pulled me inside and stood with her back to the door.

"Joe, Joe, you little jughead," she laughed. "You had me scared silly. Don't do anything like that again."

"Had to Helen. I wasn't going to come back but I had to do that too."

Maybe it was the way I said it that made her frown. "You're a funny kid."

"Don't say that."

Something changed in her eyes. "No. Maybe I shouldn't, should I?" She looked at me hard, her eyes soft, but piercing. "I feel funny when I look at you. I don't know why. Sometimes I've thought it

was because I had a brother who was always in trouble. Always getting hurt. I used to worry about him too."

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed in Viet Nam."

"Sorry."

She shook her head. "He didn't join the army because he was patriotic. He and another kid held up a joint. The owner was shot. He was dead by the time they found out who did it."

"You've been running all your life too, haven't you?"

The eyes dropped a second. "You could put it that way."

"What ties you here?"

"Guess."

"If you had the dough you'd beat it? Some place where nobody knew you?"

She laughed, a short jerky laugh. It was answer enough. I reached in the jacket, got out the pack of bills and flipped off a couple for myself. I shoved the rest in her hand before she knew what it was. "Get going. Don't even bother to pack. Just move out of here and keep moving."

Her eyes were big and wide with an incredulous sort of wonder, then slightly misty when they came back to mine and she shook her head a little bit and said, "Joe . . . why? Why?"

"It would sound silly if I said it."

"Say it."

"When I'm all grown up I'll tell you maybe."

"Now."

I could feel the ache starting in me and my tongue didn't want to move, but I said, "Sometimes even a kid can feel pretty hard about a woman. Sad, isn't it?"

Helen said, "Joe," softly and had my face in her hands and her mouth was a hot torch that played against mine with a crazy kind of fierceness and it was all I could do to keep from grabbing her instead of pushing her away. My hands squeezed her hard, then I yanked the door open and got out of there. Behind me there was a sob and I heard my name said again, softly.

I ran the rest of the way down with my face all screwed up tight.

The blue Chevy was down the street on the other side. It seemed to be empty and I didn't bother to poke around it. All I wanted was for whoever followed me to follow me away from there. So I gave it the full treatment. I made it look great. To them I must have seemed pretty jumpy and on the way to see somebody important. It took a full hour to reach THE CLIPPER that way and the only important one around was Bucky Edwards and he wasn't drunk this time.

He nodded, said, "Beer?" and when I shook my head, called down the bar for a tall orange. "Figured you'd be in sooner or later."

That wise old face wrinkled a little. "How does it feel to be live bait, kiddo?"

"You got big ears, grandma."

"I get around." He toasted his beer against my orange, put it down and said, "You're in pretty big trouble, Joe. Maybe you don't know it."

"I know it."

"You don't know how big. You haven't been here that long. Those boys put on the big squeeze."

It was my turn to squint. His face was set as if he smelled something he didn't like and there was ice in his eyes. "How much do you know, Bucky?"

His shoulders made a quick shrug. "Phil Carboy didn't post the depot and the bus station for nothing. He's got cars cruising the highways too. Making sure, isn't he?"

He looked at me and I nodded.

"Renzo is kicking loose too. He's pulling the strings tight. The guys on his payroll are getting nervous but they can't do a thing. No, sir, not a thing. Like a war. Everybody's just waiting." The set mouth flashed me a quick grin. "You're the key, boy. *If there was a way out I'd tell you to take it.*"

"Suppose I went to the cops?"

"Gerot?" Bucky shook his head. "You'd get help as long as he could keep you in a cell. People'd like to see him dead too. He's got an awfully bad habit of being honest. Ask him to show you his scars someday. It wouldn't be so bad if he was just honest, but he's smart and mean as hell too."

I drank half the orange and set it down in the wet circle on the bar. "Funny how things work out. All because of Vetter. And he's here because of Jack Cooley."

"I was wondering when you were gonna get around to it, kid," Bucky said.

"What?"

He didn't look at me. "Who *are* you working for?"

I waited a pretty long time before he turned his head around. I let him look at my face another long time before I said anything. Then: "I was pushing a junk cart, friend. I was doing okay, too. I wasn't working for trouble. Now I'm getting pretty curious. In my own way I'm not so stupid, but now I want to find out the score. One way or another I'm finding out. So they paid me off but they aren't figuring on me spending much of that cabbage. After it's over I get chopped down and it starts all over again, whatever it is. That's what I'm finding out. Why I'm bait for whatever it is. Who do I see, Bucky? You're in the know. Where do I go to find out?"

"Cooley could have told you," he said quietly.

"Nuts. He's dead."

"Maybe he can still tell you."

My fingers were tight around the glass now. "The business about Cooley getting it because of the deal on Renzo's tables is out?"

"Might be."

"Talk straight unless you're

scared silly of those punks too. Don't give me any puzzles if you know something."

Bucky's eyebrows went up, then down slowly over the grin in his eyes. "Talk may be cheap son," he said, "but life comes pretty expensively." He nodded sagely and said, "I met Cooley in lotsa places. Places he shouldn't have been. He was a man looking around. He could have found something."

"Like what?"

"Like why we have gangs in this formerly peaceful city of ours. Why we have paid-for politicians and clambakes with some big faces showing. They're not eating clams . . . they're talking."

"These places where you kept seeing Cooley . . ."

"River joints. Maybe he liked fish."

You could tell when Bucky was done talking. I went down to Main, found a show I hadn't seen and went in. There were a lot of things I wanted to think about.

Chapter III

At eleven-fifteen the feature wound up and I started back outside. In the glass reflection of the lobby door I saw somebody behind me but I didn't look back. There could have been one more in the crowd that was around the entrance outside. Maybe two. Nobody

seemed to pay any attention to me and I didn't care if they did or not.

I waited for a Main Street bus, took it down about a half mile, got off at the darkened supermarket and started up the road. You get the creeps in places like that. It was an area where some optimist had started a factory and ran it until the swamp crept in. When the footings gave and the walls cracked, they moved out, and now the black skeletons of the buildings were all that were left, with gaping holes for eyes and a mouth that seemed to breathe out a fetid swamp odor. But there were still people there. The dozen or so company houses that were propped against the invading swamp showed dull yellow lights, and the garbage smell of unwanted humanity fought the swamp odor. You could hear them, too, knowing that they watched you from the shadows of their porches. You could feel them stirring in their jungle shacks and catch the pungency of the alcohol they brewed out of anything they could find.

There was a low moan of a train from the south side and its single eye picked out the trestle across the bay and followed it. The freight lumbered up, slowed for the curve that ran through the swamps and I heard the bindle stiffs yelling as they hopped off, looking for the single hard topped road that took them to their quarters for the night.

The circus sign was on the

board fence. In the darkness it was nothing but a bleached white square, but when I lit a cigarette I could see the faint orange impressions that used to be supposedly wild animals. The match went out and I lit another, got the smoke fired up and stood there a minute in the dark.

The voice was low. A soft, quiet voice more inaudible than a whisper. "One is back at the corner. There's another a hundred feet down."

"I know," I said.

"You got nerve."

"Let's not kid me. I got your message. Sorry I had to cut it short, but a pair of paid-for ears were listening in."

"Sorry Renzo gave you a hard time."

"So am I. The others did better by me."

Somebody coughed down the road and I flattened against the boards away from the white sign. It came again, further away this time and I felt better. I said, "What gives?"

.. "You had a cop at your place this morning."

"I spotted him."

"There's a regular parade behind you." A pause, then, "What did you tell them?"

I dragged in on the smoke, watched it curl. "I told them he was big. Tough. I didn't see his face too well. What did you expect me to tell them?"

I had a feeling like he smiled.

"They aren't happy," he said.

I grinned too. "Vetter. They hate the name. It scares them." I pulled on the butt again. "It scares me too when I think of it too much."

"You don't have anything to worry about."

"Thanks."

"Keep playing it smart. You know what they're after?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "Cooley comes into it someplace. It was something he knew."

"Smart lad. I knew you were a smart lad the first time I saw you. Yes, it was Cooley."

"Who was he?" I asked.

Nothing for a moment. I could hear him breathing and his feet moved but that was all. The red light on the tail of the caboose winked at me and I knew it would have to be short.

"An adventurer, son. A romantic adventurer who went where the hunting was profitable and the odds long. He liked long odds. He found how they were slipping narcotics in through a new door and tapped them for a sweet haul. They say four million. It was a paid-for shipment and he got away with it. Now the boys have to make good."

The caboose was almost past now. He said, "I'll call you if I want you."

I flipped the butt away, watching it bounce sparks across the dirt. I went on a little bit further where I

could watch the fires from the jungles and when I had enough of it I started back.

At the tree the guy who had been waiting there said, "You weren't thinking of hopping that freight, were you, kid?"

I didn't jump like I was supposed to. I said, "When I want to leave, I'll leave."

"Be sure to tell Mr. Carboy first, huh?"

"I'll tell him," I said.

He stayed there, not following me. I passed the buildings again, then felt better when I saw the single street light on the corner of Main. There was nobody there that I could see, but that didn't count. He was around someplace.

I had to wait ten minutes for a bus. It seemed longer than it was. I stayed drenched in the yellow light and thought of the voice behind the fence and what it had to say. When the bus pulled up I got on, stayed there until I reached the lights again and got off. By that time a lot of things were making sense, falling into a recognizable pattern. I walked down the street to an all night drug store, had a drink at the counter then went back to the phone booth.

