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# MANHUNT

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MANHUNT



JULY, 1964



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*see back cover*

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# SWEET VENGEANCE

*"She killed herself, Professor; they didn't. But that won't stop you. You're a one-man crusade now."*

BY  
JOE GORES

HEAVY GANDER parked his '38 Ford by the university golf course and they crossed the black-top. There were four of them. A boy on a bicycle went by, but it was too dark for him to see much. Heavy fit his name: obese, sweating under his red and black satin jacket, his belly flopping over his trouser band at each step. When he brushed back the long blond hair from his almost cherubic face, a skull-and-crossbones ring glinted dully on his right hand.

"Are you sure she'll be here, Con?"

"Terri said she's alone here three nights a week because her husband teaches a night school class."

Cristobal Pando laughed softly, his white even teeth pale in the dim light. They called him Spig because of his olive skin and his



ability to speak broken English at will.

"I am not sure I like depending on this girl, Con, this Terri; a girl I have never seen."

"Since when do you have to like my orders, Spig?"

Conrad Vasso was a lean dark handsome boy with intense eyes and a Barrymore profile. He was a year older than the others and would have graduated the year before as an "A" student if high school hadn't bugged him so.

"All right, Con. Gently." His English was unaccented. "But it was dark when we came from that alley; this woman probably cannot give the police a make on us."

"The *Secret Raiders* make *sure*," boasted Con.

They crossed the fourteenth green, skirted the sand trap, went through trees, and came out on a gravel road leading to the house. They could hear frogs croaking in the ditch and see spanish moss on the live oaks. Lights showed in the downstairs window of the rambling shingle house. The door of the phone booth across the blacktop was shut and the inside light showed a brown-haired girl talking on the phone.

Champ Hoffman worked his big calloused hands. His jacket clung to a "V" torso, the sleeves taut around weightlifter arms. He had the grin of a man in a cigarette commercial and the eyes of a dog: alert, empty, devoted.

"Con, that girl over there—"

They crouched under the lights of a passing car. Con said: "Didn't I tell you Terri was casing this place?"

"So that is Terri." Spig's voice was a Spanish-accented sing-song. "Perhaps the *senorita* can tell us what should be done with this—"

"I can tell you that."

Con told them. Spig and Champ liked it—Champ was a devoté of paperback novels which read like case histories of sexual aberrations—but Heavy belched loudly as he always did when he was nervous.

"Con, are you sure she's alone? If some friend of her's—"

"Then Terri'd have the door of the booth open so the light would be off."

They crossed the ditch and went boldly up the gravel drive past an aluminum mailbox stencilled Lincoln L. and Suzette F. Durand. The house was old and charming, one of those the university made available to visiting professors. Con rang the bell.

The woman might have been a teen-ager: she was amazingly petite, with delicate hands and her hair in a graceful bun. The light, however, showed a fortyish face with a small mouth and eyes full of elfish delight with the everyday business of living.

"May I help you?" her voice was soft.

Then she saw the red and black embossed jackets and the ornate

dragons of the *Secret Raiders*; fear made her face ugly. They bore her back. Con told her why they were doing it and they gagged her first, but it is doubtful if anyone except the girl in the phone booth could have heard her screams anyway.

Linc Durand was in the small bedroom he had converted into a study when the bell rang. He was a spare compact man barely taller than Suzette had been, with grey-shot hair and a neat dark moustache and dark eyebrows stressing sharp features. He moved listlessly down the stairs; the opened door let spring into the house like the voice of a friend thought dead.

"Maybe you remember me, Professor Durand. Monty Heath. I'm a cop. I talked with you the night—"

"Surely." Linc stood aside to let him by. "Come in, inspector."

Heath wore a dark blue suit with a tiny grey check in it and a tie probably selected by his wife. He was a foot taller than Linc; when he stopped in the middle of the room it immediately became a position he was defending. His grey eyes were a cop's eyes, full of sad wisdom and utterly observant. The eyes, Linc thought, made it probable that he was a good cop.

"Sit down, inspector. I was correcting themes: life goes on. The coffee's stale but there's tea."

"Tea's fine." He took an envelope from his pocket. "Her note: the lab boys are through with it."

Linc thanked him and carried it into the kitchen and laid it, open, on the counter. Each word was already seared into his brain. It was a measure of Suzette that the writing was not at all shaky.

Linc darling,

Here it is, the traditional note with the touch of sadness appropriate for such occasions. If the police find out why I did this, I hope you let it drop. I could not now keep still, but neither can I again face what happened tonight. Bleeding to death is supposed to be fairly painless and I don't have the time for pills, since you will be home soon. And to be brought back when halfway gone, even by you, would be too degrading to contemplate. It's been good, darling. I hope you can forget this.

Suze

He set the tray on the coffee table with perfectly steady hands. Heath was on the new couch that had been one of Suzette's rare extravagances. His grey eyes were surprisingly watchful.

"I've got a couple of little problems, professor. Pills are the usual for a woman unless she's spiting—then they'll use the damndest things. And there were no hesitation nicks on her wrists. Finally the note: no love and kisses, no grief, no protestations of love beyond—"

"Suzette was my age, forty-four; I would assume that after nineteen

years of marriage she felt she had said it all enough times."

"Yeah." Heath's tone was almost belligerent. "I looked you up, professor. Physical anthropologist in Pacific Island cultures and prehistory; published on the subject. Finishing up a year at the university as a guest lecturer. You and your wife mutually enthusiastic about your work, about field trips, skin-diving—so why does a handsome charming literate woman whom our autopsy showed to be in perfect health suddenly commit suicide?"

Linc said astringently: "You are either hinting that it was not an actual suicide, or you want me to say that I think the autopsy showed something more."

"Yeah; that last'll do. We found abnormally large deposits of spermatazoa; also bruises on her forearms, upper belly, and calves. Abrasions on her knees and back. Suggest anything, professor?"

The clinical incisive voice reminded Linc of his own lectures on the bones of some discovered primitive dead a hundred millenia; but this man was talking of Suzette. The knuckles of the hand holding his teacup were white; he made himself set it down carefully on the coffee table.

"Go on, inspector; I'm sure you want to."

Heath was staring at him intently, mouth a little open. "We figure there were four of them. They gagged her first but they probably

posted a lookout so they wouldn't be surprised in the middle of it."

"How do you adduce four?" Linc could feel the muscles standing out along the sides of his jaw.

"It was in the papers that a kid named Frankie Gilman was going by on his bike about eight o'clock and saw four boys on the fourteenth green wearing bright jackets with some sort of designs on the back. Of course half the teenagers in the city wear fancy jackets, and the kid's description is vague—remember it was dark by then. We got tread casts of a car that had been parked on the bridal path, but they'll have changed tires by now anyway."

Linc said heavily: "Two weeks ago Suzette saw four boys in bright jackets coming from an alley after beating a man up. She—"

"—got her name in the papers. Yeah. We figure it was the same gang, making sure she *wouldn't* identify them even if she could. The guy who was mugged never saw them at all, and now with your wife . . ."

"What would they be charged with?" Linc's voice rose sharply, grating on his own ears like the voice of a stranger being tortured.

"Rape, naturally. But of course . . ."

"Of course without Suzette's testimony the District Attorney would refuse to prosecute, isn't that right, inspector?"

Heath gestured irritably. "Do

you know what we're bucking?  
*Juveniles*. When court psychiatrists and newspaper sob-sisters got done, the D.A.'d be damn lucky to get them on probation for a year."

Linc, leaning suddenly across the table, upset his teacup on the rug. Neither man noticed it.

"I know only that my wife was raped—raped under such a terrifying threat of repetition that she committed suicide so she would not have to identify them but also would not have to live with herself when she didn't. I also know there is little chance that they will ever be prosecuted, and even less chance that they will be convicted."

Heath stood up angrily. "Don't preach law enforcement to me, professor. The law may be a damned imperfect instrument of justice, but it's the best we have."

"Is it?" Linc prowled the room, moving as if he knew exactly what he could expect from his compact body. "This seems to be a situation outside the scope of the law. A handsome charming literate woman—your words. Snuffed out."

"She killed *herself*, professor; they didn't. But that won't stop you. You're a one-man crusade now." He jammed his hat wearily on his head. "These rat gangs are vicious beyond anything you can imagine; what could you do even if you did ever manage to catch up with them?"

Until that instant Linc had never imagined there was anything he

could do, but Heath's visit, his callousness, had raised dark questions he had unconsciously avoided until then. He spewed out words without even realizing what they would be until they were spoken.

"I could kill them."

Heath's eyes went flat as a snake's. "Yeah. Right now, Durand, the department has nothing more to do with your wife's death. Let's leave it at that. I don't want to end up snooping garbage pails for your body; and that's all that would happen, believe me."

Linc watched the tall man who was not at all like a television policeman go down the front steps to his unmarked city car. The rug under the overturned teacup was irrevocably stained, but Linc didn't care. After copying some names from the phone book he left the house without bothering to lock up. Whatever had been of value there was gone.

It was a curving blacktop street lined with middle-income homes and littered with the playthings of the residents' children. Linc went up the walk and rang the bell at the third Gilman he had gotten from the phone book. The early afternoon air smelled of the fog which would later slip over the barrier hills from the Pacific to creep silently down the street. The pleasant-faced woman in her early thirties who answered brought the smell of baking brownies to the

door with her. When he asked for her son she began wiping her hands unconsciously on her apron, over and over again.

"Frankie's already told you everything he saw. Everything."

"I'm not a policeman. My name is Durand. Lincoln Durand."

"Oh . . ." She put a hand to her mouth almost theatrically. "It was your wife who—"

"Yes. You can understand why I'd like to talk to Frankie."

"Four boys in bright jackets; that's all he said, that's all he saw. It was dark when he went by."

"Yes, I'm sure it was, Mrs. Gilman, but I'd still like to—"

"You stay away from him!" The automatic timer of the stove, ding-ding sharply behind her, gave her an excuse to close the door. As she did she said in a quick ashamed voice: "I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. But . . . we received a phone call."

Linc walked slowly back to his VW. The street was still except for the happy excited screams of children down the block. A phone call: Frankie's name had been in the papers. But, he thought stubbornly, the boy's safety was no concern of his.

He waylaid Frankie the next night after school.

"I gotta get home, mister." Dusk had called their sandlot baseball game. He was a sturdy boy of twelve with a mop of bright hair he continually brushed out of one eye. "I'm late for supper already."

"I just need a minute. It was my wife who died the night that—"

"You're Mr. Durand." He nodded wisely to himself. "I ain't supposed to talk to you. My folks got a phone call."

"Are you frightened?"

"Guess so, sorta. Mom hasn't even told the police 'cause they said not to. I didn't see nothing anyway, really. Just these jackets like the older guys at school wear. I couldn't see what club it was."

"Why were you out by the university, Frankie?" Obviously the boy knew nothing to help him, but in detective stories the investigator always kept on asking questions. Linc had nothing else to do.

"I was at Jimmy's house; his dad is a teacher at the university like you are. Only I'd forgot to call Mom and . . . you know. I was gonna call her on that pay phone by the golf course but this girl was using it so I just went on, and down by the fourteenth green these four—"

"Wait a minute!" Linc, leaning against the VW with his arms crossed, came erect so suddenly that the boy ducked. "Sorry, Frankie, but did you say a *girl* was in the phone booth across from my house?"

"Sure. The door was shut and the light was on so I could see her easy. Long brownish hair like Mom's, and a real bright yellow sweater." He got a startled look on his face. "Gee, I guess I forgot to

tell the police about her. All they asked about was the guys on the golf course."

Back home, Linc walked down to the phone booth. He could have seen anyone going into the house and they could have seen the lighted phone booth. By merely opening the door so the light went off, the girl could have warned . . . but my God, he thought, what sort of girl would knowingly do that? It took him an hour to word the ad exactly right.

If the girl with the long brown hair and wearing the yellow sweater has a soul, she will want to know what happened on the night she wasn't really talking on the phone at DA 5-4107. Call the number at 7:00 to find out.

He had to assume she didn't know what had really happened to Suzette; otherwise she was caloused beyond any possible appeal anyway.

The girl's long brown hair framed a heart-shaped face. Her nose was straight and short and her mouth was pursed as her eyes searched the university cafeteria. She was wearing a plaid skirt and a bright yellow bulky-knit sweater and too much lipstick. She looked neither stupid nor insensitive; merely young.

Linc could feel himself tensing as she came closer. Each night for a week he had waited for her call.

"Mr. Durand?" The same voice he had heard last night. He motioned to the chair across the heavy oak table from his own.

"Please, sit down. This isn't a trap of any sort. I'm alone and there's no one watching us."

She perched on the edge of her chair, a bird about to fly, eyes fixed on his like radar. "What you said last night . . ."

"Was the truth. It was in the papers; about the suicide, I mean."

"I know. I looked today. Until today I didn't know . . . she was dead." She had slumped in her chair as if trying to slip from beneath a heavy pack she had carried too long. Her face under the make-up was very young and slightly haunted. "They said all they did was slap her a few times; I made myself believe them, I guess."

Linc said quietly: "Are you going to give me their names?"

She recoiled from the question like a robin from a snake. "I couldn't. I mean . . . well, I just couldn't."

"Afraid?"

"They wouldn't hurt me. Co—I'm going steady with their leader." Faint defiant pride stirred in her voice. "But you never cop out. Never."

Cop out. The phrase was ugly from the mouth of a girl still in high school; a girl wearing bobby-sox and tennis shoes and with freckles.

"I don't know your name and I

don't want to. You have a conscience or you wouldn't have come tonight: use it." He stood up. "This is my home phone. A name, just one—any one—that's all I want."

Outside he sucked in cool evening air. Maybe he should have told Heath about her, had her followed; but he wanted the gang before the police. The girl? A pawn. Suzette's death had freed him from the responsibility of sympathy, forgiveness—all emotions except hatred. On that he had an option. It belonged to him. It was nurture, sustenance.

He was so abstracted that he nearly collided with a slight teenager in a loud sports jacket who was lighting a cigarette in front of the cafeteria. The boy's quick black expressive eyes and olive face betrayed Spanish descent. They grew up too fast now. There was nothing new to them, no wonder left in anything for them as adults.

Cristobal Pando pulled shut the double doors of Delmer Gander's garage. By the artificial light he was a slight teen-ager in a loud sports jacket, his quick black expressive eyes and olive face betraying his Spanish descent. Heavy looked up from the mechanical depths of the stripped-down Model "A" Ford hoodless in the center of the garage.

Spig nodded. "They are coming."

Heavy wiped his hands on a greasy rag; the light glinted dully from his skull-and-crossbones ring and flicked burnished silver from the chromed fittings of the hotrod engine. Champ Hoffman straightened up from his stool in front of the single dirty window, making his pectoral muscles quiver as if they were activated by electric shock. When Conrad Vasso escorted the girl through the side door from his red MG roadster on which his father was making the payments, they grinned at her, as if she belonged to them in some odd way.

"Fellows, this is Terri Howard." Con's voice was velvety. He was sharp and cool in slacks and sport shirt. Terri looked very young, very pretty in her pale blue summer dress and white sandals. Her taffy-brown hair was swept behind her ears and held with pins. She smiled awkwardly. Con had gone right on speaking.

"On my right, by the window, is Ernie "Champ" Hoffman; he has the biggest arms and the tiniest brain in Cal High. Make a muscle, Champ."

Champ grinned and shuffled his feet, but suddenly his biceps jumped out under his short sleeves like steel bands.

"The thing on my left is not a can of lard but Delmer "Heavy" Gander, who can make anything run. He's even been able to fix up an extension phone here without

the phone company knowing it. Heavy is a great swimmer; his guts keep him afloat. Heavy, take a bow."

Heavy, smelling strongly of stale sweat, waved an oil-grimed hand and then, unexpectedly, emitted a tremendous belch. Spig went off into high, almost hysterical laughter. Con grinned with obscure glee.

"Heavy's folks are gone for the weekend," he said cryptically. "And last is Cristobal "Spig" Pando, who said it was foolish to use a girl for a lookout while we conducted that club business by the university golf course. But maybe you saw Spig last night, Terri."

"Last night?" Her voice faltered. "What do you mean?"

Without any change of inflection he said: "I mean last night when he followed you to the university cafeteria where you spilled your guts to Professor Lincoln Durand about who we were."

"Con, I didn't!" She cowered as if under a blow. "I've never told anyone anything about you or the club, and I wouldn't, ever."

Heavy looked bored. Champ, off his stool, was running his tongue around his lips like a dog when its dish is rattled in the kitchen. Spig lunged forward like a fencer, ripped Terri's purse from her hands.

"If you would not then *por favor* why is a paper with his name and telephone number here?" His Spanish rhythm was very pronounced.

Con slid his arm around Terri's shoulders like a cat laying a paw on a crippled bird. "Take it easy, Spig. We don't *know* she's done anything except talk with this creep professor."

She met his eyes steadily. "I *didn't* tell him anything, Con. He ran an ad about me in the papers; when I answered it he asked me to meet him and promised not to have me followed or . . . or anything. All he did was give me his phone number and ask for your names." Her voice became artfully serious, as if she were self-consciously plumbing the depths of her soul. "But when I tried to think of calling him up I knew I couldn't." Color rose in her cheeks but she went on. "I couldn't because . . . because I love you, Con." They might have been alone in the garage.

He glared at the others. "See? I told you there was nothing to worry about." He turned to Terri. "We just didn't realize what being raped might do to a woman."

Her eyes were shining. "But you *do* realize it now, Con!"

"We do, Terri. I wish there were some way . . ." Suddenly he brightened. "Say, the other fellows would be awfully pleased if you'd show us you'd forgiven us. If you'd . . . well, maybe call up this professor and tell him to meet you, alone, tonight, at your folks' cabin down the coast. You could promise to give our names to him then."

"But Con, then he'd know who I am, and he could—"

"That doesn't matter, Terri; you're still the only one who can actually *identify* us. And you see, instead of *you* meeting him there, we'll be there; then we can tell him how sorry we are about his wife."

She stared up at him; Con met her gaze limpidly. The others had almost stopped breathing. "All right, Con; I'll give you the key. If my folks ever found out I gave it to you . . ."

"They won't, honey. All we want to do is make ourselves feel a little better about the terrible thing we did to his wife."

Heavy showed her the phone he had run in off the main line, and she dialled the number on the slip of paper. Con pocketed the key.

"H— hello? Mr. Durand? This is the girl who . . . that's right." Her voice steadied as she began enjoying her charade. "I've thought over what you said and . . . yes, but I have to go to my parents' cabin for the weekend. They'll go to a movie tonight and I'll be there alone." After giving directions she added: "Yes, sir, any time after nine." Her voice broke slightly. "Thank you sir; and God bless you, too."

"Did he fall for it, Terri?" Con was at her elbow impatiently.

"Yes, but I . . . Con, I feel so bad, lying to him that way!"

Con was not listening any more;

he was airily shooting his cuff to check his watch. "Well, fellows, I have to be going." When Terri started towards the door with him, Champ, who had been looking from one to the other perplexedly, suddenly broke out:

"Con, you promised . . ."

"That's right." He snapped his fingers as if in minor vexation. "You see, honey, since Spig followed you on his own after school, and found out about you and this professor, well—you can see it can't be the same with us any more."

Her lower lip had started trembling. "But I . . . I did what you asked, Con. I . . . won't I be your girl any more?"

"This afternoon you're going to be *all* the fellows' girl, Terri."

"Con! No!" Understanding shook her like strong wind. She tried to flee but Champ's iron hands dragged her back. Heavy somehow had her ankles. When she saw what Spig was doing she began screaming, throwing her head in terror like a fire-trapped mare.

"Gag her first," Con ordered. "Make sure she understands it'll happen again if she ever shoots her face off to anyone about us again."

Like Suzette, Terri screamed for a long time; but **also** like Suzette's, her screams were muffled so no one could hear **them**. No one, anyway, who was interested in helping her.

Linc was on his way out when the phone rang. He hesitated, finally went back to answer it. Nothing must interfere with his drive down the coast—unless the girl's call that morning had been a trick; but he couldn't let himself think of that possibility.

"Durand here."

"Don't go! I was lying!" He recognized the weak and anguished voice instantly. "They'll be waiting for you, all four of them."

Her rising hysterical voice brought sweat to his face. It ran down his chin and stung his neck where he had shaved too close.

"Listen, honey, if I'm to help I have to know where you are."

"In . . . in the garage. They wouldn't stop. They . . ."

By some supreme act of will he kept his voice level, almost conversational. All he could think of was her *God bless you, too* of that morning. She had been leading him on; but where was that different from deliberately playing on her guilt-feelings for information?

"Whose garage, honey? *Whose garage?*"

"Heavy's. Heavy Gander's—"

She was screaming: a piercing irrational sound like escaping steam. Linc dashed sweat from his eyes, clumsily got the "G" listings in a phone book precariously balanced on a raised knee. Only one Gander. Nothing else to do. He hung up, redialled. After two minutes of tough bored cops' voices, Monty

Heath's heavy baritone came on. Linc's knees were trembling: her screams had raised obscene anguished images of Suzette in his mind. When he heard Linc's name, Heath's voice tightened and sharpened as if he had swung his feet off the desk and leaned over the phone intently.

"Trouble, professor?"

"The girl's at 1117 38th Avenue. In the garage. She needs an am—"

Heath was cursing viciously. His voice went away, after a few moments came back. "Okay. I knew I should have kept an eye on you. It's going out on the air right now. How did you—no, skip that. Meet me—"

Linc had hung up, was racing for the back hall and mask, black rubber diving suit, snorkle, and heavy double-edged jungle knife. His only hope was that the medics would knock her out before she told Heath where they were. He wanted them first. Maybe he shouldn't have called the police until—no. Her screams would have haunted him. Now his mind was free of her. And if he could use Professor Chaltham's launch . . .

Champ Hoffman stretched his massive body, delighted with the tight powerful feeling of his muscles. It had percolated dimly through to him that the professor still hadn't shown up.

"Hey Spig, what time is it? Why ain't that teach showed yet?"

Spig came through the open doorway from the kitchen where he and Heavy had been making sandwiches. The cabin was really just a shack perched in a deep ravine enclosed by jagged California bluffs. A gravel road wound down to it from the Coast Highway. There was one bedroom, a living room dominated by a cast-iron wood stove, and a tiny kitchen with a kerosene cook stove. Below it the end of the ravine made a V-shaped beach on which the Pacific shattered with an angry fervor.

"Midnight; perhaps the little *puta* called him after we left."

"She wouldn't have dared." Con was on the sofa pulling on his loafers. "He just chickened out; a gutless wonder. I'm gonna blow. You guys clean this dump up."

He swaggered out to his MG. The black surf made incessant thunder. Cold air swept through the cabin, guttering one of the kerosene lamps. A gibbous moon hung lopsidedly above banking clouds. Con began cursing.

"Damn thing won't start. Heavy!" he yelled. "Take a look at it."

Heavy came from the kitchen with a beer in one hand and stuffing a huge corned beef sandwich into his mouth with the other. He wiped his hands on his pantlegs after draining the beer, and swung up the hood with the air of a conjurer about to perform.

"Hand me that flashlight, Spig."

Suddenly, in a very different voice, he said: "Hey, what the hell? Half the wiring's torn out. If *my* car's been—" He stopped in mid-phrase. The four new whitewall tires had been neatly slashed. The tires from the MG would not fit.

"*Why?*" Con's voice was uneasy. "*Why*, when we're four to one?"

Champ suddenly yelled: "There he is! I seen him! On the cliff!"

Before they could move he had crashed through the brush to the base of the bluff and had begun scrambling up the black rock, a dim grunting shape in the wan moonlight. Spig was already starting after him when Con caught his arm. Heavy, as if aware of his own limitations, had not moved. Con said, in a strangely subdued, almost hoarse voice:

"If anyone can get him it'll be Champ. We can wait in the house. That way none of us will be . . . alone. I've got the revolver there, too."

Fifty feet above, Champ could no longer see his quarry; but then his iron-strong fingers found a ledge; with a leg-up and a lithe twist he was lying on a narrow path. Which way had the teach gone? As if in answer, pebbles rattled down the slope to the right. He edged around a dimly-seen bulge in the rock, tensed suddenly like a cat spotting a young bird: there he was! The man was crouched twenty feet away, a vague insignificant blue in the near-darkness.

"Don't you have the guts to face me man-to-man—punk?"

"You . . . you . . ." Enraged, Champ groped through his limited vocabulary. "You lousy *teach*, you!" He sprang forward along the path.

Then there was no path. By daylight he would have seen the missing section; without his rage he would have sensed the emptiness beneath his feet. Instead he smashed against the stone face and slid. One hand found a knob of rock, seized, clung desperately. His legs were swinging over emptiness. When he looked up, the teach was lying on the path five feet above. His fingers were cramping.

"I . . ." terror thickened his voice. "I . . . mister, *please* . . ."

The face was so close above that he could see dishevelled grey hair and a slight cut above the right eye. The face was distorted.

"God help me, but I can't just let him fall!"

Fingers groped for Champ's free hand; they clasped one another's wrists. In the grip was life. But as a minute passed, and then another, they both knew that the man on the ledge was not strong enough to pull up the boy dangling below.

Fingernails raked flesh: Champ fell backwards, shoulders hunched, legs windmilling above his head, hands clawing empty air. He made no sound; nor did he hear the man on the ledge suddenly start crying.

In the cabin they heard the heavy

body crash through the undergrowth and smash sickeningly on the jagged rocks of the ravine. It brought Con to his feet clutching the 38 Policeman's Special he had stolen from a sporting goods store. His face was deathly pale.

"What—what was that?"

"Champ got 'im!" Heavy might have been cheering at a football game. Spig's lips, suddenly blue, were drawn back like a wolverine's.

"The professor is a small man—that was *Champ!* We must—"

"—do nothing." Con's voice was flat and deadly. "We can't be sure and until we are, no one goes outside."

"For Chris' sake, Con, Champ is hurt and you wish to discuss tactics. Very well: I do not wish. I shall go alone, find out—"

There were no preliminary whimperings: just sudden open-throated screams like the ululating wails of a caged puma. Spig's eyes started from his face as if he were being throttled. He looked from Con to the door and back again. Con cocked the pistol. It made a very loud noise.

"It might be a trick by the professor—he's trying to split us up so he can take us one by one."

"Con, you know that it is Champ! He is one of us and he is badly hurt. You have always said that in this club we are all for one and—"

"If he's hurt so badly we can't

help him anyway. No one leaves.”

For the next two hours the screams went on: hoarser, as if Champ were undergoing surgery without anaesthesia: but never completely stopping. Con had drawn all the blinds and sat with a leg thrown over the arm of a broken-down easy chair and the .38, still cocked, held in his lap with the muzzle pointed towards the door. Heavy was wolfing sandwiches, belching between gobbled mouthfuls. Spig could not sit still. He roamed from corner to corner like a caged animal, moaning slightly with each scream. He finally stopped short in front of Heavy.

“Will you come with me? I cannot stand that sound any more when I know that Champ is making it.”

Heavy’s cheeks were pouched like a gopher’s and the white melting fat of the corned beef ran down from the corners of his mouth. He said uneasily: “Ca . . . do it, Spi . . . Con still . . . leader.”

“Are you afraid?”

He gulped his mouthful and shook his head massively. “You know I ain’t, Spig; but Con’s right: we oughtta wait for daylight. No use in *askin’* for it. He ain’t got anything on us, really, unless Terri rats out; an’ we can take care of her easy enough.”

“We are good at taking care of women,” Spig sneered. He turned on Con. “You know what I think, *amigo*? I think you sit in that

easy chair and swing your leg because you are pretending you are not afraid. But you are afraid even to shoot me; even in the back.”

He jerked open the door. Con raised the revolver and then, face white and lips bloodless, lowered it again. His right leg, stretched out in front of him, began a slight uncontrollable twitching.

Outside the moon was much lower. Spig crouched in the shadow of the cabin, switchblade in hand. Ahead were black bushes in the shadow of the bluff. Champ screamed weakly; the broken notes at the end made it resemble a tropical bird cry. A silver-haloed bank of morning fog was coming in majestically from the Pacific. The air smelled of dawn. In a short crouching rush he made the cover of Heavy’s Ford.

Champ’s moans stabbed him, knife-sharp. Then he froze: a dozen yards away a voice was speaking in the soft low monotone one might use in gentling a horse. Spig made another silent rush, was in the bushes.

“Easy, boy; I broke down up there on the bluff, couldn’t get down any sooner. I’ll have to swim out to the boat to go for help.”

The voice was washed free from hatred, but Spig was not interested in nuances: he was barely hearing words. When Champ screamed again he moved in, a silent shadow. Close enough: he darted forward like a ferret.

Perhaps he was too eager, or the failing moonlight was deceptive, or perhaps he uttered a whine of anticipation: but as his knife swept down over the man's shoulder to plunge into his back, the professor whirled toward him under the charge. They went over, Spig on top. He did not see the knife until his own rush drove him down upon it.

There was sudden unbelievable pain as the twin-edged blade slid through his solar plexus and up under his sternum: then there was nothing at all. He did not even have time to cry out. He rolled over with his knees drawn up to his punctured belly as if in agony, but it was only motor reflexes transmitted from his dead brain. He did not see the professor stagger to his feet and vomit into the bushes. He did not hear Champ scream again, weakly.

Heavy heard Champ scream; it brought a great racking belch from the distended depths of his gut. For God's sake, he thought, won't he ever quit? The incessant sounds of anguish were driving him to action as a lion's roar drives a zebra blindly toward the lioness downwind.

"How long has Spig been gone, Con?"

Con laughed mirthlessly. His eyes were bloodshot and his right leg, still outthrust in its pose of nonchalance, jerked as steadily as a heartbeat.

"What does it matter? Spig's dead. The professor killed him."

Heavy shifted uneasily on the couch. Spig was probably thumbing a ride on the Coast Highway right now. He wished he had gone with him; but he'd thought Con would shoot. He really had.

"I'm gonna get a sandwich. You want one?" As he heaved his bulk up from the couch, Con laughed hollowly.

"Go ahead, eat your guts full. He can't get us in here."

Heavy waddled into the kitchen, belching, and busied himself over the breadboard. God, he wished he was out of here. He mayonnaised bread thickly, opened a can of spam. The spiced aroma of the canned meat made him salivate. If only his car was running; or if he had a boat. He'd open the window, roll out quick, run down the beach to . . .

He stopped dead, spam juices running down his fingers. A boat! That was how the prof had come! In a launch, probably with an underwater exhaust, to anchor out of sight in the bay. Before he had properly considered it the shade was up and the window open; by then it was too late because cold air was sweeping through. He heaved himself grunting to the sill, dove in head-first panic when Con shouted.

"Heavy! Where the hell are you go . . . Heavy!"

The 38 splatted twice but by

then Heavy, running ponderously through thick wet fog, was behind a dune. He looked back, saw Con's silhouette as the window scraped shut. The shade snapped down. Good. He trotted down the beach, snorting hippo-like, shoes full of sand and nostrils full of the wet iodine odor of kelp, belly swaying almost sedately. He felt queasy: probably nerves, from being so tense.

He had been right! It was brighter now, so even under the lowering and thickening whisps of fog he could see the ghostly outline of a launch. The fog was so thick it must have been stopping traffic up on the highway. Suddenly he was running over the wet-packed sand: a hundred yards ahead was a slight black figure donning a rubber suit.

That was the prof; and he was already into the water. Heavy had to catch him before he made it back to the launch. He could do it; he was a damn good swimmer. It took him just an instant to kick off pants and shoes, wade in. The water was stunningly cold but Heavy had the physique of a Channel swimmer; if only his body were greased that way.

He was gaining on the rubber-encased head even though the white-crested waves were larger than they had looked from shore. He churned wildly as something gripped his leg, then realized that it was kelp. He belched deeply, swallowing salt-bitter water. Slower

going here; those huge leathery sea-plants rose half-a-hundred feet from the ocean floor. Fifty feet! He shivered: kelp like dead fingers, reaching out for his . . .

The cram hit him.

It was exactly as if a giant fist had struck his churning stomach an unbelievable blow. Every muscle in his flaccid body jerked. He curled down on the epicenter of his pain like a foetus, and sank. A dozen feet down he somehow began to drive himself up through the enwrapping kelp to break water, gulp blessed air, scream, shout, sink again.

The same instinct for life drove him back, gasping and choking and flailing with weakening arms. Even as the prof turned back towards him, he saw a lean black fin cut towards him, for his struggles were sending out the uneven vibrations of distress. The shark twisted lazily and hit him exactly like a bass striking a frog.

Con knew nothing of this. He was striding the little cabin so deeply immersed in self-pity that he was only vaguely aware of Champ's screams. The revolver in his pocket drew his jacket awry. Only four shots left. *Secret Raiders!* He should have called them *Secret Deserters*.

No loyalty, no guts. First Champ, trying to sneak away over the bluffs, then Spig: oh, he knew Spig had planned to flee up the Coast Highway. And Heavy, going out

the window when Con's back was turned. Not that any of them had made it, of course; the professor had seen to that.

Con moaned abstractedly to himself. His long black hair, no longer sleek, hung over his face. At the door he lathered his hands with the invisible soap of frenzy, pressed open palms to his temples and rocked back and forth like the Jew of *Lamentations*. He would make it. He would depend on speed and surprise, catch the professor napping.

He kicked open the door, skidded through, fell on the wet grass. He screamed in terror and fired at the professor lurking shadowy behind the MG. No return fire: just the bullet-scarred windshield and moisture dripping from the cabin eaves and blanketing fog. A staggering scabble put him behind the Ford. He panted raggedly. Two more shots wasted; and the professor would surely be waiting along the road.

*Now!*

He was racing up the deserted gravel road through the mist, his soles spurning pebbles and sharp dawn air knifing his lungs.

Blessed rest. He clung dizzily to wet black bark, his chest full of razor blades and his mind full of wraiths. Too many cigarettes. Silence, utter, complete. Swirling fog. Then the professor swayed a branch above his head, yelling desirively and sending a cold shower

down his back. Con threw himself sideways and fired up into the leaves. A mountain jay arrowed away raucously into the fog.

Nerves, Con baby. Watch the nerves. Only one bullet left. He's working on your nerves, making you use them up. Not far now.

*Go, man!*

His legs pumped like pistons. He ran with his head down, his arms working, his toes digging; in every war movie he had ever seen, the hero always ran from cover to cover that way unscathed.

The blacktop!

Con's mouth was full of cotton as he backed into the middle of the curved Coast Highway; the professor had to come at him up the gravel road from which he had just run, for behind him the bluffs rose sheerly from the roadside. His heel struck a small stone.

"I'm ready for you!" he cried threateningly into the fog.

The grey blanket swirled closer around him, wetly caressing; he could barely see a dozen feet. Was that a shadow moving on the gravel? He straddled the highway's white line, making his stand.

"Come closer and I'll shoot!"

Beads of condensed mist hindered his vision. Suddenly, silently, the professor was there! His revolver thudded, clicked on empty chambers; the sounds were muffled damply by the fog. It eddied. No shadow. No professor. He had gotten the professor!

Con began laughing, head back, chest thrust out. Then a muffled growl made him whirl. A monstrous shape loomed up around the bend of the highway, yellow eyes fog-dimmed, Christmas-festooned with the red and yellow lights worn by all the big semis roaming the Coast Route between Los Angeles and San Francisco like unleashed animals. Air brakes hissed; wheels shrieked away their rubber hides on the wet tarmac.

Con dug desperately off the white line like a sprinter, slapped pavement with his other foot, twisting; he came down on the stone he had kicked aside a few moments earlier. He tumbled.

Smoking screaming desperately-braking rubber bearing uncounted tons smashed his teeth like dropped Dresden, dissolved his skull like shell of flung egg, smeared him dung-like down fifty yards of white highway center line in the serene lifting fog of the dawning day.

"You bother me, professor." Inspector Monty Heath crossed his legs and reached for a cigarette. "I underestimated you, which can be fatal for a cop."

"I don't think I understand you," said Linc.

Heath feathered smoke. "You understand me, all right. Three of them dead and the dim-witted one crippled for life with a broken back. They say he was a good weightlifter before you got to him,

although he confirms your story—he isn't even smart enough to be vindictive."

They were drinking coffee this time, and a line of Eliot's which had been a favorite of Suzette's flashed through Linc's mind: *I have measured out my life with coffee spoons*. Not that Linc had—or would, now: now he knew that he had learned too much about hatred for that.

"How is the girl?" he asked abruptly.

"Psyched for life is my guess. Not that it's *your* fault—of course." Heath leered at him through feathered smoke. "Nor mine. Law enforcement: crime prevention: that's me. Me, I don't even have a warrant on you. The D.A. is buying your tale that you were trying to help the kid who fell when Pando, the Spanish punk, rushed you and just chanced to impale himself on your knife. It *could* have happened that way."

"But you don't think so?"

"I think you conned Pando into a knife fight; I think you drowned the fat kid, Del Gander, as you would a two-headed puppy; and I think you taunted the dummy into a rage so he would get careless and fall—even if he doesn't remember it that way now."

Linc went to the window. Through the trees he could see toy men on the fourteenth green, a water sprinkler hurling exuberant jewels at the sun. He remembered

crying for an hour after Champ had fallen before he could come down from the cliff; he remembered throwing up when he had known Spig was dead. But he couldn't tell Heath about those things. Heath would not understand them. Linc barely understood them himself.

He said: "You make me sound like a five-foot-six superman."

"Uh-uh. I read your book last night, professor—damned illuminating." He marked off points with his fingers. "Marquesas Islands: mountainous, sheer—islands where men have to learn to get around like mountain goats. A year there. Tuamotus: you casually mention diving to ninety feet with pearl-shell divers with a pair of goggles for equipment. Fijis: during the war the Fiji Scouts were the best jungle-fighters in the Pacific—and the handiest with their knives. Knives like the one we found in Pando. Eighteen months in the outer Fijis."

Linc returned to his coffee: "I suppose I pushed Vasso, too?"

"That one I can't fit you in. The driver of the truck said he was alone in the road; and the time element clears you anyway." He stood up and dug in his pocket. "But here's something might interest you."

He dropped something on the coffee table. Linc picked it up: a blackened skull-and-crossbones ring, very heavy and made for a large finger. Heath was measuring

him with an almost erotic expression.

"That was Gander's. Some fishermen down the coast hooked into a ten-foot white shark yesterday; one of the maneaters. For the hell of it they sliced him open. In his belly was a partially-digested human arm—wearing this ring."

Linc could see again the bobbing boy, the fin arcing towards him. He saw himself turning away. If he had gone back, tried to beat it off . . . no. No man was a match for an aroused shark.

He said softly: "Tough on the boy's parents, I presume."

"Very tough." Heath stood up. "I told you once that the law is an imperfect instrument of justice. I took all this to the D.A. this morning—we can't touch you. No jury would convict you; just like I told you it would be if we'd caught up with them instead of you. Me, I'm just a dumb homicide cop, so I won't shake hands with you. I have to let you get away with it. But I don't have to like it."

Linc watched the tall man who was not at all like a television cop go down the steps to his unmarked city car. Maybe, he thought, the only way policemen *could* accomplish anything in their peculiarly narrow world was to over-simplify: a wife is raped, kills herself, for revenge the husband kills the rapists. If you were a cop it removed the necessity for understanding, for sympathy, for viewing people as

human beings motivated by strange individual urges instead of as statistics in crime reports. Maybe, if you viewed people individually, you wouldn't be a good cop.

