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WORLD'S BEST SELLING CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

JUNE, 1958

35 CENTS

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*("The Man With The Golden Arm")*

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MANHUNT VOLUME 6, NUMBER 4, JUNE, 1958. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. Funds) for one year. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. The entire contents of this issue are copyrighted 1958 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

# the THREAT



*A Novelette*

**BY MAX FRANKLIN**

*The set-up smelled phony, but I took the job anyway. You don't say no to multi-millionaires...*

THE VOICE on the phone was precise. "Mr. Harold Stander?"

"Speaking," I said.

"This is Mr. George Harbor, personal secretary to Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Wolfendon. Mrs. Wolfendon has asked me to engage you on a confidential matter. Are you available at the moment?"

"I'm available," I said laconically. I had been available for some time. The private detective business is never very good in Miami, and it's worse when you have to be temporarily careful to stay strictly within the law. I'd had a blunt warning from the Miami chief of police that one more step outside of it would lose my license, and I was being temporarily careful.

"Then Mrs. Wolfendon would like you to call at her home at exactly three P.M. today. Is that time suitable?"

It was an hour off, and the Wolfendons' Miami Beach mansion was a forty-five-minute drive from my office. But you don't say no to multi-millionaires. Joshua Wolfendon was chairman of the board of Wolfendon Plastics, which grosses some four hundred million a year.

I said, "I'll be there."

The Wolfendon home was big even by Miami-Beach standards. A uniformed maid answered the front door, led me through a front room

resembling a hotel lobby, through a couple of others resembling ballrooms, and finally to a small, neatly-furnished study. George Harbor and Mrs. Wolfendon were in the study.

When the maid had moved off, I studied the two. The woman was about twenty-five, a lovely, delicate-featured blonde with the kind of body which made most other women look like slobs. I knew from newspaper accounts at the time of her Cinderella marriage three years before that she had been a photographer's model in New York when she ran into Wolfendon.

George Harbor was a good-looking, well-muscled man of about thirty with jet-black hair and eyes to match. He looked me up and down too.

"You seem to have the physical qualifications, Mr. Stander," he said finally. "What are you? About six three and two twenty?"

"About," I said. "Physical qualifications for what?"

"Acting as a bodyguard." Then he remembered he hadn't performed introductions. "Marie, this is Mr. Harold Stander. Mrs. Wolfendon, Mr. Stander."

I wondered at his familiar use of his employer's first name. Later, when he referred to Mr. Wolfen-

don as Josh, I wondered still more. Still later I learned he was a first cousin of Joshua Wolfendon, and had more of the status of a family member than of an employee.

When Marie Wolfendon and I had murmured polite things to each other, Harbor said, "Show Mr. Stander the letters, Marie."

Rising, she crossed the small room to a desk and removed two envelopes from a drawer. I couldn't help admiring the graceful sway of her hips as she crossed the room. I wasn't alone. George Harbor couldn't help it either.

Returning, she handed me only one of the envelopes first. It was postmarked St. Louis and was addressed in crabbed longhand to Miss Marie Carling at a New York City address. There was no return address. I frowned when I noted the postmark date was three years old, but I didn't comment. I withdrew the single sheet inside.

The letter, in the same crabbed handwriting, read:

Dear Marie:

You must have known what the news of your intended marriage to that notorious and ancient playboy would do to me. How many times have I told you I won't, repeat *won't*, live without you? If you take this step, I swear I'll take steps too. I haven't yet decided whether I'll kill you, or myself, or both of us. But, for God's

sake, change your mind before it's too late.

With undying love and  
deadly seriousness,  
Dave

I looked inquiringly at Marie Wolfendon.

"I got that just after Joshua's and my engagement was announced in the newspapers," she said. "It's from a boy I used to go with in my home town of Washington, Missouri. His name is David Carr."

"Show it to your future husband?" I asked.

She shook her blonde head. "I couldn't. Not because I was afraid for him to know I'd had a high-school puppy-love affair, but because of the way David referred to him in the letter. I—I thought it might hurt his feelings."

I knew what she meant. Josh Wolfendon had inherited his control of Wolfendon Plastics, and though he was chairman of the board, the only actual work he did was to preside at the annual stockholders' meeting. Before his marriage, he'd spent most of his time in New York night clubs. The description was accurate enough to hurt, including the word "ancient." He was double his wife's age.

I grunted and looked pointedly at the second letter in her hand.

"Before I show you this other one, I want you to understand about David," she said. "It wasn't

anything but a puppy-love affair. We broke up almost a year before I left Missouri for New York."

When she paused, I asked, "Then why was he so upset about you marrying another man?"