I dialed the police number and asked for Gonzales, Sergeant Gonzales. There was a series of clicks as the call was switched and the cop said, "Gonzales speaking."

"This is Joe, copper. Remember me?"

"Don't get too fresh, sonny," he said. His voice had a knife in it.

"Phil Carboy paid me some big money to finger Vetter. He's got men tailing me."

His pencil kept up a steady tapping against the side of the phone. Finally he said, "I was wondering when you'd call it in. You were real lucky, Joe. For a while I thought I was going to have to persuade you a little to cooperate. You were real lucky. Keep me posted."

I heard the click in my ear as he hung up and I spat out the things into the dead phone I felt like telling him to his face. Then I fished out another coin, dropped it in and dialed the same number. This time I asked for Captain Gerot. The guy at the switchboard said he had left about six but that he could probably be reached at his club. He gave me the number and I checked it through. The attendant who answered said he had left about an hour ago but would probably call back to see if there were any messages for him and were there? I told him to get the number so I could put the call through myself and hung up.

It took me a little longer to find Bucky Edwards. He had stewed in his own juices too long and he was almost all gone. I said, "Bucky, I need something bad. I want Jack Cooley's last address. You remember that much?"

He hummed little bit. "Rooming house. Between Wells and Cap-

itol. It's all white, Joe. Only white house."

"Thanks, Bucky."

"You in trouble, Joe?"

"Not yet."

"You will be. Now you will be."

That was all. He put the phone back so easily I didn't hear it go. Damn, I thought, he knows the score but he won't talk. He's got all the scoop and he clams up.

I had another drink at the counter, picked up a deck of smokes and stood outside while I lit one. The street was quieting down. Both curbs were lined with parked heaps, dead things that rested until morning when they'd be whipped alive again.

Not all of them though. I was sure of that. I thought I caught a movement across the street in a doorway. It was hard to tell. I turned north and walked fast until I reached Benson Road, then cut down it to the used car lot.

Now was when they'd have a hard time. Now was when they were playing games in my back yard and if they didn't know every inch of the way somebody was going to get hurt. They weren't kids, these guys. They had played the game themselves and they'd know all the angles. Almost all, anyway. They'd know when I tried to get out of the noose and as soon as they did, they'd quit playing and start working. They wouldn't break their necks sticking to a trail when they could bottle me up.

All I had to do was keep them from knowing for a while.

I crossed the lot, cutting through the parked cars, picked up the alley going back of the houses and stuck to the hedgerows until I was well down it. By that time I had a lead. If I looked back I'd spoil it so I didn't look back. I picked up another block at the fork in the alley, standing deliberately under the lone light at the end, not hurrying, so they could see me. I made it seem as though I were trying to pick out one of the houses in the darkness, and when I made up my mind, went through the gate in the fence.

After that I hurried. I picked up the short-cuts, made the street and crossed it between lights. I reached Main again, grabbed a cruising cab in the middle of the block, had him haul me across town to the docks and got out. It took fifteen minutes longer to reach the white house Bucky told me about. I grinned to myself and wondered if the boys were still watching the place they thought I went into. Maybe it would be a little while before they figured the thing out.

It would be time enough.

The guy who answered the door was all wrapped up in a bathrobe, his hair stringing down his face. He squinted at me, reluctant to be polite, but not naturally tough enough to be anything else but. He said, "If you're looking for a room you'll have to come around in the morning. I'm sorry."

I showed him a bill with two numbers on it.

"Well. . . ."

"I don't want a room."

He looked at the bill again, then a quick flash of terror crossed his face. His eyes rounded open, looked at me hard, then dissolved into curiosity. "Come . . . in."

The door closed and he stepped around me into a small sitting room and snapped on a shaded desk lamp. His eyes went back down to the bill. I handed it over and watched it disappear into the bathrobe. "Yes?"

"Jack Cooley."

The words did something to his face. It showed terror again, but not as much as before.

"I really don't . . ."

"Forget the act. I'm not working for anybody in town. I was a friend of his."

This time he scowled, not believing me.

I said, "Maybe I don't look it, but I was."

"So? What is it you want?" He licked his lips, seemed to tune his ears for some sound from upstairs. "Everybody's been here. Police, newspapers. Those . . . men from town. They all want something."

"Did Jack leave anything behind?"

"Sure. Clothes, letters, the usual junk. The police have all that."

"Did you get to see any of it?"

"Well . . . the letters were from dames. Nothing important."

I nodded, fished around for a question a second before I found one. "How about his habits?"

The guy shrugged. "He paid on time. Usually came in late and slept late. No dames in his room."

"That's all?"

He was getting edgy. "What else is there? I didn't go out with the guy. So now I know he spent plenty of nights in Renzo's joint. I hear talk. You want to know what kind of butts he smoked? Hobbies, maybe? Hell, what is there to tell? He goes out at night. Sometimes he goes fishing. Sometimes . . ."

"Where?" I interrupted.

"Where what?"

"Fishing."

"On one of his boats. He borrowed my stuff. He was fishing the day before he got bumped. Sometimes he'd slip me a ticket and I'd get away from the old lady."

"How do the boats operate?"

He shrugged again, pursing his mouth. "They go down the bay to the tip of the inlet, gas up, pick up beer at Gulley's and go about ten miles out. Coming back they stop at Gulley's for more beer and for the guys to dump the fish they don't want. Gulley sells it in town. Everybody is usually drunk and happy." He gave me another thoughtful look. "You writing a book about your friend?" he said sarcastically.

"Could be. Could be. I hate to see him dead."

"If you ask me, he never should've fooled around Renzo. You bet-

ter go home and save your money from now on, sonny."

"I'll take your advice," I said, "and be handyman around a rooming house."

He gave me a dull stare as I stood up and didn't bother to go to the door with me. He still had his hand in his pocket wrapped around the bill I gave him.

The street was empty and dark enough to keep me wrapped in a blanket of shadows. I stayed close to the houses, stopping now and then to listen. When I was sure I was by myself I felt better and followed the water smell of the bay.

At River Road a single pump gas station showed lights and the guy inside sat with his feet propped up on the desk. He opened one eye when I walked in, gave me the change I wanted for the phone, then went back to sleep again. I dialed the number of Gerot's club, got the attendant and told him what I wanted. He gave me another number and I punched it out on the dial. Two persons answered before a voice said, "Gerot speaking."

"Hello, Captain. This is Joe. I was . . ."

"I remember," he said.

"I called Sergeant Gonzales tonight. Phil Carboy paid me off to finger Vetter. Now I got two parties pushing me."

"Three. Don't forget us."

"I'm not forgetting."

"I hear those parties are excited. Where are you?"

I didn't think he'd bother to trace the call, so I said, "Some joint in town."

His voice sounded light this time. "About Vetter. Tell me."

"Nothing to tell."

"You had a call this morning." I felt the chills starting to run up my back. They had a tap on my line already. "The voice wasn't familiar and it said some peculiar things."

"I know. I didn't get it. I thought it was part of Renzo's outfit getting wise. They beat up a buddy of mine so I'd know what a real beat-up guy looks like. It was all double talk to me."

He was thinking it over. When he was ready he said, "Maybe so, kid. You hear about that dame you were with?"

I could hardly get the words out of my mouth. "Helen? No . . . What?"

"Somebody shot at her. Twice."

"Did . . ."

"Not this time. She was able to walk away from it this time."

"Who was it? Who shot at her?"

"That, little chum, is something we'd like to know too. She was waiting for a train out of town. The next time maybe we'll have better luck. There'll be a next time, in case you're interested."

"Yeah, I'm interested . . . and thanks. You know where she is now?"

"No, but we're looking around. *I hope we can find her first.*"

I put the phone back and tried to

get the dry taste out of my mouth. When I thought I could talk again I dialed Helen's apartment, hung on while the phone rang endlessly, then held the receiver fork down until I got my coin back. I had to get Renzo's club number from the book and the gravelly voice that answered rasped that the feature attraction hadn't put in an appearance that night and for something's sake to cut off the chatter and wait until tomorrow because the club was closed.

So I stood there and said things to myself until I was all balled up into a knot. I could see the parade of faces I hated drifting past my mind and all I could think of was how bad I wanted to smash every one of them as they came by. Helen had tried to run for it. She didn't get far. Now where could she be? Where does a beautiful blonde go who is trying to hide? Who would take her in if they knew the score?

I could feel the sweat starting on my neck, soaking the back of my shirt. All of a sudden I felt washed out and wrung dry. Gone. All the way gone. Like there wasn't anything left of me any more except a big hate for a whole damn city, the mugs who ran it and the people who were afraid of the mugs. And it wasn't just one city either. There would be more of them scattered all over the states. For the people, by the people, Lincoln had said. Yeah. Great.

I turned around and walked out. I didn't even bother to look back and if they were there, let them come. I walked for a half hour, found a cab parked at a corner with the driver sacking it behind the wheel and woke him up. I gave him the boarding house address and climbed in the back.

..He let me off at the corner, collected his dough and turned around.

Then I heard that voice again and I froze the butt halfway to my mouth and squashed the matches in the palm of my hand.

It said, "Go ahead and light it."

I breathed that first drag out with the words, "You nuts? They're all around this place."

"I know. Now be still and listen. The dame knows the score. They tried for her . . ."