Only Linc had discovered that people weren't statistics, that vengeance, killing—even desiring to kill—is an incurable disease with its

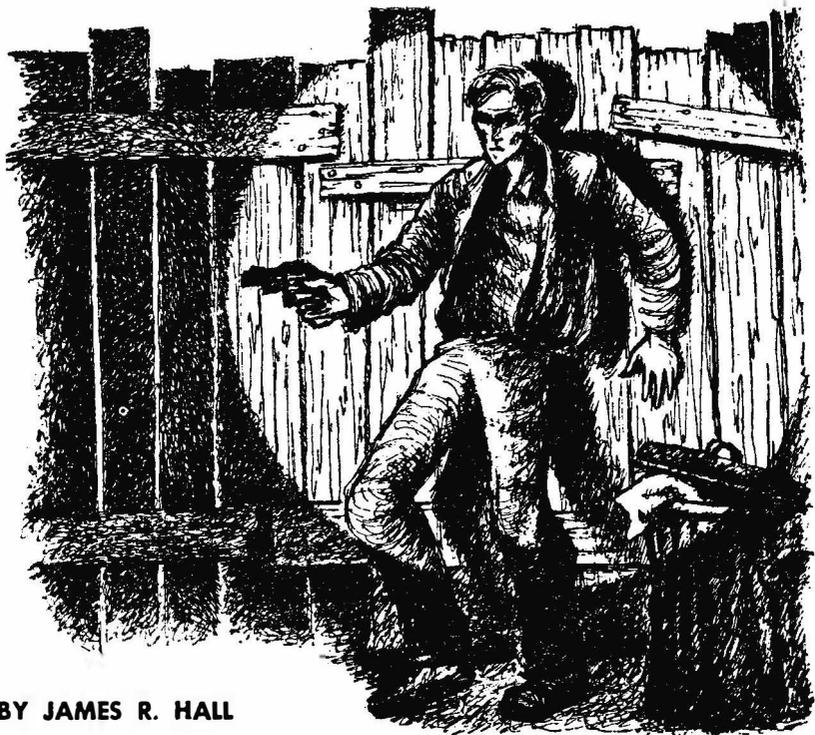
own horrors and fascinations and disgusts. Thank God he had been cured in the early stages.

Now he was a lonely man and always would be, a man with dark and empty corners in his life. But he knew, going slowly up the stairs to his study, that he was still a whole and a sane man.



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# WHAT COULD I DO



BY JAMES R. HALL

*"Damn it, if I hadn't shot back, he would have killed me."*

**E**DDIE MOORE wrapped his hand several times with the burlap bag he had, and made a fist. He peered through the window of the back door of the grocery store, but saw no movement, only the dim light shining over the cash registers. He looked behind him at the parking lot, and it, too, was empty.

"Please God," he thought, "don't let it make too much noise." Then with a quick, short jab, he pushed his blanketed fist through the small pane of glass in the lower right corner of the window.

Immediately he jumped off the concrete platform by the door, and crouched down, watching and

looking. There was nothing, but he hadn't expected anything at three in the morning.

He climbed back onto the platform and picked out the little spears of glass that clung to the edges of the broken pane. He laid each down on the platform, taking care not to drop them. Sound was his enemy now, even his own breathing caused him apprehension. With the glass out of the way, he reached through, and explored with his fingers. As he had remembered, the night latch was just a little below the empty pane, and the chain safety latch a little below that.

He unhooked the chain first, scratching his bare forearm as he strained to reach it, and his jacket sleeve rode up. The nick didn't concern him, but he cut his breath when the end of the chain slapped against the door frame. Involuntarily he searched the parking lot, though reason told him the sound wouldn't be audible fifteen feet away. He turned the night latch with one hand, while twisting the door knob with the other, pushed, and he was inside the store.

Eddie shook out the feed sack he had wrapped around his hand. He knew the store, he had worked in it while he was in high school, and for a while after that, before he went into the Navy. He moved with sureness up the barely lighted aisles, aided by a flashlight. He had tied his handkerchief over the lens, so it only gave out a diffused glow,

rather than an attention catching beam.

He had decided before to risk the cash registers in front of the big front windows. George Baumann, the owner, habitually left some small bills and change in them, so that customers could be taken care of before he got down to open the safe. And Eddie remembered a few times when he had lifted the change trays and found a large bill, taken late in the day, and forgotten by George. He would take the gamble of being seen from the street.

The two cash register drawers stood open, but there was little in them. Perhaps ten dollars in change in each, plus about twenty one dollar bills between the two drawers. Eddie stuffed it all in his jacket pocket and got away from the front of the store as quickly as he could. The dark store remained quiet, and he relaxed the smallest amount. The cigarette racks were up against the cash registers, and hidden from the street by them. Eddie hurriedly shoveled cartons into the feed sack until it was almost full, then tied it off with a shoelace taken from his pocket. He got a muddied pillow case from his jacket and put the rest of the cigarettes in it.

Eddie moved to the drug rack. He didn't want bottles, they were heavy, and they clanked. He did want razor blades, and he stripped cards of them down, dropping them in the pillow case. George must

have just restocked, for there were several of them. Eddie got them all, but the pillow case wasn't nearly full. Figure forty cartons of cigarettes, worth maybe a buck a carton; twenty-five or thirty cards of razor blades, looked like they held a half-dozen or so packages per card. Eddie wondered if he could get a quarter a package. He wanted more. He wanted enough so he would have a cushion while he was looking for a job. He knew the store, and had been in it yesterday to confirm his memory of it. But right now he couldn't remember where something small and valuable was.

Maybe ammunition. Not shotgun shells, they were too heavy and bulky. .22 cartridges, small and easily disposable. They were on the shelves under the front windows, but Eddie decided to risk detection from the street once more. There were disappointingly few boxes. Eddie sacked them hastily and scuttled back into the security of the dark rear of the store. There was a safe behind the meat counter, but he didn't even pause to consider it. He was no professional.

Eddie didn't know how long he had been in the store, but he didn't want to stay longer. The danger of detection outweighed the few dollars worth of merchandise he might find if he searched. He had one full sack, one half-full, and about forty dollars in cash. He tied off the pillow case and reversed his steps to

the delivery door he had broken into. He studied the parking lot before opening the door, then cracked it enough to get his head through and scanned the parking lot again. It seemed empty. He slid his body and the sacks through and softly eased the door closed.

He had parked his father's old pickup three blocks away, not wanting the attention parking closer might draw. He dropped off the platform, and went at a crouching run along the shadow of the building wall. At the end of the shadow Eddie stopped a moment to catch his breath. Now it was necessary to cut across the parking lot and vault a four foot wall which bordered the alley, which in turn opened onto a street a half-block behind the store.

Without warning a flashlight beam sliced through the darkness, hit the wall to his rear, moved up and struck him in the face as he turned around.

"Hey! You! Stop where you are and put your hands up!"

It was the raspy voice of old Fred Jenkins, the night marshal. He was on the sidewalk between the parking lot and the street, his position outlined by the mercury-vapor street light behind him.

"Oh, damn. Where'd he come from?" Eddie thought. "I've got to get out of here." He straightened and started running, ignoring the camouflage of the building wall now he had been detected. Jenkins'

pistol cracked, splattering gravel behind Eddie. He kicked harder, trying to reach the alley. He had almost gained the wall when the pistol spat again, and a third time, sending Eddie skidding in the gravel. His left foot was numb, but somehow burning unbearably.

Eddie forgot the sacks and desperately shoved at the gravel with his hands and right foot, near-hysteria driving him forward. The pistol didn't fire again, but Eddie heard Jenkins trotting wheezily across the parking lot. The marshal was very close when Eddie's fingers touched the wall, and he was wildly trying to claw himself up and over when the pistol boomed again, chipping away concrete only inches from Eddie's head.

"Why, that old bastard's trying to kill me." Eddie said aloud. "Jenkins! Jenkins, quit shooting. You've got me!"

There was a silence broken by a series of metallic clicks, indicating Jenkins was reloading. "Jenkins, can't you hear me? I said I'm giving up!"

A slug buried in Eddie's right side, spinning him around so his back was to the wall. Another shot followed, singing off the wall on the left. "He's not going to let me surrender," Eddie thought, and groped inside his jacket. The wet feel of his own blood made him dizzy for a moment, then he steadied as his hand closed around the

handle of a .22 revolver he had stuck in his belt before he had started out tonight. "I'm not going to let that son-of-a-bitch murder me."

Eddie leveled his pistol and pulled off two quick shots at Jenkins' shadowy form. Jenkins stepped back, hesitated, then flopped on the gravel. Eddie held the pistol stiffly in front of him, watching for movement from the inert form, but there was none. He looked at the pistol in his hand, wondering at it. Just a little toy, but it had stopped Jenkins. He raised his arm to fling the weapon over the parking lot fence when a siren growled down to nothing, and a spot light swept the parking lot. Eddie stiffened, then slumped back against the wall noting that his foot turned out at an impossible angle. "Must have busted the ankle," he thought, then sank gratefully into unconsciousness as the highway patrolman moved gingerly toward him.

Eddie waived his preliminary hearing, and was bound over to Circuit Court without bond. He appeared before Circuit Judge Mason on crutches, his entire lower left leg in a cast, every movement causing his right side to sting as though he had a nest of wasps inside his shirt.

"Mr. Moore, are you familiar with the charges against you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are charged with causing

the death of one Leroy Fred Jenkins, while you were engaged in the commission of a felony, to wit: burglary and stealing. You have waived your right to a preliminary hearing, and now appear before this Court on that charge."

The dignifying ritual of Anglo-Saxon court procedure calmed Eddie. He was charged with first-degree felony murder, but it was evident that Judge Mason was not going to allow the hysterical attitude of the town to invade his courtroom. The judge went on. "Have you had benefit of legal counsel, Mr. Moore?"

Eddie shook his head. "No, sir."

"I'm not going to ask you if you desire counsel or not. It is my construction of both the federal constitution and that of this state that you must be provided counsel, inasmuch as you are under a charge which could result in the death penalty. Have you arranged to engage the services of an attorney?"

"No, sir. I didn't know who to get."

"Very well. Mr. Ascom. . . ." An owlish appearing medium-pudgy man who had been talking with one of his fellow lawyers moved toward the bench. "I am appointing you to defend Mr. Moore here. Mr. Sheriff, you will allow Mr. Ascom to confer with his client as much as he feels necessary. I want the record to show clearly that this Court exerted itself to protect this defendant's rights.

Ascom looked at Eddie, his pink face expressionless. Then he turned aside to say something Eddie couldn't hear to Hume Leslie, the sheriff. Leslie nodded, and the two of them came over to Eddie. Ascom spoke. "Your honor, I would like to confer with Mr. Moore at this time. I think the court will agree that no plea can be entered until I talk with him."

Judge Mason nodded and Ascom indicated Eddie was to follow him. Eddie hobble after the lawyer, trailed by the Sheriff. Ascom had already settled himself in a chair in the law library, which opened off the courtroom when Eddie, slowed by his crutches and cast, made it in. Leslie closed the door and remained outside.

Howard Ascom observed Eddie discontentedly. He had a thin cigar in his mouth, and an expression on his face like a man called to the phone in the middle of a meal.

"You're Edgar Moore's boy, aren't you?"

"That's right." Eddie was known as "Edgar Moores' boy," though he was twenty-six and had put in a four year hitch with the Navy.

"Edgar's still farming, isn't he?"

What on earth was the lawyer getting at? Eddie thought they were supposed to be discussing his case. "He's farming some, but with things like they are, he's not doing much good."

"Yeah. Well. Look, Eddie, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I started to say, I don't think you got much of a case, do you? Come on, let's hear the whole thing. You know I'll keep what you tell me in confidence. A lawyer's got to do that."

Eddie told him about breaking in Baumann's, and the shooting that followed. "I was trying to give up when Jenkins shot me the second time, in the side. Damn it, if I hadn't shot back, he would have killed me."

"Boy, the fact remains, you killed a police officer who was trying to arrest you for the commission of a felony. That's automatically first degree. Besides, how come you had that pistol? You say all you wanted to do was to take a hundred or so bucks worth of merchandise. What did you take a pistol along for?"

Eddie didn't know himself. When he had been preparing to leave for town, it just seemed that the pistol belonged in his belt. God knows he didn't intend to use it.

"What would you advise me to do, then?"

"I'm not going to advise you to do anything. I'm going to tell you the possibilities, then you're going to make the choice. I don't want to be blamed for something I can't control."

Eddie waited. "What are the choices?"

"Well, you can stand jury trial.

I'll even get a change of venue for you if you want. Wouldn't have any trouble getting it, not with the attitude of the people in this county. Trouble with a jury trial is, they can bring in the death sentence. They might find you guilty, and give you life, or you might be found not guilty. Your common sense ought to tell you how probable your getting off scot free is."

"I doubt if any jury would do that."

"I doubt it, too. Like I said, you did kill an officer who was discharging his duties. Course, in this state, a jury can bring in any verdict in between."

"How likely is that?"

"Eddie, I been practicing law for twenty-six years, and I'd rather bet on a raindrop than predict what a jury will do. Going before a jury is chancy, there's no other way to say it. But in this case, I'd be pretty certain that you'd do no better than get a life sentence. And you'd run the risk of the gas chamber."

"You don't think I should stand jury trial? What else can I do?"

"You can plead guilty."

Eddie leaned forward and stared at the lawyer. "What in hell would I want to do that for?"

Ascom had been holding the information in his hand, and now he threw it down on the table in front of him with a gesture like he was getting rid of a dirty rag. "Moore, have you been listening to me? I've been trying to tell you that if you

go before a jury, you're taking a chance on getting the gas chamber. On the other hand, I'm fairly certain I could get Hank Mann, the prosecutor, to recommend a life sentence in return for a guilty plea."

"You mean I should just say, 'O.K. Put me in prison for the rest of my life.'? No. I think I'd rather take a chance on the gas chamber."

Ascom visibly controlled his impatience, and lit the previously unattended cigar before he spoke again. "I want to spell out some things for you. You might be thinking that I'd like to see you plead guilty, so I wouldn't have to spend my time in trial, and taking the appeal that's mandatory in the event of a death sentence. You're wrong. I'm not going to crap you. I don't want to neglect the rest of my clients for three weeks or a month to fight for you before a jury and the Supreme Court, but I would if you said to. Eddie, hasn't the absolute and final fact that you might be put to death if you plead not guilty impressed itself on you yet?"

Ascom had risen half out of his chair, and now he slowly sank back. He took several deep breaths, as though to calm himself. Eddie sat silent, lowering his shoulders as the reality of his situation clamped down on his head.

"Death," Eddie thought. "When you die, you don't have any more chances. You're put in a little room,

somebody turns on the gas, or however they do it, and that is the end. The final end."

The lawyer interrupted his thoughts. "Let's get this clear. I told you before I wasn't going to recommend what you should do, and I'm still not. If you want to stand trial, we'll do it. But I'll be damned if I'll recommend it!"

When Eddie replied, he was much more subdued. The futility of arguing with Ascom had become apparent to him.

"If I plead guilty for a life sentence, I've got a chance for parole, don't I?"

"Yes. I think the minimum in this state is twelve years. I'm not sure, but it's something like that."

"All right. I'll plead guilty if you can get the prosecuting attorney to get a life sentence for me." Eddie slumped, accepting the unacceptable.

Ascom started to tell Eddie that the prosecutor's recommendation didn't guarantee the life sentence, but then he thought better of it. In practice, the defense lawyer, the prosecutor and the judge talked the matter over before a plea was made, so there would be no embarrassing misunderstandings when sentence was passed. No use confusing his client. The boy was tangled up enough as it was. He rose and left the room to seek out Hank Mann.

Eddie remained in his chair, feeling the hopeless, helpless frustra-

tion of a man who has somehow gotten into a situation which he is powerless to alter.

Sheriff Leslie drove Eddie to the state penitentiary through a cloudy December morning. Eddie sat handcuffed to the armrest in front, and a deputy rode the back seat with a shotgun. Gaunt black trees, stripped of their covering, unreeled past the car windows, punctuated now and then by a dark green cedar or pine. From the time Eddie had shot Fred Jenkins until now had been one month, exactly. Twelve years or more stretched in front of him. The trip to the penitentiary took a little over three hours.

The sheriff delivered him to the office of the Bureau of Corrections, just inside the main prison gate, and then left. Leslie had spoken only twice to Eddie during the trip. The first time was when he had taken Eddie from his cell in the County Jail, and the other was to order him out of the car. The silent antagonism of the sheriff had been very plain, though. Eddie had wanted to yell at the sheriff that he didn't want to kill Jenkins, that he had to shoot him to keep from being killed himself, but he didn't. Leslie wouldn't have changed his attitude, and Eddie discovered that he didn't give a damn about anyone's opinion, anyway.

The admitting process seemed faintly familiar to Eddie. He was stripped of all his clothing, and

given a pair of shorts and sandals. He shivered through the medical examination and immunizations, and was then issued prison uniforms. He was fingerprinted, photographed, questioned, filled out forms and was given a short talk by the warden which Eddie took to be standard. Eventually he became aware that the process was very similar to the induction procedure he had undergone when he joined the Navy. He tried to decide whether this was comforting or not as he waited to see the Prison Psychiatrist.

Dr. Benjamin was tired and discouraged by the time Eddie came in. He saw from one to five convicted felons almost every weekday, men who were brought to him in the belief he could determine their intelligence and aptitudes, discover homosexuals, narcotic addicts, the latently violent, and other deviates. By law he was also to make suggestions to the prison officials for their guidance in rehabilitating the inmates. Actually, virtually no rehabilitation was possible. The warden and his subordinates had all they could do just to keep the men fed, contained, busy, and calmed.

He had seen three other men that day when Eddie Moore was brought before him. He saw a thin, blonde young man with regular features. Benjamin's data sheet, brought to him by a guard, indicated Eddie had a Stanford-Binet

score of one-hundred seventeen, was twenty-six years old, single, and had spent three years in the Navy. He was also convicted of first-degree murder, sentenced to a life term.

"Come in, Edward," Benjamin said. "Or is it Ed? Sit down."

Eddie did as he was told, and the guard behind him left and closed the door. "It's Eddie."

"You know who I am, I guess."

"I'm not crazy, doctor."

"I'm sure you're not. My job is principally one of classifying you, at any rate. You don't have any objections to answering a few questions for me, do you?"

"Doc, I've got a long way to go before parole, but I'm not going to make it any longer than it has to be. Don't worry about me co-operating."

Benjamin made a single nod with his head. "Good. We'll just go down the line, then. Remember, these questions are fairly standard, so don't be offended if some of them seem pretty personal."

"I won't." Eddie's attitude was typical of men sent up for the first time, neither surly nor resigned, simply numb.

The questions were standardized, for the most part, and Benjamin went down them quickly, noting Eddie's responses on the form on his desk. He would linger in a particular area only when it seemed sensitive to Eddie, and might throw some light on the circumstances

which had caused him to kill another human being, or which might expose some behavioral deviation that would require special handling. He got nowhere for quite some time. Eddie's responses were strikingly predictable.

The psychiatrist led Eddie through the questions about his childhood and life in the Navy, then paused to light a cigarette.

"Eddie, you're single. How about your sex life?"

"I ain't no queer, doc." Eddie reddened a little. "In fact, there was this girl at home. . . . Well, we were going to get married when I got a job."

"Do you drink?"

"Not much lately. Didn't have any money."

"How about in the Navy?"

"I got drunk on a few liberties. Never got in trouble because of it, though."

Benjamin sensed Eddie was on the defensive in this area for some reason. He pressed harder.

"Did you ever drink in the morning, before breakfast?"

Eddie frowned and stared at Benjamin, then dropped his gaze to his knees. "I guess I could save you a lot of questions. Yeah, I've got drunk in the morning. I got my separation pay in San Francisco, nearly three hundred dollars. Took a train back home, stayed half-stewed all the way in the club car. Then I got a room in a hotel and stayed there till my money

gave out. My dad only lives two miles out of town, and he never knew I was there until I spent my last buck getting out to his farm. Three weeks, and the only time I was anywhere near sober was when I'd wake up and have to go out for another bottle." Eddie wagged his head, an expression of regret on his face. He didn't know himself if he regretted blowing his money and showing up at the farm half-starved, or whether he wished he could go on another three-week binge.

His confession didn't have much impact on Benjamin. "When you broke in the grocery, were you after money for whiskey?"

"Hell, no. I could have busted a liquor store for that. No, I just wanted some money. I wanted to get out, go to St. Louis or Chicago and get some steady work."

"And you killed Jenkins."

"I never wanted to. But he came after me, shot me twice and was still shooting. I was trying to surrender, but he wouldn't let me. I had to shoot back. He was going to kill me. What could I do?"

Benjamin had heard the same thing, varied slightly each time, of course, from many of the convicts brought before him. It never failed

to make him feel helpless. "I'm not here to tell you what you should have done. You've done it. I think that's all we'll cover today. I may need to see you again after I get some more of your test scores."

The psychiatrist hit the intercom button which signalled the guard. Eddie was taken out and Benjamin completed his notes. He initialled the form in front of him, and put it and his notes in Eddie's folder. He placed the folder with those of the other men he had interviewed that day, lit another cigarette, and tried to forget the matter.

"Hell," he thought, "Moore probably figured only on taking a chance of getting arrested for burglary, and he wound up convicted of first degree murder. He'll come out of here twelve or fifteen years older, feeling like he's been cheated by society in some way. What can anyone expect? Another burglary or robbery to finance another three week drunk? Sure, he'll be back. No one's going to be able to change that."

It was Friday. There would be no new prisoners coming in over the week-end. Benjamin locked his office behind him and decided to go get drunk.





# pitaph

*What was 15 years? She'd put up with her mother-in-law for 25.*

**BY HILDA CUSHING**

**W**HEN Vera Leach was arrested for murder four weeks after her husband's death she was surprised. She didn't attempt to deny the charge. To the contrary she confessed willingly. But she could not understand why the police and the jury hadn't written it off as a perfectly justifiable act.

Mr. Renfrey, her lawyer, was puzzled, too, but at her. He said, "I can't figure you out. After putting up with it for twenty-five years why did you suddenly have to get violent now?" Then rather peevishly, "Maybe you think you were justified but the jury certainly didn't

take that view. Did you expect them to pat you on the head and say, 'good girl!'"

She could be tart, too. "You can cut out the sarcasm," she returned. "Just tell me what's going to happen now."

Mr. Renfrey drew a deep breath. "Well, in this state, legally, you can get the chair." Then hastily, "But, of course, Massachusetts hasn't electrocuted anyone for years. Life imprisonment these days means fifteen years, sometimes less. You would have to be patient but you would be free—before too long."

She had had what she considered

patience for twenty-five years; she guessed she could stretch it awhile longer.

When she married Larry, she knew his mother was part of the package but she hoped she could handle her. She heard plenty about Mamie's sacrifices. How she, poor widow, slaved to put her boy through school. How she gave him her last cent to set him up in business. Now there was nothing else to do. There simply was no money for Mamie to have a home of her own and if there were she shouldn't have to live all by herself. She would be lonely.

Larry had waited until he was past thirty for the right girl—the right girl being someone who would take Mamie along with him—the right girl being Vera because she decided she better grab what she could before it was too late.

At fifty Mamie looked a trim forty. Her tinted hair was dressed by the town's most expensive hair stylist. She patronized the best stores for her clothes and because she considered her health delicate she was constantly running up doctor's bills.

There was just no way for Vera to keep up with her on Larry's income from his little printing plant. Larry felt his mother should have whatever she wanted and it was too bad if there wasn't much left for Vera.

"She gave her whole life over to me," he said in his deliberate way.

"Now it's my turn to do something for her."

He was slow and tractable unless it involved Mamie. Then he was like a rock. Yet Vera soon found that in one respect she held the upper hand. True Mamie went everywhere with them during the day or evening and if she wasn't included in the invitation they stayed home. But when it was bedtime, that was another story! When it was time for Vera to follow Larry into their bedroom the looks she frequently received from Mamie were pure hatred.

"He belongs to me alone—here in our bedroom," she exulted. The thought somehow kept Vera buoyed for twenty-five years.

Of course, there were arguments. Vera was only human. There was one the day Larry told her he was keeping his life insurance in his mother's name.

"What about me?" she flared.

"You're young and healthy," was Larry's reproving reminder. "You could go back to work if the worst happened." He was trying not to lose his patience. "Mamie is frail, for heaven's sake, Vera, we'll both outlive her by decades! Can't you be reasonable and understand there's only a remote chance that I'll die first!"

"How do you know you won't die to-morrow and maybe I'm pregnant. Would you want me to go back to work and let someone else bring up your child?"

His hesitation was slight. "I won't die tomorrow. We'll meet the other when it happens."

She never did become pregnant so the subject was never brought up again and she never knew how much he had to leave to anyone until he was dead.

There was a small skirmish over the house. That was fifteen years ago. It had to be a one floor affair because Mamie, who at sixty looked a sturdy fifty, was still frail and weak whenever it suited her. It was a pretty ranch style with two bedrooms and, of course, when she saw the plans Mamie claimed the larger and pleasanter.

Vera decided to be firm this time. "There isn't room for two people to turn around in the smaller bedroom," she said, "But it's just a nice size for one person. Your bed will fit right between those two windows and—"

Mamie ignored her and turned to Larry with injured dignity. "I'm not comfortable in that narrow bed anymore, son. I don't sleep well. I toss and turn all night! There's a nice double bed down at Mason's store that will fit right in with the rest of the furniture in my room."

"Of course, of course!" Larry was irritated. "I'll order it tomorrow, and, Vera, let's not fuss over this any longer. Mother needs her sleep. The other room is big enough to hold a bed isn't it? Then—who cares—"

Vera soon got used to the smaller

room. At first she would get black and blue bumping into the rest of the furniture while she made the bed but after awhile she learned to move with just the right degree of caution. When she thought it over she knew it didn't matter where they slept because even in a crowded room when they went to bed Larry belonged to her—he was her husband and no one not even Mamie could take that away from her.

As the years went by Vera felt less and less inclined to test her will against Mamie's. She was bound to lose and besides there was some satisfaction, however small, in denying Mamie the scenes through which she derived her spiteful victories.

It was a somewhat uncomfortable truce and it was broken only when Larry had a heart attack a year ago. Not a severe one. He stayed in bed only a couple of weeks. When he went back to work the doctor gave him some pills and told him that within reason he was to live a normal life. He, also, advised him to take off a few pounds and gave him a diet he thought would do the job.

The weight came off with little trouble to anyone but Vera. Mamie never gained an ounce and at seventy-five she looked a wiry sixty. She didn't care for many of the items on the diet so Vera often cooked separate dishes for her. She didn't mind that too much. She

liked to cook but she wished just once that Mamie would give her a hand with the washing up. Mamie could put away a dinner that would give indigestion to a teen-ager but she was too feeble to hold a dish towel afterwards.

Because Larry now ate his big meal at noon and only a light supper he enjoyed a hot drink and a couple of crackers at bedtime. Vera prepared this but most nights Mamie would snatch the tray from her and bear it smugly into the living room where Larry sat before the TV set.

It was a small matter. As long as Larry got his hot drink Vera made no objections. This went on until the night four months ago when at nine o'clock Larry turned from his program to say, "Had a little pain here today," he touched his chest. "Thought I'd take one of those pills the doctor gave me and go to bed early. A good night's sleep should fix me up."

There was no contest over the cocoa that night. While Mamie hung over Larry urging him to have the doctor, Vera went to put the kettle on. She returned from the kitchen in time to hear Mamie say, "Well, if you won't call the doctor I know you'll sleep better if you have the bedroom to yourself. Vera can sleep out here on the couch. It won't hurt her!"

Vera tried to hold her arms steady at her sides to control her anger. Larry's eyes were closed.

"Perhaps it would help me to rest better. Of course, Vera won't mind."

Mamie's eyes were triumphant. This is the wedge, thought Vera, she is trying to take him completely away from me, and Larry's going right along with her. I won't stand for it.

"I do mind!" she said shortly.

Larry opened surprised eyes. Mamie got her word in quickly and as usual she spoke only to him. "Don't listen to her, son. She doesn't know or care what's best for you. Only mother does."

"I do know what's best for you," Vera said sharply. "You may need me in the night and I might not hear you here. Besides I'm a quiet sleeper and you're used to me."

"That's nonsense! You'll sleep much better alone!" Mamie's voice was full of concern.

"He'll sleep better if I'm with him," insisted Vera. "Besides it's my room, too. I belong there right by his side!"

Larry pounded hard on the arm of his chair. Anger rose in his face. "Stop! Stop your bickering. Vera, you're only getting me worked up. I won't have anymore of it! Mother's right. I'm sleeping in the bedroom alone. For Heaven's sake," he was disgusted. "It's only for one night!"

"Of course," she said but she knew better. The wedge was in and the malicious look in Mamie's eyes promised it would stay. Vera knew

she would have to do something. She could never give up Larry completely.

She returned to the kitchen. She slowly made the cocoa. Larry liked it with one teaspoon of sugar and only enough milk to lighten it a little. She placed the two crackers on the tray and brought it into the living room. She was composed now and able to return Mamie's look without flinching.

"Just for tonight," Larry repeated in a quieter tone looking at her appealingly.

"Of course," she said again and began to make up the couch.

The next morning when Vera entered the bedroom after a sleepless night she found Larry hanging half out of the bed as though he had tried to reach the light. As she felt for his pulse a surge of remorse swept over her. I killed him, she thought, and then, But now he's all mine—no more sharing—all—all mine! She felt a sense of exhilaration.

The doctor assured her that Larry could have suffered only briefly and because of his heart history there would be no need for an autopsy. He offered tranquilizers but only Mamie accepted any.

From the moment the undertaker came to take the body until the funeral was over Vera spoke to Mamie only when necessary. She went alone to the funeral parlor to choose the casket. She consulted with the minister and selected the

music. She made all the decisions and everyone deferred to her. She was the widow.

The only objection, and that was half-hearted, came from the undertaker when she demanded separate limousines for herself and Mamie. "The mother usually rides with the wife," he suggested gently, "Especially when there are no children. It saves on the expense."

Vera was unmoved. "Two limousines," she repeated. "And so there will be no misunderstanding, I will ride in the first one."

After Larry was buried in the local cemetery, Mr. Renfrey came to the house with the will. He hoped there would be no hysterics. It was not the sort of will he approved—the mother to get the life insurance, free and clear—fifty thousand dollars worth—the wife a heavily mortgaged house and a debt-ridden business. By the time she hired someone to take her husband's place at the plant there would be little, if any, profit for her.

He needn't have worried about Vera. "I'll manage," she said tersely. Then turning to Mamie and in the same even tone she said, "I want you to leave today. This is no longer your home. You have plenty of money so you can stay at the hotel until you decide where you are going to live. You can send for your things anytime."

There was no argument. Mamie went.

The next three weeks were busy

ones. Vera spent most of the time at the plant with an accountant digging into the books. As soon as they were straightened out she would offer the business for sale. She had already put her house on the market. With what little equity she had in it she could rent a small apartment and get herself some decent clothes. She needed to get spruced up before applying for a job. She was fifty-six and looked it but she hoped with a little help from a hairdresser and a smart gown shop to disguise a few of those years.

If the house brought a good price then she might have enough money for a stone for Larry's grave. She felt guilty about his lying out there without a marker of any kind and no flowers. The set pieces must have faded and been carted away days ago. Even if it took a long time to sell the house at least she could go out to the cemetery, look over the surrounding plots and get some idea what sort of stone would be suitable.

With that in mind she decided one day to take the afternoon off from the discouraging job of appraising the plant. She found a trowel in the garage and bought a small pot of flowers before driving the mile and a half to the cemetery. The car was fully hers only because

the time payments carried with them an automatic life policy.

As she rode through the cemetery gates the stark finality of Larry's death shook her. Once again remorse flooded her and she was trembling. But as she pulled up beside Larry's lot she had herself under control again.

She took the trowel and plants from the floor of the car and said to herself firmly, "You've got to stop feeling so guilty. Even if being cross that last night did help bring on Larry's heart attack—nothing can be done about it now. Blaming myself won't bring him back!"

She turned to put the pot on the grass and that was when she saw Mamie, a flat of petunias at her side, digging into the ground with proprietary vigor. When she saw Vera she paused, smiled and asked with malicious triumph, "How do you like it?"

Vera froze. The stone, a dark grey granite, loomed large, its bold, deeply carved letters proclaiming, "LAWRENCE LEACH, BELOVED SON OF MAMIE LEACH, born—"

It was then after having put up with her for twenty-five years that Vera deliberately and accurately struck again and again with the trowel until Mamie was dead.



# commitment to DEATH

BY  
JOHN E. LOWER

*She was a part of his past that he wanted to forget. But she came to him for help . . . and he was committed.*

I HAD spent the afternoon at a garage having the transmission of my Triumph repaired. When I returned to my Q Street apartment in Georgetown the building superintendent, a gnomish man with a limp and garbage breath, stopped me on the stairs and told me about the phone call.

"A woman, but she didn't give her name. She said she might call again, later this evening."

"My wife?"

"No, I know her voice. It wasn't her."

"Thanks."

I dismissed the call as somebody selling magazines, or potholders, or something, and continued up the stairs to my apartment to cook supper.

By ten o'clock I was immersed in the rough draft of a magazine article on Senate reorganization that I was concocting for the Post. The words and thoughts were flowing at a steady pace, so I decided to postpone the beer I had been thirsting for until I finished the segment in progress.

The number of people in the District of Columbia who know my address can be counted on four fingers of either hand, so the two short thumps on the door surprised me. It wasn't the Super; he always bellered my name at the same time he knocked. I kicked the chair away from the desk and stood up. The damn mood was broken and it would take fifteen minutes to reassemble the fragments. That's the reason only four people in Washington—my agent and three fellow free-lancers—know my address. The apartment is the one place I can lock myself in, draw the blinds, and write without interruption. I'm not trying to palm myself off as a master of deathless prose; if anything, it's lack of genius that demands this privacy.

I walked to the door, opened it, and stood staring into the eyes of my past. Pale blue eyes. And all that once had been, five years ago. I tried to say something but the words dissolved in my throat.

"May I come in, Adam?"

I stepped back and held the door open. She came inside and I closed the door.

"How are you, Kathy?"

"Fine—and you?"

"Good, thanks."

"I've seen your articles in magazines, now and then. I'm happy to see you've made it as a writer."

She stood there with her hands stuffed in the pockets of her black raincoat (black had always been

her color; it was in perfect opposition to her white-gold hair) looking as she had when I had walked away from her, out of the dirty little bar we had called ours, and into the gray afternoon snow. That was five years gone and she looked exactly as she had then, except for half-rings of tiredness beneath her eyes.

"Let me take your coat," I heard my voice saying.

"No, I've had a cold the past few days. I'll keep it on for a while."

"Sit down."

She walked to the slat-back chair by the desk and sat down, keeping the raincoat wrapped tight around her.

"I tried to call you this afternoon, but the landlord told me you were out. Sam gave me your number." Sam was my agent.

"He told me a woman had called. Would you like a drink?"

"I didn't mean to interrupt your work, Adam."

"Nothing that won't keep. I'm afraid the drink will have to be beer or bourbon."

"Bourbon, please, with a little water."

I went out into the kitchenette, built the bourbon and water, and opened a can of Schlitz for myself. When I went back into the living room, she was standing and looking around. I cleared away some of the research material on the desk and set the drinks in the space.

"Are you still a bachelor?"

"My wife and daughter are home —Bucks County, Pennsylvania. I keep this place to sleep and work in since most of my stories and articles involve Washington politics, and I do my own legwork."

"I'm glad about your family. I hope you're happy." Her words seemed genuine and without sarcasm.

"Are you married, Kathy?"

"I was, for a while. He turned out to be a dud." She shrugged, turned to the desk, and picked the brass-framed photograph from beneath the desk lamp. "Your family?"

I nodded. "That's Ellen, my wife, and our daughter, Linda. She's three."

"They're both lovely."

Then there was one of those god-awful pauses when you meet her long after it has burned out—or should have—and you wonder what the hell happened and why. You fight yourself, but you can't help wondering if the ashes are really cold.

Kathy reached for her glass and the raincoat fell open. Under it, she was wearing stockings of a thick black mesh and a bathing suit style costume that was a minimum of maroon satin and a maximum of bangles and tiny glass prisms.

"I see you still dance."

"I came directly from the club where I'm working. That's why I'm still in costume. Do you have a cigarette?"

I lighted one and handed it to her. Her eyes had been blinking constantly and she was obviously nervous. She drew on the cigarette until the tip glowed redly, then exhaled and closed her eyes.

"Adam," she said, eyes still shut, "I've got to get to a doctor."

"Are you sick?"

"Pregnant."

"I see." I dropped into the swivel chair behind my desk, tipped the can to my mouth, and let the cold beer flow to my stomach. "Who's the lucky father?"

She spoke the name of a man known even to the least conscientious scanner of the newspaper. A Senator now, Chairman of one of the most influential permanent committees in Congress, but determined to go much higher in the political world. Married, kids, a respected legislator and model family man.

"Does he know?"

"A friend of mine took some photographs of the Senator and me. If the right people got ahold of them, he'd never run for another office. I exchanged all the prints and negatives for money to get an operation."

"You had intended to blackmail him, hadn't you?"

"Yes, before I found out I was pregnant."

I didn't like hearing what five years had done to her, but I couldn't stop myself from trying to find out.

"He has the photographs and you have the money, so what's the problem?"

"Two creeps who have been tailing me since yesterday, waiting for the right moment to get rid of me. They followed me home from the Club tonight, after I finished the first set. When I decided to come to you, I tried to shake them but I couldn't. One of them was watching from the stairs when you let me in."

"If he has everything that could implicate him, why bother to have you killed?"

"I was his mistress for nearly a year. Even a stupid broad like me couldn't help finding out about some of his under-the-table deals. If the Senate gets wise, the least he'd get would be a censure."

"Could you prove he made the deals?"

"I doubt it. Even if I could, I wouldn't try. But Jim's a thorough man. He leaves nothing to chance."

"Why come to me?"

"You were the only person I could think of who might be able, and also willing, to help me."

"What about your former husband?"

"I don't know where the hell he is. Besides, he'd only run the other direction as soon as he found out I was in trouble."

"You made a sucker out of me once, Kathy. That was the last time."

"I should have known better

than to try and mix you up in this, but those two hoods have my nerves chewed up. And I didn't know about your family when I came here."

She pulled on her coat and fluffed her hair over the collar with one hand.

"Goodbye, Adam. You were good to me once, and I guess I was a bitch. Sorry, I bothered you." She didn't say it nastily. Then she started for the door.

Was I willing to let her walk out, knowing she might be run down in the street five minutes after she closed my door behind her? The question was a bridge between us. I had two choices—burn it or cross over it.

"Sit down," I said more gruffly than I intended. I thought I had long ago rejected the idea of being my brother's keeper.

I moved the telephone from the corner of the desk to a bare spot in the confusion of papers, and pulled my address book from a desk drawer. After fumbling through the crossouts and scrawls for half a minute, I located the number I was searching for and dialed.

Five rings . . . Six . . . Seven . . .

"Hello."

"Jerry?"

"Yes?"

"Adam McKenzie. Could you do an exam, tomorrow?"

I waited, hearing his breath and the rustling of papers.

"About two o'clock?"

"Fine. I'll have the lady there at two. Thanks, Jerry." I laid the receiver on the cradle and turned to Kathy. "That was an acquaintance of mine. Runs the highest class abortion mill in the District. Jerry does work for some of the most respected men in the federal government."

I was angry at myself for having gotten mixed up with her again; particularly since she only wanted me to help her get rid of a social mistake. Things were different now; I was married and had a kid. Maybe my pride had something to do with it, too.

The expression on her face, the drop of her eyes to the floor, indicated my words had produced the desired effect. Make her feel like a fallen-arched tramp. I lighted a cigarette. The smoke tasted the way burning rubber smells, so I crushed it in the ashtray until the paper split and the tobacco spilled over my fingertips.

"You'll need other clothes. Give me the key to your apartment."

She opened the black leather handbag she had placed beside the chair and handed me a ring of keys. They were separated and she pointed at a tarnished brass Yale. I put them in my trouser pocket, then took a sport coat from the closet and pulled it on.

"The door will lock automatically when I go outside. Don't unlock it for anyone, even if they tell you the building is on fire. Do you

understand?" She nodded. "I'll unlock it with my key when I get back. There's a fire-escape outside the kitchen window, in case you should have to use it. The bourbon's on the kitchen table."

"Do you have a cigarette? I'm out."

I opened the desk drawer and pulled out a fresh pack of Luckies. She thumbnailed it open and lighted one with a table lighter. Then she wrote her address on a scrap of paper from the desk and handed it to me. I shoved it into a jacket pocket.

She was sitting on the couch, smoking and watching me with those blue orphan-eyes. I wanted to say something comforting, but I couldn't think of anything so I left.

They were there. She hadn't lied to me. Two of them, sitting in a pearl-gray Riviera directly across the street from my Triumph. I got in, started the engine, and goosed the accelerator several times. They watched me with as much interest as they would a mongrel with its leg lifted to a hydrant. I slipped the stick into first gear, let out the clutch and sped away from the curb. They didn't follow, but then I hadn't expected them to. What they wanted was locked in my apartment.