"He never accepted the breakup. He made some awful scenes, including a suicide attempt on my front porch. He cut his wrists. He recovered and was committed to the state mental hospital. He was still there when I moved to New York. The next I heard from him was the letter you just read."

"Do anything about the letter?" I asked.

"I didn't report it to the police, if that's what you mean. I wrote his folks in Washington, Missouri about it. They wrote back that he was just being dramatic, and to ignore it. They said that when he was released from the state mental hospital, his psychiatrist had told them he was emotionally immature, but perfectly sane and definitely not dangerous. I decided to take their advice and ignore the letter. I never heard from him again until this came in the morning mail."

She handed me the second envelope, which was addressed, in the same crabbed handwriting as the first, to Mrs. Marie Wolfendon at her present address. The postmark was Miami and the date yesterday's.

I slipped the letter from the envelope. It read:

Dear Marie:

After three years of trying to forget you, I've given up. Life without you is hopeless. I've finally come to a decision. I'm going to die, but I'm not leaving you behind. You're going to die first.

Expect me,  
Dave

Looking up from the letter, I said, "Have you reported this to the police yet?"

George Harbor said, "We don't want any publicity, and if possible, we don't want Josh disturbed by having to know about it. That's why we called in a private detective."

I looked at him so long, he reddened slightly. Then I said, "You have a slightly wrong slant on things. Private detectives are just supplements to the police, not substitutes. If I took this assignment without reporting the situation to the police, and Mrs. Wolfendon got killed despite my efforts, I'd lose my license before the funeral. Let's get something straight right now. If I take this assignment, the police see those letters. I'd also suggest that you take Mr. Wolfendon into your confidence. He's going to be a devil of a lot more upset if he learns about this from some cop who drops around to question him, instead of learning it from you."

Marie Wolfendon said, "Oh," and wrung her hands together.

George Harbor ruefully rubbed his nose. "I told you it would be best to tell Josh all about it, and call the police, Marie. Mr. Stander's experienced in these things. We'd better take his advice."

"Josh will be furious that I never told him about the first letter," she said.

"He'll get over it," Harbor told her. "He might not if he found it out from some other source."

We let her stew the matter over without further help from either of us. Finally she said in a small voice, "All right, if you both think it's best. I'll tell Josh as soon as he comes home."

The decision made me feel better. A month previously I might have accepted the case on any basis she wanted. But temporarily I wasn't doing anything at all which might offend, or even irritate the police.

I said, "Now let's define exactly what you want to engage me for. Just as a bodyguard to keep constant watch over Mrs. Wolfendon, or as an investigator to track down David Carr and get him salted away?"

This brought on some discussion between her and Harbor. They finally decided they wanted some of both. The mansion was virtually impregnable, being equipped with burglar-proof screens in all windows and inside bolts on all doors. In addition it had a burglar alarm system. To top all this, everybody in

the place, with the exception of a housekeeper and a maid who slept in, owned a gun and knew how to use it. Harbor said that pending apprehension of David Carr, he, Joshua Wolfendon and Mrs. Wolfendon would all sleep with pistols under their pillows.

It was therefore unnecessary for me to furnish bodyguard protection except when Marie Wolfendon wanted to leave the house. They decided that the rest of the time I could devote to trying to track down David Carr.

I said, "Will you give me a description of David Carr, please." "He's just my age," she said. "Twenty-five. He's about six feet tall and weighs about a hundred sixty pounds. He's rather thinly built, and stoops slightly. He has strawberry-blonde hair, worn long, and blue eyes. Of course this description is four years old, and he may have changed since then."

"Got a picture of him?" I asked.

She shook her head.

As my client had no plans to leave the house any more that day, I arranged to show the next morning, and departed with the two letters. I took them straight to Miami Beach police headquarters.

I found Lieutenant Sam Curry going over reports in his cubbyhole of an office. At the moment I wasn't in any better favor with the Miami Beach police than I was in the city, and I didn't expect a friendly reception. I didn't get one.

He looked up and growled, "What do *you* want?"

I handed him the two letters and told him about my conference with Marie Wolfendon and George Harbor. He thawed a little, but not much.

"What's your angle?" he asked.

"Angle?"

"You don't expect me to believe you're interested in this for a mere bodyguarding fee, do you? Not after that smelly jewelry insurance deal you pulled. Or the equally smelly divorce evidences you have a habit of rigging."

"Believe what you please," I told him. "There's no angle, and I've given you everything I know."

Apparently he decided to believe me, with reservations. He rubbed a large hand over his crew-cut and scowled. "Got a description of this joker?" he asked.