We heard the feet at the same time. They were light as a cat, fast. Then he came out of the darkness and all I could see was the glint of the knife in his hand and the yell that was in my throat choked off when his fingers bit into my flesh. I had time to see that same hardened face that had looked into mine not so long ago, catch an expressionless grin from the hard boy, then the other shadows opened and the side of a palm smashed down against his neck. He pitched forward with his head at a queer, stiff angle, his mouth wrenched open and I knew it was only a reflex that kept it that way because the hard

boy was dead. You could hear the knife chatter across the sidewalk and the sound of the body hitting, a sound that really wasn't much yet was a thunderous crash that split the night wide open.

The shadows the hand had reached out from seemed to open and close again, and for a short second I was alone. Just a short second. I heard the whisper that was said too loud. The snick of a gun somewhere, then I closed in against the building and ran for it.

At the third house I faded into the alley and listened. Back there I could hear them talking, then a car started up down the street. I cut around behind the houses, found the fences and stuck with them until I was at my place, then snaked into the cellar door.

When I got upstairs I slipped into the hall and reached for the phone. I asked for the police and got them. All I said was that somebody was being killed and gave the address. Then I grinned at the darkness, hung up without giving my name and went upstairs to my room. From way across town a siren wailed a lonely note, coming closer little by little. It was a pleasant sound at that. It would give my friend from the shadows plenty of warning too. He was quite a guy. Strong. Whoever owned the dead man was going to walk easy with Vetter after this.

I walked into my room, closed the door and was reaching for the

bolt when the chair moved in the corner. Then she said, "Hello, Joe," and the air in my lungs hissed out slowly between my teeth.

I said, "Helen." I don't know which one of us moved. I like to think it was her. But suddenly she was there in my arms with her face buried in my shoulder, stifled sobs pouring out of her body while I tried to tell her that it was all right. Her body was pressed against me, a fire that seemed to dance as she trembled, fighting to stay close.

"Helen, Helen, take it easy. Nothing will hurt you now. You're okay." I lifted her head away and smoothed back her hair. "Listen, you're all right here."

Her mouth was too close. Her eyes were too wet and my mind was thinking things that didn't belong there. My arms closed tighter and I found her mouth, warm and soft, a salty sweetness that clung desperately and talked to me soundlessly. But it stopped the trembling and when she pulled away she smiled and said my name softly.

"How'd you get here, Helen?"

Her smile tightened. "I was brought up in a place like this a long time ago. There are always ways. I found one."

"I heard what happened. Who was it?"

She tightened under my hands. "I don't know. I was waiting for a train when it happened. I just ran after that. When I got out on the street, it happened again."

"No cops?"

She shook her head. "Too fast. I kept running."

"They know it was you?"

"I was recognized in the station. Two men there had caught my show and said hello. You know how. They could have said something."

I could feel my eyes starting to squint. "Don't be so damn calm about it."

The tight smile twisted up at the corner. It was like she was reading my mind. She seemed to soften a moment and I felt her fingers brush my face. "I told you I wasn't like other girls, Joe. Not like the kind of girl you should know. Let's say it's all something I've seen before. After a bit you get used to it."

"Helen . . ."

"I'm sorry, Joe."

I shook my head slowly. "No . . . I'm the one who's sorry. People like you should never get like that. Not you."

"Thanks." She looked at me, something strange in her eyes that I could see even in the half light of the room. And this time it happened slowly, the way it should be. The fire was close again, and real this time, very real. Fire that could have burned deeply if the siren hadn't closed in and stopped outside.

I pushed her away and went to the window. The beams of the flashlights traced paths up the sidewalk. The two cops were cursing the cranks in the neighborhood un-

til one stopped, grunted something and picked up a sliver of steel that lay by the curb. But there was nothing else. Then they got back in the cruiser and drove off.

Helen said, "What was it?"

"There was a dead man out there. Tomorrow there'll be some fun."

"Joe!"

"Don't worry about it. At least we know how we stand. It was one of their boys. He made a pass at me on the street and got taken."

"You do it?"

I shook my head. "Not me. A guy. A real big guy with hands that can kill."

Vetter." She said it breathlessly.

I shrugged.

Her voice was a whisper. "I hope he kills them all. Every one." Her hand touched my arm. "Somebody tried to kill Renzo earlier. They got one of his boys." Her teeth bit into her lip. "There were two of them so it wasn't *Vetter*. You know what that means?"

I nodded. "War. They want Renzo dead to get *Vetter* out of town. They don't want him around or he'll move into their racket sure."

"He already has." I looked at her sharply and she nodded. "I saw one of the boys in the band. Renzo's special car was hijacked as it was leaving the city. Renzo claimed they got nothing but he's pretty upset. I heard other things too. The whole town's tight."

"Where do you come in, Helen?"

"What?" Her voice seemed taut.

"You. Let's say you and Cooley. What string are you pulling?" Her hand left my arm and hung down at her side. If I'd slapped her she would have had the same expression on her face. I said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. You liked Jack Cooley, didn't you?"

"Yes." She said it quietly.

"You told me what he was like once. What was he really like?"

The hurt flashed in her face again. "Like them," she said. "Gay, charming, but like them. He wanted the same things. He just went after them differently, that's all."

"The guy I saw tonight said you know things."

Her breath caught a little bit. "I didn't know before, Joe."

"Tell me."

"When I packed to leave . . . then I found out. Jack . . . left certain things with me. One was an envelope. There were cancelled checks in it for thousands of dollars made out to Renzo. The one who wrote the checks is a racketeer in New York. There was a note pad too with dates and amounts that Renzo paid Cooley."

"Blackmail."

"I think so. What was more important was what was in the box he left with me. *Heroin.*"

I swung around slowly. "Where is it?"

"Down a sewer. I've seen what the stuff can do to a person."

"Much of it?"

"Maybe a quarter pound."

"We could have had him," I said. "We could have had him and you dumped the stuff!"

Her hand touched me again. "No . . . there wasn't that much of it. Don't you see, it's bigger than that. What Jack had was only a sample. Some place there's more of it, much more."

"Yeah," I said. I was beginning to see things now. They were starting to straighten themselves out and it made a pattern. The only trouble was that the pattern was so simple it didn't begin to look real.

"Tomorrow we start," I said. "We work by night. Roll into the sack and get some sleep. If I can keep the landlady out of here we'll be okay. You sure nobody saw you come in?"

"Nobody saw me."

"Good. Then they'll only be looking for me."

"Where will you sleep?"

I grinned at her. "In the chair."

I heard the bed creak as she eased back on it, then I slid into the chair. After a long time she said, "Who are you, Joe?"

I grunted something and closed my eyes. I wished I knew myself sometimes.

Chapter IV

I woke up just past noon. Helen

was still asleep, restlessly tossing in some dream. The sheet had slipped down to her waist, and everytime she moved, her body rippled with sinuous grace. I stood looking at her for a long time, my eyes devouring her, every muscle in my body wanting her. There were other things to do, and I cursed those other things and set out to do them.

When I knew the landlady was gone I made a trip downstairs to her ice box and lifted enough for a quick meal. I had to wake Helen up to eat, then sat back with an old magazine to let the rest of the day pass by. At seven we made the first move. It was a nice simple little thing that put the whole neighborhood in an uproar for a half hour but gave us a chance to get out without being spotted.

All I did was call the fire department and tell them there was a gas leak in one of the tenements. They did the rest. Besides holding everybody back from the area they evacuated a whole row of houses, including us and while they were trying to run down the false alarm we grabbed a cab and got out.

Helen asked, "Where to?"

"A place called Gulley's. It's a stop for the fishing boats. You know it?"

"I know it." She leaned back against the cushions. "It's a tough place to be. Jack took me out there a couple of times."

"He did? Why?"

"Oh, we ate, then he met some

friends of his. We were there when the place was raided. Gulley was selling liquor after closing hours. Good thing Jack had a friend on the force."

"Who was that?"

"Some detective with a Mexican name."

"Gonzales," I said.

She looked at me. "That's right." She frowned. "I didn't like him."

That was a new angle. One that didn't fit in. Jack with a friend on the force. I handed Helen a cigarette, lit it and sat back with mine.

It took a good hour to reach the place and at first glance it didn't seem worth the ride. From the highway the road weaved out onto a sand spit and in the shadows you could see the parked cars and occasionally couples in them. Here and there along the road the lights of the car picked up the glint of beer cans and empty bottles. I gave the cabbie an extra five and told him to wait and when we went down the gravel path, he pulled it under the trees and switched off his lights. Gulley's was a huge shack built on the sand with a porch extending out over the water. There wasn't a speck of paint on the weather-racked framework and over the whole place the smell of fish hung like a blanket. It looked like a creep joint until you turned the corner and got a peek at the nice modern dock setup he had and the new addition on the side that probably made the place the yacht club's

slumming section. If it didn't have anything else it had atmosphere. We were right on the tip of the peninsular that jutted out from the mainland and like the sign said, it was the last chance for the boats to fill up with the bottled stuff before heading out to deep water.

I told Helen to stick in the shadows of the hedge row that ran around the place while I took a look around, and though she didn't like it, she melted back into the brush. I could see a couple of figures on the porch, but they were talking too low for me to hear what was going on. Behind the bar that ran across the main room inside, a flat-faced fat guy leaned over reading the paper with his ears pinned inside a headset. Twice he reached back, frowning and fiddled with a radio under the counter. When the phone rang he scowled again, slipped off the headset and said, "Gulley speaking. Yeah. Okay. So long."