I drove east on Q Street, turned right onto Twenty-eighth and rode it until it merged with Pennsylvania Avenue at the bridge over

Rock Creek Park. At Washington Circle, I turned off Pennsylvania and drove three blocks south to Kathy's K Street apartment. The frame buildings huddled together like obese, gossiping dowagers. Paint chips had fallen from the boards to the ground and lay like huge dandruff flakes. Inside her apartment I found a weary suitcase of imitation leather and filled it with two skirts, matching blouses, sufficient underclothing and nylons for a short convalescence, and a pair of low-heeled black pumps. Inside of ten minutes, I was heading back, down-shifting the Tr-3 around corners with the tires yelling. On one occasion I almost traded paint-jobs with a taxi at an intersection. There was no danger I had overworked the brakes on that ride.

The Riviera and its occupants were waiting patiently. I parked in the space I had vacated, got out, and began snapping the tonneau cover in place. I had three snaps to connect when the window of the Riviera was rolled down. Although I expected to hear the driver say something, I didn't pause from snapping. A cigarette was flipped into the street and landed several feet from me. The window went back up. I picked up the suitcase and, purposefully stepping on the butt when I reached it, headed for the front door. They didn't call after me.

"Are they still out there?" Kathy

asked as I was relocking the door behind me. I glanced through the doorway into the kitchen. The level of bourbon appeared to be the same as when I had left.

"They're out there, and they won't be leaving until we do. That's not until tomorrow afternoon when I take you to see Jerry. Are you hungry?"

"A little. I'd like to change now, Adam."

I handed the suitcase to her and pointed to the bathroom door. "The linen's clean if you want to shower."

The spray of water pounded against the wall on the other side of the kitchen while I scrambled eggs, toasted bread, and made a pot of coffee. Then I smoked and watched the black coffee bubble into the glass knob on the lid of the coffee percolator. I was buttering toast when she came into the kitchen wearing a pale blue blouse, navy skirt, nylons but no shoes. Her damp hair was pinned in a bun. She watched me for a minute before speaking.

"While I was in the shower I was trying to think of some way to thank you for—"

"Cream in your coffee?"

"Adam, if you think you shouldn't be doing this because of your family . . . Just tell me to leave and I will." Her voice was soft. I believe she would have done just what she said.

I decided it was time to stop

pouting. Nobody had held a gun at my back and forced me to help her.

"I'm sorry, Kathy. I'll act my age."

She smiled. "Cream, but no sugar, please."

When we finished eating she helped me with the dishes, over my protests, and I sent her to bed. She took my bedroom and I dragged the rollaway from the living room closet where I keep it for the infrequent occasions when Ellen stays overnight. It squeaked cantankerously as I unfolded it before applying sheets and a blanket. I undressed quickly and crawled under the blanket.

Then I dragged out five years ago from some cobwebbed, corner of my mind. It wasn't a brightly colored tableau; rather there were only sharp, concise images. The party where Sam Hirsh, my agent, introduced us. Her china doll face and fluff of white-blond hair as we walked along the shore of the Tidal Basin in the cold, bright Autumn sun. Her enthusiasm for things she liked, which I interpreted as childish and decided to change. There was no denying the breakup had been my fault. I had tried to change her from what she was, an uneducated, simple nightclub dancer, to what she could never be, a mature, sophisticated woman. The clothes she wore . . . the drinks she drank . . . the love she made. Then the constant

clashing of tempers and dashing to rubble of what we had built . . .

I didn't know when she would come, but I knew she would. So I lay awake, smoking and staring at the ceiling, and wondering what the hell I would—could—do when it happened. I tried thinking of Ellen and Linda, but they kept drifting from the reach of my mind. The answer was simple and I had known it all along.

When she came, a soft shadow passing the windows gray with night-light to lie beside me, I didn't turn her away.

"I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow," she said as I held her. "But I do know I must have this tonight."

In the morning I wakened first, slipping from the rollaway without wakening her. I pulled on slacks and wriggled into a T-shirt before going downstairs to the foyer. I could see the Riviera parked across the street. Back in the apartment, I plugged in the pot and poured a cup when the coffee was hot. Kathy wakened half an hour later, looking as if she hadn't slept in days.

Our only conversation that morning was to ask or answer necessary questions. I tried to work on the article for a while, but the effort was wasted. At eleven-thirty I crumbled the page of scribbling I had written and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. We made lunch which neither of us could force

down and so scraped it into the garbage pail on the rear porch. She asked me to put a record on the phonograph so she could practice some dance steps, but the music got on her nerves so I switched off the turntable. I left her in the living room while I showered, shaved, and dressed in my olive wash-and-wear.

When I opened the bedroom door after dressing, she was sitting on the couch, her bare feet tucked between her hips and the cushions. Her suitcase was beside the couch and a glass with an inch of bourbon in the bottom stood on the coffee table. She was quietly crying; tears jerked softly from her eyes and down across her cheeks. When she looked up and saw me standing in the bedroom doorway, she brushed her hair away from her face where it had fallen, and tried to smile.

"I'm scared," she said. "I haven't been scared like this since I was a kid."

Walking over to her I didn't admit I was more than a little worried myself. I sat down beside her and she bound her arms around my chest. Her hair had the clean smell of soap from her shower, the night before. When she drew away my collar was damp.

"I'm alright, now."

"Go refinish your face. Then I'll tell you what we're going to do."

She walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. I went to the closet and took my .45

Colt, a memoir from the icy hell killed Korea, from its box on the hat shelf. After inserting one clip of shells in the handle, I pushed on the safety catch and shoved the automatic and two extra clips into the inside breast pocket of my coat. I was polishing off the bourbon when Kathy came out of the bathroom. Her eyes were filmed with redness but she was composed. She sat on the couch while I told her what she was to do. She would go downstairs to the foyer, follow the first-floor hallway to the rear door, and continue through the yard outside so she reached the gate to the alley at exactly one-fifteen.

I kissed her, holding her forearm with one hand but not touching the rest of her body.

"Remember—exactly one-fifteen. I can't afford to drive around the block until you finish powdering your nose."

Then I picked up the suitcase and went downstairs.

The Riviera was parked in the same space, directly across the street from my Triumph. Both machines were one quarter of the block from Twenty-Seventh Street, but facing Twenty-Eight. I unbuttoned the tonneau cover, stuffed it behind the jump seat, and slid behind the steering wheel.

Seven minutes past one o'clock.

I lighted a cigarette and smoked in what I hoped appeared to be an impatient manner.

At ten minutes past one I flipped

the butt into the street and turned the ignition key. The motor rumbled, followed two seconds later by the base-pitched volcanic eruption of the Riviera's engine.

Twelve minutes past one.

I pumped the horn button impatiently and glared up at a window in the front of the apartment house.

Thirteen minutes.

I thumped the horn button again and worked my face into a disgust and angry expression.

Fourteen minutes. My palms were sweating; the wheel glistened where I had been gripping it.

Fourteen minutes; forty seconds.

After drying my palms on the legs of my trousers, I slipped the stick into gear and slowly edged away from the curb toward Twenty-Eighth Street. The Riviera began to follow me, its engine murmuring like a restrained animal. When it was three-quarters of the way out of the parking space, I pounded on the brakes, slammed the shift into reverse to a grinding of gear teeth, and let the clutch out fast. The Triumph stopped dead, then bolted backward, faltered, and weaved in reverse until it reached the corner of Twenty-Seventh Street. I glanced down Q at the Riviera and saw it squirming wildly as it tried to turn to face Twenty-Seventh. Cogs clashed as I jammed the stick back into first gear, then blistered rubber half a block.

I slid around the corner into the alley in second gear and she wasn't

there. By the time my foot jumped from the accelerator to the gas pedal, I saw her standing at the fence gate and looking up the alley. She was on the passenger's side and I was holding the low-cut door open as the TR stopped beside her. Before she had pulled the door shut I was half way down the alley, the rumble of the Triumph's engine reverberating off garage doors. I glanced in the rearview mirror as we swerved and squealed from the alley onto Twenty-Eighth. The Riviera was entering the other end of the alley, sliding and fishtailing, and missing a garage door by what appeared to be less than a foot. The driver straightened and came barreling after us.

My safest route seemed to be a heavily populated thoroughfare, since I doubted the gunsels would make their move when a crowd of citizens were present to watch and remember. I headed for Wisconsin Avenue, and slid in front of a Volkswagon as I jumped from the ramp into the right lane. We passed the Georgetown Public Library and headed northwest, weaving in and out of traffic. A mile on the east side of the Naval Observatory I left Wisconsin and bounced onto a two-lane asphalt cowpath. The driver of the Riviera had maintained a two-car interval between himself and the Triumph, for the entire distance along Wisconsin. Several times I had tried darting ahead, or falling behind, but he stuck.

Now that we had a road to ourselves he tromped the gas pedal and came bearing down on my back end. The road was a progression of curves, both broad and hairy, connected by infrequent straightaways. By taking the curves with the TR's tail hanging out and the tires pounding like pneumatic hammers, I was able to lengthen to a quarter of a mile, the distance between us. On anything resembling a straightaway, the Riviera came thundering after me until the distance was closed to inches. The game was to nudge me off the road by butting the TR's tail with the front bumper of the Riviera. Twice, he almost succeeded when my right, rear tire became locked in the crevice between the paving and the dirt shoulder. Any sudden deviation of the crevice's depth would have sent the Triumph skipping head over heels into a field. Kathy closed her eyes, lowered her head, and swallowed continually. She was fighting back any food which had lingered in her stomach over the past sixteen hours, and which was now trying to get out.

I didn't begin braking before we reached the narrow dirt lane leading to Jerry's pregnancy alleviation center, hoping to foul up the bulky Riviera. The lane was a brown blur when I hit the brake pedal and we spun completely around, landing tail-first in a grass field. Kathy screamed, my stomach churned, and the wheel dripped with sweat.

The motor was silent. I nearly broke the ignition key when I twisted it but the motor turned over. The Riviera had reversed itself in the middle of the road, and by the time I bounced out of the field onto the lane it was right behind me again. I heard a loud pop that was either a pistol shot or a blowout. A small hole with a webbed edge appeared in the windshield between us, telling me which it had been. I shoved Kathy below the level of the seat.

In front of the three story brick building was a large clearing where Jerry's personnel parked during working hours. I crossed the clearing, plowed the TR through a neatly coiffured hedge and across a short lawn. My intention was to stop in front of the cement porch, but I braked too late and the TR bounced off the cement square.

"Run," I yelled to her.

Kathy pushed open her door, jumped to the ground, and began running across the grass to the porch steps. I swung my feet over the driver's door and pushed myself out of the car. My hand was still fumbling in my coat pocket for the .45 when the Riviera swung into a wide circle in the clearing and an arm holding something black jerked out of the passenger's window. There were six cracks and Kathy crumbled on the porch in front of the door. The Riviera, which had never stopped, now led the trail of dust back into the lane.

By this time the Colt was in my hand, the safety off and a round in the chamber. On one knee, I steadied my firing arm with my other hand. I fired into the dust cloud four times. Suddenly the Riviera broke free of the dust trail, careened down an embankment, and smashed into a tree. Metal crunched, glass shattered, and then a terrible silence roared in my ears. The passenger's door opened and one of them flew from the car into the field.

By the time he reached the lane, rising and falling in his haste, I was waiting with the .45 levelled and he was a dead man.

Dead as Kathy. Four .357 Magnum slugs between her neck and her waist. I held her close to me there on the bloody porch and babbled to deaf ears.

Now, white-dressed, septic looking people were running over the yard shouting unintelligibly and pointing. I laid Kathy on the porch, ran to the Triumph, and jumped in. Miraculously, the head-on with the porch hadn't impaired the engine. I looked up at the porch and someone was coming through the door. He slipped on a splotch that was Kathy's blood, and fell.

I backed through the hole in the hedge, then started through the forward gears. Jerry was standing in the clearing, impotently shaking his fists at me. I couldn't hear what he was shouting but I knew it was curses. Another time I might have felt repentant for ruining his business. But nobody had forced him to go into the abortion racket, just as I helped Kathy of my free will.

The guy I had blasted was laying at the edge of the lane. I went out of my way to pay my last respects. The tires thumped.

There was no doubt that the cops would get me. I only hoped I had enough time before that happened. Ellen and Linda were worlds of time past. The only present was Kathy, dead on a strange porch with an unborn being inside her. It was somehow easier to admit, now, that a part of me had never ceased loving her.

The future was one man. And if the future lasted long enough, ninety-nine Senators would be paying homage to their deceased colleague.

Domineering, shrill sirens were screaming through the sunlight when I swerved onto the asphalt road.





# the right man

By WILLIAM ENGELER

*It seems that Mrs. Howard Parker had made a mistake. It appeared that her lover was turning out to be not the man she had expected him to be.*

**Y**ou could make it look like an accident," the blonde said.

"Not a chance!" scoffed the thin, dark man. "A man like Howard Parker doesn't have accidents. Nobody'd believe it."

"Oh, all right!" It was an old argument, and Muriel Parker was tired of it. "Murder, then—pure and simple. No fuss, no feathers. Just plant a few silly clues—"

"Pointing where? He doesn't have an enemy in the world."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Gerald!" Muriel was just about at the end of her patience. "Anyone would think you don't *want* to kill Howard!"

"Well . . ." Gerald Madden got up and started to put his clothes on. "When you come right down to it, what's he ever done to me?" At the look of total exasperation on the blonde's lovely features, he added placatingly, "It's easy enough for you to talk. You're married to

the guy. You've got reasons for hating him. I hardly know him."

"That's another thing!" Muriel sat suddenly upright in the bed, the usually softly yielding curves of her delectable body now rigid with indignation. "I've betted you, I've pleaded with you, over and over,—get to *know* Howard! His moods, his interests, his daily routine . . . How can you plan to dispose of him properly, if you never go near the man? In the two months you've been here, I'll bet you haven't spoken to him a dozen times!"

"In the two months I've been here, you haven't let me out of the sack a dozen times—not long enough to get near anyone," Gerald pointed out, defensively. "You wanted a lover darling—I never pretended to be anything more. This other matter was your idea."

"Fortunately, one of us has ideas—about something besides how to spend money," Muriel said, biting-ly. "Let's face it, lover. On the miserable allowance Howard gives me, I can't afford you. Oh, what's the use? We've been over all this before. I should have hired a professional in the first place, and gotten the job done right. The way you're going about it, Howard will die of old age before anything more profitable happens to him."

"Well—he's eighty-seven now . . ." Gerald said, hopefully. "With the estate, and all that insurance . . . how much more profitable does it have to get?"

"Double indemnity, stupid! How many times do I have to tell you? If he goes violently, it pays double!" Angrily, Muriel started to dress, continuing to lecture her lover in rising accents of bitter denunciation as she did so. "Trouble with you, Gerald, you never learned to think big. Like Howard does. How do you think he made all that money, to start with? Anything or anybody that ever stood in his way, he got *out* of his way. You can bet he'd do a lot quicker and better job on you than you're doing on him! The more I think about it—maybe I took out insurance on the wrong man?" She paused in her dressing to stare scornfully at Gerald. "Who'd ever notice, with you gone? If ever a man was expendable—"

"You've no right to say that, Muriel. Perhaps the work has gone rather slowly. But, something like murder—you have to work up to it. These things take time . . ."

"Time!" Muriel laughed harshly. With a curt toss of her head, she indicated the still rumbled bed they had just vacated. "You always seem to have time for that, I notice!" Her full, red lips curved in a contemptuous smile as, through half-lidded eyes, she regarded his angrily rigid body with cool appraisal. "Doesn't take you long to work up to it, either."

"This time it does," Gerald replied with pained dignity. "This time, your insults have gone too

far, Muriel." He deliberately turned from her and, standing before the dresser mirror, donned his tie with angry, whip-like flourishes. "How long do you expect me to go on returning pleasure for pain, ecstasy for—"

"Pleasure! Ecstasy!" Muriel gasped. "Why, you miserable, egotistic . . . You think I put up with a mattress maniac like you because I *like* it?"

"That will do, Muriel!" Gerald replied, icily. "I think you've said quite enough." He finished knotting his tie and headed for the door.

"You actually thought you had something I needed, didn't you?" Muriel shouted after him. "Well, I have news, lover! All I really needed from you was a helping hand, to give a little shove to an eighty-seven-year-old man who's already got one foot in the grave. And you weren't even good for that!"

"Then—you didn't need the money to get me . . ." Gerald faltered, in slow accents of dawning comprehension. "You needed me to get the money . . ."

"Honestly, Gerald!" Muriel's softly rounded shoulders shook with spiteful mirth. "If you aren't the most naive—I should keep you around, just for laughs!"

"That was it, wasn't it?" Gerald insisted. He stared with strange detachment at the luscious contours of her half-clothed body, as though seeing them for the first—or last—

time. "You were just using me . . ."

"And now I'm through with you," Muriel coldly informed him. Tossing aside a snagged stocking, she sat on the bed and tore open a fresh box of hose with quick, impatient fingers. "I should have known better than to count on you for anything." Moulding a silken sheath to one long, tapering leg, she held it aloft in admiring appraisal of its smooth perfection. "It was just so convenient, Howard bringing you here when he did." She laughed derisively. "Business associate! I had you pegged for a parasite the minute you walked in. Why Howard didn't see it, I'll never know. He must be getting old fast!"

"Maybe not as fast as you think," Gerald said quietly. He picked up the stocking she had discarded and ran it thoughtfully through his fingers. "Actually, he has some pretty progressive ideas, for a man his age."

"You don't say!" replied Muriel, disinterestedly. "Marrying me, that was real smart of him, wasn't it?"

"No-o-o . . . it wasn't. But he's smart enough to admit it." Gerald raised the stocking he held to the light, and studied its laddered runner with an irritating half-smile of reflection. "In fact, that was one of the first things he told me—what a mistake he'd made, marrying a hustling chick, half his age. 'There's no fool like an old fool,' was the

way he put it. Not very original. But his solution to the problem, I think, is." Gerald sat beside Muriel on the bed. "Like you said—anything gets in his way, he puts it out of his way. Violently, if need be. You two have that much, at least, in common."

"Howard has plans for putting me away?" Muriel giggled, faintly amused. "As old and weak as he is, he's thinking of getting violent?" She threw back her lovely head in a burst of derisive laughter. "Howard?"

"Not Howard, himself . . ." Gerald explained, whipping the stocking about the columnar whiteness of her conveniently exposed throat. With a dexterous twist, he pulled the silken noose taut. Noting the look of alarmed surprise on Muriel's purpling face, he clued her further while waiting for her struggles to subside.

"Another thing he told me was the importance of always hiring the right man for a job, no matter what the cost. 'Name your own price, my boy,' he said—and I did. 'An honest day's pay for an honest day's work, sir, is all I ask,' I told him. He liked that, I could tell. An old man, your husband, with some old-fashioned ideas about marital fidelity and all that—but some progressive ones, too. 'You're on your own, my boy,' he said. 'I believe in letting a man do his work in his own way and in his own time.' A piece of advice that you would

have done well to follow, my dear . . ."

Gerald eased the tension on the stocking experimentally. Then, as her eyelids began to flutter, he pulled it tight again. "Had you been less impatient, we might have come to terms—" But Muriel was no longer listening. Relaxing his grip, Gerald let the stocking fall from her swollen throat and gently eased her head back on the pillow. He sat contemplating the curvesome length of her once vibrant, now lifeless body for a few half-regretful moments, before pulling the sheet over her for the last time. Then he went downstairs to report to his employer.

He found Howard Parker sitting at his desk in the library, with his customary air of patient expectancy.

"With a silk stocking, eh?" The old man chuckled appreciatively. "One of her own?"

"She had just started to put them on," Gerald explained. "We'd woke up late, you see, and—"

"You can spare me the nauseating details, young man," the aging millionaire interrupted, rather primly. "I was all through with that sort of thing, about the year you were born. Tell me, though—did she look at all surprised? Eyes popping with sheer disbelief, and all that?"

"They popped, all right," the younger man assured him. "Of course," he added, "they always do. The pressure, you know."

"Yes, of course . . ." The old man chuckled again, visualizing his departed wife's discomfiture at the unexpected turn of events. "She certainly had no reason to suspect anything, after the build-up you gave her." The old man frowned. "Seems to me you took your own sweet time getting the job done."

Gerald smiled easily. "With both of you paying my expenses, what was the hurry? Seriously, though . . . in simulating a crime of passion, I find I cannot achieve ultimate perfection unless I first allow myself to be goaded to a climax of passionate hatred for the victim. Then, I just go ahead and do what comes naturally. That way, it *is* a crime of passion, and no smart-aleck investigator can make something else out of it."

"I see. Good thinking, Madden!" The old man nodded approvingly. "Well, that about wraps it up, I guess. Except, of course, for the little matter of payment." He turned to the wall safe behind him and extracted a thick ward of currency from its bulging contents. "It's all here—in cash, of course. Count it, if you like."

"That won't be necessary," Gerald smiled. He picked up the bundle and started for the door. "If it comes up short, I'll know where to find you."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, young man," Howard Parker replied, gloomily. "The doctor says I haven't too much longer." He tapped his chest significantly. "Heart, you know."

"Really?" Gerald Madden stared at the region indicated with some surprise. More than a little doubtful that the old man had a heart, he drew his revolver and had a shot at it, anyway.

With an unwillingness that Gerald thought a little absurd in a man of Parker's years, the octogenarian shuddered unbelievably and died—a bit more surprised, possibly, than Muriel had been.

Gerald then gathered up the remaining cash in the still open safe and added it to his gross earnings. Not without misgivings. It was stupid, he reflected, to act on impulse like this—taking chances with an obvious murder for profit when, had he taken time to build a little hatred . . .

But, by the old man's own statement, time was of the essence. There simply had been no time to establish elaborate motivations. Yet . . . he couldn't shake a disturbing premonition that this latest, too hurried caper would prove disastrous in the end. It was not a true **crime of passion**.

He'd rather liked the old man.



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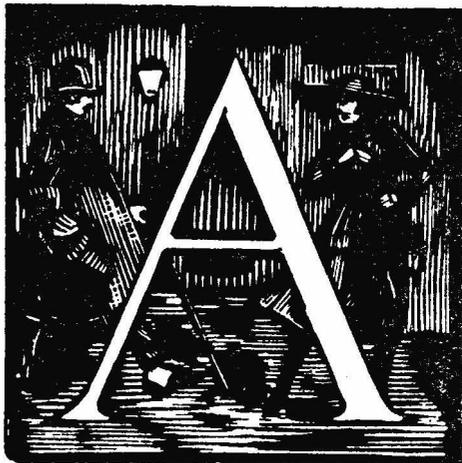
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*"You can't stand your wife, and I can't tolerate mine. Now, just between you and me . . ."*



# deadly proposition

BY PAT MACMILLAN

**E**THEL had a mouth that just wouldn't quit. It moved on and on endlessly, uttering inanity after inanity, seemingly cut off from the rest of her; self-autonomous.

Elmo was thoroughly convinced that the Mouth was a separate entity, having no physiological connection whatsoever with Ethel's brain—if, indeed, she possessed such an or-

gan; There was considerable doubt in Elmo's mind that she did.

As Elmo scooped up the last of his runny egg with a piece of toast, he unwillingly listened for the hundredth time to Ethel's Mouth recounting Ethel's many ailments.

According to the Mouth, Ethel's ailments were always much much worse than a similar run-of-the-mill disease experienced by some other

afflicted person. The doctors, the Mouth reiterated time and again, had never seen a worse infected tooth, a higher bloodcount, a larger appendix than Ethel's appendix—now removed—which sat fatly in a jar of alcohol on a kitchen shelf ready to be displayed at the tiniest opportunity; Ethel was lucky, they said, to be alive. Maybe Ethel was lucky, but Elmo considered himself quite at odds with fortune over this medical miracle.

The Mouth was now explaining that, moreover, Ethel's *relatives* were also inflicted beyond the endurance of ordinary persons. Uncle Luke's shriveled liver was now a matter of medical history, while Aunt Ruth's gallstones—the size of walnuts—never ceased to amaze the profession.

There was a pause while the mouth scooped in a huge bite of jellied toast, no doubt to renew its strength for the next harangue.

Elmo, from his seat, was able to command a view of the rows of medicine bottles adorning the kitchen cabinet. He counted 17 bottles, each intended for a different ailment; each undoubtedly filled with harmless sugar candy pills; and each quite, quite expensive.

Not that the expense mattered, in itself. Elmo could well afford any little whims that Ethel cared to indulge in. In a way, he had Ethel to thank for his considerable income since he had worked long hours at the plant merely to avoid coming

home and as a result had risen to a high position in a relatively short time. No, it wasn't the expense, it was just the terrible waste and the endless hypochondriacal monologues that ate at his soul.

The Mouth, apparently rejuvenated, began its new onslaught. Ethel had been giggling with vast amusement at the sheaf of paper she held clutched in her claw, obviously inviting curiosity on Elmo's part. As none was forthcoming, the Mouth decided to treat Elmo to what proved to be a long and extraordinarily dull letter from Aunt Ruth, recounting her endless drab and uninteresting experiences in a manner meant to be amusing but as far as Elmo could ascertain, possessing no anecdotal merit whatsoever.

“ . . . and then the Doctor said to me, Mrs. Perkins, those are absolutely the *largest* gallstones I've ever seen! You can imagine how simply horrified I was, and what *Pain* I've been in! Why last night, I got up in the middle of the . . . ”

Elmo rose hurriedly, almost knocking over his chair in his haste to be spared the ordeal of what had happened in the middle of the night to Aunt Ruth. Having been treated to similar letters, he had no doubt her description would be very explicit, very minute in detail, leaving nothing to the imagination.

“I've got to rush, Dear. I'll be late for work.”

“Don't you want to hear what Aunt Ruth says here, Dear?”

There's a real amusing little story about how she strikes up an acquaintanceship with the old curator in the museum, who also has gallstones—Oh, she's so dare-devil! Sit down, dear, it's only 3 pages long!"

Off-hand, Elmo could imagine nothing that would bore him more thoroughly than the old curator's gallstones.

"Some other time, dear. I've got an important meeting this morning. We're meeting with. . . ."

"Elmo", Ethel cut in as usual. She never listened to Elmo when he managed to squeeze a few words in. He reflected that the last thing he had said that she had heard was his proposal and God knows, he had wished a thousand times that she had stopped listening sooner.

"Elmo, I just don't seem to have any appetite anymore", the Mouth lamented, as Ethel smeared her fourth slice of toast liberally with blackberry jelly and spoke through a mouthful of eggs and bacon.

"Maybe I'd better stop in and see that Doctor that Amy recommended. Why, I'm just wasting away to nothing! Look!"

Elmo looked reluctantly at the flabby hulk before him and shuddered to himself.

"Yes, Dear", he said wearily.

"What time will you be home, Elmo?" she queried, but Elmo knew better than to attempt an answer, for by the time he could have formed a retort, the Mouth had again taken over.

He slipped unobtrusively out the front door just as Ethel was reaching for the first of the 17 bottles. As he breathed deeply of the fresh morning air and headed for the bus stop, he couldn't help but think how enjoyable life could be without Ethel. He had enough money so he would never have to work again—and how pleasant it would be to spend his leisure in a *quiet* house! The idea intrigued him.

Elmo worked late again, as usual. When he left the plant and emerged into the cool, quiet evening, he decided to take a walk to sooth his over-wrought nerves. It had been a particularly trying day at the office, and of course home offered no solace, no fireside far from the cares that are, no haven of rest.

Presently, Elmo's footsteps took him to a strange part of the city and he began to take note of his surroundings. He noticed a quaint German restaurant before him and as he peered into the clean, quiet interior, it occurred to him that he had had no dinner, although it was well past the dinner hour. The thought of dining alone in this restful atmosphere and delaying his inevitable homecoming appealed to Elmo and he entered the dimly lit dining room and took a table in the back.

He ordinarily read a newspaper to avoid the necessity for thinking. When he thought, his thoughts eventually always turned, as if drawn irresistibly, to the Mouth.

Tonight, however, he was so tired, so completely drained of energy, that he was content to relax and let his mind picture mental images of how life would be without Ethel. He saw himself seated by a pool, quietly sipping a cocktail—the Mouth said drinking was sinful and had been put on earth as a temptation to man—and petting the big dog he had so often wished for—the Mouth had frequently orated long and loudly on the subject of dogs, their filthy habits, their weak character, and large appetites. He even daringly threw into his dream a few lithe girls lounging around the pool. He sighed wistfully for what was not, gave his order to the waiter and returned to unpleasant reality.

As he sat contemplating, he gradually became aware that someone was watching him. He looked up to meet the eyes of a sad-looking little man sitting a few tables away from him. Elmo gave a start, for it was like seeing a reflection of his own eyes. He could read the same look of misery, the same hopelessness in them. Apparently, the little man also sensed this common bond, for he arose hesitantly and walked over to Elmo's table.

"I'm dining alone, too—I wonder—would it be too much of an imposition if—you see, I watched you sitting there, and thought you looked as lonely as I feel."

"Sit down, sit down," Elmo said. He was not in the habit of inviting

strangers to join him but a certain feeling of empathy seemed to draw him closer to the little man, who looked relieved and took a seat opposite Elmo.

They talked of inconsequential things throughout the meal—the weather, their jobs, fishing. Their mutual feeling had been correct. They were indeed compatible in every way and Elmo was delighted at having this pleasant, unexpected company. It was wonderful to be listened to, for a change.

After dinner they ordered the rich dark German beer served as the house specialty and lingered on in the restaurant.

"Tell me", queried the little man. "Why is it you're dining alone tonight? Your family out of town? Forgive me if I'm being too inquisitive." His bright eyes stared expectantly at Elmo through thick lenses.

"Ah, family". Elmo said sadly. He was not the type to air his family troubles to the world; yet, there was something about this sad little man, coupled with the heady effect of the beer, that loosened his reserve.

"Let me tell you about my family—it consists entirely of a mouth!"

"A mouth?" the little man exclaimed with surprise and interest in his voice.

"Let me explain—I have no children, just a wife—and what a wife! I couldn't even tell you what she

looks like anymore! All I see is the Mouth, because that's all she is to me now! She talks constantly and says nothing! Her remarks are stupid, conceited, sick! She never listens, never does anything but talk! But excuse me, I shouldn't burden you, a stranger, with my problems. Still, you don't really seem like a stranger!"

"I'm glad you feel that way, and I'm glad you told me! I just knew it was something like that. You see, I recognized that lonely look because I, too, have a miserable home life! My wife nags me all the time—nag, nag, nag. Nothing I do is ever right!"

"Well, in all fairness, I must say that Ethel doesn't nag—she doesn't care enough about me for that—she just never shuts up!

". . . and another thing", the little man continued, obviously caught up in his confession, "she's fat—terribly fat. I hate fat and always have! She was slim and tiny when I married her! It's cheating!" He concluded passionately.

"What a pair we are!" said Elmo, smiling. "A mouth and a fat slug for wives, and here we sit alone in a restaurant, dreading to go home!"

They both began to laugh, as the humor of their situation struck them—they laughed and laughed, and then suddenly they both stopped as if by a signal.

"It's not really funny, is it", Elmo sighed, gazing into the dark sediment at the bottom of his glass.

"It's tragic", said the little man.

They sat there for a while, silently, then the little man looked up and gazed at Elmo intently.

"Tell me", he began hesitantly, "Have you ever—no, forget it! I am presuming too much on such a short acquaintanceship."

"No, no—please! Some people know each other for years, and have not established the rapport we feel! Please go on!"

The little man looked gratified.

"Well, promise me you won't be offended if I go ahead!"

"No, of course I won't be! Come, come, you have me curious, Man!"

"Well, first let me ask you something! Why is it you've never sued for divorce if you're so unhappy?"

"Ha!" Elmo exclaimed. "Don't think I haven't asked Ethel for a divorce! She absolutely refuses. I'm quite well off, you know, and she would be a fool to give all that up—and I'm stuck without her cooperation! After all, you can't divorce a woman for talking too much, unfortunately!"

"Ah", the little man said thoughtfully. "I see, I see! Now in my case, I can't even consider divorce because my wife is the one who holds the purse strings—and holds them quite tightly, I might add!! Still, she has instilled in me a taste for the finer things—good clothes, good food, an excellent car—things I could no longer do without, so divorce is out of the question."

Elmo noted with approval the

conservative but expensive cut to the little man's suit, which detracted from his shortness, broadened his shoulders, and concealed his paunch.

"Now then", the little man continued, "If you're sure you won't be angry with me. . . ?"

Elmo was beginning to be impatient with the cautious little man, but he noted that it was the type of impatience one might feel toward an old friend one wanted to help.

"Please go on! I'll be angry with you if you *don't!*"

"Very well!" he said briskly, suddenly deciding it was worth the risk. "Now, we both know our wives are bound to live on and on and on."

Elmo nodded, now beginning to get the drift of the other's thoughts and appreciating the reason for his caution.

"Has it ever occurred to you—now here comes the socking part—to—shall we say—ah, hasten her demise?" He finished with a rush, as if in a hurry to release the irrevocable statement, once he had started.

Elmo knew he should have been repulsed—at least offended—by such a suggestion! And yet, when it came he was not even surprised. It was as if he had known all along that the meeting would come to this. They were too much alike, too much afflicted with the same problem. Elmo wondered if it were possible that the meeting had been pre-ordained by fate.

"It has occurred to me—again and again, and with increasing frequency!" He said slowly and clearly, gazing intently into the little man's eyes, so there was no chance of his misunderstanding. He had decided that this was no time to mince words.

The stranger released a long breath and Elmo realized he had been holding it in anxious anticipation, awaiting his reaction. He dabbed at his perspiring forehead with a fine linen handkerchief.

Elmo continued, "Yes, I don't know why I'm sitting here admitting to you what I have tried not to admit even to myself—I don't understand why I should divulge this secret to you, a complete stranger until this evening, but . . ."

"Please don't think of me as a stranger!" The little man interrupted hastily. "One finds so few kindred spirits in this world!"

". . . But," Elmo continued, acknowledging his new friend's interruption with an understanding nod, "although I have thought and thought, I can find no safe way to—how shall I put it—hurry Ethel along! In spite of all of her pills and doctors, she is healthy as a horse!"

"Of course she is! My wife, too, is uncommonly healthy in spite of all those flabby layers of grotesque fat! And I've reached the end of my endurance. I can't tolerate life with her any longer! When I first saw you, I had been sitting here, trying

to figure out a safe but sure way to get rid of her!"

"And did you arrive at any ideas that would allow you to escape detection?" Elmo asked with great interest. Fleetinglly, he thought to himself how strange it was that the two of them should be sitting here so detachedly, discussing murder in such a light manner, as if it were an ordinary conversation. He cast a hasty glance around the room to see if anyone was within earshot. The room was deserted except for the two waiters who stood in deep conversation by the cash register across the room.

The little man faced Elmo with an almost mischievous glint behind the thick lenses.

"Yes, I've figured out a way for both you and I to rid ourselves of our horrible burden and no one will ever be the wiser! You see, I am quite willing to kill your wife if you will kill mine!"

He settled comfortably back in his chair with the air of one who has presented a masterful and infallible scheme.

Elmo was silent, turning over in his mind the ramifications of such a big undertaking. Why not, he thought to himself. They were perfect strangers, as far as anyone knew. No one had the slightest idea that their paths had crossed. They could not possibly be connected in any way. And after all, one could not feel too strong a repugnance toward murdering a complete strang-

er! Even if he loathed Ethel—which he did—there was still that hesitance to kill her, borne of their long years of association together.

"What you are suggesting", Elmo said dreamily with the feeling that he was no longer in control of the situation but was merely moving along, caught up in an irresistible current, "is that I provide myself with an airtight alibi while you do away with my wife; in return for this favor, I will do the same for you while you set it up so no suspicion can possibly fall on you!"

"Exactly", his accomplice-to-be said with a modest smile of accomplishment. "You have grasped the plan admirably!"

Elmo deliberately extended his hand across the candle-lit table; the other grasped it firmly. The light mirrored Elmo's image in the little man's convex lenses, and Elmo saw his reflection bulging out at him, nodding in complete accord with the plan; a new partnership had been formed.

"Elmo—I woke up with such a splitting headache this morning. Where *are* those headache tablets! I had the most awful dream! I can't even remember it but I know it was something horrible. Ohh, nobody—absolutely nobody—suffers like I do! You don't know how it is to have your health gone, Elmo! If you have your health, you have everything! If you don't have your health you have nothing!"

The Mouth went on and on, inex-

orably, but Elmo for once did **not** mind. As he sipped his coffee, a warm glow came over him and he thought about his alibi. He would be at the office late that night, in a meeting with the four other influential men who ran the plant; their word would be undisputed in establishing an alibi—and while he was there, he would undoubtedly receive a call from the police. The little man was to call them and give them an anonymous “tip” to make sure they found the body while Elmo was occupied in the meeting. He had no idea how the murder was to be committed, and he didn’t want to know.

Elmo slipped out the door, shutting off the sounds of the Mouth, happily aware that it was the last time he would hear them. As he rode to the office he allowed himself to indulge in his favorite day dream of himself seated beside the quiet pool—but now there was an important difference—his new friend was also in the picture appreciating the good life, although it would be some time before they would be able to do so together.

Somehow, Elmo managed to get through the day, even managed to appear perfectly normal to his co-workers. The important meeting began, as scheduled, at 7 pm. As the meeting dragged on, nearing its close, Elmo began to get worried. Why hadn’t the call come yet?

Then, at 9:27 the phone rang and Elmo held his breath.

“For you, Elmo!” the voice said. He made his way to the phone and managed a querulous greeting.

“Mr. Parsons? This is the police!”

“Police!” Elmo said in feigned surprise. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m afraid there’s been an unfortunate occurrence—I’m calling from your home. We received a call and came right over and—Well, I would rather not go into this over the phone. It’s a pretty bad situation!”

“What’s happened—has anything happened to my wife?” Elmo exclaimed with what he hoped was a suitable amount of alarm in his voice.

“Please come home immediately, Mr. Parsons—I’ll tell you this much—it’s a pretty grave business!”

As Elmo hung up he repressed an hysterical impulse to giggle at the policeman’s unintentional pun.

He excused himself from the meeting, explaining with a puzzled air that there was an emergency at home. The others clucked their concern, and Elmo was on his way. So far, it had been ridiculously easy, but as he relaxed in the back seat of the taxi, he reflected that the real test of his acting ability lay in his performance before the police. He wondered idly if he would be required to view the body, and decided that he would certainly have to for identification purposes. That would be the hardest part, pretending grief. Then a strange thought occurred to him—would the Mouth

be closed? He could never recall having seen it shut!

When Elmo arrived at the house he found it all lit up, with both uniformed policemen and plainclothesmen swarming all over. This only bolstered his morale. Nothing could have gone wrong; there wouldn't have been so many policemen on the job unless the murder had gone off successfully.

He was admitted by a young officer who gazed sympathetically at him.

"You'd better sit down sir—the lieutenant will be out in a minute. It's a horrible thing!"

"Are you the man who called?" Elmo asked.

"No, that was the lieutenant. He's in the living room with the body!"

"Body?" Elmo said. "Oh, no—don't tell me . . ."

"You didn't know, Sir? I'm terribly sorry—No, don't go in there. It's very messy! I thought the lieutenant had told you the details!"

The young man was obviously new at his job and obviously distressed at his indiscretion.

Elmo sank back in the chair and covered his face in a gesture of despair. It must have been very convincing for the young man said, "Here, let me get you something!" He crossed over to the side board where Ethel kept a bottle of whiskey—for medicinal purposes, of course—and poured Elmo a stiff drink. Elmo took it gratefully. Al-

though he had begun to enjoy the part, it taxed his acting abilities considerably. After all, he felt like expressing the great sense of relief and joy he felt. He wished his new friend could be here to share the wonderful irony of the situation with him, but of course that was out of the question.

"Thank you, young man", he said dolefully, wondering how his friend had administered the coup de grace. "I think I can control myself now. How-how did it happen?"

"A blow on the head! You know that small bust you have on your mantle?"

Elmo nodded, hoping it had been broken in the process. Ethel had bought it one day at an auction, gleeful in her incredibly tasteless manner. It had always particularly revolted him. He was inwardly amused. No doubt his friend, equally repelled, had deliberately chosen it for that reason. He wondered fleetingly how the little man had ingratiated his way into the house. His curiosity would have to wait, though, as they had agreed upon the utmost caution and were not to meet for 6 months. At that time, Elmo was prepared to fulfill his part of the bargain.