I passed on the description Mrs. Wolfendon had given me, and forestalled his next question by telling him no pictures were available.

"We'll send a man out to interview her," he said. "Put out a want on David Carr. Stake out the Wolfendon home. Any other suggestions?"

"Might check with the Washington, Missouri, police," I said. He has folks there. Possibly they have his Miami address."

"Yeah," Curry said. "We'll try it for size. Anything else you want to tell me?"

"Just that Mrs. Wolfendon wants

her letters back. She wants to show them to her husband."

The lieutenant frowned, but he let me have them back. However, he admonished me to hang onto them, as they'd be needed as evidence when and if David Carr was picked up.

The next morning I arrived at the Wolfendon home at nine sharp. The maid showed me into a dinette where Joshua Wolfendon and his wife were having breakfast. George Harbor wasn't present.

Joshua Wolfendon was bronzed and still muscular at fifty, with a full head of graying hair and a relatively unlined face. He seemed a little petulant about being brought into his wife's confidence at such a late date, but otherwise he was pleasant enough.

"Sit down, Mr. Stander," he said after introductions. "Had breakfast?"

"Thanks," I said. "I'll just take coffee."

He told the maid to bring me some coffee.

I gathered from the ensuing conversation that Marie had told him the whole story when he returned from a yacht race the previous afternoon. Apparently it upset him, but he had gotten over it, as George Harbor had predicted he would.

I learned that a police officer had interviewed Mrs. Wolfendon shortly after her husband had arrived home, and she had repeated the same story she told me. The officer

had told them that the house would be kept under surveillance, and suggested that Mrs. Wolfendon go out as little as possible, even when accompanied by me as a body-guard.

Wolfendon asked if I still had the letters, and I showed them to him. He scowled at the reference to himself as a notorious and ancient playboy, but made no comment. When he handed them back, I put them in my pocket.

"I think the arrangements you made with my wife yesterday are adequate, Stander," he said. "With George and me in the house, there's no point in your staying here nights. My room is right across the hall from Marie's, and I could get to her in seconds if she yelled. I'm a dead shot with a pistol. As a matter of fact, Marie is, too. Taught her myself. And all of us will keep pistols in our rooms for the time being. Not that I think we'll need them. It would take a professional burglar to get in this house."

A phone bell sounded. Without getting up, Marie reached across to lift an extension phone from a wall nook near the table.

"Wolfendon residence," she said.

Her husband and I could clearly hear the low-toned voice of the caller. "Marie?"

"Yes."

"David, honey."

Marie drew in her breath in a gasp.

"I'm coming to get you, Marie,"

the voice droned on. "Not this minute, but soon. Don't think you can escape by staying in that prison you live in. I can break any lock ever invented, and short any burglar alarm system there is. And don't think the police you have around your house will protect you. I saw them there. I walked right past them an hour ago. I'll walk right past them again when I come for you. Expect me."

A click sounded and Marie slowly hung up the phone. "My God!" she said. "He really means to kill me."

Before either Wolfendon or I could say anything, George Harbor burst into the kitchen. "I heard it," he said excitedly. "Marie, I picked up the extension in my office at the same time you answered."

Then he saw me and gave me a nervous nod of recognition. He turned to Wolfendon. "This Carr must be a maniac, Josh. Could you hear what he said?"

Wolfendon said, "I heard it."

"Maybe he is a lock expert. Maybe he does know how to short the burglar alarm system. And maybe he could walk past the police. I think we'd better reconsider and have Stander move in here. There's plenty of room."

Wolfendon looked at me and I shrugged. He looked at his wife and she said in a low voice, "I think I'd feel safer. If David did manage to break in somehow, there'd be nobody to stop him until he got to

the top of the stairs. Mr. Stander could sleep in the downstairs bedroom and act as a sort of first line of defense."

Wolfendon looked back at me, and I said, "You're paying the fee. I'll play it any way you want. Only the first thing to do is report that phone call to the police."

I rose, rounded the table to the phone and dialled police headquarters.

The rest of that day was uneventful. I drove back to my Miami apartment, packed a bag and returned to Miami Beach. I found the front door bolted when I got back. George Harbor peered at me through the thick glass before opening it. Obviously the phone call had brought on a maximum security effort.

They put me in a guest room on the first floor next to the servants' quarters. Nothing happened all day except a phoned report from Lieutenant Curry that David Carr had still not been apprehended, but that an intensive search was underway for him.

We all retired at eleven P.M. Before going to bed I accompanied Joshua Wolfendon on a tour of the entire house while he inspected each window and each door bolt.

It didn't seem very likely to me that, despite his boasts, David Carr would get into the house that night.