When he went back to his paper I crouched down under the rows of windows and eased around the side. The sand was a thick carpet that silenced all noise and the gentle lapping of the water against the docks covered any other racket I could make. I was glad to have it that way too. There were guys spotted around the place that you couldn't see until you looked hard and they were just lounging. Two were by the building and the other two at the foot of the docks, edgy

birds who lit occasional cigarettes and shifted around as they smoked them. One of them said something and a pair of them swung around to watch the twin beams of a car coming up the highway. I looked too, saw them turn in a long arc then cut straight for the shack.

One of the boys started walking my way, his feet squeaking in the dry sand. I dropped back around the corner of the building, watched while he pulled a bottle out from under the brush, then started back the way I had come.

The car door slammed. A pair of voices mixed in an argument and another one cut them off. When I heard it I could feel my lips peel back and I knew that if I had a knife in my fist and Mark Renzo passed by me in the dark, whatever he had for supper would spill all over the ground. There was another voice swearing at something. Johnny. Nice, gentle Johnny who was going to cripple me for life.

I wasn't worrying about Helen because she wouldn't be sticking her neck out. I was hoping hard that my cabbie wasn't reading any paper by his dome light and when I heard the boys reach the porch and go in, I let my breath out hardly realizing that my chest hurt from holding it in so long.

You could hear their hellos from inside, muffled sounds that were barely audible. I had maybe a minute to do what I had to do and didn't waste any time doing it. I scut-

tled back under the window that was at one end of the bar, had time to see Gulley shaking hands with Renzo over by the door, watched him close and lock it and while they were still far enough away not to notice the movement, slid the window up an inch and flattened against the wall.

They did what I expected they'd do. I heard Gulley invite them to the bar for a drink and set out the glasses. Renzo said, "Good stuff."

"Only the best. You know that."

Johnny said, "Sure. You treat your best customers right."

Bottle and glasses clinked again for another round. Then the headset that was under the bar started clicking. I took a quick look, watched Gulley pick it up, slap one earpiece against his head and jot something down on a pad.

Renzo said, "She getting in without trouble?"

Gulley set the headset down and leaned across the bar. He looked soft, but he'd been around a long time and not even Renzo was playing any games with him. "Look," he said, "You got your end of the racket. Keep out of mine. You know?"

"Getting tough, Gulley?"

I could almost hear Gulley smile. "Yeah. Yeah, in case you want to know. You damn well better blow off to them city lads, not me."

"Ease off," Renzo told him. He didn't sound rough any more. "Heard a load was due in tonight."

"You hear too damn much."

"It didn't come easy. I put out a bundle for the information. You know why?" Gulley didn't say anything. Renzo said, "I'll tell you why. I need that stuff. You know why?"

"Tough. Too bad. You know. What you want is already paid for and is being delivered. You ought to get your head out of your whoosis."

"Gulley . . ." Johnny said really quiet. "We ain't kidding. We need that stuff. The big boys are getting jumpy. They think we pulled a fast one. They don't like it. They don't like it so bad maybe they'll send a crew down here to straighten everything out and you may get straightened too."

Inside Gulley's feet were nervous on the floorboards. He passed in front of me once, his hands busy wiping glasses. "You guys are nuts. Carboy paid for this load. So I should stand in the middle?"

"Maybe it's better than standing in front of us," Johnny said.

"You got rocks. Phil's out of the local stuff now. He's got a pretty big outfit."

"Just peanuts, Gulley, just peanuts."

"Not any more. He's moving in since you dumped the big deal."

Gulley's feet stopped moving. His voice had a whisper in it. "So you were big once. Now I see you sliding. The big boys are going for bargains and they don't like who

can't deliver, especially when it's been paid for. That was one big load. It was special. So you dumped it. Phil's smart enough to pick it up from there and now he may be top dog. I'm not in the middle. Not without an answer to Phil and he'll need a good one."

"*Vetter's in town, Gulley!*" Renzo almost spat the word out. "You know how he is? He ain't a gang you bust up. He's got a nasty habit of killing people. Like always, he's moving in. So we pay you for the stuff and deliver what we lost. We make it look good and you tell Phil it was Vetter. He'll believe that."

I could hear Gulley breathing hard. "Jerks, you guys," he said. There was a hiss in his words. "I should string it on Vetter. Man, you're plain nuts. I seen that guy operate before. Who the hell you think edged into that Frisco deal? Who got Morgan in El Paso while he was packing a half a million in cash and another half in powder. So a chowderhead hauls him in to cream some local fish and the guy walks away with the town. *Who the hell is that guy?*"

Johnny's laugh was bitter. Sharp. Gulley had said it all and it was like a knife sticking in and being twisted. "I'd like to meet him. Seems like he was a buddy of Jack Cooley. You remember Jack Cooley, Gulley? You were in on that. Cooley got off with your kick too. Maybe Vetter would like to know about that."

"Shut up."

"Not yet. We got business to talk about."

Gulley seemed out of breath. "Business be damned. I ain't tangleing with Vetter."

"Scared?"

"Damn right, and so are you. So's everybody else."

"Okay," Johnny said. "So for one guy or a couple he's trouble. In a big town he can make his play and move fast. Thing is with enough guys in a burg like this he can get nailed."

"And how many guys get nailed with him. He's no dope. Who you trying to smoke?"

"Nuts, who cares who gets nailed as long as it ain't your own bunch. You think Phil Carboy'll go easy if he thinks Vetter jacked a load out from under him? Like you told us, Phil's an up and coming guy. He's growing. He figures on being the top kick around here and let Vetter give him the business and he goes all out to get the guy. So two birds are killed. Vetter and Carboy. Even if Carboy gets him, his load's gone. He's small peanuts again."

"Where does that get me?" Gulley asked.

"I was coming to that. You make yours. The percentage goes up ten. Good?"

Gulley must have been thinking greedy. He started moving again, his feet coming closer. He said, "Big talk. Where's the cabbage?"

"I got it on me," Renzo said.
"You know what Phil was paying for the junk?"

"The word said two million."

"It's gonna cost to take care of the boys on the boat."

"Not so much." Renzo's laugh had no humor in it. "They talk and either Carboy'll finish 'em or Vetter will. They stay shut up for free."

"How much for me?" Gulley asked.

"One hundred thousand for swinging the deal, plus the extra percentage. You think it's worth it?"

"I'll go it," Gulley said.

Nobody spoke for a second, then Gulley said, "I'll phone the boat to pull into the slipside docks. They can unload there. The stuff is packed in beer cans. It won't make a big package so look around for it. They'll probably shove it under one of the benches."

"Who gets the dough?"

"You row out to the last boat mooring. The thing is red with a white stripe around it. Unscrew the top and drop it in."

"Same as the way we used to work it?"

"Right. The boys on the boat won't like going in the harbor and they'll be plenty careful, so don't stick around to lift the dough and the stuff too. That 'breed on the ship got a lockerfull of chatter guns he likes to hand out to his crew."

"It'll get played straight."

"I'm just telling you."

Renzo said, "What do you tell Phil?"

"You kidding? I don't say nothing. All I know is I lose contact with the boat. Next the word goes that Vetter is mixed up in it. I don't say nothing." He paused for a few seconds, his breath whistling in his throat, then, "But don't forget something . . . You take Carboy for a sucker and maybe even Vetter. Lay off me. I keep myself covered. Anything happens to me and the next day the cops get a letter naming names. Don't ever forget that."

Renzo must have wanted to say something. He didn't. Instead he rasped, "Go get the cash for this guy."

Somebody said, "Sure, boss," and walked across the room. I heard the lock snick open, then the door.

"This better work," Renzo said. He fiddled with his glass a while. "I'd sure like to know what that punk did with the other stuff."

"He ain't gonna sell it, that's for sure," Johnny told him. "You think maybe Cooley and Vetter were in business together?"

"I'm thinking maybe Cooley was in business with a lot of people. That lousy blonde. When I get her she'll talk plenty. I should've kept my damn eyes open."

"I tried to tell you, boss."

"Shut up," Renzo said. "You just see that she gets found."

I didn't wait to hear any more. I got down in the darkness and headed back to the path. Overhead the

sky was starting to lighten as the moon came up, a red circle that did funny things to the night and started the long fingers of shadows drifting out from the scraggly brush. The trees seemed to be ponderous things that reached down with sharp claws, feeling around in the breeze for something to grab. I found the place where I had left Helen, found a couple of pebbles and tossed them back into the brush. I heard her gasp.

She came forward silently, said, "Joe?" in a hushed tone.

"Yeah. *Let's get out of here.*"

"What happened?"

"Later. I'll start back to the cab to make sure it's clear. If you don't hear anything, follow me. Got it?"

". . . yes." She was hesitant and I couldn't blame her. I got off the gravel path into the sand, took it easy and tried to search out the shadows. I reached the clearing, stood there until I was sure the place was empty then hopped over to the cab.

I had to shake the driver awake and he came out of it stupidly. "Look, keep your lights off going back until you're on the highway, then keep 'em on low. There's enough moon to see by."

"Hey . . . I don't want trouble."

"You'll get it unless you do what I tell you."

"Well . . . okay."

"A dame's coming out in a minute. Soon as she comes start it up and try to keep it quiet."

I didn't have long to wait. I heard her feet on the gravel, walking fast but not hurrying. Then I heard something else that froze me a second. A long, low whistle of appreciation like the kind any blonde'll get from the pool hall boys. I hopped in the cab, held the door open. "Let's go, feller," I said.

As soon as the engine ticked over Helen started to run. I yanked her inside as the car started moving and kept down under the windows. She said, "Somebody . . ."

"I heard it."

"I didn't see who it was."

"Maybe it'll pass. Enough cars came out here to park."