The young officer was still speaking—"A gory mess. The whole side of the head caved in! I don't see how a sick person could have struck that blow with such force!"

He stopped, as the living room door opened, but Elmo was arrest-

ed and puzzled by his last statement—what did he mean, sick person! For the first time, he felt an uneasy feeling of foreboding. He turned to the door and gasped in horror and amazement!

A tall, plain clothes detective—presumably the lieutenant who had called him was holding the door open to permit someone to leave the room. That someone, gaily bedecked in a huge, floral patterned robe, myriads of curlers hugging her head, was Ethel!

“Ethel!! But—I thought you . . .” He turned wildly to the young officer. “You said her head was bashed in!” He shouted angrily, and stared at his wife, who was obviously enjoying her usual robust health.

The young man stammered in confusion. “But—you mean you thought—My God! It wasn’t your wife who was killed! I thought you understood!”

“Oh, Elmo, Thank Heaven—”

“I’ve had the most terrifying expe-

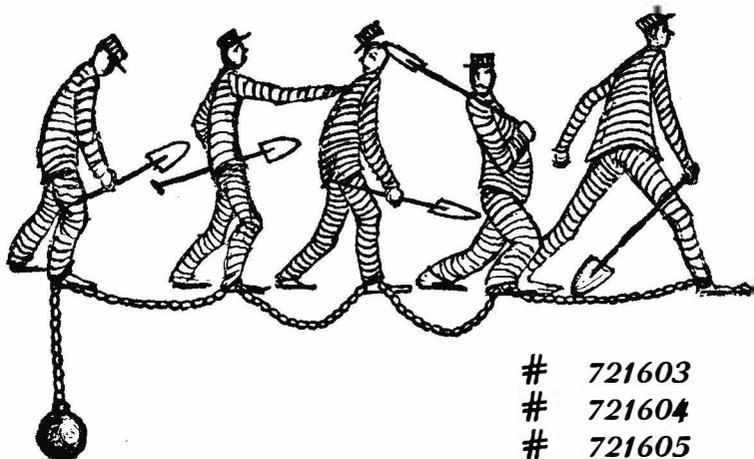
rience!” she announced with great relish. “I don’t think I’ll ever get over it! I was in the bathroom, taking my liver pills, when I heard this noise in the living room! I went in and this horrible little man was standing in the room, closing the window he had just climbed through! He had a gun in his hand, Elmo! Well, without thinking, I grabbed the bust and hit him as hard as I could!”

There was more, but it all became a confused babble to Elmo, who felt the weight of circumstance crushing in on him. Through the doorway he saw the unbroken bust leering at him from beside his friend, who lay sprawled grotesquely on the rug. He slumped in his chair, defeated.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Parsons,” the lieutenant was saying, “It’s a clear case of self-defense. Your wife is completely in the clear”.

The Mouth continued forever . . . and ever . . . and ever.





# 721603

# 721604

# 721605

*The Stir*

*Oneonta, New York*

*Dear Editor,*

*We, the officers of The Bird Club of cell-block 16, want to extend our congratulations to you boys at Manhunt for your fine and very informative magazine. It's a real "inside" piece of work.*

*We are particularly interested in making a meet with the guy that writ that piece on passing queer in Vegas. If you boys could make the contact, we'd appreciate it.*

*Louie Fats sends his best to your business manager. They was buddies together in Atlanta.*

*Friends of Manhunt*

*Johnny Jump*

*Louie Fats*

*Sausage Charley*

*P.S.*

*See back cover*

*Manaja was an exotic dancer. Her body had been rubbed with oil and glistened in the spotlights. Every eye in the room was on her . . . except one. That one sighted along a gun barrel.*



# Circle of Jeopardy

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY HENRY KANE

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NEW YORK is lousy with night clubs. There are strip joints, clip joints, jive joints, live joints, square joints, hip joints, crash joints, splash joints, crumb joints, class joints.

The Lond-Malamed is class. All the way.

It is located on Fifty-fifth Street at the southeast corner of Madison Avenue. It is a narrow, two-story, rust-red building with a shimmering, scarlet, patent leather canopy, and a shimmering, scarlet-adorned doorman. Three steps up are heavy translucent glass doors and, when you push through, you're in the small ante room which is the cocktail lounge of the Long-Malamed.

Separating the cocktail lounge and the night club room are two winding white marble stairways, each—I had been informed by To-

bias Eldridge, the amiable genius behind the bar—leading upstairs to the well-furnished town apartment of Joe Malamed, one of the owners of the club.

I had never met Mr. Joe Malamed. He had recently moved up to the big time, coming from Miami and forming a partnership with a young man of many dollars, one Melvin Long. Joe Malamed had a wife, and I had heard, too, that she took an active interest in the operation of the club.

I was seated at a hinge in the bar, near to the door and opposite the check-room, working on a tall scotch and water, and watching Miss Irene Whitney.

Nothing had been stacked like Miss Irene Whitney since the Pyramids. Miss Whitney was tall and perfect. Miss Whitney has a shock of

tousled short-cut iridescent auburn hair that was practically indecent, a lovely nose, and dark blue eyes. Miss Whitney also had legs.

At the hazard of a guess. I would suggest that Miss Whitney had been hired by the Long-Malamed on the strength of her legs. That, anyway, is what her uniform declared. She wore spike-heeled black shoes, black opera-length nylons, a tiny flounced skirt (that was one flounce and no skirt), a black silk sash, a white silk blouse and a short sequined monkey jacket. Miss Whitney was a serious student of the drama, attending a dramatic school in the daytime and acquiring the wherewithal to do same by checking coats in night-clubs at night, and offering cigarettes and fuzzy little pandas for sale. Miss Whitney was a floor show on her own.

The floor show moved to me at the bar.

"Hi," I said. "How's Yale?"

"Yale." Disparagement made wrinkles on her nose, adding to its effectiveness.

Yale was a young man who attended Yale University, a school of learning. Weekends he came into town for the avowed purpose of giving a rapid rush to Miss Irene Whitney. My name is Peter Chambers, and I am neither as young, handsome, unobtrusive or rich as Yale, but I was in there pitching too. This was Miss Whitney's second night in the employ of the Long-Malamed, and I'd been there both nights.

"Drink?" I said.

"Not with the boss sitting at the other end of the bar," Irene said.

Two men were seated at the far end. The one nearer to the archway was pale, slender and immaculately attired. He handled his drink with delicate fingers. He had straight white hair, parted in the middle, and neatly combed. He looked on the good side of sixty. The other was perhaps fifteen years his junior, a small man, a rugged little man with a ruddy sun-creased neck and a face as pink as the shrimp-fed flamingos at Hialeah. They seemed in the midst of a gentlemanly argument, the slender man's voice quiet and modulated, the small man's intense and rasping.

"Which one?" I said to Tobias.

"The one with the white hair. He's Joe Malamed."

"Who's the other one?"

"Remember Frankie Hines? Used to be a top jockey. Top jockey in the whole country. Don't tell me you don't remember Frankie Hines?"

Sure I remembered Frankie Hines. "That," I said, "was a long time ago. I thought he was dead, or something."

"Ain't dead nohow. Retired. Got a million enterprises. Got more loot than King Midas. Who the hell, Mr. Chambers, was this King Midas, anyway?"

I sipped and I smiled at Tobias Eldridge. Tobias was an old friend who had worked many of the top

bars in our city of New York, as had I, except I was generally on the other side of the stick from Tobias. He was tall and thin with a shock of black hair falling over his forehead. He had a long inquisitive nose, a young face, and the knowing, old, ageless eyes that are the special prerequisite of bartenders born to be bartenders.

"King Midas?" I said. "A myth. Everything he touched turned to gold."

"That's Frankie," said Tobias. "Frankie Hines is loaded."

"Loaded," Irene said, "reminds me of the customers in the back room. They should be in the mood now for the cute little pandas, purveyed by yours truly, don't you think?"

"I think," I said.

Irene went to her check-room and I watched, appreciatively, as her hands went up over her head, attaching the strap about her neck. She came out bearing the tray of cigarettes and the pandas, winked at me, and proceeded with undulant grace through the archway and into the darkened room.

"You going in to see the show, Mr. Chambers?" Tobias asked. "It's going on any minute."

I was about to answer when Joe Malamed rapped on the bar for Tobias' attention. Tobias moved off, stumping the wooden bridge behind the bar, and refilled Malamed's glass.

The argument got louder.

"Look," Joe Malamed said to Hines, "I owe you the dough and I admit it. But you're making a pest of yourself. Quit hounding me, and you'll get paid faster."

Frankie Hines said, "If I quit hounding you, I'll never get paid. And I'm sick and tired of waiting." He opened his knees and got off his stool. "If you want me to put the squeeze on, Joe, I got friends what can squeeze."

"Malamed smiled up at Tobias. "Now he's threatening me."

"I beg your pardon," said Tobias, blandly.

"Nothing," Malamed said. "Forget it. And you forget it too, Frankie boy. You'll be paid inside a week. Now go in and enjoy the show."

"Can I sit at your wife's table?"

"Be my guest," Malamed said. "She's sitting with our book critic friend, Charles Morse, and a few other people. You know Charley?"

Frankie Hines had already disappeared into the darkness through the archway. Tobias returned to me.

"What's the hassle?" he said

"Search me. When it's the boss who's in an argument, the bartender wears earlaps. You know how it is, Mr. Chambers."

The M.C.'s voice came through from the darkened room.

*" . . . and now, ladies and gentlemen, Calvin Cole . . . the great Calvin Cole . . . the one and only . . . in an Afro-Cuban fantasy on the drums . . . assisted by Manaja . . . the dancing dervish."* Now he made

his joke. "*Hold on to your pockets, ladies and gentlemen. Darkness will descend upon the room. Total darkness.*" His voice rose to a high pitch. "*Calvin Cole . . . and Manaja.*"

All the lights went out. A tiny spot played on the glistening features of Calvin Cole as he rapped out his rhythms against the skin-tight drums he held between his knees.

"You going to watch?" Tobias said.

"What have I got to lose?"

I found a place just inside the archway, leaning against the wall, holding my drink. Now, lightning from the spot hit the stage in garish waves as Manaja began her torso-flinging performance. Her copper body had been rubbed with oil, reflecting the bursting flashes of light . . . light and darkness . . . light and darkness. I watched for some five minutes and then I went back into the gloom of the cocktail lounge. Tobias Eldridge was in the check-room, feet up like a banker, smoking.

"What's with you?" I asked. "You quit?"

"Resting," he said. Nobody at the barexcept Mr. Malamed. Everybody watching Calvin and that Manaja. Wow, that Manaja! I got a needle for that Manaja."

I extended my glass. "Let's freshen this up, huh?"

Tobias sighed, ground out the cigarette in a sea-shell ashtray and stood up. "Okay. I'm ready." He stretched languidly. "That Ma-

naja!" He walked behind the bar.

"I'll take Whitney."

He grinned. "So would I. If I could."

Mr. Joe Malamed had his arms crossed on the bar. His head nestled in his arms.

Tobias reached behind him for a bottle, and I moved to Mr. Malamed.

"I'm buying," I said, "as long as it's so lonely out here."

Mr. Malamed made no answer.

I touched him. His head moved.

Blood made a bright red trickle on the white bar.

Tobias Eldridge gulped a brandy but it did nothing for the pallor of his face.

"This guy's dead," I said.

The lights went on in the inner room. Ruth Benson, the chanteuse, came on, singing her naughty songs.

"Dead?" Tobias said. "You sure?"

"One little bullet. Clean through the temple. I'm sure."

"One little bullet," Tobias said in wonderment. "One lousy little bullet." His voice reached up to falsetto. "Why, the guy was just sitting here, just sitting here with a drink . . ."

The first one out was Irene Whitney.

She saw what I held in my hands, and screamed. Piercingly.

Ruth Benson's song stopped. People poured out of the inner room. Screams topped screams. The men made a rush for the check-room, grabbing at coats. The cocktail lounge swarmed with hysteria.

I dropped Malamed back on the bar and fought through to the thick glass doors. I shot the bolt, locking the doors, and then I turned and spread my arms out wide like a young cop trying to hold up the pandemonium of onrushing traffic.

"All right," I yelled. "Everybody, Quiet. *Quiet.*"

A young man in a tuxedo, dragging his coat, rushed me, trying to get out. I wound up a fist and caught him as he came. He went down clean. It helped. The noise simmered down to bubbling sounds.

"Quiet," I yelled. "Shut up, everybody."

Suddenly there was absolute silence. The women stared at me, goggle-eyed. The men stared at me exactly like the women.

"All right," I said. "A guy's been murdered. Nobody leaves till the cops come. That clear?"

There was no argument.

"Fine," I said. "Now all you guys start putting your coats back into the check-room. And somebody get this drunk in front of me off the floor."

Somebody did. Some of the men moved to the check-room and hung their coats back.

I said: "All right. Now all of you go back to your tables. All of you go back where you were."

The crowd began to thin out. I said: "Any music in the house?"

A woman's voice came back at me. "Yes."

"Well, get them playing."

The woman's voice called, "Stan, get the boys together. Start them playing."

"Right, Mrs. Malamed. Right you are. Okay, boys. Let's go. On the double."

Soon there was music, soft strain.

"Okay," I said. "Everybody back in place. Nobody comes in, nobody goes out. Till we get the cops."

A young man, a guy with broad shoulders and black hair, shouldered through to me. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot."

"Who are you?"

"Melvin Long, Joe Malamed's partner."

"Well, get them back to their tables, Melvin. Get them all back to where they were."

"You're Chambers, aren't you? Peter Chambers?"

"How do you know?"

"Seen you around."

"Okay. Now get them back, huh? Get them all back."

Soon enough the coats were back in the check-room and the customers were back in their chairs. Nobody remained in the cocktail lounge except Malamed, head-down on the bar near the archway. Tobias rigid near the brandy bottle behind the bar, Irene Whitney near the check-room, and Melvin Long nervously rubbing his hands directly in front of me.

"You too," I said. "You and Miss Whitney. Back there exactly where you were."

Long said. "He's right, Irene."

Come on. You were out on the floor."

He led her through the archway and now I was alone with Tobias. I left my station at the glass doors and went to the bar. I said, "One for you, one for me, and then you call the cops."

I had scotch neat.

He had brandy.

Then he reached down, brought up the phone, stuck a trembling forefinger in the slot marked O, and whirled the dial.

## II

Fifteen minutes later, Detective Lieutenant Parker and his gang of experts from Headquarters held class in the Long-Malamed. Parker, out of Homicide, was a straight cop with no curves. He was squat and solid and built like a beer barrel. He had a square jowl, crew-cut black hair, strong white teeth and black eyes. Parker had a respect for his fellow men, excepting criminals, and including private eyes. Detective Lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, New York City, was an old and valued friend. Under his capable supervision a good deal of work was accomplished in a comparatively short period of time.

Louis Parker summed it up: "The guy was killed from a bullet shot from the inside room. What with the drum raps and the light flashes, the pistol shot went unnoticed. He was killed by a thirty-eight. He was

a sitting duck, a perfect target, out in the light of the cocktail lounge, near enough to the archway. Nobody saw anybody with a gun, they were all watching that oiled-up Manaja. Pretty gorgeous, that Manaja. And everybody's accounted for. I mean, everybody was seated at his respective table, nobody went to the john or nothing. This eliminates quite a group."

"Why?" I said.

"Because I've got experts, and they've got instruments that measure. Now, from the trajectory of the bullet and the angle of entrance into the temple, considered in conjunction with the particular shape of the room—"

"Trajectory," I said, my eyebrows up in admiration. "Real fancy."

"Means the curve described by a body moving through space—the body, in this case, being a bullet discharged from a thirty-eight. Anyway, it eliminates a goodly group, and places in jeopardy only those within the segment from whence the shot could have been fired."

"Whence," I said. "Brother, what are our cops coming to?"

"The room seats two hundred and eight. And it was filled to capacity. But within our circle of jeopardy—only two tables: that of Mrs. Joe Malamed, and a table seating a party of six, visitors in from San Francisco, with not the remotest acquaintance-ship with Joe Malamed."

"That narrows it down plenty, doesn't it?"

"And how it does." Parker turned to one of his uniformed minions. "Okay, let them go now. They get their coats out of the check-room and blow. Take the names, occupations, addresses. Have them show identification." He consulted a card. "The ones that stay are Claire Malamed, Melvin Long, Charles Morse, Frank Hines, and Ruth Benson."

"Why do they stay?" I asked.

"Because they were the ones seated at Mrs. Malamed's table during Calvin Cole's performance." He called to the cop again. "It's okay for Morse, Hines and Long to get their hats and coats. That whole crew's going downtown with us."

They lined up at the check-room like an impatient queue at the box office of a hit show. The men obtained their hats and coats, took the arms of their girl friends, and hurried the hell out through the heavy glass doors.

I found a spot near Parker at the bar and I said, "Is it all right if I have a drink?"

"Sure. And I want to thank you for the way you handled this, Pete. Nice job, locking the doors and keeping them here."

"Scotch," I said to Tobias. To Parker: "How does it look?"

"Stinks," he said.

"But why?"

"First, no gun. No weapon. Nothing in sight, and this is a big joint. Second, these." He brought up a pair of old leather gloves. "Found them right by the archway. Dropped

during the excitement after Whitney screamed. They don't belong here, do they? Don't belong in a snooty night club, a pair of broken-down, grimy, ordinary leather gloves."

"No, they don't."

"Whoever did this job, planned it," "You shoot off a gun, you get nitrate impregnations in your palm. You wear leather gloves, the impregnations remain in the gloves. These pair fit a man or a woman. Where does that leave me?"

"You can trace gloves, can't you?"

"You ought to know better than that, Pete. With you I don't have to make like a sherlock. These are an ordinary pair of leather gloves purchased, maybe, easy, six months ago. Thousands of stores sell them to hundreds of thousands of customers right across the counter. We'll make the routine try, of course, but it don't figure."

"You're so right, Lieutenant."

"Now we're taking that bunch from Mrs. Malamed's table downtown for a fast paraffin test for disclosure of nitrates in the palm. We'll find nothing." He tapped the gloves. "We'll find it all here."

"What about prints? On the gloves?"

"Whoever was smart enough to figure the gloves was smart enough not to get prints on the gloves."

"Stinks," I said, "is right."

I drank part of my drink and turned toward the check-room. Most of the clients of the Long-Malamed had already vacated.

Frankie Hines got his coat and hat and tipped Irene a dollar.

"Well, thank you," Irene said.

Hines and Melvin Long, wearing their coats, joined us at the bar and ordered drinks from Tobias. The next in line at Irene's check-room was a tall, distinguished man of about thirty-five, with grey temples, curly dark hair, light blue eyes and a thin mustache.

"Charles Morse," the man said to the cop with the notebook. "Book critic." He showed identification, then he handed his check to Irene. She helped him with the coat, accepted his tip.

"What's the address?" the cop said.

"Fifteen East Nineteenth."

"Thanks," the cop said. "You stay."

"Yes. I know."

Morse moved toward us at the bar, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his dark blue coat.

Suddenly, he froze.

A grimace grew on his mouth.

"What's the matter?" Parker called.

Morse's right hand came out of his coat pocket. It held a gun. A nickel-plated, pearl-handled revolver that looked like a thirty-eight. I heard a gasp. I turned. Melvin Long's face had gone whiter than a napkin at the Waldorf.

Parker and Frank Hines rushed at Morse. Parker used a handkerchief and took the revolver out of Morse's hand.

"This yours?" Parker said.

"No. Of course not."

"What's it doing in your pocket?"

"I wish I knew."

Parker squinted down at the gun and an unhappy smile widened his mouth. "This looks like it." He wrapped it in the handkerchief and handed it to a cop. "You sure?" he said to Morse.

"Sure I'm sure. Look, Lieutenant, I wouldn't kill a man, then put the gun in my own coat pocket, then come up with it and display it to you. Now, would I?"

"No. You wouldn't." Parker said. "Figures during that excitement around the checkroom, everybody grabbing for coats, somebody shoved that gun into the first available coat pocket. That's the way it figures." He sighed, and his voice came up. "All right. Everybody on my list, let's go."

Fingers squeezed my arm. Melvin Long said, "I want to talk to you."

"Now?"

"As soon as I can."

"Now you're heading for downtown."

"I know. But as soon as possible after that. Where?"

"You know Schmattola's?"

"Yes."

"I'm always there after curfew."

"After curfew? I said as soon as possible."

"By the time they get through with you, it'll be after curfew."

"All right, Mr. Chambers. Wait for me. Please."

"Check," I said.

Parker called: "Let's go, everybody. Come on. Come on."

### III

Ernie Schmattola's Pizza Parlor was located on Forty-ninth Street off Sixth Avenue. Ernie had figured out a deal and it had paid off. Ernie had been born in Naples but he was more New York than New York. He knew the town, he breathed the town, he loved the town, he lived the town. Where most restaurants opened at about eleven in the morning and closed at about eleven at night. Ernie opened at eleven at night and closed at eleven the next morning. There are a good many late birds in New York who get hungry at the most inappropriate hours, and these are the birds that Ernie served. Schmattola's was always crowded, giving a view of a cross-section of the populace, from the parasites of low syndicate to the paragons of high society.

Schmattola's was a mass of many rooms, with scurrying waiters and the thrum of constant and overlapping conversation. The cooks in the kitchen were the best in the land, as were the prohibitive prices which prohibited, it seems, nobody. Ernie himself was a squat man, the shape of a butter tub and with the strut of a penguin. He was swarthy with dark, beady, humorous eyes, and he was the soul of compassion. To his friends he served, on call,

compassionate after-hour drinks in reminiscent tea-cups. I was a friend.

He met me at the door and I said, "I want privacy, Ernie. I want privacy, a double scotch, water, white bread and ravioli."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Chambers."

"I'm expecting a friend. He'll ask for me."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Chambers."

He took me to a nook away from the crowd. I sipped my scotch, sniffed my ravioli, and dug in. I began to think about the Long-Malamed. Of the people at the table of jeopardy, as Parker had so quaintly put it, I had seen Frankie Hines (of whom I knew by past bright reputation) I had seen Charles Morse (of whom I knew by present unblemished reputation), and I had spoken with Melvin Long. I had not even seen Mrs. Claire Malamed, or if I had, I didn't know who she was. Ruth Benson I had observed singing from afar at various clubs about the town. So much for the cast of characters.

I had finished the ravioli and was mopping up the plate with the wonderful white bread when Ernie ushered Melvin Long to my table.

I said, "Something?"

"Can I get a drink?"

"It might be arranged."

"I need one. Gin and tonic."

"That's too fancy for here. You can have gin, in a tea-cup."

"Gin. In a tea-cup."

I nodded at Ernie.

"How was it downtown?" I asked.

"Pretty lousy."

"They find anything?"

"They found nothing. All of us responded negative to the test. We were all sent home."

"I see. Now what's with the urgent conversation with me?"

He squirmed around in his seat like he was sitting at a concert and didn't like music. Then he blurted, "That was my gun."

"What?"

"The gun that Charles Morse produced, it was my gun, I'd swear it."

"Your gun?"

"A shining, nickel-plated, thirty-eight calibre revolver, with a pearl-type handle. There aren't too many around like that."

"Look, pal. Did you kill Joe Malamed?"

"No."

We sat in silence and stared across at one another. He seemed a nice enough guy, about twenty-eight, with glistening black well-combed hair, scared brown eyes, dark cheeks closely shaven to a bluc sheen, and long white fidgety fingers with buffed nails.

I said, "Why do you think it's your gun?"

"Because I had one exactly like that. It disappeared."

"Got a license for the gun?"

"Yes."

"How'd it disappear?"

"I don't know. It was in my apartment. Then it wasn't."

"Any idea who hooked it?"

"Any one of five hundred people."

"Do that a little slow for me, will you, pal?"

"I have a penthouse suite on Central Park South. Two days ago, I had a cocktail party, and it was open house. People came and people went. You know how it is."

"Yeah," I said.

"Here's the truth, Mr. Chambers. When it comes to guns—any kind of firearms—I'm a bust. I have a phobia about guns. I may have fired a gun at targets maybe three times in all my life, and each time I was scared to death."

"Then how come you own one?"

"I got it as a gift. I . . . I sort of liked it, made me feel good, that sort of thing. I got a license for it, and kept it around the apartment—for protection, sort of, though I don't think that's the real reason."

"What would the real reason be?"

"I don't know. Made me a big man with a gun. Blew up my ego in some cockeyed kind of way." His smile was wan.

"All right, then, Melvin—"

"My friends call me Mel."

"Okay, Mel. Just what do you want me to do for you?"

"I want to retain you—right now—to discover who murdered Joe Malamed."

"Don't you think the cops can do it?"

"That's just what I'm afraid of. I'll wind up as their pigeon. Guns can be traced, can't they?"

"I take it you didn't mention any of this to Lieutenant Parker."

"No. I didn't mention it. Will you handle it, Mr. Chambers?"

"Did you kill him, Mel?" I asked again.

"No, I didn't."

"Okay. I'll handle it. But I'll tell you right now, if it develops that you're it, I turn you in, pal, *and* I keep the fee." I tried a smile. "It's what you call ethics."

He took out a folding check book and a small ball-point pen and he scribbled and he scraped the check from the pad and handed it over. It was for one thousand dollars. I like rich clients.

"Fine," I said and folded the check and put it away. "One question. About you and Joe Malamed."

His face puckered. "Yes?"

"How'd you get along, you and Joe—say, as of yesterday?"

He looked for more gin in the tea-cup. There was no more gin in the tea-cup. "I'd rather not discuss that."

"Suit yourself. You're the client." What the hell—it would be easy to find out.

"Where'll I be able to reach you, Mr. Chambers? I mean—"

"I've got an office, but I'm almost never there. I'm up nights and sleep days, mostly. Here. Here at Schmatola's. From curfew till sun rise, you figure to find me here."

"Swell."

He stood up and rubbed his hands. "Okay if I leave now?"

"Not at all. Leaving myself. Hang on till I pay the check, and I'll ride up a way with you."

## IV

The next day I made the bank by a whisker and deposited his check. It was a day of high wind and everybody looked healthy. I fought the wind to a theatrical-type store and made a purchase that put a dent in my new fee. I fought the wind again to the Long-Malamed. I didn't take a cab. You've got to do something for your lungs occasionally.

There's nothing more dreary than a night club before it opens, except a graveyard in a fog. The Long-Malamed smelled of yesterday's cigarette smoke and today's disinfectant. One bright light cast long and frightening shadows. Tobias was behind the bar vigorously putting sparkle to the cocktail glasses.

"Hello, Mr. Chambers," he said. "You're a little previous. We ain't serving yet."

"You're serving him, aren't you?" I pointed to the back of a man at the end of the bar.

"He's special."

"Is he?"

The man turned around. It was Louis Parker.

"Special enough, Tobias. My apologies." I placed my flat package down on the bar and went to Parker. I said, "How goes it, Lieutenant?"

"Not too good. What brings you pub-crawling this early?"

"Same brings you, I imagine."

"You mean you cajoled a client out of this mess?"

"That's the truth, Lieutenant."

"Who?"

"Confidential, but I've got a hunch you'll know sooner than you think."

"We're not going to cross wires, are we, Pete?"

"With other guys in the Department—maybe. But not with you, Louis."

"Thanks."

"How goes it?"

"Stinks."

"The gloves?"

"Just the way I figured. Absolutely nothing."

"The gun?"

"Only prints are Charles Morse's, which is as it should be, since he handled it taking it out of his pocket. The rest were smudges."

"Pretty smart."

"Smarter than you think. I had one angle. I figured that would do it for me."

"What was that, Lieutenant?"

"All our respects furnished us with specimens of their prints. Voluntarily, of course, but on request."

"But if the gun had no useful prints, and the gloves had nothing—what'd you need the specimens for?"

"My angle. Any guesses about my angle?"

"Nope, I'm dull this afternoon."

"There's stuff people forget, when they're not too smart."

"Such as?"

"Such as you leave no prints when you wear gloves and no nitrate particles hit your palm—but what people frequently forget is that prints can be left *inside* the gloves. Check?"

"You're a cutie, Lieutenant."

"Well, whoever pulled this was cuter. They made sure to rub the fingerprints off the gloves, so nothing showed." He shrugged. "Smart operator, Petie. Real smart. It'll be a pleasure to nab him. Or her."

"Trace the gun yet?"

"We're working on that."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." He got off the stool, went to the door, said, "Keep in touch," and left.

"Nice man," said Tobias.

"The best. How's about an eye-opener?"

"Only for you, Mr. Chambers. On the house." He poured.

I raised the glass. "First today."

The doors swung and Irene Whitney entered, pert in a neat blue suit and rosy with the wind.

"First today," I said at Irene Whitney.

She made a prim face. "Anybody who drinks before nightfall is a drunk."

"That's me," I said, and knocked it down. It burned and I shuddered.

"Got a present for you."

"For me?" said Tobias.

"For her," I said.

"Naturally," said Tobias.

Irene hovered while I unwrapped the package. Her perfume was

lovely. "Oh," she said with enough enthusiasm to equal the purchase price. "Opera-length nylons! Long, wonderful lace nylons." She looked at me with real affection, kissed my cheek. "You're a thoughtful kind of guy." She kissed me again.

"You'll leave marks on his face," Tobias said.

"Let *me* worry," I said, "about marks on my face."

Irene leaned toward Tobias. "How's she taking it?" she said softly. "Mrs. Malamed."

"Like a trooper." He inclined his head toward the inner room. "She's inside, setting things up for tonight."

"If she asks for me, I'm upstairs, getting into my uniform." Her wonderful teeth shone in a smile. "Uniform, I call it." She took up the package. "Thanks, Peter."

"Date for tonight? You've got your bribe."

"It's no bribe and you know it. Boy, how these men try to talk tough! Pick me up at closing?"

"You bet."

"Date for tonight." She went to the stairway, called back to Tobias: "Ruth here yet?"

"Upstairs."

She ran up the stairs. I watched her legs. Then I turned back to Tobias. "How's it set up, up there?"

"Joe Malamed's room in the rear, Claire Malamed's room in the front, a couple of toilets, and one room, in the middle, for acts to dress in."

"I get it. Now about this Frankie Hines."

"You mean that big typhoon?"

"Typhoon?"

"Retired rich guy?"

"Tycoon."

"Yeah, tycoon."

"I'm going to want to talk with him. Where do I find him? You know?"

"This time of day, you figure to reach him at the coffee pot."

"That what?"

"Coffee pot."

"What coffee pot, Tobias?"

"One of the enterprises of the typhoon is a little coffee pot over on Fifty-second by Seventh. It's called The Horseshoe. It's easy to find. It's the one with no customers. I think that Frankie just keeps it to have a little hangout for himself, maybe a hot meal sometimes when he's hungry."

He looked over my shoulder, and went back to polishing glasses. A young woman came up to us. She said, "I'm sorry, but we're not serving yet." She looked at the shot glass near me, and then she looked at Tobias. Tobias said, "He's a cop."

"Cop?"

"Private," I said.

Tobias said, "Mr. Chambers, Peter Chambers—Mrs. Claire Malamed."

"Well . . ." I said. "Well . . ."

"May I ask why you're staring, Mr. Chambers?"

"Well . . ." I said. "Uh . . . I didn't expect . . . someone quite

as young . . .” Lamely I added: “And beautiful.”

Beautiful she was. And young she was. About twenty-five, I figured, with blue eyes, and a white skin like the inside of an apple, and pouting red lips, and clean sweeping eyebrows, and blonde blonde hair piled over her head in beautiful waves that shone like gold in the harsh white light. Her voice was low, deep, musical.

“Young?” she said. “I’m twenty-seven. I was married to Mr. Malamed for two years. We were quite happy. I’ve told all of this to Lieutenant Parker, but if there are any other vital statistics that I can supply, I’d be most happy.”

“No,” I said. “No, thank you.”

“Then, if you’ll excuse me, I have many things to attend to, Mr. Chambers . . .”

“Yes, of course, Mrs. Malamed . . .”

She looked from the shot glass, to me, to Tobias, turned and walked off toward the inner room. She was almost as good from the back as from the front.

“Tell her I left,” I said to Tobias.

“What?”

“Tell her I left.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No. I’m leaving you, but I’m not leaving. I’m going”—I pointed —“upstairs.”

I put a twenty on the bar. “Now kindly don’t be insulted. This is business, a business deduction. It’s for you to say—in case of emergency

—that I said goodbye, started for the doors, that you turned your back and went to work on the glasses. If I happened to sneak back—how would you know?”

“But Mr. Chambers . . .”

“Take the twenty, Tobias. I’m going up to talk to Irene.”

I went. But I didn’t go to Irene. I by-passed the middle room, and the toilets, and I didn’t go to the back room. I went to the front room, which turned out to be a lavishly-furnished, large studio room with slanting glass facing north for a ceiling. I mosied. I peeked. I searched. I poked. I made like a hundred percent private eye hot on the trail of nothing. In a drawer of a dressing table I found a jewel box. When I lifted the top, it opened to three stuck-out compartments like a little step ladder. There was a good deal of gleaming junk in it, some of it quite expensive. In the lower compartment there was a flat velvet box. It contained a large gold medal about three inches across and about a half inch thick. I took it out and examined it. Just from its weight it must have been worth three-four hundred dollars. One side of it had engraved crossed pistols, beneath that the initials C.M. The reverse side said *Target Club Competition, First Prize, June 15, 1962*. I slipped the medal into my pocket, shut the velvet box, put it back into the jewel case, and stuffed it back into the drawer. I tried another drawer. A voice behind me said:

"Looking for something special, Mr. Chambers?"

I twisted around. Claire Malamed had a black automatic in her hand and a funny look in her eye.

"No," I said. "Nothing special."

"Get out of here. Quickly, please."

"I'm not finished yet, Mrs. Malamed."

"You're finished." The automatic dipped and came up again.

I began to move toward her. "I've been retained to look into Mr. Malamed's murder. That's what I'm doing here, looking into Mr. Malamed's murder."

"You're trespassing."

"Am I?"

"Get out, and get out quickly."

Her soft voice moved up a peg. "And don't come a step nearer."

I kept walking. Toward her. "I don't think you'll pull that trigger."

"Won't I, though? I'm within my rights, and you know it."

"I'm gambling you don't."

"Don't come near me."

I didn't stop. I lost my gamble.

She pulled at the trigger. I saw the knuckle of her forefinger go white with pressure.

Nothing happened.

She squeezed at it again.

Nothing happened again.

I was near enough. I slapped the gun from her hand and picked it up. I looked at it, emptied the clip and threw the gun on a divan.

"Automatics don't shoot," I said, "with the safety catch on."

I tried for a short, curt, military bow, and I got out of there.

## V

The Horseshoe was a narrow white-walled slot set in between a huge dour warehouse and a clip joint with strippers. There was a narrow plastic-topped eating bar with six fixed oscillating stools, two little tables and a telephone booth. Nothing more. There was no room for anything more. The only customer was the boss, seated at one of the stools, a thick-mugged cup of coffee in front of him. He was speaking to the counter-man, tall and very slender, wrapped in a white apron and wearing a white overseas-style hat. The counter-man's eyes were squinting in agitated grief, and his Adam's apple had more jumps than the navel of a belly-dancer.

"This is the pay-off," Frankie Hines was saying. "When a man don't like the coffee in his own coffee pot, maybe it's time to change up the help around here."

"But, Mr. Hines! I just made that coffee ten minutes ago."

"What'd you use to make it with? Buckshot?"

I coughed. I said, "Mr. Hines?"

Frankie whirled around. "Yeah? What's it to you?"

"My name's Peter Chambers."

"Oh, yeah, yeah. The hero of the Long-Malamed. The private eye. Yeah, yeah." He looked at me coldly. "What do you want here?"

"Talk."

"With me?"

"If you please, Mr. Hines."

"What can we talk about?"

"Let's talk and find out, huh?"

How about one of these tables?"

"Sure thing."

He moved and we sat at one of the tables. I said, "I've been retained, privately, on that Joe Malamed thing."

"Yeah?"

"You're one of the suspects, Mr. Hines."

"Not me, fella. They gave me that paraffin job down there, and I came out clean."

"So did everyone else. Which sets you all up as suspects again."

He contemplated that. "You know," he said. "You got something there." Then he smiled. "Only with me"—shrug—"no motive."

"There's a question about that."

"Is there?"

"Did you tell the police, Mr. Hines, about your argument with Mr. Malamed?"

"Now look here—"

"Did you tell them that you threatened him?"

"Now look, fella—"

"I didn't either, Mr. Hines."

He sat back, a little man with shrewd eyes, and a sun-baked wrinkled face. "Why?" he said. "Why didn't you?"

"Because, I'm not put together that way. I don't put a man on the spot, unless the spot fits. I don't know, yet, about you."

"Thanks. You're a right guy."

"Do we talk, Mr. Hines?"

"You bet your saddle boots we do, Mr.— Mr.— what did you say your name was."

"Peter Chambers."

"You bet your boots we do, Pete. You ask the questions, pal."

"What was the argument about?"

He brought out cigarettes, offered one to me, and we smoked. "Two months ago," he said, "down in Florida, he went for a bundle on the hayburners. He didn't want to wire to New York for more cabbage— didn't want his wife to know he got cleaned. I lent him fifteen G's."

"Fifteen thousand dollars? Just like that?"

"Oh, I took his I.O.U. and there was a nice little piece of change for a bonus. Now, when I come back up north and present my marker, he keeps stalling me."

"Maybe he couldn't afford to pay?"

"He could afford it, all right."

"How would you know?"

"There's a lot of thing I know, Mr. Chambers. I know that night club was a paying proposition. I know he lived high, wide and handsome. I know he carried two hundred thousand dollars worth of insurance for that young wife of his. And I know, only last week, he bought a five thousand dollar mink coat."

"For his wife?"

"His wife is *got* a mink coat. No. For that doll, the singer, Ruth

Whatever-her-name-is. I ain't good at names, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Quite a guy, Mr. Joe Malamed."

"And his partner didn't like no part of that."

"Melvin Long?"

"Yeah, Melvin. You want to know why?"

"I do."

"Because that Melvin's crazy about that chick. You know her, Ruthie?"

"No, I don't. By the way, did you attend Long's cocktail party?"

"Bet your saddle boots I did. What a shindig. Why?"

"Just asking. You know a hell of a lot about these people, don't you?"

"Know a hell of a lot more, but right now I ain't talking. I got a fifteen-thousand-dollar investment to protect. I'm going to make one last pitch for it tonight. If I don't get it—stand by for a load of information that'll have your ears buzzing. Where you going to be later on?"

"Tell you in a minute." I looked at my watch. "Hold it, huh?"

I got up and went to the phone books hanging from a hook near the booth. I checked Charles Morse's number, and I called him. I explained the situation and asked him if I could come over for a chat. He was very cordial, informed me that he would be at home, working, for the remainder of the afternoon, and that I would be welcome at any time. I thanked him, hung up and went out to Frankie.

I said, "I'll be on the town for maybe an hour or two. After that, home until midnight. That okay?"

"Fine. What's the phone number?"

I wrote out my phone number and gave it to him.

"Fine," he said, "fine. I got a hunch if I spill my information, you're going to have your killer, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Chambers." I took back the sheet and wrote my name over the number. "Just so you don't forget," I said.

"You're going to have your killer, or you're going to come pretty close. That's my hunch, Peter."

"I hope you're right. What's wrong with right now for the information?"

"Got an investment to protect."

"It's up to you, Frankie."

"It's always up to Frankie."

I left him working up a new head of steam about the coffee for the counterman.

## VI

Fifteen East Nineteenth Street is near enough to Two Forty Centre Street, which is Police Headquarters. Louis Parker operated out of Headquarters so I dropped in on him first and found him desk high in paper work.

"Don't ask me how goes it," he said, "because the answer is the same. It stinks."

"Nothing new?"

"I told you ballistics proved up the murder gun, didn't I?"

"You didn't, but I assumed as much."

"You got anything for me, Pete?"

"Not yet. Not anything new."

Parker scrubbed at his head. He looked down at a sheet in front of him. "What have we got? We got it narrowed down to one table. What have we got there?"