Her hand was tight in mine, the nails biting into my palm. She was half-turned on the seat, her dress pulled back over the glossy knees of her nylons, her breasts pressed against my arm. She stayed that way until we reached the highway then little by little eased up until she was sitting back against the cushions. I tapped my forefinger against my lips then pointed to the driver. Helen nodded, smiled, then squeezed my hand again. This time it was different. The squeeze went with the smile.

I paid off the driver at the edge of town. He got more than the meter said, a lot more. It was big enough to keep a man's mouth shut long enough to get him in trouble when he opened it too late. When he was out of sight we walked until we found another cab, told the

driver to get us to a small hotel someplace, and the usual leer and blonde inspection muttered the name of a joint and pulled away from the curb.

It was the kind of a place where they don't ask questions and don't believe what you write in the register anyway. I signed *Mr. and Mrs. Valiscivitch*, paid the bill in advance for a week and when the clerk read the name I got a screwy look because the name was too screwballed to be anything but real to him. Maybe he figured his clientele was changing. When we got to the room I said, "You park here for a few days."

"Are you going to tell me anything?"

"Should I?"

"You're strange, Joe. A very strange boy."

"Stop calling me a boy."

Her face got all beautiful again and when she smiled there was a real grin in it. She stood there with her hands on her hips and her feet apart like she was going into some part of her routine and I could feel my body starting to burn at the sight of her. She could do things with herself by just breathing and she did them, the smile and her eyes getting deeper all the time. She saw what was happening to me and said, "You're not such a boy after all." She held out her hand and I took it, pulling her in close. "The first time you were a boy. All bloody, dirt ground into your face.

When Renzo tore you apart I could have killed him. Nobody should do that to another one, especially a boy. But then there was Johnny and you seemed to grow up. I'll never forget what you did to him."

"He would have hurt you."

"You're even older now. Or should I say matured? I think you finished growing up last night, Joe, last night . . . with me. I saw you grow up, and I only hope I haven't hurt you in the process. I never was much good for anybody. That's why I left home, I guess. Everyone I was near seemed to get hurt. Even me."

"You're better than they are, Helen. The breaks were against you, that's all."

"Joe . . . do you know you're the first one who did anything nice for me without wanting . . . something?"

"Helen . . ."

"No, don't say anything. Just take a good look at me. See everything that I am? It shows. I know it shows. I was a lot of things that weren't nice. I'm the kind men want but who won't introduce to their families. I'm a beautiful piece of dirt, Joe." Her eyes were wet. I wanted to brush away the wetness but she wouldn't let my hands go. "You see what I'm telling you? You're young . . . don't brush up against me too close. You'll get dirty and you'll get hurt."

She tried to hide the sob in her throat but couldn't. It came up any-

way and I made her let my hands go and when she did I wrapped them around her and held her tight against me. "Helen," I said. "Helen . . ."

She looked at me, grinned weakly. "We must make a funny pair," she said. "Run for it, Joe. Don't stay around any longer."

When I didn't answer right away her eyes looked at mine. I could see her starting to frown a little bit and the curious bewilderment crept across her face. Her mouth was red and moist, poised as if she were going to ask a question, but had forgotten what it was she wanted to say. I let her look and look and look and when she shook her head in a minute gesture of puzzlement I said, "Helen . . . I've rubbed against you. No dirt came off. Maybe it's because I'm no better than you think you are."

"Joe . . ."

"It never happened to me before, kid. When it happens I sure pick a good one for it to happen with." I ran my fingers through her hair. It was nice looking at her like that. Not down, not up, but right into her eyes. "I don't have any family to introduce you to, but if I had, I would. Yellow head, don't worry about me getting hurt."

Her eyes were wide now as if she had the answer. She wasn't believing what she saw.

"I love you, Helen. It's not the way a boy would love anybody. It's

a peculiar kind of thing I never want to change."

"Joe . . ."

"But it's yours now. You have to decide. Look at me, kid. Then say it."

Those lovely wide eyes grew misty again and the smile came back slowly. It was a warm, radiant smile that told me more than her words. "It can happen to us, can't it? Perhaps it's happened before to somebody else, but it can happen to *us*, can't it? Joe . . . It seems so . . . I can't describe it. There's something . . ."

"Say it out."

"I love you, Joe. Maybe it's better that I should love a little boy. Twenty . . . twenty-one you said? Oh, please, please don't let it be wrong, please . . ." She pressed herself to me with a deep-throated sob and clung there. My fingers rubbed her neck, ran across the width of her shoulders then I pushed her away. I was grinning a little bit now.

"In eighty years it won't make much difference," I said. Then what else I had to say her mouth cut off like a burning torch that tried to seek out the answer and when it was over it didn't seem important enough to mention anyway.

I pushed her away gently. "Now, listen, there isn't much time. I want you to stay here. Don't go out at all and if you want anything, have it sent up. When I come back, I'll knock once. Just once. Keep that

door locked and stay out of sight. You got that?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Don't worry about me. I won't be long. Just remember to make sure it's me and nobody else." I grinned at her. "You aren't getting away from me any more, blondie. Now it's us for keeps, together."

"All right, Joe."

I nudged her chin with my fist, held her face up and kissed it. That curious look was back and she was trying to think of something again. I grinned, winked at her and got out before she could keep me. I even grinned at the clerk downstairs, but he didn't grin back. He probably thought anybody who'd leave a blonde like that alone was nuts or married and he wasn't used to it.

But it sure felt good. You know how. You feel so good you want to tear something apart or laugh and maybe a little crazy, but that's all part of it. That's how I was feeling until I remembered the other things and knew what I had to do.

I found a gin mill down the street and changed a buck into a handful of coins. Three of them got my party and I said, "Mr. Carboy?"

"That's right. Who is this?"

"Joe Boyle."

Carboy told somebody to be quiet then, "What do you want, kid?"

I got the pitch as soon as I caught the tone in his voice. "Your boys haven't got me, if that's what you're thinking," I told him.

"Yeah?"

"I didn't take a powder. I was trying to get something done. For once figure somebody else got brains too."

"You weren't supposed to do any thinking, kid."

"Well, if I don't, you lose a boat-load of merchandise, friend."

"What?" It was a whisper that barely came through.

"Renzo's ticking you off. He and Gulley are pulling a switch. Your stuff gets delivered to him."

"Knock it off, kid. What do you know?"

.. "I know the boat's coming into the slipside docks with the load and Renzo will be picking it up. You hold the bag, brother."

"Joe," he said. "You know what happens if you're queering me."

"I know."

"Where'd you pick it up?"

"Let's say I sat in on Renzo's conference with Gulley."

"Okay, boy. I'll stick with it. You better be right. Hold on." He turned away from the phone and shouted muffled orders at someone. There were more muffled shouts in the background then he got back on the line again. "Just one thing more. What about Vetter?"

"Not yet, Mr. Carboy. Not yet."

"You get some of my boys to stick with you. I don't like my plans interfered with. Where are you?"

"In a place called Patty's. A gin mill."

"I know it. Stay there ten minutes. I'll shoot a couple guys down. You got that handkerchief yet?"

"Still in my pocket."

"Good. Keep your eyes open."

He slapped the phone back and left me there. I checked the clock on the wall, went to the bar and had an orange, then when the ten minutes were up, drifted outside. I was half a block away when a car door slapped shut and I heard the steady tread of footsteps across the street.

Now it was set. Now the big blow. The show ought to be good when it happened and I wanted to see it happen. There was a cab stand at the end of the block and I hopped in the one on the end. He nodded when I gave him the address, looked at the bill in my hand and took off. In back of us the lights of another car prowled through the night, but always looking our way.

You smelt the place before you reached it. On one side the darkened store fronts were like sleeping drunks, little ones and big ones in a jumbled mass, but all smelling the same. There was the fish smell and on top that of wood the salt spray had started to rot. The bay stretched out endlessly on the other side, a few boats here and there marked with running lights, the rest just vague silhouettes against the sky. In the distance the moon turned the train trestle into a giant spidery hand. The white sign,

SLIPside, pointed on the dock area and I told the driver to turn up the street and keep right on going. He picked the bill from my fingers, slowed around the turn, then picked it up when I hopped out. In a few seconds the other car came by, made the turn and lost itself further up the street. When it was gone I stepped out of the shadows and crossed over. Maybe thirty seconds later the car came tearing back up the street again and I ducked back into a doorway. Phil Carboy was going to be pretty sore at those boys of his.

I stood still when I reached the corner again and listened. It was too quiet. You could hear the things that scurried around on the dock. The things were even bold enough to cross the street and one was dragging something in its mouth. Another, a curious elongated creature whose fur shone silvery in the street light pounced on it and the two fought and squealed until the raider had what it went after.

It happens even with rats, I thought. Who learns from who? Do the rats watch the men or the men watch the rats?

Another one of them ran into the gutter. It was going to cross, then stood on its hind legs in an attitude of attention, its face pointing toward the dock. I never saw it move, but it disappeared, then I heard what it had heard, carefully muffled sounds, then a curse.

It came too quick to say it had a starting point. First the quick stab of orange and the sharp thunder of the gun, then the others following and the screams of the slugs whining off across the water. They didn't try to be quiet now. There was a startled shout, a hoarse scream and the yell of somebody who was hit.

Somebody put out the street light and the darkness was a blanket that slid in. I could hear them running across the street, then the moon reached down before sliding behind a cloud again and I saw them, a dozen or so closing in on the dock from both sides.

Out on the water an engine barked into life, was gunned and a boat wheeled away down the channel. The car that had been cruising around suddenly dimmed its lights, turned off the street and stopped. I was right there with no place to duck into and feet started running my way. I couldn't go back and there was trouble ahead. The only other thing was to make a break for it across the street and hope nobody spotted me.

I'd pushed it too far. I was being a dope again. One of them yelled and started behind me at a long angle. I didn't stop at the rail. I went over the side into the water, kicked away from the concrete abutment and hoped I'd come up under the pier. I almost made it. I was a foot away from the piling but it wasn't enough. When I looked back the guy was there at

the rail with a gun bucking in his hand and the bullets were walking up the water toward me. He must have still had a half load left and only a foot to go when another shot blasted out over my head and the guy grabbed at his face with a scream and fell back to the street. The guy up above said, "Get the son . . ." and the last word had a whistle to it as something caught him in the belly. He was all doubled up when he hit the water and his tombstone was a tiny trail of bubbles that broke the surface a few seconds before stopping altogether.

I pulled myself further under the dock. From where I was I could hear the voices and now they had quieted down. Out on the street somebody yelled to stand back and before the words were out cut loose with a sharp blast of an automatic rifle. It gave the bunch on the street time to close in and those on the dock scurried back further.

Right over my head the planks were warped away and when a voice said, "I found it," I could pick Johnny's voice out of the racket.

"Where?"

"Back ten feet on the pole. Better hop to it before they get wise and cut the wires."

Johnny moved fast and I tried to move with him. By the time I reached the next piling I could hear him dialing the phone. He talked fast, but kept his voice down. "*Renzo? Yeah, they bottled us. Some-*

body pulled the cork out of the deal. Yeah. The hell with that, you call the cops. Let them break it up. Sure, sure. Move it. We can make it to one of the boats. They got Tommy and Balco. Two of the others were hit but not bad. Yeah, it's Carboy all right. He ain't here himself, but they're his guys. Yeah, I got the stuff. Shake it."

His feet pounded on the planking overhead and I could hear his voice without making out what he said. The next minute the blasting picked up and I knew they were trying for a stand off. Whatever they had for cover up there must have been pretty good because the guys on the street were swearing at it and yelling for somebody to spread out and get them from the sides. The only trouble was that there was no protection on the street and if the moon came out again they'd be nice easy targets.

It was the moan of the siren that stopped it. First one, then another joined in and I heard them running for the cars. A man screamed and yelled for them to take it easy. Something rattled over my head and when I looked up, a frame of black marred the flooring. Something was rolled to the edge, then crammed over. Another followed it. Men. Dead. They bobbed for a minute, then sank slowly. Somebody said, "Damn, I hate to do that. He was okay."

"Shut up and get out there." It was Johnny.

The voice said, "Yeah, come on, you," then they went over the side. I stayed back of the piling and watched them swim for the boats. The sirens were coming closer now. One had a lead as if it knew the way and the others didn't. Johnny didn't come down. I grinned to myself, reached for a cross-brace and swung up on it. From there it was easy to make the trapdoor.

And there was Johnny by the end of the pier squatting down behind a packing case that seemed to be built around some machinery, squatting with that tenseness of a guy about to run. He had a box in his arms about two feet square and when I said, "Hello, chum," he stood up so fast he dropped it, but he would have had to do that anyway the way he was reaching for his rod.

He almost had it when I belted him across the nose. I got him with another sharp hook and heard the breath hiss out of him. It spun him around until the packing case caught him and when I was coming in he let me have it with his foot. I skidded sidewise, took the toe of his shoe on my hip then had his arm in a lock that brought a scream tearing out of his throat. He was going for the rod again when the arm broke and in a crazy surge of pain he jerked loose, tripped me, and got the gun out with his good hand. I rolled into his feet as it coughed over my head, grabbed his

wrist and turned it into his neck and he pulled the trigger for the last time in trying to get his hand loose. There was just one last, brief, horrified expression in his eyes as he looked at me, then they filmed over to start rotting away.

The siren that was screaming turned the corner with its wail dying out. Brakes squealed against the pavement and the car stopped, the red light on its hood snapping shut. The door opened opposite the driver, stayed open as if the one inside was listening. Then a guy crawled out, a little guy with a big gun in his hand. He said, "Johnny?"

Then he ran. Silently, like an Indian, I almost had Johnny's gun back in my hand when he reached me.

"You," Sergeant Gonzales said. He saw the package there, twisted his mouth into a smile and let me see the hole in the end of his gun. I still made one last try for Johnny's gun when the blast went off. I half expected the sickening smash of a bullet, but none came. When I looked up, Gonzales was still there. Something on the packing crate had hooked into his coat and held him up.

I couldn't see into the shadows where the voice came from. But it was a familiar voice. It said, "You ought to be careful son."

The gun the voice held slithered back into leather.

"Thirty seconds. No more. You might even do the job right and

beat it in his car. He was in on it. The cop . . . he was working with Cooley. Then Cooley ran out on him too so he played along with Renzo. Better move, kid."

The other sirens were almost there. I said, "Watch yourself. And thanks."

"Sure, kid. I hate crooked cops worse than crooks."

I ran for the car, hopped in and pulled the door shut. Behind me something splashed and a two foot square package floated on the water a moment, then turned over and sunk out of sight. I left the lights off, turned down the first street I reached and headed across town. At the main drag I pulled up, wiped the wheel and gearshift free of prints and got out.

There was dawn showing in the sky. It would be another hour yet before it was morning. I walked until I reached the junkyard in back of Gordon's office, found the wreck of a car that still had cushions in it, climbed in and went to sleep.

Morning, afternoon, then evening. I slept through the first two. The last one was harder. I sat there thinking things, keeping out of sight. My clothes were dry now, but the cigarettes still had a lousy taste. There was a twinge in my stomach and my mouth was dry. I gave it another hour before I moved, then went back over the fence and down the street to a dirty little diner that everybody avoided except the boys who rode the rods into town. I

knocked off a plate of bacon and eggs, paid for it with some of the change I had left, picked up a pack of butts and started out. That was when I saw the paper on the table.

It made quite a story. GANG WAR FLARES ON WATERFRONT, and under it a subhead that said, *Cop, Hoodlum, Slain in Gun Duel*. It was a masterpiece of writing that said nothing, intimated much and brought out the fact that though the place was bullet-sprayed and though evidence of other wounded was found, there were no bodies to account for what had happened. One sentence mentioned the fact that Johnny was connected with Mark Renzo. The press hinted at police inefficiency. There was the usual statement from Captain Gerot.

The thing stunk. Even the press was afraid to talk out. How long would it take to find out Gonzales didn't die by a shot from Johnny's gun? Not very long. And Johnny . . . a cute little twist like that would usually get a big splash. There wasn't even any curiosity shown about Johnny. I let out a short laugh and threw the paper back again.

They were like rats, all right. They just went the rats one better. They dragged their bodies away with them so there wouldn't be any ties. Nice. Now find the doctor who patched them up. Find what they were after on the docks. Maybe they figured to heist ten tons or

so of machinery. Yeah, try and find it.

No, they wouldn't say anything. Maybe they'd have to hit it a little harder when the big one broke. When the boys came in who paid a few million out for a package that was never delivered. Maybe when the big trouble came and the blood ran again somebody would crawl back out of his hole long enough to put it into print. Or it could be that Bucky Edwards was right. Life was too serious to sell cheaply.

I thought about it, remembering everything he had told me. When I had it all back in my head again I turned toward the place where I knew Bucky would be and walked faster. Halfway there it started to drizzle. I turned up the collar of my coat.

It was a soft rain, one of those things that comes down at the end of summer, making its own music like a dull concert you think will have no end. It drove people indoors until even the cabs didn't bother to cruise. The cars that went by had their windows steamed into opaque squares, the drivers peering through the hand-wiped panes.

I jumped a streetcar when one came along, took it downtown and got off again. And I was back with the people I knew and the places made for them. Bucky was on his usual stool and I wondered if it was a little too late. He had that all gone look in his face and his fingers were caressing a tall amber-colored glass.

When I sat down next to him his eyes moved, giving me a glassy stare. It was like the cars on the street, they were cloudy with mist, then a hand seemed to reach out and rub them clear. They weren't glass any more. I could see the white in his fingers as they tightened around the glass and he said, "You did it fancy, kiddo. Get out of here."

"Scared, Bucky?"

His eyes went past me to the door, then came back again. "Yes. You said it right. I'm scared. Get out. I don't want to be around when they find you."

"For a guy who's crocked most of the time you seem to know a lot about what happens."

"I think a lot. I figure it out. There's only one answer."

"If you know it why don't you write it?"

"Living's not much fun any more, but what there is of it, I like. Beat it, kid."

This time I grinned at him, a big fat grin and told the bartender to get me an orange. Large. He shoved it down, picked up my dime and went back to his paper.

I said, "Let's hear about it, Bucky." I could feel my mouth changing the grin into something else. "I don't like to be a target either. I want to know the score."

Bucky's tongue made a pass over dry lips. He seemed to look back inside himself to something he had been a long time ago, dredging the

memory up. He found himself in the mirror behind the back bar, twisted his mouth at it and looked back at me again.

"This used to be a good town."

"Not that," I said.

He didn't hear me. "Now anybody who knows anything is scared to death. To death, I said. Let them talk and that's what they get. Death.