"Claire Malamed, Charles Morse, Ruth Benson, Frank Hines, Melvin Long, Whodunit, Professor?"

He scrubbed harder. "Scratch me. The wife? Why should she? She's sitting pretty, married to a very rich man. The book critic? Why should he? Plus he wouldn't plant the murder gun in his own pocket. The singer? Why should she? What would she have to gain? The ex-jockey? Don't figure, he was an old friend. The partner? Why should he? Plus he's supposed to have a phobia about guns. He says. What a mess, huh?"

"What about the gun?"

"No prints except what supposed to be on it. The rest, just smudges."

"You told me that too, Louis. I mean have you traced it yet?"

He wrinkled his eyes at me. "You keep bothering me with that one question. Why?"

"Just asking, Louis."

"Just asking—why?"

"Well, a gun ought to be easy to trace.

"Ought it to be?" His hand slammed down on the desk. "Well,

this one ain't. Nothing is easy in this miserable case."

"Good bye, Lieutenant. You're in no humor for casual chit-chat."

Charles Morse's studio was warm and book-lined and thick-rugged. Charles Morse worked his cigarette through an ivory holder. He was lavish with his whiskey and that is always good by me.

"I've found the Long-Malamed a nice spot, Mr. Chambers," he said. "Strange as it may seem, a book critic works hard, and needs relaxation like anybody else."

"Yes. I presume so." I sipped excellent scotch.

"A good many of us are frustrated writers. And I'm one of those. Our creative abilities just don't measure up to our critical tastes." He deposited ash in a tray. "So—under the yoke of my permanent frustration—I'm a pretty good customer at drinking bars, and I've been an excellent customer of the Long-Malamed ever since it opened. Which brings me to the reply to your question. Yes, I know most of the people at the club fairly well."

"Was there—well, any disharmony—that you know of?"

"No—not really." His brows came together in thought and he flipped a fingernail at his mustache. He was a handsome man. "There was a bit of a controversy about a week ago, between Mr. Long and Mr. Malamed. The bartender, Tobias, was present at the time, and I

was rather, well, an interested observer. Both men were drinking, and I wouldn't want to give it undue importance. But there was some sort of dispute."

"How did it wind up?"

"Mr. Malamed threatened Mr. Long, and Mr. Long laughed it off."

"*Malamed* threatened *Long*? Now there's a switch."

He smiled. "I didn't think it had any bearing on the case."

"Do you know what the argument was about?"

"It concerned a young lady. Ruth Benson. Do you know her? The young lady who sings."

"Yeah, Ruth Benson. Now what was the argument about, Mr. Morse?"

"I really don't know."

"I see." I set down the glass, uncrossed my legs, got up and we shook hands. "Thanks for your help, sir."

"Not at all, Mr. Chambers. I wasn't of any help really, I know that. But if there's anything I can do, at any time—please don't hesitate. I'm at the Long-Malamed practically every night."

"Thanks. Thanks, again."

I went home. I called my office for messages but my secretary was gone for the day. I thought about the fact that I was certainly giving Joe Malamed my exclusive interest. But then I had accepted a one grand fee to discover exactly who had knocked off Joe Malamed. I shrugged and took a bath.

I lay long and smoked many cigarettes, littering the bathroom floor. Then I got out, rubbed down, cleaned up the bathroom floor and shaved. I went to the bedroom and set the clock for eleven, and at eleven it woke me. I yawned, went to shave, realized I had already shaved, went to the kitchen and raided the refrigerator. I cleaned up the dishes and dressed. I wore a formal navy blue suit because come what may on the Malamed thing, there was going to be a prize. I had a date with Miss Whitney come closing time.

I was at the door, going out, when the phone rang. I bulled back like a wrestler who suddenly discovers he's not in a fix. I caught the phone at its last ring.

"Hello," I said. "Hello."

"Hey. I thought you wasn't home."

"Who's this?"

"Frankie Hines."

"I'm glad you called."

"You're going to be gladder. Look, I'm in my joint, the Horse-shoe. They ain't nobody here, no counterman, no kitchen help, no nobody. I'm alone, and I'm waiting for you. I want to talk with you."

"Fine. I'll be right there."

"The faster the better. I been pushed around plenty, and I'm ready now for some pushing around on my own. I'll show—"

There were four shots.

I heard them as clearly as though I were there.

Then I heard a grunt that turned to a gasp, the sliding of a body along the phone booth wall, a thump, and the awful lonely knocking of a phone receiver, swinging, unheld.

I hung up and dialed Headquarters right away.

## VII

When I got to the Horseshoe, it was teeming with cops, prowl cars askew at the curb, and a crowd already collected. I shoved through, got sass from a young cop, returned the sass but softly, explained who I was, and he ushered me in to Louis Parker, hat on back of his head, busy with details.

"You again?" Louis said without enthusiasm.

The young cop saluted. "He said he knows you, Lieutenant."

"Okay, okay," Louis said impatiently.

"Yes, sir," said the cop, saluting again, but not quite as smartly. He turned and went back into the street.

"This is a new wrinkle," Louis said. "I can't get called into a case without running into you."

"I called you, Louis."

"How's that?"

"I called you."

"You called me?" He was suddenly interested. His hat moved forward on his head. "How come?"

"I was talking to Hines when the shooting started."

"You mean you were here?"

"On the phone."

"How come?"

"He called me. At home."

"What about?"

"Something," I said, "about collecting fifteen thousand dollars that Joe Malamed owed him."

"We found an I.O.U. in his wallet for that amount. From Malamed, to him. You mean he was going to retain you to try to collect?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"What time was it?"

"About five to twelve. How'd he get it, Louis?"

"A forty-five. Three bullets."

"Trace the gun yet, Louis?"

"We just got here, for God's sake. Furthermore, there ain't no gun. Nobody kindly left a gun."

"I don't mean this gun. I mean the one that got Joe Malamed?"

He came very close to me. The hat went back on his head. He said very quietly: "What the hell is this extraordinary interest in our tracing that gun?"

"Just asking, Lieutenant."

"I don't believe you. What's that gun got to do with you?"

"Nothing, Louis."

"Something's tickling you about that gun, Pete. You want to tell me?"

"Nothing's tickling, Louis."

"Okay. Anything else you want to tell me? About this one here. This Frankie Hines."

"There's nothing else I know."

His face tightened. "I doubt that." Then he said: "Okay. Blow.

I don't need you. I got work."  
"Louis . . ." I said, aggrieved.  
"Blow."

I blew. I walked across town and up to the Long-Malamed. The bar was loaded three deep. I gave my hat and coat to Irene and she returned a small wolf-whistle.

"Handsome tonight! All dressed up in the blue serge, and all."

"Special for you, beautiful."

"Well, thanks."

"How's Yale?"

"Called me twice today. How many times did you call?"

"Who gave you nylons?"

She grinned, and the way she grinned, it's the sweetest thing that can happen to any face. "I'm wearing them."

I looked down and I loved it. Nylons are nylons, but nylons on Irene are the way that the guy that invented nylons dreamed that nylons should look, and he'd have to be a pretty good dreamer at that.

Customers with coats interrupted my reverie.

"See you," I said.

I called for my drink to Tobias, and it was handed to me in a relay of three bar-flies. The third was Charles Morse. "Nothing like a murder to stimulate business," he said. "Is there?"

"Nope." I took my drink. "What are you doing out here?"

"Can't get in back there. They're capacity."

I could hear Ruth Benson singing in the inner room.

"She almost finished?" I asked. He listened. "Yes. This is her last song." He smiled. Sadly. "I know the routines here pretty well." He raised his glass. "Skool." We both drank.

"Melvin Long here?" I asked.

"He's somewhere in the rear."

"And Mrs. Malamed?"

"She was called downtown. Further police questioning. Those details never end."

"Lieutenant Parker?"

He shook his head. "This time it's the D.A.'s office."

"I want to talk with her myself, though, between you and me, I don't think she loves me overly. I want to talk with you some more too, and with Ruth Benson, and Melvin Long"—I looked about—"but this is no place to talk."

"Here she is now."

Ruth Benson came through to the cocktail lounge. She was tall and very dark, with a rich warm skin, an oval face, black up-tilted eyes, and black hair worn in a braid like a crown over her head.

"Excuse me," I said. I went to her. "Miss Benson?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Peter Chambers. I'm a private detective."

"So?"

"I've been retained on that Joe Malamed thing. Can I talk with you?"

"Of course."

"Can you get out for a few minutes?"

"I don't understand."

"If we could go somewhere where it's a little quieter . . ."

"Oh, Yes. If you wish."

She had a flat monotonous controlled voice. You couldn't tell what she was thinking from the way she talked. You couldn't tell from her expression either. Make-up covered her face like a tarpaulin over a rainy infield. Her cheeks were smooth, powdered brown, her full lips were dark red with a purple cast, her eyelashes were long and heavy, and there was a shining dark cream over the lids. There were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She said, "Excuse me. I'll be with you in a moment."

She disappeared, and came back with a wrap. I decided to forego my hat and coat. I took her arm and we moved toward the door. Irene threw me a look that could kill at fifty paces, but I ducked. I pushed open the door, and the doorman opened a cab door for us. We went to Pete and Jerry's Patch on Fifty-seventh where it was quiet and we could talk. We took a back table. I ordered scotch and water. She ordered a double stinger. She removed her wrap. Her off-the-shoulder dress was of black satin, cut deep. Her shoulders were smooth and dark and her arms were slender but round. She leaned toward me. Her breasts were almost completely exposed, full and smooth and dark, and heaving.

"What is it, Mr. Chambers? What can I do for you?"

"I don't know. Yet, If you'll forgive me, I'll come right to the point."

"Please do."

"You know that I'm investigating Malamed's murder."

"So you told me."

"Two things, Miss Benson. If you don't want to answer, you can tell me to go fly a kite."

The waiter brought the drinks. She drank hers quickly.

"Two things, Mr. Chambers?"

"First, I've been informed that Joe Malamed recently purchased a mink coat. For you. Second, I heard that Malamed and Melvin Long had an argument. About you. Want to talk about any of that?"

Again she drank of the stinger. "Yes."

"Fine. Did you accept a mink coat from Malamed?"

"Yes."

"His wife know about this?"

"I don't think so."

"Want to talk more about it?"

"Yes, I do." She finished the drink, pushed the glass away. "I loved Joe Malamed."

I wove an aimless design of wet circles on the table with the bottom of my glass.

She said, "I know what you're thinking. I met Joe before he was married, in Miami. I went for him, hook, line and sinker. He went for me too. It was hot and heavy for a while, and then he met Claire. She came down as part of a chorus line, a cute kid from a rather good family.

He made a big play for her. When I saw the way it was, I quit—I was working in his club at the time. I went to Havana, and then I took an engagement in Paris—Spivy's. When I got back to New York, they were married, and he'd bought the Long-Malamed with Melvin."

"And how was it between you, then, when you returned?"

"Bad as ever. Really just as bad."

"Even though he was married?"

She cried peculiarly. Her eyes were shaped so that the inside corners pointed downward. The tears were wet straight lines down her nose. She was crying bitterly, but her face remained the same, as did her voice. Only the quickened movements of her dark naked bosom showed her agitation.

"I loved Joe Malamed. And he loved me. I've been around a long time, Mr. Chambers. Joe was a complex man. It is very possible that he was deeply in love with Claire too. She's much younger than I am, and a far different type. I won't even say I was jealous." She paused and took a deep breath. "Maybe I've been around too long, but there's one thing I've learned in life. You can't hate it all. Of anything, I loved Joe Malamed, and Joe loved me, and that was that, period."

I gave her my handkerchief and she dabbed at her face.

I said, "Do you think Claire knew?"

"I don't think so. I wouldn't care if she did. But I don't think so. Joe

was too smart for that and, in a way, too kind."

"Do you think she loved him?"

"I wouldn't know. Really, I wasn't interested."

"But—I mean—the guy's wife?"

"The moral aspects are beyond me. Claire Malamed was something away, outside. Joe Malamed was for me, and whatever he did, he did—I couldn't cut Joe away from me any more than I could cut my head off. If you disapprove, I don't give a damn. I'm giving you the facts, and I don't care how you feel about them. I'm telling you because it might help. I've never been vengeful, but whoever killed Joe Malamed—I want that person dead. I'd do it myself."

"I understand."

"I'm glad I'm working. I'm glad I can come in there and sing. I'd go crazy if I didn't. Working and . . ." She looked at the empty cocktail glass.

I waved to the waiter for refills.

"And Melvin Long? His argument with Malamed?"

"Oh, that."

"It might have some bearing, Miss Benton?"

"Do you think it could have been Melvin?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"What about the argument?"

The waiter brought the new drinks and took away the old glasses. Ruth Benson sipped, her black eyes shining over the rim of the glass.

"He's in love with me."

"Melvin?"

She sipped again, set the glass down. "Melvin. I could be his mother. I don't mean in years—but I could be his mother. A sweet, spoiled kid."

"Did Joe know?"

"He thought it was funny."

"Then why the argument?"

"Melvin had told Joe that I had been at his apartment. That riled Joe, for a minute, and they had words. Joe forgot it, fast."

"Joe threatened him. He was heard threatening him."

"Maybe he did. He might have told him he'd knock his teeth in, something like that, but I bet he forgot it ten minutes later."

"Did you know Frankie Hines?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that Joe owed Frankie fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Joe never welshed on a debt in his life."

"He was in the process of welshing on Frankie."

"That's a lie."

"Easy, Miss Benson. I happen to know that he owed Frankie the money, and that he was stalling on paying. And he could afford to pay."

"Right, Mr. Chambers. Right on both counts."

"Yet you say he never welshed a debt in his life."

"Right, there, too."

"Is that supposed to make sense?" I asked.

"You bet your life. Joe was down there, on a vacation, playing horses at Tropical. Joe was a big bettor, never threw it into the machines. He'd sit in the clubhouse and make last minute bets with a bookmaker. It would be too late to go into the machines to knock the price down. Many big bettors operate like that."

"I know that they do."

"He went for about sixty thousand dollars."

"What's that got to do with Frankie Hines?"

"Frankie was touting him."

"What does that mean?"

"Lots of big gamblers don't know too much about horses. They get a guy they trust, who knows the game, and they depend on his advice."

"I know that too."

"Frankie recommended the bookmaker."

"What's that got to do with Frankie's fifteen thousand?"

"Joe lost sixty thousand dollars. Then he borrowed fifteen from Frankie and he lost that too. That was enough. He had it. He came back north. Back here, a syndicate slob straightened him out, told him he'd been taken."

"How?"

"Frankie's bookmaker was a nobody, big flash, no organization. A shill. He and Frankie played footsie. They took Joe. Frankie gave Joe bum steers, Joe bet the bookmaker and Frankie and the bookmaker split Joe's losings."

"How do you know all this?"

"Did you ever hear of Three-fingered Gray?"

"Yeah. Boss man in Miami."

"He's been sick. An old friend of Joe's. He's holed up in an estate in Orlando. Joe sent me down to Gray with the whole story. The book-maker's name—the shill—is Sylvan Dell. Gray hauled him in. The guy spilled his story. Gray was coming up here to see doctors. He was bringing Dell with him. They were due here this week. That's why Joe was stalling Frankie Hines. He didn't want to tip his hand until he could face him with this Sylvan Dell."

"I understand," I said. "Fully."

I sat back and drank scotch. She had stopped crying. She returned my handkerchief. The waiter came up and I paid the check. She had some stinger left, and she killed that. I had no scotch.

I said, "Just one little bit more, please."

"Sure."

"You said that Melvin had told Joe you were at his apartment. Was that true?"

"Yes, it was."

"Do you want to tell me about that?"

"Of course. The kid was beginning to give me a hard time, pawing around. I had to set him straight, but it was tough to do, working in the club. One night, last week, we had a few drinks together, and he asked me to come over to his place. I accepted, because I wanted to

flatten that out once and for all. He's got a beautiful place, way up, overlooking the park. We had a few more drinks up there, and then he started making with the pitch out on the terrace. I stopped him, and I told him off."

"How'd he take it?"

"Not too good. He was practically feeling no pain at the time. He got crazy-eyed, you know, all melodramatic. All of a sudden, he runs inside and comes back with a gun. Now he's going to kill himself, finish it off. You know these kids when they've got one too many in them. I talked him down, easy-like, and finally, I took the gun away from him. I never handled one of them in my life. I'm moving away from him, holding it, when all of a sudden, I must have touched something wrong. It went off."

"Anybody hurt?"

"I thought so for a moment."

"Why?"

"He dropped. I thought I'd shot him. I bent over him, and he was out, cold. I looked for blood, something, but he wasn't hurt. He'd just plain fainted, and me with that thing in my hand. I ran inside, put the gun in a drawer somewhere, under some things, and I brought out water. Nothing helped. I almost drowned him. He stayed out. Then I tried brandy. Finally—I must have poured a ton of brandy down his throat—he came to."

"He's got a phobia about guns."

"You're telling me." She looked

at her watch. "I've got to get back. Is there anything else? Anything at all?"

"Nothing," I said. And then, without looking at her, scrunching up from the table, I said, "I'm sorry about Joe, real sorry, Miss Benson."

### VIII

The Long-Malamed was still crowded. Ruth Benson went directly to the back room. Irene Whitney made a face at me, but there was something extra-special in the face. Could be my excursion with Ruth Benson was going to do me more good with Irene than with the murder of Joe Malamed.

I pushed through to Tobias. I said, "Where's Morse?"

"Got a seat inside."

"Mrs. Malamed?"

"Still downtown."

"Melvin?"

"Here I am," Melvin said, touching my shoulder.

"Can we go upstairs, you and I, where we can talk?"

"Sure."

"Just a minute." I leaned over to Tobias. "When you get a chance, and you get a free waiter, tell Morse I'm upstairs with Melvin, to come up and join us."

"Okay, Mr. Chambers."

Melvin took me upstairs to the room that had been Joe Malamed's. It was an all-male room, with a fireplace, and heavy oak furniture.

"Melvin," I said. "Why didn't

you tell me there was trouble between you and Joe Malamed?"

"It wouldn't have helped. In finding your murderer."

"Wouldn't it? And why didn't you tell me about Ruth Benson?"

"Now, look, Mr. Chambers—"

"Why didn't you tell me, Melvin? You hired me. You must have figured me for a pretty smart guy. You must have figured I'd find out. Why didn't you tell me, Melvin?"

"Because it was none of your business, that's why."

"Wasn't it?"

"If I thought it would be of any help, I'd have told you. I don't believe in washing dirty linen in public." His face got creased up and his fidgety fingers came out shaking. "Look, Mr. Chambers, I didn't kill Joe Malamed."

From the doorway, Charles Morse said: "They want you downstairs, Mr. Long."

Melvin's hands dropped to his sides, and he looked toward me. "Is it all right?"

"Sure, Melvin."

His head swivelled from me to Morse to me, and then he turned and walked out quickly.

Morse dropped into an easy chair near the door. "I heard, Mr. Chambers."

"Heard what?"

"His denial. Didn't you accuse him of murder?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm accusing you."

"I beg your pardon."

"I'm accusing you. Of the murder of Joe Malamed."

He squinted at me a moment, and smiled. He had his ivory holder out. He dropped it back in his pocket and stood up.

"Is this some new method of questioning?"

"Nope. It's a statement of fact."

"I murdered Joe Malamed?"

"That's right."

"You'd better tell me what's on your mind, Chambers," he said, quietly.

I wondered whether he was wearing a gun, but it was too late now for wonder. "One group," I said, "at one table, could have killed Joe Malamed. Someone of that group. You know that?"

"Very well. I also know that unless you can prove beyond a reasonable doubt *which* one at that table did so, legally, there's no case."

"I'll proceed to do so."

"You have my rapt attention, Mr. Chambers."

I moved close, close enough in case of action. "At the table, we have Ruth Benson, Frankie Hines, Melvin Long, Claire Malamed, and you."

"So far, so good."

"We'll first eliminate Ruth Benson."

"Why?"

"Because she was wholly, completely and irrevocably in love with Joe Malamed. She'd have rather killed herself than him. Agreed?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"We'll eliminate, next, Frankie Hines."

"Why?"

"Because he's dead, killed by the same one that killed Malamed."

"I can't accept that, or—shall we say—I accept it with reservations."

"Next we eliminate Melvin Long. Because he has a phobia about guns. His statements to that effect have been positively corroborated by one whose paramount interest is the death of the killer. Whom does that leave, Mr. Morse?"

The smile was still there.

"According to you—Claire Malamed and myself."

"Very good, Mr. Morse. You have an orderly mind."

Then I made my first move to obliterate his smile. I dipped into my pocket and brought up the gold medal I had rescued from Claire Malamed's treasure chest. It worked. The smile went away and never came back. A vein in his temple began to dance.

I held up the gold medal. It glinted in the light.

"The police," I said, "have been busy working on routine. Sooner or later, it will come to them. Whoever killed Joe Malamed had to be an expert marksman. One shot, remember, from the inner room. One little bullet, and wham—Joe Malamed was dead, a bullet through his temple. So . . . our quarry is an expert marksman."

"What do you have in your hand?"

"A medal for marksmanship. Target Club Competition. Awarded to C. M. This was found in Claire Malamed's jewel box."

He was beginning to squirm. "Even if true, that would involve Claire Malamed, not me."

"Uh uh," I said. "Claire Malamed knows nothing about guns. She tried to pop me with an automatic, and didn't even know enough to spring the safety catch. Your initials are C. M., Mr. Morse. You won this medal. It won't take much investigation to prove that. You're our marksman, pal. There isn't another one at that table that could shoot a gun that expertly. The cops will come to it soon enough, and then you're it. Mr. Morse, you're double it."

"And so far this has been your own, solitary venture?"

"So far, but not for long."

"Thanks," he said. He flipped open his jacket. He wore a belt holster. A large forty-five, competently held, looked at me. I looked back at it. "It's pleasant to know," he said, "that no one else, so far, has come to these conclusions. Perhaps no one else will, without prompting from you. And I'll do what I can, within reason of course, to prevent you from prompting."

"Easy, pal," I said. "Would you like me to go on, or would you like to finish off the prompter, promptly? I'd suggest you wait for Calvin and his drums. He does pretty good to screen off the sound of a shot."

"Sure," he said pleasantly. "Go ahead. I'm not really worried about screening shots this time. We had a talk and split up, and I doubled back and found you sneaking around here, and you got tough, and I used a gun for which I have a perfectly valid license. Mrs. Malamed will verify the fact that you've sneaked around before."

"Who's going to make the speeches, pal—you or me?"

"You. For the nonce."

"Okay. The medal. Rather valuable. You gave it to Mrs. Malamed."

"Why?"

"Token of affection. Like a fraternity pin, or Air Force wings. You two are—how do they say it?—thataway."

"How do you know that?"

"We'll come to it. Let's finish one murder first. With Malamed dead, Mrs. Malamed inherits plenty, and she cashes a two hundred thousand dollar policy. Pretty good?"

"Good, indeed."

"So you plan it carefully. Gloves and stuff. Darkness, wild lights, Calvin Cole's drums. You're even smart enough to plant the gun in your own coat pocket, just in case any latent fingerprints can be developed."

"Pretty smart yourself."

"It began to come clear to me," I said, "when Frankie Hines told me he had a hunch about the killer. But he wouldn't talk. Want to know why?"

"I'm dying to know why."

"He said he had an investment to

protect. Investment. Fifteen thousand dollars that Joe owed him. Now, who would he go to for the protection of this investment? Who, Mr. Morse?"

Silence. Silence, and a black gun, and pale steady eyes.

"One person," I said. "Only one. Claire Malamed. Who else? Then he said he was going to make one last pitch for it tonight. And he added, quote: 'If I don't get it—stand by for a load of information.' " I rubbed the flat of my palm across my mouth. "What kind of information that he could use as a crowbar to pry loose fifteen G's? Stack that up against a heavy gold medal that little Claire treasures in her jewel box. C. M. Claire Malamed. Also, Charles Morse. It figured. He was a nosey little guy. He knew about Claire's extra-marital romance. He knew about Claire and you. So he came to her. He said for her to pay up—and he'd shut up."

"Blackmail." Charles Morse made his first impulsive, involuntary statement of the night. "If she paid him once—it would never end."

"Of course. So you followed him back to his eatery, and you let him have it. Probably out of the same forty-five you're holding now. You're supposed to get rid of that, Mr. Morse."

"Right now," he said, "it's safest with me. There are numbers and things to be filed off before disposing of it. Please remember, this was an emergency usage."

I grinned, suddenly, and I thumbed my nose. "Got you, pal." "Got me?"

"Sure. You can't use the gun you're holding no matter how much you want to. It'd tie you right up to Frankie's murder. Work your way out of that one, book critic."

I had thrown him a curve and it confused him. He wavered. For just one instant. I had inched my way near enough to take advantage of that one instant. After all, I'm in the business. I hit his gun hand with my left and I hit his jaw with my right. The left worked. The gun splattered to the floor. The right left him gaping, but he was still on his feet. I waved the left again, big in his face, and as he ducked, the right caught him, good this time, flush on the mouth. He went down, spluttering blood. I reached for the gun—and looked up to Mrs. Claire Malamed, mink coat and all, in the doorway.

"What . . . ?" she said.

"Downstairs, lady. You and your beautiful boy friend."

He got up, quivering. The blood was leaking down his chin. He fluttered a hand for a handkerchief.

"Nope," I said. "No toiletries. Downstairs, the two of you."

The Long-Malamed's cocktail lounge buzzed when I herded them down the white marble stairs in front of Charles Morse's ugly black forty-five.

## IX

Ernie Schmattola's was seething with people. I was seated thigh-close to Irene Whitney and many teacups had come and gone at our table. Suddenly, she turned and kissed me square on the lips. A long, lingering kiss.

"The hell with Yale," she said, "You win. Three cheers for you."

Louis Parker, across the table, cleared his throat.

"Getting back to this pistol."

"Gimme," I said. "I'm dying to see what's so tough to trace."

Louis handed the gleaming nickel-plated pearl-handled thirty-eight revolver to me. He said, "Every possible mark of identification has been filed off. *You* trace it."

"I'm certain I can give you the name and address of the gun's owner within a half hour," I said.

"Bet?"

"Yes. A dinner at the Chambord for Irene—Miss Whitney—and myself, against my contribution of

one thousand dollars to the Police Athletic League."

"Done," Parker said.

At this precise moment, Melvin Long came roaring down Schmattola's aisle, riotously gay or riotously drunk.

"Mr. Chambers," he called.

He stood over us, his grin so wide it lifted his ears. "I found it! Stuck away in the bureau drawer beneath my shirts."

"Found what, Mel?" I asked.

"This." He fumbled in his coat pocket and laid a twin to the nickel-plated job beside the other. There was silence for a long moment.

"And don't worry, Mr. Chambers. Don't worry about the fee. You certainly earned it."

"The fee," I said, "I've just lost, Mel."

No fee. But could I kick? I felt the pressure of Irene's thigh again, and I decided, why hell, no, I couldn't kick.



# CRAVING

*She ran from one reputation to uphold another. But she couldn't escape the fierce craving that mocked her.*

BY NEL RENTUB

DAN noticed the house was dark as he got out of the car. "Hey," he said, "what's with your aunt? How come she's not waiting up? She sick or something?"

"Car trouble," Irma replied. "She's stuck over at grandfather's for the night."

They went up the steps, his face filled with concern. "I don't like it, Irma. I mean you in there alone—and that moron right out back."

"Hector" She laughed. "He's perfectly harmless. Why, Hector wouldn't hurt a fly."

"He belongs in an institution."

"Oh, he isn't that far out, Dan. Did you know Aunt Bessie has the neatest garden in town?"

"Anybody can pull weeds," he

said, frowning. "Anybody can trim the hedge and cut grass." He maneuvered her across the porch and pulled her to him on the glider. Tremulously and passionately he kissed her on the mouth. "But Hector could be dangerous. I don't like the idea of you staying here alone tonight."

She gulped for air. "I imagine you have a few other ideas," she said teasingly. "Such as keeping me company for tonight. But no thanks —"

"I could sleep on the couch."

"I know what you're thinking, Dan," she said righteously. "But I'm not that kind of a girl."

Then his lips were on hers again, pressing hard. She clinched her

teeth together tightly to block his prying tongue. She pounded her fists on his chest. "Don't, Dan!" she panted. "You know what it does to us. Don't start it again."

He ignored her. For a while longer she resisted. But his quivering body transmitted into hers a delicious almost overwhelming flood of desire. She couldn't keep her jaws locked. She couldn't take his hand from the front of her blouse. He pushed her down on the glider and she felt him tugging at her skirt.

Then all at once her mind managed to get control. With a desperate, awkward twist of her body she got her legs under her. She raced for the door and threw it open.

But he wouldn't let her close it. "Come on, Irma," he pleaded. "Don't do this to me."

She pushed at his shoulders frantically. How much longer, she wondered dizzily, could she stand his hot breath on her cheek? "Go!" she whispered. "Please, Dan—just go!"

"I've got to come in. Listen—I'll do the right thing. Right afterwards. We'll cut out for the state line—straight to the JP."

"Let your parents down? Is that the right thing?" She shook her head violently. "No. A church wedding. We promised, remember? Well, that's exactly how it's going to be."

He released the door. "Okay, okay," he said shortly. "Have it your way. Boy! Do I need a drink!"

"Good night, Dan."

"A couple of stiff ones," he said, whirling away from her.

She watched through the screen as he walked rapidly down to his car. The front of her blouse heaved as though two small animals were trapped inside. God how she wanted him!

She rushed outside. Halting at the edge of the porch, she called his name. But the gunned motor of the T-bird swallowed her frantic cry. Rear wheels shrieked against asphalt and he was gone. Insects hummed around her in the warm summer night. With a deep sigh, she turned and went inside, latched the screen door behind her.

In the bedroom she kicked off her shoes. Leaning toward the mirror, nervously erasing smeared lipstick, she saw the big stone on her finger catch the light. She stared at its pure brilliance. She knew she wouldn't be wearing it if she'd really been honest with Dan. Maybe he'd still take her riding in his T-bird, but hardly to dances at the Country Club. A few beers in a cheap roadhouse would be more like it. Afterwards he'd find some place to park out on a lonely road. Wouldn't he be just like the others—the ones back in Hillsdale that knew all about her? Wouldn't he be just as eager to help himself and then talk it all over town?

But since moving in with her aunt she'd conducted herself as the nice young lady. And Dan was very

much the right sort of guy. Only he hadn't made it any easier on her. Of course he hadn't known how it tortured her to wait. It scared her sometimes to realize that she was so much like an alcoholic or dope addict. The only difference was in the thing she craved.

But soon the waiting would end. Next month she'd be telling Dan that she'd injured herself in an accident on a swing. She'd make him think that he was really the first. But so far she'd given him every reason to believe her. She had to keep it that way.

Irma turned off the light and undressed. Completely naked, she stretched out across the bed on her stomach. Her hips squirmed. Her flesh felt feverish, hurting with want. Why must she have to suffer like this when it was so easy for Dan to get relief? She wondered if he'd gone directly to someone else to finish what he'd started with her. Angrily, she remembered the Hillsale boys who had dropped in to see her after the nice parties they never asked her to attend. No matter what it had done to her reputation they'd always come out lilly-white clean. And so would Dan.

"Damn it to hell!" she said aloud. "It just isn't fair!"

A faint breeze drifted in through the hall. She stopped squirming as it touched her and propped her head up on elbows. She gazed intently toward the back of the house. She could see the window in the

kitchen and the sash was only half raised. She got up and went to it and gave it a light but ineffective tug.

Standing there naked in the dark, still house she heard the faint sound of music. It came from a radio. She raised her eyes slightly and peered out into the night. Light sifted through the top of the leafy elm. It flickered as a gust of fresh air brushed her legs. For several moments she watched it, holding herself perfectly still. She chewed thoughtfully at her underlip, a silly tune running through her head. Finally she turned and left the window.

Going first into the bedroom, she got into her robe. She switched on the kitchen light as she passed through on her way to the back door. Pushing it open and stepping into the yard, she felt the cool dampness of dew on her bare feet. She paused at the foot of the outside stairway that led up to the tiny apartment over the garage.

"Hector!" she called. "There's something I want you to do."

After a moment he came out on the landing, a tall and slouched silhouette against the sky. She could make out that he was wearing the usual T-shirt, denim trousers and sneakers.

"It's me—Irma," she said, clutching the thin robe about her. "Come and see if you can get the window up for me."

The radio played on as he obedi-

ently trudged into the house behind her. He came over to the window beside her and leaned over and she watched the lower sash slip up easily for him. He straightened, a proud small-boy grin crossing his face.

She smiled up at him. "Strong, aren't you?"

He grunted, looking pleased.

"Know what?" she said. "You're kind of cute, too. I think it's a shame that—" She paused, and aware of his bright gaze down the top of her robe, said slyly, "But maybe they're all wrong about you, Hector. Maybe you're not as retarded as everybody says you are."

After she'd persuaded him to sit down, it took but a minute to get out the wine bottle and pour a tall glass half full. She held it up for him to see.

"Soda pop?" he asked.

She laughed. "You can call it that. But Aunt Bessie takes it for her nerves. Let's see what it does to you."

He raised the glass eagerly and the reddish liquid began to disappear. "Good," he mumbled. "Good."

"Tell me, Hector," she said, studying him thoughtfully, "what do you think about out there all alone at night? Is it ever girls?"

"Sometimes."

"Could one of them be me?"

Again the small-boy grin. "Yes'm."

She was standing near the table,

looking down at him. "Why, that's real sweet."

He finished the wine. "More?"

Shaking her head, she reached for the empty glass. It was then his long arm shot out toward her. She yanked backward, but too late. His fingers had already closed on the flimsy robe and she heard the fabric rip as she pulled away.

She stared at the large frayed square of pink cloth in his fist. "Wh—why—" she stammered, "why, look what you've done!"

He looked. His eyes were roaming hungrily over her. Her flesh seemed to glow as she fumbled with the front of her robe. Her heartbeat quickened as he stood up, the chair toppling over behind him. He threw down the pink cloth and came toward her.

She backed up. "What are you going to do to me?"

"You know."

"But what?" She tingled all over, but not with fear.

"You know."

She kept backing away from his steady advance. Through the hallway, into the bedroom. "Tell me what you're going to do."

"I won't tell nobody."

She almost laughed in his face. "You won't tell!" Then she felt the back of her legs touch the bed and she sank backward limply. "Who'd believe you if you did?"

He towered over her in the light flowing in from the kitchen. Then his shadow fell across her and the

mattress sagged under his knees. She smelled the wine on his breath, felt the scratch of a stubble of beard. Big hands crawled down her back, settled under her. They pulled upward, clamping her to him.

She gave a little whimpering sound. "Please, Hector—not so rough."

Then she closed her eyes tightly. Her face went slack.

A voice exploded in her ears. "Hey, Irma! Wake up!"

She froze.

The screen door rattled insistent-ly. "Get up! Get dressed! We're cutting out for the state line! Now! I don't intend to wait!"

Utterly paralyzed one moment, she was clawing wildly at Hector the next. Then she screamed at the top of her lungs.

She heard the latch break. The whole house vibrated with the rushing footsteps. Clumsily, Hector rolled over and got out of bed. She sat straight up, wide-eyed. Seizing the sheet, she swept it over her torn robe as Dan lunged into the room. He sprang straight for Hector.

"Goddam filthy beast!" he yelled. "You Goddam filthy beast!"

She stared at his flying fist. It sank so deep in the T-shirt she had to gasp. Hector stumbled backward, wheezing. He crashed heavily into the night table. The lamp tottered crazily, its shade separating as it fell. She watched in horror as Dan

bent over and came up with the hard metal stem. His legs straddled Hector's sprawled form, and Dan raised the bottom part of the lamp high.

"Son of a bitch!" he panted. "I'll spatter your filthy brains!"

Hector threw his arms up as a shield, and she had to jerk her eyes away. She flung herself down on the bed. Her face sank deep into the pillow. It seemed to blot out some of the sound.

A dull metallic thud, and her moment of detachment was gone. The sickening sound came again—and again. She cried. She squeezed the pillow with all her strength and cried. Would he ever stop beating Hector?

Suddenly she realized the terrible sound had ceased. All she could hear was heavy breathing and her own muffled sobs. The worst of the nightmare was over. They would want to give Dan a medal for what he'd done, she imagined, and felt the start of relief.

When Dan came over to her, she knew she wouldn't need to pretend. She *was* shocked. Never in her entire life had she found herself in such a dreadful state of shock.

She heard footsteps then. A hand touched her shoulder, gentle and warm. She waited expectantly for the comforting words.

"I won't tell nobody, let's do it some more."



# A CRUISE

*A Novel*

**BY ED LACY**

*The "Hoyden" roamed the Pacific at the whim of her skipper. It seemed an idyllic life . . . but it ended in murder.*



..... **TO HELL**

**I** WASN'T exactly eavesdropping and they weren't exactly whispering in the cabin below, merely talking in low voices which erupted into violent loudness when Kaipu shouted, ". . . I *am* pregnant, you big ape, and I damn well expect you to do something about it!" Her

warm, husky voice was shrill and harsh in anger.

"Something like what?" Buzz Roberts' deep actor's voice answered. "You know- and knew- my situation; my wife, the crappy good-husband image I have to maintain. Stop being a pest, K.K., I'll give you

money for the kid. Honey, are you sure you're caught?"

"Certainly I'm sure! Plus the doctor on Howland Island confirmed my hunch, day before yesterday. You listen to me, Buzz, money isn't the answer. I haven't the smallest intention of bringing another little South Pacific bastard into this crummy world! You're going to give our child your name, be a real father—because you're going to marry me and take me to Hollywood, as you promised!"

"K.K., you're out of your silly mind. Turn it off, hon, you know I can't do that, much as I want to."

"Why not?" Kaipu asked. "You haven't seen your wife in over a year. You louse, have you even asked her for a divorce?"

"Look, cut the cute act. It's all out of the question. As you damn well know it would tumble my career, if you'll pardon the stupid word."

Hearing K.K.'s harsh laughter, I could picture her open, heavy-lush red lips. She asked, "So I'm the one going for cute now? Buzz, baby, you'd better believe I'm serious. I warn you, nothing is 'out of the question' where my baby is involved. As for. . ."

"This mother hen pose is downright comical, on you, K.K."

". . . your career, might be a choice item for the Honolulu columnists, perhaps juicy enough for the wire services: Buzz Roberts, the poor man's Brando, was taken to court today on a paternity charge

by an island—no, by a 'native' girl. Man, they'll eat up the native bit, even ask me to pose in a corny grass skirt and . . . !"

"Stop the Brando stuff and shut your dumb mouth, K.K., before I close it for you. And I'm not kidding, either!"

"Try it! You just try it—I'll be the last brown girl you'll ever belt! Under all your great talk, you're truly the typical *popaa* right down to the wire, aren't you, Buzz? Knock-up an island babe and then slap her down if she complains!"

I heard Buzz chuckle. When K.K. called herself a 'brown girl' she was both very serious and boiling. He said, "Honey, let's leave the dramatics to me. If you're really pregnant I'll give you money to take care of the child, set up a trust fund, but I won't stand still for blackmail or. . ."

"Blackmail? Why you miserable, unwashed, blonde bastard!" Kaipu added a few more curses, some of them quite remarkable. Roberts called her various kinds of a whore and a bitch and for a moment their conversation became a low mumble I couldn't make out.

Sprawled on some kind of worn grass mat atop the cutter's cabin I stared up at the clean blue sky and wondered at the dream-like unreality of things. It wasn't exactly a nightmare, merely a puzzling dream—the puzzling part being, what the devil was I doing here?

I was staring at the sky because I

had to. Although I'd been on the cutter for over 20 days now and in some choppy water, for the first time I was sea-sick. The Pacific was calm and the HOYDEN slicing the blue water in front of a good breeze. But for some reason a slight swell kept striking one side of the boat, making my guts do a rumba.

Far off to the West I saw a plane speck against the blue sky. For a small second I watched it, but seeing anything against the horizon made me aware of the cutter's roll. Jimmy Turo, at the wheel, was also watching the plane, through binoculars. Glancing at his squat figure, all of him tough and lean in faded plaid shorts, I wished I had his calm. Jimmy had hired on in Honolulu, one of those silent, terribly efficient jokers. He was a Nisei, or so he claimed.