From one side or another. It was bad enough when Renzo took over, worse when Carboy came in. It's not over yet." His shoulders made an involuntary shudder and he pulled the drink halfway down the glass. "Friend Gulley had an accident this afternoon. He was leaving town and was run off the road. He's dead."

I whistled softly. "Who?"

For the first time a trace of humor put lines at the corner of his lips. "It wasn't Renzo. It wasn't Phil Carboy. They were all accounted for. The tire marks are very interesting. It looked like the guy wanted to stop friend Gulley for a chat but Gulley hit the ditch. You could call it a real accident without lying." He finished the rest of the drink, put it down and said, "The boys are scared stiff." He looked at me closely then. "Vetter," he said.

"He's getting close."

Bucky didn't hear me. "I'm getting to like the guy. He does what should have been done a long time ago. By himself he does it. They know who killed Gonzales. One of Phil's boys saw it happen before

he ran for it. There's a guy with a broken neck who was found out on the highway and they know who did that and how." He swirled the ice around in his glass. "He's taking good care of you, kiddo."

I didn't say anything.

"There's just one little catch to it, Joe. One little catch."

"What?"

"That boy who saw Gonzales get it saw something else. He saw you and Johnny tangle over the package. He figures you got it. Everybody knows and now they want you. It can't happen twice. Renzo wants it and Carboy wants it. You know who gets it?"

I shook my head.

"You get it. In the belly or in the head. Even the cops want you that bad. Captain Gerot even thinks that way. You better get out of here, Joe. Keep away from me. There's something about you that spooks me. Something in the way your eyes look. Something about your face. I wish I could see into that mind of yours. I always thought I knew people, but I don't know you at all. You spook me. You should see your own eyes. I've seen eyes like yours before but I can't remember where. They're familiar as hell, but I can't place them. They don't belong in a kid's face at all. Go on, Joe, beat it. The boys are all over town. They got orders to do just one thing. Find you. When they do I don't want you sitting next to me."

"When do you write the big story, Bucky?"

"You tell me."

My teeth were tight together with the smile moving around them. "It won't be long."

"No . . . maybe just a short obit. They're tracking you fast. That hotel was no cover at all. Do it smarter the next time."

The ice seemed to pour down all over me. It went down over my shoulders, ate through my skin until it was in the blood that pounded through my body. I grabbed his arm and damn near jerked him off the stool. "What about the hotel?"

All he did was shrug. Bucky was gone again.

I cursed silently, ran back into the rain again and down the block to the cab stand.

The clerk said he was sorry, he didn't know anything about room 612. The night man had taken a week off. I grabbed the key from his hand and pounded up the stairs. All I could feel was that mad frenzy of hate swelling in me and I kept saying her name over and over to myself. I threw the door open, stood there breathing fast while I called myself a dozen different kinds of fool.

She wasn't there. It was empty.

A note lay beside the telephone. All it said was, "*Bring it where you brought the first one.*"

I laid the note down again and stared out the window into the night. There was sweat on the

backs of my hands. Bucky had called it. They thought I had the package and they were forcing a trade. Then Mark Renzo would kill us both. He thought.

I brought the laugh up from way down in my throat. It didn't sound much like me at all. I looked at my hands and watched them open and close into fists. There were callouses across the palms, huge things that came from Gordon's junk carts. A year and a half of it, I thought. Eighteen months of pushing loads of scrap iron for pennies then all of a sudden I was part of a multi-million dollar operation. The critical part of it. I was the enigma. Me, Joey the junk pusher. Not even Vetter now. Just me. Vetter would come after me.

For a while I stared at the street. That tiny piece of luck that chased me caught up again and I saw the car stop and the men jump out. One was Phil Carboy's right hand man. In a way it was funny. Renzo was always a step ahead of the challenger, but Phil was coming up fast. He'd caught on too and was ready to pull the same deal. He didn't know it had already been pulled.

But that was all right too.

I reached for the pen on the desk, lifted a sheet of cheap stationery out of the drawer and scrawled across it, "*Joe . . . be back in a few hours. Stay here with the package until I return. I'll have the car ready.*" I signed it, *Helen*, put it by the phone and picked up the receiver.

The clerk said, "Yes?"

I said, "In a minute some men will come in looking for the blonde and me. You think the room is empty, but let them come up. You haven't seen me at all yet. Understand?"

"Say . . ."

"Mister, if you want to walk out of here tonight you'll do what you're told. You're liable to get killed otherwise. Understand that?"

I hung up and let him think about it. I'd seen his type before and I wasn't worried a bit. I got out, locked the door and started up the stairs to the roof. It didn't take me longer than five minutes to reach the street and when I turned the corner the light was back on in the room I had just left. I gave it another five minutes and the tall guy came out again, spoke to the driver of the car and the fellow reached in and shut off the engine. It had worked. The light in the window went out. The vigil had started and the boys could afford to be pretty patient. They thought.

The rain was a steady thing coming down just a little bit harder than it had. It was cool and fresh with the slightest nip in it. I walked, putting the pieces together in my head. I did it slowly, replacing the fury that had been there, deliberately wiping out the gnawing worry that tried to grow. I reached the deserted square of the park and picked out a bench under a tree and sat there letting the rain drip down

around me. When I looked at my hands they were shaking.

I was thinking wrong. I should have been thinking about fat, ugly faces; rat faces with deep voices and whining faces. I should have been thinking about the splashes of orange a rod makes when it cuts a man down and blood on the street. Cops who want the big pay off. Thinking of a town where even the press was cut off and the big boys came from the city to pick up the stuff that started more people on the long slide down to the grave.

Those were the things I should have thought of.

All I could think of was Helen. Lovely Helen who had been all things to many men and hated it. Beautiful Helen who didn't want me to be hurt, who was afraid the dirt would rub off. Helen who found love for the first time . . . and me. The beauty in her face when I told her. Beauty that waited to be kicked and wasn't because I loved her too much and didn't give a damn what she had been. She was different now. Maybe I was too. She didn't know it, but she was the good one, not me. She was the child that needed taking care of, not me. Now she was hours away from being dead and so was I. The thing they wanted, the thing that could buy her life I saw floating in the water beside the dock. It was like having a yacht with no fuel aboard.

The police? No, not them. They'd want me. They'd think it

was a phoney. That wasn't the answer. Not Phil Carboy either. He was after the same thing Renzo was.

I started to laugh, it was so damn, pathetically funny. I had it all in my hand and couldn't turn it around. What the devil does a guy have to do? How many times does he have to kill himself? The answer. It was right there but wouldn't come through. It wasn't the same answer I had started with, but a better one.

So I said it all out to myself. Out loud, with words. I started with the night I brought the note to Renzo, the one that promised him Vetter would cut his guts out. I even described their faces to myself when Vetter's name was mentioned. One name, that's all it took, and you could see the fear creep in because Vetter was deadly and unknown. He was the shadow that stood there, the one they couldn't trust, the one they all knew in the society that stayed outside the law. He was a high-priced killer who never missed and always got more than he was paid to take. So deadly they'd give anything to keep him out of town, even to doing the job he was there for. So deadly they could throw me or anybody else to the wolves just to finger him. So damn deadly they put an army on him, yet so deadly he could move behind their lines without any trouble at all.

Vetter.

I cursed the name. I said Helen's. Vetter wasn't important any more.

The rain lashed at my face as I looked up into it. The things I knew fell into place and I knew what the answer was. I remembered something I didn't know was there, a sign on the docks by the fishing fleet that said "SEASON LOCKERS."

Jack Cooley had been smart by playing it simple. He even left me the ransom.

I got up, walked to the corner and waited until a cab came by. I flagged him down, got in and gave the address of the white house where Cooley had lived.

The same guy answered the door. He took the bill from my hand and nodded me in. I said, "Did he leave any old clothes behind at all?"

"Some fishing stuff downstairs. It's behind the coal bin. You want that?"

"I want that," I said.

He got up and I followed him. He switched on the cellar light, took me downstairs and across the littered pile of refuse a cellar can collect. When he pointed to the old set of dungarees on the nail in the wall, I went over and felt through the pockets. The key was in the jacket. I said thanks and went back upstairs. The taxi was still waiting. He flipped his butt away when I got in, threw the heap into gear and headed toward the smell of the water.

I had to climb the fence to get on the pier. There wasn't much to it. The lockers were tall steel affairs, each with somebody's name scrawled across it in chalk. The

number that matched the key didn't say Cooley, but it didn't matter any more either. I opened it up and saw the cardboard box that had been jammed in there so hard it had snapped one of the rods in the corner. Just to be sure I pulled one end open, tore through the other box inside and tasted the white powder.

Heroin.

They never expected Cooley to do it so simply. He had found a way to grab their load and stashed it without any trouble at all. Friend Jack was good at that sort of thing. Real clever. Walked away with a couple million bucks' worth of stuff and never lived to convert it. He wasn't quite smart enough. Not quite as smart as Carboy, Gerot, Renzo . . . or even a kid who pushed a junk cart. Smart enough to grab the load, but not smart enough to keep on living.

I closed the locker and went back over the fence with the box in my arms. The cabbie found me a phone in a gin mill and waited while I made my calls. The first one got me Gerot's home number. The second got me Captain Gerot himself, a very annoyed Gerot who had been pulled out of bed.

I said, "Captain, this is Joe Boyle and if you trace this call you're going to scramble the whole deal."

So the captain played it smart. "Go ahead," was all he told me.

"You can have them all. Every one on a platter. You know what I'm talking about?"

"I know."

"You want it that way?"

"I want you, Joe. Just you."

"I'll give you that chance. First you have to take the rest. There won't be any doubt this time. They won't be big enough to crawl out of it. There isn't enough money to buy them out either. You'll have every one of them cold."

"I'll still want you."

I laughed at him. "I said you'll get your chance. All you have to do is play it my way. You don't mind that, do you?"

"Not if I get you, Joe."

I laughed again. "You'll need a dozen men. Ones you can trust. Ones who can shoot straight and aren't afraid of what might come later."

"I can get them."

"Have them stand by. It won't be long. I'll call again."

I hung up, stared at the phone a second, then went back outside. The cabbie was working his way through another cigarette. I said, "I need a fast car. Where do I get one?"

"How fast for how much?"

"The limit."

"I got a friend with a souped-up Ford. Nothing can touch it. It'll cost you."

I showed him the thing in my hand. His eyes narrowed at the edges. "Maybe it won't cost you at that," he said. He looked at me the same way Helen had, then waved me in.

We made a stop at an out of the

way rooming house. I kicked my clothes off and climbed into some fresh stuff, then tossed everything else into a bag and woke up the landlady of the place. I told her to mail it to the post office address on the label and gave her a few bucks for her trouble. She promised me she would, took the bag into her room and I went outside. I felt better in the suit. I patted it down to make sure everything was set. The cabbie shot me a half smile when he saw me and held the door open.

I got the Ford and it didn't cost me a thing unless I piled it up. The guy grinned when he handed me the keys and made a familiar gesture with his hand. I grinned back. I gave the cabbie his fare with a little extra and got in the Ford with my box. It was almost over.

A mile outside Mark Renzo's roadhouse I stopped at a gas station and while the attendant filled me up all around, I used his phone. I got Renzo on the first try and said, "This is Joe, fat boy."

His breath in the phone came louder than the words. "Where are you?"

"Never mind. I'll be there. Let me talk to Helen."

I heard him call and then there was Helen. Her voice was tired and all the hope was gone from it. She said, "Joe . . ."

It was enough. I'd know her voice any time. I said, "Honey . . . don't worry about it. You'll be okay."

She started to say something else,

but Renzo must have grabbed the phone from her. "You got the stuff, kid?"

"I got it."

"Let's go, sonny. You know what happens if you don't."

"I know," I said. "You better do something first. I want to see the place of yours empty in a hurry. I don't feel like being stopped going in. Tell them to drive out and keep on going. I'll deliver the stuff to you, that's all."

"Sure, kid, sure. You'll see the boys leave."

"I'll be watching," I said.

Joke.

I made the other call then. It went back to my hotel room and I did it smart. I heard the phone ring when the clerk hit the room number, heard the phone get picked up and said as though I were in one big hurry, "*Look, Helen, I'm hopping the stuff out to Renzo's. He's waiting for it. As soon as he pays off we'll blow. See you later.*"

When I slapped the phone back I laughed again then got Gerot again. This time he was waiting. I said, "Captain . . . they'll all be at Renzo's place. There'll be plenty of fun for everybody. You'll even find a fortune in heroin."

"You're the one I want, Joe."

"Not even Vetter?"

"No, he comes next. First you."

This time he hung up on me. So I laughed again as the joke got funnier and made my last call.

The next voice was the one I had

come to know so well. I said, "Joe Boyle. I'm heading for Renzo's. Cooley had cached the stuff in a locker and I need it for a trade. I have a light blue Ford and need a quick way out. The trouble is going to start."

"There's a side entrance," the voice said. "They don't use it any more. If you're careful you can come in that way and if you stay careful you can make it to the big town without getting spotted."

"I heard about Gulley," I said.

"Saddening. He was a wealthy man."

"You'll be here?"

"Give me five minutes," the voice told me. "I'll be at the side entrance. I'll make sure nobody stops you."

"There'll be police. They won't be asking questions."

"Let me take care of that."

"Everybody wants Vetter," I said.

"Naturally. Do you think they'll find him?"

I grinned. "I doubt it."

The other voice chuckled as it hung up.

I saw them come out from where I stood in the bushes. They got into cars, eight of them and drove down the drive slowly. They turned back toward town and I waited until their lights were a mile away before I went up the steps of the club.

At that hour it was an eerie place, a dimly lit ghost house showing the signs of people that had been there earlier. I stood inside the door, stopped and listened. Up the stairs

I heard a cough. It was like that first night, only this time I didn't have somebody dragging me. I could remember the stairs and the long, narrow corridor at the top, and the oak panelled door at the end of it. Even the thin line of light that came from under the door. I snuggled the box under my arm and walked in.

Renzo was smiling from his chair behind the desk. It was a funny kind of a smile like I was a sucker. Helen was huddled on the floor in a corner holding a hand to the side of her cheek. Her dress had been shredded down to the waist, and tendrils of tattered cloth clung to the high swell of her breasts, followed the smooth flow of her body. Her other hand tried desperately to hide her nakedness from Renzo's leer. She was trembling, and the terror in her eyes was an ugly thing.

And Renzo grinned. Big, fat Renzo. Renzo the louse whose eyes were now on the package under my arm, with the grin turning to a slow sneer. Renzo the killer who found a lot of ways to get away with murder and was looking at me as if he were seeing me for the first time

He said, "You got your going away clothes on, kid."

"Yeah."

"You won't be needing them." He made the sneer bigger, but I wasn't watching him. I was watching Helen, seeing the incredible thing that crossed her face.

"I'm different, Helen?"

She couldn't speak. All she could do was nod.

"I told you I wasn't such a kid. I just look that way. Twenty . . . twenty-one you thought?" I laughed and it had a funny sound. Renzo stopped sneering. "I got ten years on that, honey. Don't worry about being in love with a kid."

Renzo started to get up then. Slowly, a ponderous monster with hands spread apart to kill something. "You two did it. You damn near ruined me. You know what happens now?" He licked his lips and the muscles rolled under his shirt.

My face was changing shape and I nodded. Renzo never noticed. Helen saw it. I said, "A lot happens now, fat boy." I dropped the package on the floor and kicked it to one side. Renzo moved out from behind the desk. He wasn't thinking any more. He was just seeing me and thinking of his empire that had almost toppled. The package could set it up again. I said, "Listen, you can hear it happen."

Then he stopped to think. He turned his head and you could hear the whine of engines and the shots coming clear across the night through the rain. There was a frenzy about the way it was happening, the frenzy and madness that goes into a *banzai* charge and above it the moan of sirens that seemed to go ignored.

It was happening to Renzo too,

the kill hate in his eyes, the saliva that made wet paths from the corners of his tight mouth. His whole body heaved and when his head turned back to me again, the eyes were bright with the lust of murder.

I said, "Come here, Helen," and she came to me. I took the envelope out of my pocket and gave it to her, and then I took off my jacket, slipping it over her shoulders. She pulled it closed over her breasts, the terror in her eyes fading. "Go out the side . . . the old road. The car is waiting there. You'll see a tall guy beside it, a big buy all around and if you happen to see his face, forget it. Tell him this. Tell him I said to give the report to the Chief. Tell him to wait until I contact him for the next assignment then start the car and wait for me. I'll be in a hurry. You got that?"

"Yes, Joe." The disbelief was still in her eyes.

Renzo moved slowly, the purpose plain in his face. His hands were out and he circled between me and the door. There was something fiendish about his face.

The sirens and the shooting were getting closer.

He said, "Vetter won't get you out of this, kid. I'm going to kill you and it'll be the best thing I ever did. Then the dame. The blonde. Weber told me he saw a blonde at Gulley's and I knew who did this to me. The both of you are going to die, kid. There ain't no Vetter here now."

I let him have a long look at me. I grinned. I said, "Remember what that note said? It said Vetter was going to spill your guts all over the floor. You remember that, Renzo?"

"Yeah," He said. "Now tell me you got a gun, kid. Tell me that and I'll tell you you're a liar. I can smell a rod a mile away. You had it, kid. There ain't no Vetter here now."

Maybe it was the way I let myself go. I could feel the loosening in my shoulders and my face was a picture only Renzo could see. "You killed too many men, Renzo, one too many. The ones you peddle the dope to die slowly, the ones who take it away die quick. It's still a lot of men. You killed them, Renzo, a whole lot of them. You know what happens to killers in this country? It's a funny law, but it works. Sometimes to get what it wants, it works in peculiar fashion. But it works.

"Remember the note. Remember hard what it said." I grinned and what was in it stopped him five feet away. What was in it made him frown, then his eyes opened wide, almost too wide and he had the expression Helen had the first time.

I said to her, "Don't wait, Helen," and heard the door open and close. Renzo was backing away, his feet shuffling on the carpet.

Two minutes at the most

"I'm Vetter," I said. "Didn't you know? Couldn't you tell? Me . . . Vetter. The one everybody wonders about, even the cops. Vetter the

puzzle. Vetter the one who's there but isn't there." The air was cold against my teeth. "Remember the note, Renzo. No, you can't smell a gun because I haven't got one. But look at my hand. You're big and strong . . . you're a killer, but look at my hand and find out who the specialist really is and you'll know that there was no lie in that note."

Renzo tried to scream, stumbled and fell. I laughed again and moved in on him. He was reaching for something in the desk drawer

knowing all the time that he wasn't going to make it and the knife in my hand made a nasty little snick and he screamed again so high it almost blended with the sirens.

Maybe one minute left, but it would be enough and the puzzle would always be there and the name when mentioned would start another ball rolling and the country a little cleaner and the report when the Chief read it would mean one more done with . . . done differently, but done.



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