I turned to stare up at the unmoving sky again, my insides queasy. It was hard for me to believe I was on a small boat in the Pacific; I usually did all my adventuring riding a chair in the reading room of the Los Angeles Public Library, with eye strain the sole. . . ."

"K.K., stop nagging me or so help me, I'll lean on you!" Buzz suddenly roared below. Then I heard Will Howell come barging in, although he could hardly have slept through the previous shouting, tell Roberts, "You lay a hand on Kaipu and I'll kill you!"

"Well now, what's this, the great war hero to the rescue?"

"Buzz, I'm not fooling," Will warned. "I'm sick of the off-the-wall way you treat K.K!"

"You are? Looking for a fat lip, Will?" Buzz asked. "I'm in the mood to paste. . . ."

K.K. cut in with, "Butt out of this, Will, I can take care of myself."

"Yes. I didn't mean to butt in," Howell mumbled. "Buzz, don't forget what I said. I don't care if we're friends, partners in the boat—I won't stand for you hitting Kaipu!"

There was a moment of awkward silence below. I glanced over at Jimmy Turo. As the trite phrase goes, his Oriental face was expressionless. But I knew he was listening, as he still watched the vanishing plane through his glasses.

Above the gurgling sound of a drink being poured I heard Buzz say gently, "You know we're all acting like tense jerks, have cabin fever. Those few hours on Howland weren't enough, we need to spend a couple of days on land. Easy to become stir-happy on a small boat. Get your charts out, Will."

"This is far from settled," K.K. said.

"Of course, honey, but we'll talk it through some other time."

"Then I think I'll get some sleep," K.K. said, voice normal and throaty. I heard her move forward to the smaller front cabin with its four narrow bunks, then silence below after the sound of the head being flushed.

Closing my eyes I could so easily

picture them in the cabin beneath me, which only added to the utter unreality of things.

Buzz Roberts with his wild and rough blonde hair, the handsome and strong-featured face, the tattered shorts showing off his still powerful heavyweight body and great muscles. K.K. in her worn red bikini looking every curve the dream island beauty with her fine figure and golden skin. Will Howell with his thin, grey hair, wiry body in a sport shirt, dirty slacks and sneakers. He was the only one of us wearing shoes, perhaps because Will was the 'captain' of the 45 foot cutter. He'd be standing there with the usual far-away and sad expression in his pale eyes, undoubtedly touching the scar which ran from the hairline down one side of his weather-beaten face and across his chest. Seemed odd, with the wonders of plastic surgery, the Navy docs hadn't done a better job. One side of his sensitive face looked like a miniature aerial view of cultivated fields: irregular patches of various shades of pink, brown and sickly white skin. Perhaps the docs weren't at fault, could be Will really didn't want the scar removed.

I grinned up at the mast and the sun. Roberts looked the typical movie star, K.K. the exotic 'native' gal with all her physical charms, and certainly Howell was the sea-going captain. Yet they were all phonies, each in their own way.

The first bit of unreality about

Buzz Roberts was his name, it actually was his true handle. I know, I have this horrible curiosity for such petty research. Buzz was every inch the popular conception of a motion picture star; tall and still muscular for his 38 years, the hint of brutal ruggedness on his handsome face so necessary for manly beauty. There was arrogant power in his every move, even in the wild disorder of the sun-bleached blonde hair, the lazy gaze of the hard blue eyes, the sullen cast of the square jaw resting on a bull neck. Strangely enough, most of the stories about Buzz were not publicity plants. He was an orphan, had rode the rails, worked as an oil rigger and lumberjack, did time on an assault rap, was a bottle man and a hell of a brawler. Even the story about his once flattening a heavyweight contender in a bar was true, I'd checked. Buzz was also a very talented actor, made good money and could pull down top bracket loot if he wanted. Yet he claimed to hate the profession. I wasn't certain whether this was a pose or not, all actors are childish at times, the occupational disease of their trade. But I was grateful for one fact, Buzz wasn't an actor who felt he had to be on stage all the time.

It also was a fact Buzz turned down many jobs. Whenever he could escape from Hollywood or TV, Roberts was on the first plane for Honolulu, to disappear aboard his HOYDEN. Of course this could

also be merely a smart business sense, Buzz was never over-exposed on the screen, always in demand. But it wasn't publicity, the HOYDEN never touched at Tahiti, or any of the other tourist islands where he'd be seen. I think Buzz sincerely loved the peace and solitude of his boat. As he once told me, "Writer, our sick world has shrunk so goddamn much, a small boat on a clean sea is the only healthy place left."

K.K. Collins, the K.K. standing for Kaipu Krenborg, lacked only a corny sarong to look as if she'd tumbled out of a 'B' island movie. Her mother was Polynesian and part German, while K.K.'s Irish-Scotch father managed one of Honolulu's newer supermarkets. K.K.' lovely, almond-shaped dark eyes, the soft black hair reaching her hips, the delicate planes of her otherwise strong face, all said there had to also be touches of Chinese and East Indian in her background. Yet she was far from the romantic, giggling, island beauty of fiction and screen—at 26 she was not plump and she had an M.A. from the University of Hawaii, had been a highschool teacher for a few terms. I'd checked all that out, too.

Although K.K. had been living with Roberts for over a year, their relationship puzzled me. Certainly aboard the HOYDEN—despite its name—there wasn't room for sex. The large main cabin, which also held the galley, was used as a kind

of office by Roberts. The other cabin, in the bow, was a pullman bunk deal with the five of us taking turns sleeping there very casually. I'd seen all of K.K. in various stages of undress, plus the fact the door to the head never completely closed. If I had expected some sort of romantic sex orgy between Buzz and Kaipu, it was physically impossible in our crowded quarters. It was true K.K. slept a great deal— but always alone.

K.K. was supposedly hanging around Buzz because he was going to "get her into pictures," which was a piece of transparent bunk. K.K. had no acting ability and was far too intelligent not to know that the day of beauty alone had gone out with the talkies, plus also knowing the picture industry is dying. If she actually wanted to try Hollywood, Roberts wasn't tight with his money and K.K. had the charm to open, or at least try, many doors. In my own mind I'd decided she really didn't give a fat hoot about becoming an actress, that it was merely an excuse (for her own mind) to live on the HOYDEN, enjoy the happy life of sailing to nowhere.

Could even be K.K. was in love with Buzz, he was a charmer when he wanted to turn it on, but if that was the case he was slipping her a hard time—I knew Buzz had quietly divorced his wife years ago. He'd even told me in Honolulu that the main reason he couldn't start immediate production on his own TV series was because his alimony was

keeping him broke. Of course marriage to an islander might hurt Buzz's box office value, although I doubted it. What's more, I was sure he really didn't give a damn. All Buzz Roberts wanted out of life was sufficient money to stock the HOYDEN with food and booze, and even after taxes he drew down that kind of salary any time he wished to work.

Will Howell not only held captain's papers but also the Navy Cross, yet he was content to live on the cutter with the small pension his scarred face brought him each month. He claimed he couldn't command a liner or a freighter due to the attention his face caused. However, aside from the first curious stare it wasn't the sort of face which gave me the shudders. In fact, as captain of a liner I could picture him as quite a dashing and romantic figure. Still, he had suffered a frightful wound and wounds often go far beneath the physical surface damage. I had him pegged as a shy joker who would have been afraid to face the world under any circumstances, was using his odd puss as an excuse to be a sailing bum.

Stretching as I blinked up at the bright sky, I wondered if Buzz wasn't correct—it *was* a sick world if we needed excuses to do nothing. Even a lazy clown like myself, I was as phony as. . . .

I felt somebody sit beside me and opened my eyes to look at Jimmy

Turo lighting a short cigar. He'd lashed the wheel down. "How's the belly feeling, Harry?"

"Fair to nauseous," I said. There was also something unreal about Jimmy, he was far too efficient to be floating around the Honolulu waterfront as an unemployed A.B.

"The trick is to eat lightly and eat solids. You'll be okay. All quiet below." His wide face wrinkled into a large grin. "Crazy the way they battle like tigers one minute, forget about it the next second."

"Yeah," I said cleverly and returned to sky-watching: seeing Jimmy's black crewcut salted with grey swaying against the horizon wasn't helping my insides.

He puffed on his cigar for awhile before he said, "That plane flying over a while back. Looked like a private job, small, double-engine job. Can't have a range of much over a 1000 miles."

"What's so puzzling, it was flying toward Hawaii, only about 800 miles away."

"Sure, but where did it *come from*? It was flying in from due West and the nearest islands with an air field in that direction are the Marshalls, and they're a good 1800 miles from Hawaii. What's more, it's dangerous flying a small plane this far from land."

"I suppose so."

Jimmy didn't try to make small talk for some minutes, puffed happily on his rope. I was grateful he was sitting on my lee side, if that's

the correct nautical term, the wind blowing his cigar stink away from me. Removing the rope from between his lips, he carefully licked some loose ends together as he asked, "Wonder what island Buzz will make for now? Or will we keep going, return to Honolulu? We should have spent more time on Howland, not that there was anything much to do there. None of these islands, after Papeete, offer a good liberty, except Pago Pago and that. . . ."

"Please, don't remind me of that place, I got stoned out of my living mind there."

Jimmy laughed. "Yes, I remember, you threatened to kill Buzz. Odd how. . . ."

"Pure big talk," I mumbled.

". . . many people threaten Roberts. I mean, he looks as if he could break you and Will into pieces with one hand."

"He could ruin me with one finger," I said, glancing at the lard hanging over the edge of my trunks—even when I was on my back.

Jimmy stood up and flexed his muscles, as if to remind me what a ridiculous soggy figure of a man I cut. "Look at the curve of our wake, this swell is taking us off course. Let me get back to the wheel."

I watched his slightly pigeon-toed walk as he returned to the wheel. Closing my eyes I thought of my wife, Irene. Not that she walked that way, if anything she sort of

waddled. I'd found myself thinking of Irene at such peculiar times lately it left me bewildered.

I'd flown out to Honolulu for a 'weekend' against my better judgement. I'm a writer and my agent had heard along the grapevine that Buzz Roberts was thinking of starting his own TV series, retiring after a few years to live on the re-run money. My agent wired him and Buzz suggested I fly to Hawaii to talk over the details of the pilot film.

Irene, and even our 14 year old daughter, constantly tell me the screen and TV work I've done is "commercial writing." They say this in the same tone they'd talk about rape. My kid once introduced me to some of her school chums as the 'director' of a play which had been on our local TV station the night before. Later she calmly told me she had been ashamed to tell them I'd written the play because, "Daddy, it was so trite."

My darling wife will tell me any old time that my library research has resulted in my ". . . inability to communicate true art because you haven't experienced the reality of life."

I've never attempted to translate that into basic English nor do I get upset about Irene's shoe polish because her idea of "art" is any plotless sketch which leaves the reader wondering what the hell is going on. Shakespeare I am not. But what actually burns my butt is the fact Irene and my daughter make their

speeches without batting an eye at the fact my alleged "hacking" buys their clothes, the station wagon and all the rest of our middleclass scene.

I flew to Honolulu without any contract or firm agreement and the weekend stretched into a week with Buzz having other urgent matters on his brain, like getting a skin-full and sleeping it off. I met and immediately liked Will Howell, and K.K. who scornfully called me a "coast haole" (meaning I was a square pale face from California) when I innocently committed blasphemy in her eyes by saying I thought the supermarkets with their frozen coconut milk and plastic bags of *poi* were dandy.

Not only that, I even bought a loud aloha shirt. I liked Hawaii but Buzz and K.K. were on this kick that anything the Chamber of Commerce advocated had to be automatically lousy. I'd spent nearly \$800, counting my plane fare, when Buzz proposed I'd join them in cruising on the HOYDEN, where he would positively work with me on the story line of the TV show. Although it wouldn't cost me anything, Roberts vaguely mentioned the cruise would last a "brace of weeks, or so." I couldn't afford losing that much time but a Buzz Roberts' series, if it ever reached the TV screen, would mean the big time. Nor was I keen on writing off my \$800 spent as a loss.

I phoned Irene, in Los Angeles, for her opinion and she gushed,

"Of course you must sail with him, Harry. Do you a world of good to live life for a change, add a sense of quality to your work."

At nearly a buck a word I wasn't up to this long distance nonsense and I suppose I went aboard the HOYDEN in a stupid huff, mainly to spite Irene. The weird angle was I soon learned life is more like a soap opera than Irene knew.

I've been married to Irene for 16 of my 37 years and never thought of being unfaithful. But in Pago Pago, slightly high on sweet palm wine, I somehow found myself in the bed of a young, honey-brown beauty, her supple, demanding body as beautiful as any starlet's. While I'll certainly never tell Irene this, you can't arouse passion in a vacuum, or with a vacuum, and all the time I was fondling this strong bundle of curves, I was longing for my plump wife, her familiar body.

The whole incident was strictly a bomb—on my part. I switched from wine to hard stuff to erase this blow to my "manhood," although I didn't quite rationalize it that way at the time. I got so drunk I tried to pick a fight with Buzz because he was still stalling on the TV job, hysterically threatened to break his bull neck with my bare hands—before a number of amused bar patrons.

Buzz could knock off a bottle without staggering and happily for me he had only laughed at my drunken threats, had picked me up like a child and carried me back to

the boat, dumped me on my bunk to sleep it off.

I'd been on the HOYDEN for nearly three weeks and we still hadn't talked business. In a sense I was becoming as carefree as Buzz, K.K. and Will, content to let time slip by without doing a damn thing.

Since I'm so much *not* the relaxed type, it all fitted in with the dream-like tone of the voyage.

Jimmy Turo had prepared a tasty supper of shredded cold chicken in some sort of spicy lime sauce and a heaping salad. Eating, like everything else aboard the cutter, was anytime you felt up to it. K.K. awoke to eat with me as Jimmy turned in for a nap. Capt. Howell was reading a technical book on atomic-powered ships, while Buzz held down the wheel—looking far more the hero than he could on any screen.

K.K. ate with her fingers, tearing at the chicken with such delight I wondered if she was putting on a 'native' act for me. Staring at her slender body barely concealed in the brief strips of bikini, I didn't believe she was pregnant. Of course, if she was only a month or so gone, it would hardly show. Examining the soft curve of her tan stomach, the firm bosom, with my eyes, I also wondered if Buzz had slept with her during all the time I'd been with them—and what business it was of mine.

Kaipu was in a talkative mood,

off on one of her pet ideas. "If Buzz's TV thing goes over big, I understand within about 18 months he can make himself nearly a half a million."

"Well, first it has to get off the ground. We have nothing on paper, not even established the plot line," I said, considering if I could get K.K. to work on Buzz, prod him to get matters signed and in the works. But the guiding spirit of the HOYDEN—indifference—had infected me and at the moment I felt too lazy to give a damn. The food had settled my stomach and that was all I cared about.

"It will mean a year of steady and boring work for poor Buzz, but once he has the money we shall hunt around for an islet to buy, return to the old culture and ways of living. We will settle our island with a select group, a dozen or so young couples, and no canned foods or booze. We shall live the healthful and peaceful life of my ancestors, with anger and greed unknown."

I wanted to ask which of her ancestors she was gassing about but I merely belched, far too contented to start an argument.

Licking her lips, then using a lovely forearm as a napkin, K.K. added, "If we can only buy an island within the State of Hawaii, which takes in a lot of ocean, Buzz will be able to call it an investment, turn it into a capital gains deal and probably skip taxes. Why, Harry, the tax bite on a half a million

would be more than enough to buy our island."

"And how are you going to keep outsiders from your private paradise?" I asked, lighting my pipe.

"With guns, if need be," K.K. said quickly.

"Guns in utopia?" I asked, trying not to sound sarcastic. "That's how it all starts, next you'll have locks and keys, then some guy peddling mutual funds."

"Nonsense, we shall . . ." She abruptly stopped talking, realizing I was kidding her, and promptly told me just where I gave her a sharp pain.

We went up on deck where K.K. took the cigarette from Buzz's lips, stretched out on the grass mat I'd been using atop the cabin.

Buzz was studying a chart and told me, "The delights of sailing your own ship, writer—all the world's problems are reduced to one simple question, where shall our next port be."

"Good idea as a sub-theme for the TV series," I said, but it was only a mild pitch.

"We can head East for Kingman Reef—not much there. Of course if you're in a hurry to return Stateside, we can be back in Honolulu in less than a week, drop you off."

I knew the big bastard was goading me and didn't answer. Buzz suddenly flashed the hearty grin known on so many screens. "Don't worry, Harry, when we return to Hawaii, we'll sit down and work

on the pilot script. I dislike working while sailing."

"You . . . ? Why did you bring me on this cruise?"

Buzz brushed his thick blonde hair with his free hand, surprise crossing his face. "Because I thought you'd enjoy the experience. Writer, you suffer from the modern plague—tension. I rarely ask anybody to join me on the HOY-DEN."

"I'm flattered." The way he said "writer" sounded like Irene at her nagging worst.

Buzz stared at me for a moment, the pale blue eyes so hard I felt certain he was acting. Then he boomed, "Harry, you're a goddam ingrate!"

K.K. sat up to look at us.

I had this feeling that a wrong word on my part could not only blow the deal, but get me a busted face. "About the flattery, I meant that sincerely, Buzz," I told him. "This has been an experience I'll never forget."

"Now you're a patronizing ingrate!" he roared, rage in his voice until he suddenly doubled over in laughter at whatever he saw on my fat face.

I hated his guts for making me feel a coward, although I wasn't sure the whole thing hadn't been a gag.

K.K. stood up and stretched, truly a cat-like movement, then she said, "I am going to take a bath." Removing her bra and skimpy trunks, she

gracefully walked by us in the nude, grabbed a rope tied to the stern and jumped overboard, bouncing along on the water behind us like a human dinghy—a real sexboat, if you'll pardon the pun.

Buzz didn't even turn to glance at her, kept studying his chart. I watched the foamy wake break over her sensuous tan face, long black hair rippling like a flag, her perfect breasts reminding me of the busty, wooden figureheads on ancient schooners. But it was hardly an exercise any doctor would recommend for a pregnant woman.

Several minutes later K.K. pulled herself back along the rope to the stern, came aboard with an athletic jump, her own round stern hitting the deck with a wet, smacking sound as she let her feet dangle over the side. Then she stood up to face the wind, fluffing her long hair to dry. In an idiotic fit of modesty I turned my back, tried to relight my pipe. I finally ran out of matches, had to step down into the cabin to repack and light the pipe. When I came on deck again Kaipu was 'dressed' in her old red bikini, sitting beside—and leaning against—Buzz, her wonderful eyes staring at the water as if seeing the Pacific for the first time.

"Will!" Buzz let out a hammy roar.

Howell came up on deck, still holding his book. Pointing to the chart Buzz asked, "Isn't this speck, South-by-West, Soran?"

Squatting between the actor and K.K., Will glanced at the chart and nodded.

"Not more than a day and a half's sail. I never thought of visiting it before."

"Nothing to see there, Buzz, tricky reef and sheer rocks around the remains of an old volcano. Little vegetation; uninhabited."

"Sounds interesting," Buzz told him. "Will it be too risky crossing the reef?"

"No. Look, it's a lot of nothing, a bleak spot—a zero." It seemed to me patches of Will's scar had suddenly turned vivid.

Almost mocking Will, Buzz said, "Since it was the scene of your war heroism, I'd think you'd want to revisit it. Ever been back there?"

Will rubbed the scar-side of his face nervously as he shook his grey head. "I saw enough of Soran in '45."

"Let's go—might see the bones of all the Japs you killed."

"Japanese, not Japs," Will said gently. "Buzz, no point in going hundreds of miles off course to see a pile of rocks and. . ."

"Sounds like you're afraid of ghosts," Buzz cut in.

"I'm merely telling you that you'll be disappointed. Why not head for Palmayra Island, or Christmas Island, where we'll at least be able to get fresh fruit?"

"If it's uninhabited, I'd like to go there," K.K. said. "Might be the very island we can settle on."

“Soran is just a pile of harsh lava rocks,” Will said. “Believe me.”

“Captain, you’re out-voted, we sail for Soran,” Buzz said, standing to turn the wheel, change course.

Looking unhappy, Will merely shrugged.

The meal had left me sleepy and I went down to stretch out on my bunk, wonder what Irene was doing at the moment—if she missed me—as I lazily watched the rise and fall of Jimmy Turo’s deep tan chest; he was sleeping across the aisle in K.K.’s bunk.

When I awoke it was dark outside the one porthole. Jimmy was still pounding his ear and K.K. was on the bunk above him, lying on her side, the red bikini panties covering her compact hips facing me. It’s amazing that something as purely functional as a backside can arouse a feeling of beauty in a man—K.K. sure had a pretty behind.

For a long and smug moment I listened to the hiss of the hull cutting water, then I got up and stretched, surprised as always by the full headroom of the cabin. The HOYDEN was dipping and bucking a little as I went to the head and I gave up the idea. Walking through the main cabin I saw Buzz asleep on one of the cushioned seats, all of his mighty muscles relaxed, the open mouth surrounded by its stubble of blonde whiskers—snoring lightly.

A half-filled bottle of Scotch lay across his crotch and an empty

glass rolled back and forth across the floor. I put the glass in the galleysink as I went on deck. It was a cool night, the sky packed with a fantastic number of stars.

Bundled in a blue parka, Will was huddled over the wheel. He said hello as I crossed the deck and added to the water about us. I felt chilly and went back to the cabin, slipped on one of Buzz’s sweatshirts. Putting away the remains of the food, I dropped some dirty dishes into a net bag and took them and the garbage on deck. I washed the dishes by lowering the bag over the side. Without being asked I’d become the dishwasher and garbage man on the HOYDEN, about the only things I knew how to do on a boat.

Hanging the net bag from the boom to dry, I managed to light my pipe on one match. Sitting on the other side of the wheel I told Will, “Some night. You know we haven’t hit a squall or had a rainy day.”

“Not the season for rain.”

We were silent for a time and then I said, “I take it you don’t relish returning to Soran. Bring back too many rough memories?”

He put his hand inside the parka to touch his scar. “Doesn’t bring back anything—I’ve nere escaped those memories. Still have nightmares about the island. For the first few months I was in the hospital, not a night passed that I didn’t wake up screaming.”

“That bad?” I asked, knowing the words sounded stupid.

He nodded. "You see on any small boat the crew becomes one big family, but on a combat ship like a PT boat, the relationship is even closer. I saw seven of my men cut down by machine guns there. Just Abe Bergor and I got away. Abe died of a heart attack two years ago. He lived in Pittsburg and I was in Hawaii and we wrote to each other twice a week regular, all during the years. Sometimes a letter but mostly just an airmail card with our name on it. Wasn't anything to say, we only wanted to know the other was alive. Abe was my engineer and I almost cracked when I didn't hear from him for a few weeks, then the letter from his wife telling me Abe was dead, all about his heart attack." Will's voice trembled.

"I'll shut my flabby mouth if talking upsets you."

He shrugged. "Harry, in the hospital I was a compulsive talker, used to bore the hell out of any other patient I could get to stand still. Seemed the right therapy for me to talk it out. Of course that was nearly 20 years ago; I haven't talked about it for years now—except to myself."

"A writer's best tools are his ears, you won't be boring me."

Will said okay and then for a long time didn't add another word. I puffed on my pipe and waited. Almost as if thinking aloud he suddenly said, "It really is the little things which shape our life. Be-

cause I was lucky enough to reach the finals of the California state tennis tournament one year, I ended up commanding a PT boat. As the corny saying goes, odd way for the ball to bounce."

"Certainly is. How did it happen?"

"In 1942 I was 24 years old and a year out of the maritime academy. Naturally because of the war things were speeded up and soon I was captain of a Liberty ship carrying supplies in the Pacific. A Japanese sub sunk that under me and I was picked up after a few days on a rubber raft. I was given a tanker but a plane blew it out of the water at an island dock. There was a PT squadron in the islands, mostly Ivy League fellows whose sailing experience had been limited to racing sloops. I'd played tennis with one of these men years before and he suggested I join their squadron, pulled the necessary strings. After what I'd been through I was anxious to take a poke at the enemy, not be a sitting duck on a freighter. Soon I was Lt. (jg) Will Howell, skipper of a fast, 80 foot plywood PT armed with four torpedo tubes, machine guns and a 20 millimeter anti-aircraft gun mounted on the stern. We operated at night mostly, cutting Japanese supply lines, sinking motorized troop barges, freighters, sometimes attacking destroyers. If I'd wanted combat, I saw plenty."

"Sounds like you had more than

your share," I said, to keep him talking.

"We saw plenty of hell, Harry, but neither my crew or our old green PT boat suffered any major casualties, during combat. I mean our regular missions. A miracle of sorts because the boat had no armor and we carried obsolete Mark VIII torpedoes, with each torpedo you also let go a small prayer that the torpedo tube didn't end up ablaze. PT's are okay for small island work but as the action moved closer to the invasion of the Japanese mainland we found ourselves taking it easy. We were based on the Marshalls, mostly delivering mail and supplies. I was now a full lieutenant and my future looked rosy, the war would be over shortly with a great demand for ship captains."

Will's voice died for a moment as he fingered his scar. The HOYDEN was heeled over, the stiff breeze making happy whistling sounds in our rigging. Will said, "It was one of those things, just a few months before the atom bomb would end the war, the Japanese were out on their feet anyway, when a plane spotted a life boat drifting some 135 miles East of our base. My PT was sent out to investigate. As I told you, by this time the war for us was merely driving a speedboat, dashing about on errands like this. Some damn errand!"

His voice vanished again. After a

moment I asked, "Who was in the lifeboat, Will?"

"We never found it, we ran into a hell of a squall which damaged our rudders. It was impossible to return to our base, buck the storm. I found Soran on the chart, decided to ride out the storm and head for the isle. Using a temporary rudder and only two of our three 12 cylinder engines we made it. Soran was listed as uninhabited and it looked that way—less than a mile of dark lava rocks with an old volcano cone rising a few hundred feet at one end of the tiny island, all of it surrounded by the usual rusty-colored coral reef. A PT doesn't have much draft and I took her over the reef without bumping, but it seemed to me that the reef looked black under the angry, pounding green waves—instead of coral-red. There weren't any beaches, the lava rocks dropped almost vertically—about 15 feet—to the smooth water inside the reef. We found a cove with a rocky shelf which would serve as a beach of sorts. Soon as I dropped anchor I sent an ensign with three men to scout the island. They returned without seeing any signs of people or fresh water, not even the usual coconuts and wild fruits. Soran was a pile of jagged rocks and scrubby bushes with the volcano cone sticking up out of the mess like a crude smoke stack."

Will turned to glance at our wake bubbling in the moonlight, then at the compass before he said, "I'd

radioed our position to the base, explained that it should take a few days to make repairs, that we had sufficient gas to return. It was a holiday, the men fishing and swimming, cleaning up the ship. Using a home made block and tackle deal attached to the rocks, we managed to raise the stern out of water, repaired the rudders. A few of the crew explored the island, hunting for birds. I don't know, Harry, I keep telling myself we took all the usual precautions, never saw any signs of people."

"But there were people on Soran?" I said.

Will nodded his parka-covered head rapidly. "On the morning we were ready to leave I was studying the charts at the wheel, most of the crew were either taking a last swim or washing clothes on the rocky shelf—when a burst of machine gun fire got us. Bent over the charts I was unknowingly protected by the metal splinter shield on the port side of the cockpit. Except for a flesh wound in my shoulder caused by flying glass, I was okay. But I still couldn't believe we'd been attacked. I saw my crew dead in the water, on the rocks, all their blood—and still I refused to believe it. Up on the rocks above us I saw some dozen or so Japanese soldiers, most of them bearded, and in ragged summer infantry uniforms, firing at us with sub-machine guns. In my shocked daze I noticed only one officer, a tall, thin fellow with

a sweaty and completely bald noggin. This long, thin, wispy black moustache draped his sneering mouth like an evil frame. He wore a ragged blue naval officer's uniform, the usual clumsy sword at his belt. He was firing a pistol at us.

"Machinist Mate Abe Bergor, who'd been below, came on deck and dashed for the forward gun turret. Bullets criss-crossed the deck all around him and he fell overboard. I was wearing only my skivvies, didn't even have a hip gun handy. After all the barking of gun fire there was this moment of deep silence, the clean silence one sometimes feels in church. Not a sound, even a moan of pain nor the booming of the waves out on the reef. The Japanese came down the rocks. I knew enough of their lingo to understand the officer was bawling the hell out of somebody for firing at Abe—and hitting the ship. Lowering myself over the side I swam underwater—the sea still pink with the blood of my men. I made for the rocks on the far side of the cove. I broke the surface behind the floating corpse of our cook, watched the Japanese boarding my boat. I managed to climb ashore, fall behind a bush and I heard a whispered, 'Mr. Howell!' There was Abe Bergor hidden in another bush."

"Hadn't he been shot?" I asked.

Will shook his head. "Somehow he'd dived over without being hit.

The Japanese were so busy examining our boat we were able to climb up the rocks and reach the scrub bushes. We remained there for the rest of the morning, watching them. The officer kept slapping one of his men and while we were too far away to hear what he was shouting, obviously he was mad because this fellow in shooting at Abe had caused some damage to the deck—although I couldn't see what real harm the boat had suffered. They started counting the bodies of my men, pushing them off the rocky shelf, must have thought our bodies had sunk or drifted toward the reef. We saw them trying on our uniforms and of course I got the message—they were going to escape from the island on the PT. Aside from leaving us stranded the bigger deal was the damage they could do in any port with our torpedoes and depth charges before it was known who the hell they were."

"How had they come to Soran?" I asked.

"Judging by the condition of their uniforms they'd been on the island for at least a year. I realized the dark part of the reef must have been their small boat which sunk out there. Whether they were a life boat off a battleship, or some sort of small patrol boat, I never found out. The point was, the officer obviously knew PTs, he and another man spent the balance of the day checking our motors and controls.

They'd been watching us all the time, of course, waited until we'd repaired the ship before shooting us like fish in a barrel. Bergor and I were dressed only in shorts and canvas shoes, without arms or food. We got one break—the Japanese opened our tool chest and started repairing the deck—they weren't going to sail that day. Two of their men went back up on the rocks and we were able to tail them from a distance. We watched them remove supplies, ammo boxes and a radio set from a cave, then bury something in the ground. When the men returned to the boat we entered the cave, fortunately found tins of fresh water—must have been a spring some place—and a kind of wild, pulpy root they'd been living on. Nothing in the cave but grass mats, a portable stove, some handmade wooden cups. Not a gun nor a . . ."

"How about the stuff they'd buried?" I cut in.

"We dug that up in the moonlight, while they were making a banquet of our rations on board, nothing but a small mortar and several shells, radio parts, a few knives—Lord knows how they'd got the stuff ashore when they went aground on the reef. Bergor and I each took a knife and spent the night in the bushes. In the morning the Japanese were still busy—busy getting the PT ship-shape. We went back and dug up the mortar tube and two of the shells, carefully

filling in the hole. I'd vaguely read about the use of mortars but felt if I could figure out the firing arc, we might lob a shell into the PT and sink it, at least prevent them from using it. In . . ."

"But you'd be stuck on a tiny island with armed enemy soldiers."

"Harry, with our boat they could have wrecked transports, raised hell in a suicide charge. We suddenly heard the loud cough of the TP's three Packard motors and raced to the edge of the rocks, figuring we were too late. But the officer and two men had the PT inside the reef on a shakedown run. The rest were watching from the rocky shelf. After about an hour the PT headed back for the cove. The men cheered as the moustached officer stood atop my charthouse and made a speech of some kind. Then he came ashore and handed out soap and razors; the men stripped and cleaned up, splashed about in the water, laughing as they tried to work up a lather in the salt water, shave off their beards. I didn't have to tell Abe it was that old now or never moment. He held the mortar tube with his left hand while I tried to figure out the correct angle of fire. There was a ring on the business end of the shell and these bags of gunpowder attached to the fins. Aiming the tube for a high arc shot, I pulled the ring and dropped the mortar shell down the tube—jumping to one side so I could judge where to

plant the second shell. Harry, we were fantastically lucky." Rubbing the part of his patched face the blue parka didn't hide, Will turned to grin at me.

I didn't say a word, tried to relight my pipe and then put it away. Will said, "Our PT was anchored about 20 feet from the rocky shelf and the shell dropped smack into the water between the boat and the rocks, exploding on contact and killing the men swimming and shaving—but not damaging the PT, which rocked like mad! Abe and I couldn't believe our eyes, the PT rocking undamaged with the dead Japanese floating around or lying smashed on the rocks. The concussion had tossed the officer against the rocks and he was face down in a pool of blood, his legs in the water."

"All that damage from a single mortar shell?" I asked.

"Harry, a direct mortar hit can stop a tank. Don't forget the shape of the cove and the water gushing up—all increased the blast power of the shell, as if it had exploded inside a tunnel. It took Abe and myself a few minutes to reach the cove. We stepped cautiously among the bloody and smashed bodies, our knives ready. Suddenly Bergor pointed toward the officer who was trying to turn himself over, said, 'Sir, he's alive!' I bent down to turn him on his back, had some idea of taking him with us—when he suddenly tossed this grenade.

"A grenade?" I repeated. "Where did he get that from?"

"Who knows, may of been carry one inside his belt all the time. In that split second I saw two things: the mocking smile on his odd face and the glaring eyes—and this giant burst of orange flame which seemed to pick me up and fling me to one side. Actually, due to the uneven rocks my footing wasn't very good and I did fall, or was kicked by the concussion, to the fringe of the blast area. If I'd been standing flat-footed I would have been killed. I was half-dead, my entire left side a bloody, burned mess. The Japanese officer was flung onto another rock, dead face staring up at the sky and blackened. The blast had knocked Abe down, broke his leg."

Will was silent again, staring at the wheel, one hand still stroking the scarred side of his face. After a long moment he said, "The rest was a nightmare but easy due to my being numb with pain. I stood up and tumbled into the water, the salt eating at my burns. Abe crawled in after me and we swam out to the PT, somehow got on board. I remember making a splint for Abe's leg and his eyes full of horror as he said, 'Mr. Howell—Will—your face, my God!' I didn't talk, helped him down the ladder into the engine room. He called up that the motors looked okay. I still had my knife and I staggered forward, cut the anchor rope, then started the engines and we went

roaring over the reef. I set a course for the base, lashed the wheel and sat there until I passed out. I don't know how long I was unconscious, but when I finally could get things in focus again, I found myself in the base hospital tent, alongside Abe's bed."

I studied the almost gaudy, jeweled sky overhead, wishing Irene was with me—she loves the stars—wondering, as I did about any new story I heard, how much was an exaggeration, unintentionally magnified by time. Finally I asked Will, "If you passed out, how did the PT cover the several hundred miles of open sea?"

"Luck, again, although at that time this area of the Pacific had less shipping than even now. We didn't hit anything, not even a storm—happily. Our boat simply plowed through the ocean at top speed until the gas gave out. We were floating some 79 miles from our island base when a plane spotted us, radioed another PT to come out and look us over. They towed us in. You have no idea how luck was riding with us; Abe not only had a broken leg but had also hit his head in the engine room when we went jumping over the reef. I remained in shock and a coma for days, but Abe was able to talk shortly, gave all the details. The Navy sent a destroyer to Soran to bring back the bodies of our men, also to check on whether the island had been used as a watch point to

radio ship movements back to Japan, although it would hardly have been much of a spot for that. From the papers they found there we learned the officer was a Lt. Yamiri, a Navy man, while the others were infantry soldiers. Most likely the men had come from a sunken transport. Most of the bodies were never recovered, of course."

I asked, "How long before you returned to active duty?"

Will gave me a thin-lipped, nervous grin. "Never, I'd had it. I spent months in one hospital after the other, and that was it. Of course my being a ship captain was finished. Although I still get offers, turned down the command of a sugar freighter last month. Having my crew sneering at my face, or worse yet, feeling sorry for me, well, it would destroy the whole idea of command. Raise hell with ship morale, especially mine—I can't stand being stared at, does something to me."

"I don't see why. Frankly, your scar adds to the popular conception of the dashing sea captain."

"Doesn't work like that, Harry. I know what any crew would be thinking—this slob lost his crew because he was careless. Think that everytime they saw my scarred puss, lose all respect for me. Respect is the vital factor in command. I'm going on 46; I've had it."

"Nonsense. Ocean liner captains

usually retire when they're past 60."

Will shook his head. "Skip the pep talk, Harry. Besides, I like the life I'm living."

Living, you're half-dead, I thought. Aloud I told him, "This Lt. Yamiri was quite a guy, full of the Kamikaze spirit."

"In a sense that was what bugged me—after the mortar shell burst had hurled him on the rocks, he must have waited, badly wounded, thinking only of getting me with his grenade. Takes a kind of super-human guts. That was the special nightmare I used to have for years of nights—not the blood or the dead, or my own wounds, but the smile on his face, the hate in his eyes. Our lives are made up of millions of seconds, yet one flashing split-second can affect a man's life, ruin it. Sometimes I try to think it through, understand exactly how he must have felt—marooned on that damn rocky isle for months, half-starved; then by pure chance a form of escape appears, he successfully carries out his attack, things seem set—until my lucky shot explodes all his hopes. No wonder he hated me so." Will rubbed the scar side of his face again under the blue parka as he turned to glance at our wake.

I sat there for more minutes, then took the bag of dishes down to the galley. As I was stacking them on the shelves I felt myself being watched. Buzz was awake,

cold blue eyes on me. He said, "I'll buy you an apron, Harry the kitchen slavey!"

"Come on, I like to do something aboard and I'm hardly a sailor."

"You're a nut. You know that, don't you, writer?"

I stared at Buzz, still sprawled on the cushioned seat, with troubled eyes, astonished by the venom in his voice.

"Buzz, if it upsets you, I can let the dishes go," I mumbled, fully aware how banal my words sounded.

"At least he isn't a drunken slob. Harry's a nice guy." K.K. was standing in the doorway, now wearing dungarees and a golden sweater to match her skin. A cigarette hung from the heavy red lips.

"Thank you for the kind words, 'mam," I said, trying to make it sound like a joke but really puzzled by it all.

As she walked toward me, and the steps to the deck, Buzz stretched out a lazy hand toward her. Like a halfback avoiding a tackle, she neatly swayed her hips out of his reach, told him, "You have your bottle, don't need me."

He tried to slap her can but missed. Passing me, a warm and exciting body perfume about her, K.K. went on deck to sit beside Will.

Finishing the dishes I headed for my bunk. I had this awful feel-

ing as I walked by Buzz that he might slug, or worse yet, slap my backside. It was a silly feeling, but frightening because I wasn't sure what I'd do if he tried it, and I knew I'd have to do something. I felt frightened and bewildered, a new part of the unreality of the voyage. I wanted to turn, go back up on deck, but forced myself to keep going, aware I was sweating.

But as I went by him Buzz broke wind, stretched his powerful arms, grinned up at me as he said, "Good night, writer, you nut."

I awoke late in the morning to find everybody on a busy-busy kick. Buzz had been trolling and landed a large Jack, about 14 pounds, which K.K. was cleaning and cutting into thin slices. Will left the wheel to help her make a sauce of lemons, coconut cream and salted with many different herbs. She carefully marinated the slices in this. Jimmy Turo, who'd been at the wheel most of early morning, awoke in time to cook a remarkable lime pie. We had a great meal, the raw fish unusual-tasting but delicious.

In the middle of the afternoon the four of us played bridge in the cockpit and as none of us took the game too seriously, we had a wild and good game. Finally K.K. took over the wheel from Jimmy, who promptly sat down and bid and made 6 No Trumps, so we started playing penny ante poker. Will

pointed to a glow on the horizon, said that was the reflection from the smooth water inside Soran's reef. A few hours later we began to close in on the little island, its rocky cone making it look like a squat tug boat in the distance. Soon we could see and hear the waves smashing against the reef, the dark rocky shore with the tops of a few coconut palms.

We passed the binoculars around, eagerly studying the island as Buzz Roberts said, "Look at our faces—the false promise and excitement of a new port—like the hot eagerness of a stud approaching a new cat house although his common sense warns it will be the same as the last one."

"Spare us your whorehouse philosophy," K.K. said, gayly.

When it was my turn with the glasses I not only saw coconut palms but it seemed there was a small, dark, sandy beach at the foot of some of the rocks, while bushes sporting various brightly colored flowers could be seen on others. The island certainly didn't look as barren as Will had said.

Despite his being the captain he used the binoculars last, told us, "It's been over 20 years since I was here and the island has been seeded and fertilized by birds. Look at all the frigate birds overhead, the ugly creatures."

"Ugly?" K.K. asked. "They look comical with their long beaks. I buy the high rocks; don't have to

worry about hurricane damage or tidal waves. I didn't see any huts."

It was twilight when we reached the reef and Will took the wheel, had the HOYDEN tacking back and forth all night outside the reef, which made a jagged, phosphorescent ring about Soran in the moonlight. Jimmy and K.K. were with him for a time, while Buzz and I drank Australian beer in the cabin. I again suggested the idea of seeking a rainbow port, a different kind of adventure, as the theme for the TV series.

To my surprise Buzz showed some interest, gave me a small idea of what he wanted. Naturally there would only be one big role—his—and he pictured the hero as being constantly on the run; sailing a small boat single-handed around the world, finding romance and fist-packed adventure in each episode and sailing on. "You see what I want, Harry, the guy is actually afraid of life. He's done something big and it haunts him—like the pilot who fingered Japan for the atomic bomb raid who has been in and out of institutions and jails ever since, ridden by a guilt complex. Our boy is fast with his mitts and tumbling the gals in the hay—but beneath it all he's a troubled jasper, always on the go—really seeking salvation. Some deal like that, but nothing crappy or sugary. I want it to have a hell of a punch, but a legitimate wallop—that's our selling point."

"Buzz, you know TV, best we lay off any atom bomb guilt."

Roberts made a winding motion in the air with his powerful right arm, as if the shoulder was stiff. "Okay, Harry, maybe the hero is a Kraut, but a good type at heart. He sent thousands of women and kids to the gas chambers and ovens during the war, but actually thought he was merely sending them to a prison camp for their own protection, get them away from the SS louts. When he learns the truth, he flips."

"Come on, Buzz, talk sense; TV is a 21 inch blank brain-nothing controversial. Suppose, and this is off the top of my head, you're a former pug, a champ, who has killed a man in the ring and . . . ?"

"Writer, please! Not only is that corny but I want our guy in *big* trouble with himself, responsible for thousands of death—but unintentional stuff. Think about it, Harry."

This was my alleged reason for being on the cruise and I lay on my bunk so busy turning over ideas in my weary head, I barely watched K.K. undress when she turned in.

The morning was clear and hot when I came on deck. K.K. was standing beside Buzz who was handling the wheel—looking much like the swashbuckling jokers he played on the screen, all his blonde hair rippling in the wind, tanned muscles glistening in the bright sun, the hard, handsome

face in a tense scowl. Will Howell was astride the bowsprit, studying the water, calling back directions as the HOYDEN slowly approached the reef.

Handing me a cup of coffee, Jimmy Turo said around the cigar stub between his white teeth, "Nobody on this hunk of rock for sure. I had the wheel most of the night, didn't see a light on shore. You know islanders, by now they'd be out in outriggers to welcome and guide us in. Spooky place."

We were perhaps 100 yards from the reef. Soran seemed about a mile long and half as wide, shaped like a rough egg. The dark lava rocks rose 20 feet or so out of the water, a sheer drop in most places and despite the shrubs and bushes with their few gay flowers, the one line of slender coconut palms growing on the lee side, in the morning light the island did look spooky—nothing but an old heap of dark ashes.

I forgot all this in the excitement of crossing the reef. On the other islands we'd visited there had always been a channel through the reef. The cutter suddenly shot through the boiling water, sending a cloud of salt spray over us and for a moment we seemed suspended in the foaming water and I saw the rusty coral of the reef beneath us. Then we were in the calm and deep blue-green water inside the reef and we all relaxed, even the HOYDEN seemed to sigh.

With Will still sitting on the bowsprit we quickly circled Soran. The small black sandy beach of the cove we'd first sighted seemed the only landing place. Jimmy lowered the sails and started the motor as Will came back to take the wheel. I asked him, "This cove—where it all happened?"

He nodded, face drawn, scar deep and pale patches of skin. "Time has changed it—some. I suppose in another 20 years the sea will grind more of the rock into sand."

We dropped anchor about 100 feet from the beach and Buzz immediately dove over to see what kind of a bottom we were on and if the anchor was holding. I wondered aloud about sharks but K.K. told me the reef would keep them out.

Seconds later Buzz's head broke the water like a golden buoy. Grinning up at us he shouted. "Have at least 30 feet her, fine rocky bottom—won't need any anchor watch."

As Jimmy lowered the dink, Will told us, "Wear sneakers, the rocks make for rough going."

I put on my canvas casuals and rowed Jimmy ashore. He was wearing a dirty-grey sweatshirt above his shorts. Buzz was waiting for us on a tiny strip of beach, shadow-boxing to dry himself. I noticed a knife in the waist of his worn trunks. Will was checking the anchor again. I rowed back for him and K.K., who couldn't find

her sneakers. I heard her cursing as she slammed lockers and drawers in the cabin below. Finally she called up, "Go on, I'll catch up with you. I remember wearing the damn shoes on Howland, but where in hell did I put them?"

"Take it slow, Kaipu, we'll wait," Will told her.

"Go on, may take me all bloody morning to find them."

Buzz called from the beach, asking what was holding us up. Will told K.K., "We'll leave the dink for you."

"Don't bother, I'll swim ashore."

"Bring the dink with you," Will said firmly, taking off his shoes and tying them around his neck. I didn't bother removing mine. Will dived in and I slipped over the side of the dink—nearly sinking it—did my awkward crawl to shore. Will was already there, of course, explaining to Buzz about K.K.'s sneakers. The actor said, "We can cover the entire island before she's ready."

"Well, let's take it easy. No sense in anybody breaking a leg on these damn rocks," Will told us.

I was looking around the small beach, kicking up the dark sand with my wet shoes, expecting to see bones and/or skulls of the dead Japanese soldiers. Climbing up the grey lava rock we found ourselves on a rough plateau covered with wild bushes, moss and ragged dark rocks—some splattered with white bird dung.

"Any snakes here?" I asked, afraid of the low, thick bushes.

"Shouldn't be, in this area of the Pacific," Buzz said. "Man, this is really for the birds."

"I told you there wasn't anything here," Will said, nervously.

"We'll split up," Buzz snapped, "cover the island faster. Two of us will start from the right, the other two walk towards the left."

"I'll go with you," I told him, wanting to talk about an idea for a TV show I'd thought of during the night.

Buzz nodded. "We'll always be within shouting distance. Let's go."

"Best we tell K.K. to wait here for us," Will said glancing down at our cutter, which even from this small height suddenly looked tiny and flimsy, like a model boat on a pond.

"It's hot and we can walk all over this place and she'll still be looking for her shoes when we return." Buzz started off and I followed, panting to keep up as he jumped from rock to rock, kicked through the brush with no fear of snakes. Now and then various kinds of ugly crabs raced from beneath our feet and once we crossed a few feet of smooth sand and soft grass covered with the white remains of thousands of bird eggs.

A dozen minutes later, as we reached the shade of the coconut trees, Buzz warned, "Don't get too close, Harry, a falling coconut is a big yak in the cartoons but 10 or

15 pounds falling from 80 feet can be a concussion in real life. Always tell a tourist in Hawaii, park their cars in the shade of a coconut palm, often return to find the roof bashed in."

As I stared up at the two rows of sturdy palms waving gently with the breeze, he picked up a large green nut with a neat hole bored into one end of the husk. "Work of a rat," he said, hurling the empty nut like a football at a large one-claw coconut crab disappearing beneath the layers of rotted palm leaves and husks at the base of the trees.

"Writer, nature doesn't make a bit of sense," Buzz went on, in a talkative mood. "The nuts float from island to island, some remaining to take root. Wasn't for that the South Pacific would be empty of people. There's an old saying: an islander will never go hungry or naked within the shade of a coconut palm. But nature also sends rats and crabs along, and of course the bigger animals like ourselves, to make sure the old war of eat or be eaten goes on and on."

"Speaking of war," I said, like a hambone actor coming in on cue as we walked on, "I've been mulling over the character picture you gave me last night. Our hero is a former U.S. Army officer who, during the Battle of the Bulge, was fooled by a Nazi platoon dressed in G.I. uniforms, taken in by their slang and talk about baseball, etc.

etc., as really happened. He let them through a checkpoint and once they reached the exposed rear of his regiment, they massacred most of his own men, leaving him running through life bitter, full of a sense of guilt."

"Could be," Buzz said, walking ahead of me as we pushed through blue flowers. I saw scratches and even blood as the branches hit his sunburnt skin. "Yes, guy sure would have a strong sense of guilt about a thing like that. We'll make him a sergeant, not any goddamn officer. Yes, he's a Ranger and they been through hell and back and here, when the show's about over, they all get it. Even though our boy has personally machine gunned the Nazis after they knocked off his old pals, he still feels at fault. Be a great change of pace in the flashback—one scene we're on a boat in the Pacific and he's fooling with a native broad, then we cut to the winter of the Bulge. Harry, that sounds fine, gives us a working character to start . . ."

A large spot suddenly appeared on Buzz's wide back, then burst into a bloody red rose as the sound of a shot rang in my ears, off to our right. Buzz half-spun about, staring at me with a stupid, glassy expression, mouth wide open—before he pitched forward, creashing through the bushes.

I stood there, unable to move a muscle, even breathe, for a long

moment. Somehow, I was certain Buzz was dead but never having seen a man killed before, I kept telling myself this *had* to be a practical joke. Any second now Buzz would spring to his feet, take a bow or . . .

I was able to breathe again and I ran toward Buzz. The terribly bright and bubbling blood gushing from the large spot on his back was real. No doubt . . . I turned him over and heard myself scream—a shrill yell of terror in the sudden stillness. The bullet had come out by tearing open half of his chest. I stared at the mess of pink lungs and bloody meat, his lifeless eyes staring back at me like two pale-blue marbles. I turned him back on his face again, to hide the hideous wound, then backed away, giving up breakfast like a bitter fountain.

A crashing sound in the bushes behind me and I yanked Buzz's knife from his trunks—his skin already cold where my bloody fingers touched it—spun around.

Jimmy and Will Howell came running toward me, Jimmy holding a snub-nose .32 pistol in his hand. I sighed with relief at the sight of them. They both knelt over Buzz, then Jimmy got up and looked around, the bushes nearly level with his head. Howell finally stood up, face ashen, all of him trembling—including the hand pressed to the scar-side of his face.

*"We were walking along and*

*suddenly I saw blood break on his back, heard a shot from over there. It was like a . . . a bloody red rose burst out of his back.*" The voice was a dry croak and seemed to come from a great distance. I heard it for a second without realizing I was hearing myself talking. Jimmy and Will were staring at me and I knew I was pointing at the direction from which the shot had come with Buzz's knife, my hand covered with his blood.

"We heard the shot," Will whispered, "Came . . . here."

Jimmy glared at me as he added, "Buzz got it in the back!"

"Yes, he was walking ahead of me. What the hell are you staring at me for? What's wrong with you two, do you think I killed Buzz?" I heard myself screaming, was much nearer to my own voice.

"You just said it, Harry, we didn't," Jimmy told me, coldly. "You threatened to kill Buzz once before and yesterday I heard him call you an ingrate. *Did you murder him, Harry?*"

"*Murder? . . . Me?*" I yelled, waving the knife before their eyes, my voice once more back in my mouth. "Are you both crazy? Buzz was shot, not knifed to death! I've no gun, nobody has a gun except you, Jimmy!"

Jimmy snapped, "He was shot by something bigger than a .32. Maybe you had a .45 under your shirt, hurled it into the bushes."

"I swam ashore, remember? The

gun would have been seen under my wet clothes, the water would have made it unuseable! Buzz . . ." I got my voice under control, told them in a low whisper, "This is insane—I don't have to defend myself, prove my innocence, I didn't kill Buzz. Why, we were talking about my doing his TV series, had agreed on the main character's background, when somebody shot Buzz."

Will was still staring at me with troubled eyes but Jimmy asked, "Funny, for weeks on the cutter you couldn't get him to work on the TV show, but suddenly he discusses it with you in these bushes—and is shot!"

"Look, Jimmy, use your head, I had no possible reason for killing Buzz. Sure, I threatened him once, while drunk. Just sloppy words . . . hell, day before yesterday, Will threatened to kill Buzz, arguing over K.K. Remember? That doesn't mean that Will would . . ."

Jimmy nodded his crewcut head slowly. "But Will was with me. You were with Buzz and he's . . .!"

"Let's stop standing here, bullying!" Will cut in, his voice shaking. "Jimmy, take his legs, Harry and I will carry his shoulders—have to get Buzz back to the boat, fast!"

We picked him up and Buzz weighed a ton. I walked along, holding Buzz's left shoulder, feeling his blood dripping on my legs like drops of thick ice-water. I stared straight ahead at Jimmy's

muscular back, the actor's legs under his arms; I knew I'd get hysterical if I saw the gaping wound in Buzz's chest again, the glassy eyes.

It seemed to take us only seconds to reach the rocky edge, lower Buzz down to the dark sandy beach. As we put the corpse down, Jimmy pointed out toward the HOYDEN; the dink was loose, floating several yards beyond the cutter, toward the reef.

I called out, "K.K." while Will dived into the smooth water and swam out to the dinghy. Pulling himself aboard, he rowed back to the HOYDEN and went below. A moment later he jumped into the dink, came racing ashore. "Kaipu's gone!" The words were almost a sob of horror.

"She heard the shot as she rowed in, forgot to tie up the dink, must be looking for us right now," Jimmy said.

Will sat in the boat, holding his wet cap and head. "No," he whispered, "we would have seen her, or Kaipu would have seen us. One of her sneakers was on her bunk. I . . . I think she was . . . taken from the cutter!"

"What? Taken by who?" I mumbled, glancing up at the rocks above us.

"They took her, they killed Buzz!" Will whispered.

For no reason I dipped my hand into the ocean, washed off Buzz's blood as I asked, "*They?* Will,

there's nobody on Soran but . . ."

"The Japanese! I saw . . . *him!*" Will said, still holding his head.

Jimmy Turo said coldly, "I didn't see anybody. Captain Howell, this isn't any ghost story—there's been a murder and maybe a kidnapping!"

Will said, his voice stronger, "I'm not talking of ghosts! Back there, when I ran off into the bushes—just before we heard the shot, I saw Lt. Yamiri sneering at me!"

My voice seemed to take off again. I heard myself saying, "Come on, Will, he's been dead for . . ."

Will jumped up, said fiercely, "You fools, I wasn't seeing any ghost nor was it my imagination—it was him! He looked older, the wispy moustache grey, his uniform still in shreds! My God, can't either of you understand what I'm saying?"

Jimmy said, "Take it easy, Captain, we . . ."

"Listen to me," Will went on, voice strong and low. "There must have been other Japanese soldiers here back in '45 that I didn't know about. Now—I've made the same mistake all over again!"

"What mistake?" I asked, on top of my own voice again.

Will pointed up at the rocks. We both spun around, didn't see anything. Will said, "Lt. Yamiri was only wounded, the others could have taken him with them, back into hiding. Except for the Navy

coming here immediately after I returned to my base, and naturally the Japanese would have remained hidden, this island hasn't been visited since!" Will was staring at us, his face livid, even the scar tissue.

"Then . . . Wait a minute, are you saying there's still . . . Japanese soldiers here who don't know the war is over?" I asked.

Will nodded.

"Captain, that was more than 20 years ago," Jimmy Turo said calmly. "That's impossible."

"Is it?" Will asked, pointing toward Buzz's corpse.

"Can you speak Japanese, explain the situation to them?" I asked Jimmy Turo, feeling foolish as I mouthed the silly words for I damn well didn't believe there were any soldiers on Soran. In fact, now that I could think clearly in this nightmare, everybody *except* me had the opportunity to kill Buzz. Jimmy had a gun and by their own admission he and Will were not together all the time. Certainly Will had *really* threatened Buzz and this nonsense about seeing his old Japanese officer enemy in the bushes—could be a poor alibi while Will ducked away to plug Buzz. Will could have had a pistol in his pants all the time, or even knew of a gun hidden on the island all these years—he sure knew Soran better than the rest of us. Nor was I forgetting K.K., with the best motive for killing Buzz;

she could have easily tailed us and knocked him off.

Jimmy said slowly, "Yes, I speak the lingo but even if there are former soldiers here who don't know the war is over, wouldn't they try to capture us rather than shoot first? We're neither armed nor in any uniform and they would have seen the HOYDEN, see it couldn't possibly be a Navy ship or . . ."

"Let's not stand here and hold a debate, we have to find Kaipu!" Will cut in.

Flies were on Buzz. I asked, "How about taking him out to the boat first?"

"Harry, these men haven't seen a woman for nearly a quarter of a century, we can't waste a second finding K.K.!" Will said, rushing for the rocks.

"Captain!" Jimmy snapped, voice almost a growl. "Shouldn't you radio Honolulu immediately, report this? Also, let's get the rifle Buzz used for shooting sharks. I'll row out and radio, if you want."

Will hesitated, rubbing his face. "You're right, I should radio this in, as captain, and we sure can use that rifle." He ran back across the short beach, jumping over the actor's corpse and into the dink as Jimmy pushed the boat off the sand.

I started up the rocks, Jimmy following me. Reaching the top I looked around, expecting to see some movement. Cupping my hands, I called for K. K.

Jimmy squatting on his stubby legs looked up at me, said dryly, "You make a perfect target, standing against the horizon. And if K.K. was anyplace near here, the sound of the shot would have brought her long ago."

I sat beside him, hard. "You actually believe this forgotten soldier deal?"

"No, but I sure as hell believe there's a killer loose."

I nodded, staring at the pistol in his hand. He suddenly grinned and held the short barrel near my nose. "Smell—it hasn't been fired so don't give me your fishy-eyed accusing look."

"You accused me."

"Yeah, but you threatened a man who was later found shot in the back, by your side," Jimmy said. "Harry, this isn't any TV show with the solution coming up before the final commercial—Buzz Roberts has been murdered!"

"Thanks for telling me! How long were you and Will apart?"

"I don't know, a minute or less. Will wouldn't have had time to do it, plus the shot sounded too far away."

"Still, Will *wasn't* with you when you heard the shot," I insisted.

Jimmy shook his head. "I heard him crashing through the bushes, running toward me, then the shot—then we both ran toward the sound. Harry, did you ever work for Buzz before?"

"No. Listen, did Will mention

seeing this ghost, or whatever he saw?" I asked.

"We didn't have time to say anything, just made for the sound of the shot. Now that I think of it, Will did look pale then, but he's been nervous ever since we headed for Soran. Hell, we're a fine lot, accusing each other like some . . ."

Jimmy pointed below as Will jumped into the dink, rowed ashore. I stared down at Buzz's corpse, still looking muscular and powerful, as if Buzz was asleep—except for the awful rip in his chest.

"Will the birds bother Buzz?" I asked.

Jimmy didn't answer and a moment later Will was on top of the lava rocks with us, panting, "The radio's smashed and the rifle is gone!"

I heard the words as if listening to some tall story. "Think K.K. took the rifle?" I asked. "I mean, we all heard her shout about being pregnant, ask Buzz to marry . . ."

Will shut my mouth—with his fist. The belt on the jaw shook me and made my knees sag, but I didn't fall. Nothing was hurt except my dignity. As I started to swing on Will, Jimmy pushed us apart. "Stop it! We're in enough of a jam as it is."

"I know Kaipu," Will said coldly, glaring at me. "She didn't kill Buzz!"

"I didn't say she did, merely suggested she had motive, and rifle."

"What motive?" Jimmy asked. "Buzz said they'd talk over the marriage deal later and she agreed to that. Why kill him?"

"Suppose she *wasn't* pregnant and Buzz found it out, so in a fit of anger K.K. . . ."

Will started to swing again, then abruptly dropped his hands. "God, let's stop standing around and arguing like idiots—we must find Kaipu!"

"Of course," I said, feeling like a cad. "What do we do?"

"Stick together and cover the island," Will said, his voice low. "Try to remember we're in enemy territory, so don't talk and be careful. Let's get moving."

We started off in the direction Buzz and I had taken before. Passing the line of coconut trees I had this feeling I'd lost something, realized I'd left Buzz's knife on the beach when I washed my hands. Our only weapon was Jimmy Turo's gun. I made a point of walking behind him.

Dodging over the rocks and through bushes, running across the open spaces with sudden gullies adding to the obstacle course, was rough. When we'd covered about a quarter of a mile we were all puffing and my lungs felt ready to explode, my legs and feet were cut and heavy as lead. Childishly, I'd made up my mind I wouldn't be the one to ask for a rest, but I couldn't keep in a sob of relief when Will sat under the snake-like

roots and branches of a pandanus. It was cool in the shade of the wide palm leaves and I forgot about the evil look of the aerial roots. For a long time the only sounds were our panting and then this shrill cackle of a nutty bird singing someplace near us. The hairs on the back of my plump neck came to attention—I knew no bird was making the insane chuckle; it reminded me of the movies about jungle warfare, the sounds the Japanese made to drive men nuts. Glancing at Jimmy and Will I was somewhat relieved to see they thought the sound was phony, too.

Jimmy pointed toward a clum of bushes off to our right, innocent-looking bushes with delicate pink flowers—*frangipani*, I thought, although we were too far away to smell their sweet odor. Will nodded and started to crawl toward the bushes when Jimmy stood up and shouted something in Japanese. The idiot cackling stopped and Jimmy called out more Japanese, probably explaining we were friends.

The silence was intense. Still talking Japanese he moved toward the bushes. Jimmy had taken a few steps when a rifle barked and he went over backwards, blood on the sweatshirt near his left shoulder. I saw the orange fire of the rifle among the pink flowers.

Jimmy was damn good; with one motion he rolled over, got to his feet and charged the bush, getting

off a burst of shots. Will and I started after him and there was another rifle blast, the bullet singing through the leaves above our heads as Jimmy fired twice more.

We found Jimmy holding his right hand to his wounded left shoulder, the pistol stuck in his trunk tops. He was standing over a thin, young Japanese in a torn, bleached-grey uniform, a tattered cap on the strong black hair. Rags were wrapped around his feet and blood was discoloring part of the uniform over the lean stomach. The face was smooth and hairless, the unseeing eyes held the look of the dead, while the teeth in the open mouth were very white and even.

I picked up the oiled rifle at the dead soldier's side as Jimmy said, "I was lucky, got him with my last bullet."

"Let's have a look at your wound," Will said, tearing off part of the bloody sweatshirt.

"I think the bastard smashed my collarbone," Jimmy said, face screwing with pain as Will's fingers probed the wound.

"Nasty, but the lead came out. I'll try getting a tourniquet across your shoulder," Will said, yanking a knife from the belt of the dead soldier and cutting the leg off one side of his own pants, making this into a rough bandage.

Kneeling beside the dead man I was struck by two things— he looked more like a dead *boy* and if his uni-

form was in rags, the shiny belt seemed practically new. The face looked as if it had never known a razor or. . . .

Will said, "Harry, don't stand there with your thumb up! I need a stone about the size of an egg and a stick to tighten the tourniquet. Hurry!"

I handed him rocks of assorted shapes and a root I broke off the pandanus tree and Will tightened the bandage until Jimmy grunted with pain. When Jimmy was able to stand he asked for the rifle, told us, "This is an Arisaka, Model 99—about 7.7 caliber, bolt action—used by the Japanese infantry in the last war. Think they held 5 slugs in each clip, meaning there's three left in this baby."

"I wonder how many others are on the island?" Will asked as if thinking aloud.

"Wait a minute," I whispered, "there's something wrong here. You're theory is that this Lt. Yamiri had more men hidden on the island—maybe holed up in caves—when he was ready to leave in your PT boat. Why wouldn't he have taken them all off? And this one looks like a kid. If he was stranded here in say, 1944, and he had to be at least 17 years old to be in the army—that would make him a good 37 now." I pushed the cap off the wild dark hair with my shoe; blood seemed to spread out under his back at the movement. "Look at him, not a grey hair and

I'll give odds he's never shaved."

"Does look damn young," Jimmy said. "But many Japanese are hairless on their face. See if he has another clip for his rifle on him, Harry."

I didn't like poking my hands into his pockets. Except for a slip of paper with some numbers on it his front pockets were empty. Slightly amazed at my own courage I shoved my hand under his bloody rear and in the hip pocket found a wallet and another clip. The wallet was worn and rotted with sweat, empty except for a picture of a semi-nude girl cut from a Japanese magazine. I handed Jimmy the rifle clip, held the picture up before Will. "You can skip that forgotten Japanese soldier bit."

Will stared at the picture with open mouth. Jimmy tried to shrug and gasped with the pain. He said, "Yeah, sure weren't any Marilyn Monroe cheesecake photos around in 1944!"

Will and I stared at each other, I suppose my face blank as his. I had the feeling Jimmy was more interested in watching us than in the nude picture. He held the rifle under his right arm, finger on the trigger. Will said, "I don't get it, unless a magazine drifted ashore."

"Come on, Will, the caption is in Japanese," I said. "If he read the magazine he would have known the war was over. Beside, any magazine drifting in the ocean for weeks or more—the paper wouldn't be in

such good condition. Jimmy, can read the caption?"

"It mentions the late M. Monroe, meaning it can't be more than a brace of years old," he said slowly, still watching us. "Not only is this stiff under 20, but those coconut trees back there—they're in straight lines, meaning they were *planted*, not tossed ashore by the sea."

"How long does it take for a coconut palm to grow and have nuts?" I asked, turning to glance at the tops of the slim palms on the other side of Soran. "I know it takes years before. . . . Isn't that smoke?"

Against the blue sky there was a spiraling streamer of white smoke. Cutting directly across the island, which wasn't more than a few hundred yards, moving carefully, helping Jimmy over the rocks, we reached the rocky shore. The HOYDEN with her jib sail up, towing the dink, fire and smoke coming from the cabin, was making for the reef. Across the stern we saw Buzz's dead body. As the cutter reached the reef a short man in blue trunks dived off and swam toward shore.

The HOYDEN danced and shook in the boiling water, finally slid across the reef and drifted out to sea, mast ablaze and most of her covered with billowing smoke.

The swimmer was making for the cove and as he came nearer it was obvious he was *not* Japanese but a swarthy white. We ran down to the little sandy black beach and when the swimmer saw us, he

turned, started swimming strongly down the rocky coast. Will motioned for the rifle. There was the click of the bolt, the clean bark of the gun. The swimmer's dark head jerked awkwardly, an odd movement having no relation to the rest of his body. His hands thrashed about for a short second as the water turned a dark purple, then he was abruptly pulled under. From the action in the water a large fish was attacking the corpse, although I didn't see fins break the surface.

A moment later the violent ripples died down and what looked like an arm or part of a leg bobbed to the surface, drifted casually toward the reef.

Taking the rifle from Will, Jimmy said, "You're a crack shot, Captain Howell."

"Merely lucky," Will answered, as if we were at a skeet match.

Glancing at the vanishing cloud of smoke and flames which was the HOYDEN, at the part of the arm nearing the reef, I licked my dry lips. My throat seemed stuffed, I couldn't swallow. I finally belched, a hoarse sound, completely inhuman.

Starting at the bit of smoke, now far beyond the reef, which was the HOYDEN, my only link with the world, a number of dizzy thoughts crashed about inside my mind, all of them on the corny side—or perhaps not so corny for this was what I was thinking under *real* stress.

Closing my eyes I thought how happy I'll be when I awake in our bed, Irene's soft body beside me, the way she folds her legs when laying on her side, as if about to run in her sleep. Maybe I'll awaken her to explain about my nightmare on this island and in her sleepy way she'll say, "Harry, your mind is twisted by all this junk you read up on in the library. Go out and taste real life, find the true pure sweetness there can be in living, not the action and violence of your trite yarns. Lord, people don't go around shooting or punching each other. . . ."

Suddenly, in my own built-in TV screen, my mind, I see myself at my desk in the den I call an office. My daughter comes in, rushing as always, looking older than her 14 years, already showing the curves of a woman—which secretly makes me swell up with pride, for some unknown reason. She says, "Dad, one good thing about having you around the house 24 hours a day, you can help me with my homework. You remember any algebra from your school days? Or wasn't algebra invented back then?" The delightful, teasing grin on her young lips, happy with her little dig. . . .

The one thought which kept returning again and again: What was a staid clown like myself, twice past vice-president of the local PTA, doing on a Pacific isle. . . . ?

Will's low voice jarred me back to reality as he asked, "Damn it,

Harry, you sleeping on your feet? We have to find Kaipu!"

I opened my eyes to see Jimmy's crudely bandaged shoulder. He said, "Will, we've been playing ball their way, let them look for us. We need a place to hide, food and water. Killing the swimmer and M. Monroe's fan will bring the rest of them here."

"Are you giving orders, Jimmy?" Will asked. "I'm the captain!"

Jimmy jerked the rifle toward the smoke on the horizon. "You're the captain of that, I'm the man holding the gun!"

"You always have a gun," I mumbled.

Jimmy said, "No point in fighting among ourselves—I didn't sign on for murder or to be marooned on a rocky island. Will, I overheard you telling Harry about your war experience here, do you remember where the cave was in which the soldiers lived?"

Will nodded. "Down toward the cone tip of the island."

"Let's go."

"Our first job is to find Kaipu!" Will snapped.

"Getting ourselves killed will hardly help K.K."

"They might still be using the cave?" Will said.

"I don't think so. 'They' probably are living in something far more comfortable than a cave. Let's get the show on the road." Jimmy turned sharply, forgetting his wounded shoulder, and staggered.

"You seem to have an idea what this is all about," I told him as we moved through the bushes and over the rocks but keeping to the edge of Soran so the ocean protected one flank.

"Yeah, I have an idea."

We moved silently in Indian file, crouching low, Jimmy pushing the dense shrub aside with his rifle barrel. *Not* talking added to my jitters. I whispered to Will, walking ahead of me, "Won't the fact that we fail to return to Honolulu start a search for us?"

"I suppose so, but when? We weren't sailing on any schedule. The burnt hull, or some part of the HOYDEN *may* be found, start a search, but nobody knows where we are—haven't made radio contact since we left Howland Island."

"All that can take months—we'll be dead of hunger or thirst, if not by bullets!" Jimmy called back. "What's more, since they don't know whether we were in radio contact with some other port or ship, they'll try to knock us off fast!"

"Exactly who is 'they'?" I asked, wishing I wasn't bringing up the rear, expecting a shot slamming into my lardy can any second. I'd sent Irene an airmail from Howland but if she didn't hear from me in another week or so, she'd probably wire the authorities in Honolulu.

"We'll damn soon find out who we're dealing with!" Jimmy snapped. I couldn't understand his

being so mysterious nor his anger. We were all in this mess together.

Reaching an open stretch of ground about 100 feet wide, we crouched in the bushes staring at the clear space of dark sand and small rocks. Beyond were grayish rocks rising to about 30 feet. Will grunted, "The cave was in those rocks."

We stared at the rocks, and the higher ridge of stone beyond them. I couldn't make out any movement except for birds overhead. In the heat of the mid-day sun I wanted a drink badly. Jimmy told Will, "Throw a stone at the cave, see what happens."

Will picked up a black pebble, hit the rocks with it. He threw another stone. Then he pointed toward a couple of frigate birds gliding in for a landing on top of the rocks and some smaller birds perhaps terns, making a racket as they flew away. Will told Jimmy, "I doubt if birds would be nesting there if men were in the cave."

Inserting the last clip of shells into the rifle, Jimmy said, "You and Harry dash to this side of the rocks, I'll cover you—in case we're wrong about the birds."

I looked at Will, our faces saying we didn't think much of the plan. I glanced at Jimmy sitting there, the rifle between his knees, tried to recall if he'd been the one who'd suggested we visit this damn island.

Will said, "You can't shoot that with one hand."

"We're wasting time. Or aren't you in a rush any longer to help K.K.?" Jimmy asked sarcastically.

Will ran across the open sand, falling behind a small black boulder. I dashed after him, feeling silly with my rump up in the air, fell panting beside him. We were in the shade of the rock and for a moment I was grateful for the coolness. The frigate birds with their horrible beaks and graceful wings made a lot of noise taking to the air, scolding us. We didn't hear any other sounds. I looked back at the bushes and couldn't see Jimmy.

When I told Will I didn't see Jimmy, he whispered, "That bastard is putting us on! Always thought him too good to be an ordinary seaman!"

"I've had the same feeling—he's too efficient. But Buzz was the one who suggested coming here, plus Jimmy is wounded. Too complicated to make sense." Talking didn't help my parched mouth. "Was there a spring near the cave?"

"I don't remember. Must be water someplace. Where the hell is Jimmy?"

We remained behind the boulder for another few minutes then crawled over to the rocks, standing like cockeyed and jagged dark tombstones thrown together. Will pointed toward an opening in one of the larger rocks. For a long time we both watched the dark opening and then I pointed at some low brush growing before the entrance.

whispered, "It doesn't seem to have been trampled."

Will said, "Let's see," and we raced toward the cave. I expected a welcoming blast of gunfire, so the quiet and cool darkness of the cave was sheer relief. We stood inside the entrance, listening to many small and dragging sounds. Will flicked his cigarette lighter and in the gloomy shadows I saw a large cave with plenty of headroom. The air was musty and the sandy floor covered with the rotted remains of grass mats. There were also many holes in the sand, about an inch wide, each surrounded by a tiny barricade of husks and sand piles. Something stirred in one of the holes nearest us. I hissed, "Snakes?"

Will shook his head, pushed the sneaker of his pantless leg toward the hole. A large claw took a fast swipe at the sneaker, then vanished down the hole. Blowing out his lighter Will mumbled, "Just a coconut crab, although I don't know what the devil they're doing in a cave."

"Place doesn't look as if it's been used for years."

Will shook his head again. "Lt. Yamiri is certain to come hunting for us—me—here, we have to leave."

"Captain, are you sure you saw him? I'm not doubting you but. . ."

"But it sounds like I've blown my marbles?" he added. "I saw him, Harry, and it wasn't any mental mirage—the same hard eyes, the droopy moustache framing his evil

smile is all grey now. I realize how it must sound, but I saw him. Impossible as it may seem, obviously he didn't die in the grenade explosion. I can't explain the young fellow Jimmy shot nor the photo of M.M. . . . *But I did see Lt. Yamiri!*"

"Sure, Will." My eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and poking at one of the crumbled mats with my shoe, I felt something hard. I told Will to turn on his lighter. Pushing the powdered leaves away we saw the chalk-white leg and pelvis bones of a skeleton. Kicking the rest of the mat away, I couldn't find the other parts of the skeleton. The pelvis bones were small, perhaps those of a child. I glanced at Will and he shrugged, closed his lighter as he stepped toward the cave entrance.

We both stood there in the dim light, not knowing what we were waiting for. Will said, "We can't kill time here, have to find Kaipu."

"Of course. You knew her far better than I did, do . . . ?"

"Harry, don't use the past tense, she's still alive!"

I backed away, expecting another belt in the mouth. "Listen to me, for a second, Will. I have a far-out theory about all that's happening to us. K.K. was bugged on finding some remote island, returning to the old Polynesian culture. Think it's possible she already had Soran set for the deal, put on tattered Japanese uniforms to frighten off anybody who happened to land here? That would

account for the burning of the HOYDEN . . .”

“Harry, you’re talking like a man with a paper brain! Have you forgotten Buzz’s death?”

“No, that fits—in an off-the-wall way, too. This bit about K.K. being pregnant. I don’t think she was and killed Buzz when he found out she was bluffing. Of course I haven’t tied up all the loose ends to . . .”

“You’re talking like an ass. Kaipu is pregnant—I know for sure,” Will said softly.

“You?”

He fingered the scar side of his face. “Yeah me, isn’t that a laugh? before Buzz returned to Honolulu this last time, Kaipu had a spat with her folks, moved aboard the cutter. Just the two of us. I’ve been in love with her for months—but what does she need with an old tramp like me, with my face?”

“Did . . . eh . . . Buzz suspect?”

Will shrugged. “I doubt if he would have given a damn—if he did know. Buzz was a highly intelligent man in most things, but his attitude toward women they were a commodity, like candy bars. I guess girls had been throwing themselves at him ever since he was a dozen years old.”

Absentmindedly I reached in my pocket for my pipe and tobacco. The pipe was gone, tobacco pouch and matches still damp. “K.K.—she love Roberts?”

Still playing with his scar, Will mumbled, “I don’t know. Kaipu is a

bundle of **complex** moods. She admired him tremendously, claimed he was the only honest man she knew.”

“Honest?” I repeated, bewildered.

“To quote Kaipu, an honest man is one who has a choice. Buzz could have been the big star, the big money, fame, the fondling by the public—the whole scene. But he chose the HOYDEN, to . . .”

There was a movement on the rocks nearest the cave and we both froze. Looking around for a stick or a stone, I almost grabbed one of the shin bones of the half skeleton, but it felt deadly damp to my touch.

A voice whispered loudly, “Will? Harry?”

“Jimmy?” Will whispered back.

A second later Jimmy Turo’s cropped black hair and flat face appeared above a dark rock, then the rifle and bandaged shoulder as he came around the rocks, walked slowly—almost casually—into the cave. Will asked, “Where the hell have you been?”

“Reconnoitering. Come on, I’ll show you the answer to things!”

“You’ve found Kaipu?” Will asked as we followed Jimmy out of the cave.

“No, but I know where she is.”

To the right of the cave a wall of jumbled and ragged dark rocks cut across the island like a wall. With an astonishing agility, considering his plugged shoulder, faint blood showing through the bandages, Jimmy climbed over the nearest rocks

and suddenly disappeared. We scrambled up the rocks, burning hot from the long hours in the sun, found him waiting in a twisting path through the rocky 'wall.' The path was so narrow we had to move sideways. The rough boulders above us seemed loose and I sucked in my breath, expecting one to come crashing down at the slightest movement or sound. The path was 30 feet of sharp turns and the last one brought us to a valley about 25 feet below us.

I was hungry, thirsty, depressed, bewildered and scared stiff, although maybe not in that order—but at the moment I could think only of the beauty before me. We were looking down on a fairly flat valley, a half a mile long and perhaps several hundred yards wide, filled with millions of red, blue and white flowers. Running down the center of the flowers was this narrow strip of lava rocks smoothly fitted together and painted over in weird stripes of green and yellow. The wall-to-wall flower valley ended at the base of the old volcanic cone where, hidden beneath a number of tall palms and some sort of spreading shade tree, there was a kind of ranch house, quite modern in design.

Sucking in his breath, Will said, "This wasn't here—before, in '45."

"Of course not," Jimmy Turo said, as if giving us a guided tour. "This is a cultivated field, must have broken a lot of backs clearing

the rocks, making that air strip. Notice the simple but neat job of camouflage."

"Then—this is where that two-engined plane must have come from," I said.

"You bet," Jimmy told me.

"What plane?" Will asked and I told him about the small plane passing over the HOYDEN two days ago, although it now seemed a couple of life-times ago.

Pointing with his rifle, Jimmy asked, "Notice the two tall palms nearest the house? Sun isn't hitting it right, from this angle, but I saw the gleam of a radio antenna between the trees. They radio the plane whenever a shipment is ready and radioing Honolulu for help is the only way we'll ever get off Soran alive."

"A shipment?" Will repeated. "Have enough flowers in Hawaii without importing any."

Jimmy gave him a long look, then a tight grin before he said, "Guess I owe both of you an apology. I'm a Treasury Agent, Narcotics Bureau. These flowers are. . ."

"You're not!" I cut in, giggling.

Jimmy gave me an odd look. "I am a narcotics agent—what's the joke?"

"Nothing. Just that . . . talk about soap operas coming true, a U.S. agent to the rescue!"

"We're a long ways from any rescue!" Jimmy snapped. "As I was saying, the flowers are poppies, an Asiatic variety with a coloring new

to me. It's a sure bet that inside the house we'll find a lab for removing opium from the flowers, converting the coagulated juice into heroin!"

"A dope deal?" I asked, stupidly.

"One of the biggest! Volcanic soil is very fertile so they probably get three crops of poppies a year with each crop giving a dozen or more pounds of pure heroin-making this a multi-million buck operation! We've known for some time 'H' has been coming into Hawaii, smuggled from there into the States. Frankly, we thought it might be coming in on the HOYDEN, which is why I signed on as crew."

"Junk on *my* ship? Will said loudly, looking slightly comical as he drew himself up—with only one pants' leg. "What the hell gave you that idea?"

"We'd been checking all the regular passenger and freight ships, the airlines—of course we didn't look for a light plane flying the stuff in. Well, we didn't find a clue. Then we started checking out yachts and there was the HOYDEN with its erratic and unknown voyages. You never touched at any known ports. With an actor like Buzz Roberts for a front, the HOYDEN could have been the perfect courier. We figured the junk was coming in from Southeast Asia, that you either picked up the bundle in some small port or met another ship at sea. We were wrong, but that doesn't matter, at last we've found the source!"

"No wonder they burned the HOYDEN, have been taking pot shots at us!" I said, mostly to myself. "Source—how are we going to get out of here?"

Jimmy started to shrug, until his face twisted with pain. "That's the part I haven't solved—yet. From what I've seen there's only three men in the house, that ex-Japanese officer and two whites. Might be others in the bush but I doubt if they'd need more than five or six men to run this end. We'll wait. . . ."

"If Kaipu's in there, let's get going," Will interrupted.

"Have to wait until night to make a move. We'd be perfect targets making for the house now," Jimmy Turo told him.

"We've waited too long as it is! These goons probably haven't seen a woman in months. Give me the rifle."

"Will, getting ourselves killed won't help KK.. Look at the house, commands a view of the whole valley and it's impossible to reach it by sea, or going over the rocks. One man could hold off an army."

"Jimmy, are you going to give me the rifle or must I take it from you?" Will asked softly, the scar patches deadly pale against the tan of his narrow face.

"Captain, we're dealing with killers. Being stupid-brave will only play into their hands. Wait until night and then we'll see what breaks."

Will grabbed the rifle barrel and

Jimmy let go of it. Captain Howell said, "I'm not asking you two to come with me. I *have* to take Kaipu out of there now!"

"Will, use your head," I told him. "We all want to rescue K.K. but it isn't as simple as saying 'I'm not asking you two to come with me.' You're taking our only gun with you and if you're killed or captured, it will only make matters worse for all of us, including K.K., and things are tough enough now. Jimmy's right, this isn't any one man show. I know how you feel, but let's talk this through, work out the best plan."

"Harry," Will said, staring at the house, "I can't be logical about Kaipu. I'm sorry." He started down the rocks toward the fantastically colored field of poppies.

I glanced at Jimmy and the government man said, "We might as well go along, make it three against three. Spread out and crawl, due to the variety of colors we might not be spotted."

Sliding down the hot rocks I kept thinking of the line about the poppies growing in Flanders field, wondering if I'd soon be dead in this sea of flowers with their evil beauty. The poppies grew about knee high and Will ran up the center, near the air strip, crouched low. I came up on the left side of the valley like a soggy end racing for a pass, while Jimmy moved along the right side.

Running a half a mile is rugged

for a guy who was never in shape, running crouched over was impossible. After a few minutes I fell on my gut and rested, smelling the sweet perfume, unaware before that poppies had any odor. Jimmy and Will were still on the go. I tried crawling, then walking like a kid on all fours, until the pain in my stomach muscles left me faint.

Resting again, I stuck my head above the flowers and couldn't see either Will nor the government man. The dark earth felt damp and I put some on my cracked lips but quickly brushed it off. I snapped a poppy stem in half, squeezed out a drop of a bitter-tasting sap and wondered if I was licking opium. It didn't help my thirst nor ease my tiredness.

I still couldn't see any sign of Will or Jimmy and had this sudden fear I'd been left behind, felt like the last man in the world. I remembered reading how infantry men advanced by running in a mad zig-zag and then hitting the dirt. I studied the house ahead for a second, they had real glass windows. I didn't see anybody around the house and many yards ahead of me there was a patch of purple poppies a little taller than the rest.

Jumping up, I sprinted a cockeyed course toward them and dived into the purple patch: the whole island seemed to explode in my guts as I fell off into a choking darkness. Opening my eyes many seconds later. I found myself sobbing for air,

this awful numbness in my plump belly. Touching my stomach, expecting to find blood—certain I'd taken a bullet—found myself sprawled across a large and flat, grey rock. I'd literally made a 'rock play'—knocked myself out by diving on the stone.

I sobbed aloud again, this time with sheer relief. I saw Will's cap up ahead, he seemed to be sitting in the poppies, but there wasn't any sign of Jimmy. Crawling on his wounded shoulder would be hell. I was now close enough to the house to see the radio antenna, wires shaped like the outline of a giant hot dog. The house was a sturdy, if home-made, job of coral and lava rocks cemented together, the inverted V roof of woven palm and pandanus leaves browned by the sun. Stone steps built up to a worn wooden door with one large window beside it. I figured the house was divided into four large rooms.

Resting as my wind returned, I watched Will, wondering what he thought he could do. For all we knew Kaipu might not be inside. And if she was, while I appreciated Will's concern for her I had a hunch K.K. could be a real cage of apes when she got angry, hardly a pushover under *any* circumstances. Jimmy and I had been fools to let Will make this grandstand play, we'd all be killed. Although our chances of living another day, under any circumstances, were dreadfully small.

Will seemed to be watching something inside the house which I couldn't see from my angle of view. I'd been laying there like a lump for perhaps 15 or 20 minutes when the door opened and two men with pistols strapped to their waists stepped outside. They were wearing the ragged Japanese uniform bit but their new shoes were the latest Italian style. The older man was of slight build, thick head of dirty-grey hair and a small beard on his unshaven face, cigarette bobbing between his thin lips. He looked European. The cigarette sent out nervous puffs of smoke.

The younger man, and he was at least 40, had greasy blonde hair and seemed powerfully muscled. They talked in low voices; I was too far away to hear what they were saying, or the language, but from their expressions the older man was steamed about something and the greasy-blonde-with-muscles was trying to calm him.

The door behind them opened and Lt. Yamiri *strode* out on the steps, truly a villain dropped smack out of an old Fu Manchu melodrama. Tall and rangy, torn uniform a faded blue, he wore highly polished jack-boots with a large knife stuck in his wide, black belt. The large and absolutely bald head, long, thin moustache dropping over the long lips, the arrogant way he held himself—all added up, to a caricature of evil incarnate.

He seemed to bawl out the older

man, and I had an idea they were talking German . . . when Kaipu suddenly appeared in the doorway. The bra of her red bikini was torn with one breast showing, both hands were tied behind her with an ugly bruise on her forehead. But she stood very straight, face unafraid and full of dignity.

The three men turned to glance at her; Yamiri grinning, the older man's stare cold. When the blonde man offered K.K. a cigarette, she spat in his face. Lt. Yamiri slapped her—and the action broke fast.

Running awkwardly, rifle at his shoulder and working the bolt, Will came charging in, yelling, "Kaipu, duck!" At the sound of the first shot K.K. hit the first two men with her shoulder, sending them sprawling down the steps as they went for their pistols. Lt. Yamiri started inside the house and K.K. brought her knee into his belt—sending him staggering off the steps. Making a graceful leap over the men on the steps, K.K. raced through the poppies toward Will.

The blonde joker got off a shot but Will's rifle barked twice and the man spun around on his knees before collapsing. Holding one arm around Kaipu, Will turned his back on the house and ran with her. Reaching the poppies he turned for a second, got off a couple of wild shots.

I saw the older man get to his feet and yank out his pistol, aim it at Will's back, holding the gun with

both hands. As I yelled a warning, Jimmy Turo suddenly bounded up near the edge of the poppy fields, fired a burst of shots with his revolver and the old man quickly ducked behind the steps.

Watching it all as if I had an orchestra seat, I wondered where Jimmy had found more bullets for his gun as I saw Will and K.K. dive into the flowers and crawl away. Jimmy vanished into the poppies like a jack-in-the-box and for a moment the scene was one of peaceful quiet, the flowers dancing in a mild breeze.

The older man crawled around the steps and dragged Lt. Yamiri into the house, slammed the door. Seconds later a burp gun barked from the window and I fell flat among the poppies, then started crawling back toward the rocks and the cave as fast as I could move, realizing I wasn't a spectator.

The breeze was a break, the movement of our crawling couldn't be seen, but I worked faster than a green snake when bullets sang through the flowers to my right. I kept crawling when the firing stopped, praying my big rear wasn't showing, a plump and easy target riding the surface of gay colors.

Scratched and panting I reached the end of the poppy valley and the ridge of dark rocks sooner than I expected, fright being my jet fuel. I sat there, throat like torn sandpaper, waiting for the others. Moments later I saw K.K.'s dark hair pop up

in a sea of pinkish flowers. She looked around wildly and when I waved she motioned with her head for me to come over. Will was stretched out beside her, ashen face and dirty-white shirt covered with blood. Kaipu's hands were still tied behind her and she was covered with scratches and small bruises. Will's head rested on her lap, her free firm breast almost touching his cropped grey hair as she rubbed her beaten face against his. She was crying softly. Except for her puffed eye and bruises she didn't seem hurt.

Finding a jagged rock I worked on the cord binding her hands, felt foolish at all the time it took me to cut her loose.

K.K. seemed to be in shock, didn't know her hands were free until I rubbed her wrists and gently pushed her away from Will. Unbuttoning his bloody shirt I saw a nasty hole below the rib cage on his right side. I put my hand under his back, didn't find any wound there: the slug was still in him.

Will opened his eyes, tried to smile as he whispered, "Told you I'd get Kaipu out."

"I'll carry you over the rocks to the cave."

Closing his eyes, Will shook his head—fell back against K.K.'s thigh as he said, "I'll never make it. I've had it."

"Don't talk like that!" K.K. wailed. "We're going to make it!"

He moved his head, rubbed the scar side of his face against the

curve of her tan stomach. "No honey. I'll never see my kid."

Kaipu stared down at him, eyes coming awake—almost hard with anger for a second. She asked, "Will if you knew the child was your's . . . all the time, why didn't you say something?"

"Say what? The kid wouldn't want a bum like me for a father. Buzz could offer you and the child so much more. . . ."

"You idiot, I never thought you really wanted *me*!"

"I love you, Kaipu, but with a face like mine . . . well."

"Your face is wonderful, full of character!" she said, crying again, her tears falling on his nose. "Will, Will, when are you going to stop hiding behind a scar and a memory, be the man I . . . ?"

He licked at the tears on his nose before he said, "Far too late for lectures, honey."

"No . . . No it isn't," she moaned, sobbing.

"Let's stop all the chatter," I told them, ripping off the remains of my polo shirt. "K.K., you know anything about first aid?"

"Not much. We can bandage him perhaps stop the bleeding. The ancient islanders had herbs that healed but . . . Hell, I'm such a damn phony, I can't recall what they were."

Sitting among the poppies as if at a picnic we used my shirt to bandage Will as best we could. There was a sound ahead of us and my

heart did a rumba until I saw Jimmy's hand and then his drawn face appear above some scarlet poppies. He was in rough shape, his shoulder wound had opened and he seemed in a semi-coma. Dragging him gently over to K.K. by his good shoulder, she helped me tighten the blood-soaked tourniquet. Both men seemed asleep, or had passed out.

Twilight comes on fast in the tropics. Glancing at the darkening sky, I said, "They'll come for us when it grows dark."

K.K. sat there, as if she didn't hear me, or didn't know I was around. Then she whispered, "Maybe. They know we're trapped. The bald devil said there's nothing much we can do except die of thirst. The only spring is back of the house. They spoke German and I speak enough to understand them. They radioed for help. The plane is due in the morning. By tomorrow it won't matter, Will and Jimmy will be dead."

Although she didn't have to put it in words, the inference was practically shouted—she didn't count on me for any help or being much of a man. Nor did I feel of any use, sitting there unarmed, with two dying men. I asked her where the rifle was.

"It was empty, Will dropped it."

I ran my hands over Jimmy's trunks, found his pistol, all the shells used. Shaking him slightly, I asked, "Jimmy, do you have any more bullets for your gun?"

"No."

"Are you positive—this time?"

"Yes." It was hardly a gasp.

I turned to Kaipu. "How many are there in the house?"

"Two, now. The grey-haired one is a chemist. They have a lab in there. I guess you know what they make?"

"Yeah. K.K. can you go back and shinny up one of those coconut trees, get some drinking nuts? I mean, will you're being pregnant let you do . . . ?"

Back in her daze again, K.K. said listlessly, "I suppose I could climb, but it would be impossible to open them without a knife."

"Can't you use a sharp rock? Could you show me how?"

She shrugged, the one bare breast dancing.

"K.K., try to snap out of it! I realize what you've been through but you know the old ways and the first islanders didn't have knives."

"Harry, go away, I'm very tired. What difference does it make? By morning we'll be dead—we'll die thirsty."

"I was thinking of them," I mumbled. "Nor do I intend to die!" I added this last to myself. Squatting among the poppies, which could easily be my wreath, I tried to think logically. Harry the chump with the logical brain which worked out plot twists and surprise endings.

There were two armed in the house who probably didn't know we were out of ammo. Could I somehow sneak up with Jimmy's

empty pistol, bluff them? But after our 'attack' and rescue of K.K., they'd certainly be keeping a lookout, so coming upon them with an empty gun would only be a dumb form of suicide. There was only one thing I knew for sure, I had to make *some* move before the night was out and their plane returned. I didn't have any idea what I was going to do but I damn well knew I had this deadline for life or death—and *that* didn't sound at all trite, to me.

As the darkness of the sky deepened I sat among the poppies in a trance, watching the countless stars appear above, my tongue aching with thirst. The dream-like quality of everything was stronger than ever and many unrelated thoughts kept cruising my dizzy head.

Why wasn't there any light in the house at the other end of the flower valley; did that mean they were out hunting for us? Would Irene have to wait 7 years to cash my insurance policies if my body was never found, and how would she and the kid live during those years? The damn bright stars, why couldn't it rain! But K.K. was right, if we died thirsty what difference would it make? Could I sharpen a branch, a stick of some kind, with a sharp hunk of lava stone, use it as a spear to kill one of the two men in the house? Then bluff the other with the empty pistol?

But another side of my mind which wasn't on the mental merry-

go-round coldly told me the idea was stupid, that I wasn't banging this out on a typewriter—*this had to be for real!* This part of my mind knew it would take me all night to find and sharpen a branch, that I'd never thrown a spear before. Still another level of my weary brain, that part still acting the spectator, was amazed at the casual way I considered killing, as if I knocked off people every day. But under all my crowded thoughts one remained heavy and unmovable—I had to do *something* by morning.

At times my brain drifted off to consider Lt. Yamiri's fantastic story—surviving alone and badly wounded, hiding himself from the U.S. Navy search party—pride forcing him to refuse surrender—and probably being picked up years later by tuna fishermen who must have had a time convincing him the war was over. But during his lonely years on Soran what could have given him the evil idea of growing dope on the island? Or had he been in the junk business before the war? Could he have been an addict himself, forced to take the 'cold turkey' treatment when stranded on Soran? The hell with Yamiri . . . still he *had* survived, half-alive and alone, why couldn't we? True, at the time he wasn't being hunted by killers and had been on Soran for months or years, knew where the water was, must have dug up roots for food.

Then some coconuts had drifted over the reef: I could picture his joy at eating some, planting the rest to . . . *Dug!*

Crawling over to where K.K. was laying beside Will like sleeping lovers in the darkness, I whispered, "Will."

"Leave him be, he's sleeping," K.K. said.

"I have to wake him." Bending over him I said in his ear, "Will, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Harry." In the night-quiet his voice was astonishingly strong.

"Listen. You told me when you were here during the war, after the Japanese had taken the PT boat, you and your buddy dug up a mortar and some shells, that you took two of the shells. Were there more shells buried there?"

"Yes."

"Okay. As I recall you covered up your digging and waited for a chance to shell the PT boat. Now, where did you dig up the mortar?"

"Someplace near the cave—this side of it." Will's voice dropped so low and weak I could hardly hear.

"How far from the cave? 5 feet? 10 feet?"

"I don't remember. We . . ."

"Harry, leave him alone," K.K. cut in. "Can't you see he hasn't the strength to talk. And this is hardly the time for small talk."

I stood up. "Kaipu, help me dig for the mortar shells—if there are any."

"No, I can't leave Will."

"K.K. this may be the only way of saving all our lives and it speeds things if two people dig. I was never in the army but I've done a good deal of reading and research on combat and recall reading of some famous infantry G.I.—can't remember his name now—who was awarded the Medal of Honor for killing off a mess of Nazis in Italy by throwing mortar shells at them, using the shells like grenades. I don't know if the Japanese shells are still good, if they ever could be used like that, or even if there are any, but it's worth the try."

Jimmy Turo said out of the darkness, "I was with the 442nd in Italy, heard about that incident. I think the G.I. was in a house, surrounded by Krauts, and dropped tar shells on a cobble-stoned courtyard below. If you can hurl a mortar shell hard enough and the war-head strikes something . . . like rock or steel . . . it might work. We've nothing else going for us."

"We don't have even this until we dig up the shells—if they're still there—and not rusted to powder. It's been over 20 years," I mumbled.

"Still, it is a chance. Go with him, K.K.," Jimmy said. "Nothing you can do for Will and I'm awake, able to move about a little."

Kaipu bent over and kissed Will on the scar-side of his face, then followed me toward the rocks. I made no attempt to find the path through the rocks at night; we

climbed over the black ridge, moving slowly and awkwardly, my hands unaware of K.K.'s seminakedness as we helped each other over the larger boulders. On reaching the cave we both rested, sitting back-to-back for support, my lips and tongue like cracked leather, plump belly full of hunger pains.

The moon now gave enough light for me to make a rough circle, about 10 feet in diameter, outside the cave entrance. We began digging with our hands, in opposite directions, criss-crossing the circle.

Although the ground was sandy it was packed hard beneath the surface and it was rugged work making a ditch some two feet deep. I felt dampness and thought I'd struck water until I realized my finger tips were bleeding. Sucking my own blood relieved the dryness of my lips and I turned to K.K.—found she was gone.

I called her name softly several times, overcome with dread and terror, until she appeared out of the darkness and handed me a flat, sharp stone for digging. She had ripped off the rest of her bikini to wrap around the top of her digging rock and I did the same with my shorts. It was easier and faster with our primitive tools, but when our backsides touched I realized we'd cut the circle without finding a damn thing. I motioned to start another trench in a new direction.

We finished the trench and sat side by side, exhausted and pant-

ing, must have made a weird picture; two naked savages. The hard work, the lack of water and food, left me giddy and depressed. The whole idea now seemed stupid, certainly in all the years Yamiri was stranded on the island he must have dug up the shells. Still, what could he possibly need mortar shells for? Or, had the U.S. Navy squad that came to Soran to find the bodies, also found the shells and destroyed them?

It seemed a waste of time but I started digging again, on the outskirts of my rough circle, mainly because I knew I'd start screaming if I sat there and didn't do something. After awhile K.K. joined me, a tiny part of my dull mind aware of how delightful her nude body was in the pale moonlight. We ploughed up more dark ground without finding a thing. She grunted we must dig deeper, down to three or four feet. I was numb with utter exhaustion and I merely sat and watched K.K. work for a time. Again, random thoughts slowly crashed about in my groggy brain. I thought of the time Irene and I had dug in the garden, vainly trying to raise our own vegetable patch. Staring at Kaipu's full breastworks as she dug, I even recalled an old burlesque joke about, "You looking for a bust in the mouth?" It hardly seemed funny at the moment and I felt like a backward kid.

I tried to force myself to think,

really think. If I'd been living in the cave, I asked myself, would I bury explosives near the entrance where I could get them in a rush, or farther back—say behind the cave—in case one of the shells went off? But the Japanese soldiers hadn't expected any sudden attack or they never would have buried the mortar and shells at all.

I crawled out of the trench I'd dug, walked back until I was about a dozen feet from where the rear of the rocky cave became a sheer drop to the ocean below, started digging. Minutes later my stone struck something hard, sending a shock up my arm. I called K.K. and we both began digging like frightened moles until she said, "Hell, Harry, we're hitting bedrock!"

Too bushed to say a mumbling word I moved a few feet in and began digging again as Kaipu sprawled on the ground, rested. It was perhaps an hour later, my hands moving mechanically, that I dug up a hunk of cloth which crumbled in my swollen fingers. I called K.K. to dig beside me and for minutes we dug furiously with sudden energy, grunting and moaning, a sharp and sweaty odor about us, although we were not sweating in the cool night. It was an aura of fear—fear actually stinks.

We finally reached rotting wood and there they were like buried treasure—three dark mortar shells, each in a layer of dry grease which

peeled off and crumpled to the touch. The shells looked like midget torpedos, about a foot long and weighing a few pounds each.

We kept digging, hoping to find a gun or some kind of weapon but when we struck bedrock again I told Kaipu we'd had it. Holding a shell up in the moonlight I saw a metal ring near the pointed head. I recalled reading that bags of gunpowder were attached to the fins, exploded when the shell hit the bottom of the mortar tube, with the force of the explosion sending the shell out of the tube. I went back and dug around in the dirt where we'd found the rotting-wooden box of shells but didn't find any powder bags. When K.K. asked what I was digging for, I told her, "Loose gunpowder."

"What would you do with it?"

"I don't know," I said, and stopped digging.

K.K. suggested we start back at once but since we were both nude, except for my shoes, climbing back over the rocks without dropping the shells was going to be a problem. Kaipu tried making a sling from the remains of the clothing we'd used around our digging rocks, but there wasn't enough material to hold the heavy shells. Pointing toward the coconut palms waving in the night against the stars, she told me to wait. But the last thing I wanted was to be alone, so cradling the three shells in my arms like metal babies, I followed

her over the relatively smooth ground.

Reaching the foot of the trees K.K. rummaged around, frightening crabs and rats, until she found several long palm leaves. Sitting on the layer of rotten leaves and husks K.K. told me, "Now we'll see how well I really know the old ways—after all my gassing. Palm leaves were woven into cloth."

"I know, the grass skirt bit."

"Harry, you ass, I mean real cloth. I'll try making a bag to carry the shells."

I sat beside her, uneasy at my bare rear on all the buggy old leaves, watching her swollen fingers moving expertly in the faint moonlight. By the time I remembered Buzz's warning never to sit under a coconut tree, K.K. had about a square yard of mat-like cloth. We were both sitting so quietly several large and ugly crabs came out of their holes, waving their rough-armored claws like a pug feinting with his left jab.

Kaipu's right hand flicked out, grabbed one behind its top-heavy claw smashed it against a rock. She offered me a piece of raw crab meat, shoved some into her mouth. The meat was astonishingly cool, tough and very slimy. Chewing on it, I wondered if this crab had feasted on the remains of the half-skeleton in the cave. I didn't give a damn, the mouthful of damp meat gave me new strength.

I tried grabbing a crab and

missed, the clumsy beast burrowing into the dead leaves with fantastic speed. "Easy, Harry, they have a nasty bite. Watch." K.K.'s hand shot out after another crab but her fingers were too far from the claw. Just as I was sure the jagged teeth would get her, K.K. sent the crab jerking high in the air. For a horrible moment I was certain the monster was going to land in the tender cleft of her bosom—but with another lightning movement she caught it behind the claw, broke the shell against a rock and tossed the crab among the mortar shells. "We'll take that one back for Will and Jimmy. See if I can bag another."

But the action seemed to have frightened the crabs and after a few futile minutes of waiting, we started back. I carried the palm cloth full of shells, which seemed unbelievably heavy. But I was glad to get out from under the coconut trees.

As we walked toward the rocks I saw a crab moving with his awkward side-gallop off to my left and ran at him, figuring to stomp him with my big feet. But I stumbled over a root, nearly fell with the shells. Hearing K.K.'s dry laugh I knew I must have looked a sorry sight, my pot belly pushing ahead of me.

Her laughter stung my dazed mind like a slap.

Climbing the rocks in the moon-

light we finally got a small break, I spotted the narrow path between the boulders. Squeezing our naked bodies together, the lava stone now ice-cold wherever it rubbed my skin, we pushed through the twisting path and soon reached the poppy fields, a pale blanket of innocent watercolors in the dim light.

The house at the far end was still dark and I prayed K.K.'s information about not bothering to hunt us down until their plane came in the morning was correct. If not, I'd soon learn whether or not one heard the sound of the bullet which killed you.

Lugging my woven bag of mortar shells through the flowers, walking buck-naked behind Kaipu's tired but still graceful nude figure, I felt like part of a far-out Dali painting. With the motion of the thick green pods of the flowers brushing against my legs, I shook myself awake, expecting to hear Irene mumble, "Go back to sleep, Harry, it's still dark." I blinked at the stars. A happy family man who only flexed his flabby muscles over a typewriter, a clown who's idea of living dangerously was falling off a bar stool: what the devil was I doing walking nude behind a naked goddess through a poppy field? But such fringe thoughts vanished as I looked at the height of the moon and realized it was after midnight, that we only had a few hours remaining before daybreak.

Jimmy Turo was sitting up and waved at us. Kaipu took some of the crab over to Will, who seemed asleep. Squatting beside Jimmy I handed him the rest of the crab, which he chewed without a second's hesitation. Licking the wet of the crab off of his right hand Jimmy picked up one of the shells, told me, "Doubt if these are Japanese, look of German make."

"I don't give a hoot if they come from Mars—if they work. Have you any idea how long it's safe to hold a shell after pulling the ring?"

"They're not a grenade, won't explode unless the head makes contact. Once you pull the ring don't lay the shell down or drop it. You have to hurl it with all your strength at a hard surface."

I nodded, like a kid listening to the head coach. "I figure on throwing them at the stone steps. The explosion, if they work, should blow the door open and kill anybody inside. To merely hit the side of the house might only wreck the house without knocking them out." I heard myself discussing it quite casually, as if I blew up houses every other sunny morning.

Jimmy stared at me for a moment before he said, "Harry, you know you can't throw anything this heavy more than five or ten yards, with any force. Meaning you'll be within the blast radius yourself. After you toss the shell, hit the ground damn fast."

I nodded again, although *that*

had never entered my cluttered mind. I'd had some grandiose idea of pitching the shell like a baseball from the safety of a few hundred feet. Hell, I probably couldn't throw a ball that far, much less a shell weighing several pounds.

We sat there without talking for a moment, there wasn't anything more to say. In the stillness I heard my heart pumping much too fast. I told myself that as soon as I rested a bit. I would do it. Simple as that. But I knew I was as rested as I'd ever be, the longer I waited the harder it would be to move. And I also knew there was no ducking it, no one else could do it.

Placing the shell Jimmy had been examining back with the others I carefully picked up the mat and started walking through the flowers toward the house, the naked peddler and his bundle. My mind was blank except for one tiny thought flashing over and over like an electric advertising sign: my chances of ever being an hour older were slight, to say the least.

I heard Kaipu's whispered, "Harry, wait for me!"

"You stay here!" Somebody ordered. I was surprised I could talk so coolly.

I approached the house in a series of lumbering zig-zag runs, crouching low and cursing the moonlight. My nakedness made me feel terribly exposed, as if a shirt or pants were the smallest protection against a bullet. Holding the

shells against my trembling chest I crawled the last 25 yards on my back, then cut over toward the side of the silent and dark house. I felt sure one of them *must* be on guard at the dark window, must have seen me.

The trees behind the house cast long and very deep shadows against the night. I listened for a long moment and then stood up and moved slowly in the shadows toward a corner of the rock house. I still didn't hear a sound from inside and a sliver of ice rolled down my left side making my body tremble. I knew it was merely my own cold sweat.

There was no point in waiting. I carefully put two shells at my feet and feeling like a joker about to be a suicide, I held the third mortar shell in my left hand and yanked at the ring. It didn't give and I yanked again, so hard I cut my battered skin. The ring came off. I calmly wiped my bloody right hand on my chest, took the shell in my right hand, stepped around the house and silently yelling, "Irene!" I flung it at the stone steps. Turning smartly, I dived next to the side of the house, not feeling the shock of all of me smacking the hard ground.

In the quiet I heard the damn shell hit the steps and bounce away with a series of metallic thumping sounds. Then silence until the door banged open and there was the clipped barking of a submarine

gun as they sprayed the poppies with lead.

Moving like a mechanical man I stood again, yanked the ring from the second shell, stepped around the side of the house to hurl it at the two men almost silhouetted by the orange bursts from the guns they held. Once more, like a ham-bone, I turned smartly and did my swan dive along the side of the house. For what seemed the longest second in the world I heard only the bark of the guns and bullets wacking into the trees off to my right as I prayed—prayed as sincerely as I could—that this shell wouldn't be another dud. Then there was this wonderful pink-red light all around me and the sound of thunder as the ground shook with welcome movement and finally—heavy silence.

Still moving in a robot-daze I got to my feet, pulled the ring from the last shell and stepped around the corner of the house. My arm froze in mid-air. In the smoke and flicking light from the burning door I saw the remains of two bodies filling the gaping hole where the top step had been. Without thinking I walked over, gazed down at the jumble of arms, legs and bones sticking out of bloody skin and burnt clothing. Part of Lt. Yamiri's head was wide open, like a cracked billard ball.

I stood like that for a moment, feeling no remorse or any real emotion at the sight of the men I had

killed. Something wet dripped on my forehead. Hoping it was rain I glanced up at the stars and saw blood dropping from my torn fingers still holding the shell above my head.

Rather calmly I walked back to my favorite corner of the house, hurled the shell into the darkness of the poppy fields, turned and hit the ground hard. The earth seemed to leap up to meet me and I passed out as a beautiful orange flash filled the night.

Dawn was streaking the sky a delicate grey-silver. Jimmy Turo and I were sitting on either side of the dark lava runway, casually smoking Australian cigarettes we'd found in the house. Jimmy held a carbine in his good hand while an automatic shotgun rested across my knees.

I was also wearing somebody's fine cashmere sweater and slightly tight drill pants. Kaipu, looking like a walking barbershop calendar in a yellow and purple aloha shirt which about covered her middle, left the house and walked through the poppies toward us, saucy sway to her good hips, a first-aid kit under one arm. Passing us she said, "Will hasn't any fever. He's demanding more water but I only rinse out his mouth. I think water is bad for a gut wound. Want anything?"

Jimmy said no and glancing at the sky added, "Must be about 5

a.m.—docs should arrive soon. You impress upon Will he's not to move?"

K.K. nodded, long black hair dancing over her hips. She winked at me as she walked on.

I hadn't slept for nearly 24 hours, hadn't eaten more than a sandwich of the food we'd found in the house, yet I felt very strong, powerful and . . . capable is the word I want. At the moment I had no doubts about myself—I could do anything; lick the heavyweight champ or run a mile in 3 minutes. The magic of water is truly tremendous, a glass of cool water and my fatigue had vanished. After a second belt of aqua I'd felt like that well known 'new' man.

The mortar shells had left a ragged hole in the doorway but despite the blast and noise had actually done little damage inside. The radio transmitter was working, even most of the delicate glass tubing in the lab at the back of the house, where the opium was converted into heroin, had survived. The remains of Lt. Yamiri were still a sticky mess under the house.

I'd come to after the third shell exploded to find K.K. kneeling over me, crying as she asked, "Harry, are you okay? Oh Harry, Harry, when the chips are down you're such a hell of a man!"

My dazed mind ate up the words—words I'll remember with sheer pride for the rest of my life—as my

bewildered eyes stared up at her lovely nipples. Then K.K. had poured even lovelier cold water on my face. We had taken water and food out to Will and Jimmy and within minutes Jimmy was on his feet, making for the house, radioing Honolulu for help. Almost as if listening in on a party line I heard him describe Will's wound and then the nasal doctor's voice in Hawaii warning of the danger of internal hemorrhage if we tried to move Will.

Even now, calmly sitting beside the airstrip, leisurely puffing on a bland cigarette, feeling so confident and capable—the aura of unreality I'd felt throughout the whole crazy curse was still strongly with me.

The sole working thought in my tired head was the happy one that I'd soon be in Honolulu and perhaps, with some luck, by tomorrow I'd be home with my wife and daughter. I was quite aware of the smug, almost sadistic delight in my desire to see them again.

Lord, how I'd bug them, rub it in hard, would damn well run things in my house from now on. No more heckling from either of them. I'd truly "lived" and taken a big bite out of the "fruit of life" as Irene was constantly nagging me to do. The joker in the deck was that life had turned out to be cornier, wilder and far more brutal than any yarn I'd ever cooked up over a library table.

# JAIL-BAIT

**F**RANK SIMMONS sat in the large straight-backed chair and looked out a window. He didn't have a choice of chairs, but he had a choice of windows. In the outside world leaves were starting to change color. They were starting to fall. They would have to be raked and burned. Frank wouldn't be raking this year. He wouldn't be burning either. Someone else would be doing these chores. And all his other chores, too. Perhaps he was doing them already. Frank thought about looking out a different window. He didn't bother. The view would be the same.

Yesterday, he celebrated his thir-

tieth birthday with his wife and brother. They had cake. Nobody ate any. The party was a flop. Like his life. The party was a complete flop.

Most of Frank's schoolmates were established professionals or tradesmen. But not Frank. Somewhere he got on the wrong track or turned right when he should have turned left or spouted off when he should have been listening.

He shifted his weight slightly to get more comfortable.

Frank took his first wrong turn at twenty three. He worked as

**BY C. ASHLEY LOUSIGNONT**

*Frank Simmons felt real proud of himself. He knew when to stop. Not many men had that kind of control.*

night manager of a service station. He was the only one on duty. He called himself a manager.

There'd been no sales for the past hour. Maybe because of the rain, but more likely because it was three thirty in the morning. Frank was listening to a commercial on the little radio beside the cash register. Some stud with a southern accent you could cut with a knife was selling Bibles with jan-yew-wine lehtuh bindin for only one dollar down and fifty cents a month until the low low price of only nine ninety nine was paid. He wondered when the station was going to identify itself. Sometimes on nights like this you got stations as far east as Mississippi.

He didn't hear the door open. He heard it close. She had on one of those transparent raincoats, kind of a blue in color and a crazy yellow, red and green bandanna tied around her head.

"Didn't hear the bell", he said, rising, "Fill it up for you?"

"Pardon? Oh, I'm not driving. I'm walking. May I stay here for a while and get warm, sir? . . . I won't get in your way or be any trouble".

Hell, she was just a kid. Frank told her to take her coat off and dry out. Seems she was on her way to her aunt's house. Her aunt lived in the next town, about twenty miles or so. She said she was nineteen. Frank figured she jacked up her age by about four years.

Her figure was starting to fill out real nice. She'd be a thirty-six by thirty-six in a few years. Might even make thirty-eight on top. Now she was a chubby little thirty-four. Right age to split a malt with. Too young for much of anything else—legally that is.

She got real chummy. Wanted to know if Frank had a car. He said he had. She wanted Frank to drive her to her aunt's house. Said her aunt would pay him. Frank told her he wasn't running no taxi service and how did he know her aunt would pay him.

She started to bawl. Told how she'd run away from home cause her father and stepmother beat her up all the time. All about how they wouldn't let her go with boys, not even for a soda or movie. She couldn't go back there. Never. Not in a zillion years. But she'd do anything, just anything, to get to auntie's house.

Frank looked her over. Not bad. Jailbait, but not bad. He didn't want a piece. Not from her, anyway. Too damned risky. No harm in getting a few kicks, though. Him having a few innocent kicks wouldn't hurt no one. Hell, after he finished he would take her to her aunt. Sure. If he didn't take care of her—anything could happen to her.

"Tell you what," he said to her, "If you let me feel you up a little bit, I'll drive you right straight to your aunt's house and it won't cost you or her a cent."

"I don't know," she said, blushing as she pondered his proposition, "That sounds kinda naughty. . . . Promise you won't ever tell my father or aunt. Never in a zillion years? Cross your heart and hope to die?"

Frank crossed his heart and promised in a hushed voice like a true conspirator and exacted the same promise from her.

He turned the lights out in the office and locked the door. After checking to see if any cars on the highway looked like potential customers, he carried a chair over to the darkest corner and sat down.

She came to him without hesitation and stood between his legs. Her knees were warm against his thighs. She put her hands on his shoulders and said she was ready. Her voice shook slightly. Frank put his hands on her buttocks. She came closer. He put an arm around her. His hand went under her sweater. Fingers gently kneaded the flesh of her bare back. She shivered. The other hand went under the front. She had her head on his shoulder. She breathed hot and explosively against his neck. He unzipped her skirt. It dropped. She broke from his embrace. But not for long. Only long enough to send her panties after her skirt. Her mouth sought his and found it.

A sharp, fiery ache in his groin said, "Go, man, go!" A small voice told him it wasn't worth it. The

small voice won. Two falls out of three.

Frank made her get dressed by threatening to tell her aunt if she didn't. She begged him. Frank was firm. His gut hurt all the way to his knees. But he was firm. He felt real proud of himself. Not many men had that kind of control.

He put a "Back in 30 Minutes" sign on the door. He locked the pumps and office. The trip was holy hell. She was all over him. Wanted to stop and get in the back seat. She knew what she wanted. Called it by name. Several times. They made it to her aunt's house all right. Frank was real proud of himself.

Three days later the cops came for him. She'd broke her promise. She'd told her aunt. Her fiction was more believable than the truth. Not many men had his self control. Frank was real proud of himself. He pleaded guilty. He got five and was out in two on parole.

Next time was a year after he got out. He was still on parole. Frank went to a matinee. He took a seat on the aisle. When his eyes adjusted to the dim light he saw the girl. He was sitting next to her. She was fat. Well stacked. But fat.

They got to talking. Small talk. About movies and movie stars. The picture was a comedy. She was real excitable. When something funny happened on the screen, she

bounced up and down and squealed. After they got acquainted, she didn't bounce. She grabbed Frank's arm and squealed. When the cartoon came on, he had his arm around her. With the news-reel, kisses. When the feature started up again they were both half undressed and someone had complained to the manager.

She was sixteen. Her father came and took her home.

He was twenty seven. A policeman came and took him to the station. He spent the remaining year of his sentence cursing female teenagers and cops on general principles.

In prison, he decided to get married. Figured it was the smart thing to do. Frank's last week behind bars, he dreamed of the wedding. He also dreamed of the honeymoon. He didn't know who his bride would be. He dreamed anyway.

Frank picked a twenty five year old waitress. He knew she was twenty five. He made her show her birth certificate. She was well built and reasonably cute.

After a whirlwind courtship of six days covering four hotels, one motel and a park bench, they were wed. Frank got a job with a recapping firm and everything was sweet and rosy.

But everytime some chippy got pinched on the ass, the cops picked Frank up for questioning. Once they held him for three days cause

some sixty year old broad complained of a prowler outside her bedroom window.

The cops brought him home one night after a session. His wife was mad. She called him a sex maniac. He called her a whore and punched her in the nose. He went out and got drunk.

Driving home, he saw this broad. She was wearing a red dress. She was standing on the side of the road and looked awful lonely. Frank stopped. He asked could he give her a lift somewhere.

He drove slowly. He coaxed her a little. She came over close. Frank slid her dress up and rubbed the inside of her leg. His upper arm was pressed tight against her breast. Frank was living. Really living.

He asked her if she'd like a drink. She asked him what he had. He said he didn't have any in the car. They'd stop at a bar up the road a piece and have a couple. She said she couldn't. Frank asked why. She said they knew her. He asked her what she meant by that. She said she was under age.

She assured him, though, that she was ready, willing and able to give him the time of his life. Any way he wanted it and as much as he wanted. She would do it for half the going price, too.

Frank hit the brake pedal. She hit the dashboard. The bump on her head made her dizzy. She wanted a ride back to town. Frank pushed her out of the car. She said

a dirty word. Frank threw gravel all over getting away from her.

Next day at work, Frank heard it on the radio. Young girl. Head beaten with a rock. Red dress near body. Newspaper said corpse had been sexually assaulted. Women warned to stay off streets at night. Fiend at large. . . .

They got him at the city limits. A hastily packed suitcase was in the back seat. He had a bank pass book in his pocket. The balance was \$0000.00.

Frank was too scared to say anything. Cops found a witness who saw him pick her up. Frank talked

then. He told the truth. He told the whole truth. He told nothing but the truth. Too late.

Those people outside the windows. Lots of people. Lots of windows. All the way around. The people looked sick. They were looking at Frank. He'd show them. Like a man. He'd show them how to go. He heard the splash under his chair. He sat so straight. So brave. He'd show them. His arms trembled. As much as the heavy straps would let them. His legs trembled. As much as the heavy straps would let them. His mouth trembled most of all.