A ringing phone awakened me. I glanced at the luminous face of my watch, saw it was three A.M., and sleepily reached for the bedside phone before I realized I wasn't in my own bed. Coincidentally the extension was in the same relative place that my own bedside phone is.

I put it to my ear just as Marie Wolfendon's voice said, "Hello."

I heard the click of still another extension phone being lifted, then a low voice rasped, "It's not hello, Marie. It's good-by."

"David!" Marie gasped.

"Yeah, David, honey. Expect me. Expect me at any minute. I'm coming after you right now."

The phone went silent. I continued to hear the sound of Marie's breathing, then two clicks as two extension phones hung up.

Cradling my phone, I leaped from bed, groped for the bedlamp switch, pulled a robe over my pajamas and grabbed my gun. I didn't bother with slippers.

A small night light in the upper hall furnished enough illumination for me to see my way up the stairs. I took them three at a time. At the top I found Joshua Wolfendon's bedroom door open and Wolfendon, wearing only pajamas, in the act of reaching for the knob of his wife's bedroom door. At the far end of the hall George Harbor was just coming from his room dressed in a robe. Both men had pistols in their hands.

I started to yell, "Hold it!" to Wolfendon, but it was too late. He already had the door open and stood framed in the darkened doorway, the dim glow of the nightlight in the hall silhouetting his form to his wife inside the room.

I sensed the tragic mistake that was going to happen, and braced myself against the roar of the shot even before it sounded. In the close confines of Marie's bedroom it sounded like a cannon.

Josh Wolfendon went over backward like a falling timber. I didn't have to move any nearer to see that he had died instantly. The slug caught him squarely in the center of the forehead and took along a section of skull as big as a tennis ball when it exited at the back of his head.

A dozen feet away George Harbor halted with his mouth gaping open.

Hugging the wall to one side of the door to Marie's room, I called, "Hold your fire, Mrs. Wolfendon. Turn on your light."

"Is he dead?" her voice came thinly.

"Yeah," I said in a dry tone. "Turn on your light. I'm coming in."

Light came up in the room and I cautiously stepped through the door. Marie was sitting up in bed in a filmy nightgown through which her flesh showed pinkly in the glow of the bedlamp. She held a snub-nosed thirty-eight in her

hand. When she saw me, she let it drop to the bedspread.

"You sure he's dead?" she asked fearfully.

"Certain," I said. "Better put on a robe."

She glanced down and became conscious of the filminess of her nightgown. Flushing, she pulled the sheet over her bosom. I picked a thin robe from the foot of her bed, tossed it to her and returned to the hall.

George Harbor was standing over his dead employer, looking down at him blankly. He glanced at me, his mouth still open.

"She thinks she shot David Carr," I said. "I'll let you handle the hysterics when she comes out. I'll be phoning the police."

I went into the dead man's room to phone. Before I could dial, Marie stepped into the hall and went into the hysterics I had prophesied.

Stepping back to the doorway, I watched Harbor's ineffectual efforts to quiet her screaming. I shouted over the racket. "Who's the family doctor?"

It took two shouts to get the question to him. He said preoccupiedly, "Dr. Philip Hudson," and returned to his back patting.

I phoned the doctor before I phoned the police. He got there first and had Marie back in bed, under a sedative before the police arrived.

Lieutenant Sam Curry was the

chief investigating officer. He talked to me first, and after hearing my account of events, he talked to George Harbor. It developed that Harbor had heard the phone conversation between David Carr and Marie too.

"Seems obvious it was just an unfortunate accident," Curry said. "Damn shame, a thing like this happening. Wolfendon should have known his wife would be so upset after that call that she'd shoot when he opened the door."

"He didn't have time to think," I said. "He was rushing to protect her."

Curry said, "Well, there isn't anything we can do tonight. The doc says she's under a sedative and can't be questioned. Not much point in questioning her anyway, since we know what happened. Have to eventually, of course, as a matter of routine. She'll possibly even have to appear at an inquest. But that will be routine too. I'm convinced it was an accident. Any idea where that call came from?"

Harbor shook his head and I said, "No. But I'll bet Carr never intended to make a try for her tonight. Or any other night, for that matter."

The lieutenant raised his brows. "Why do you say that?"

"If he's serious about killing her, why does he give advance warning? Tonight, for instance, he'd know his call would alert the whole house, plus the police outside. He's

a nut, but he can't be that stupid. I think he's just been trying to scare her pants off, and never intends to do anything else."

He thought this over, finally said dubiously, "Maybe, but we'll play it like he's serious. I'm doubling the outside guard."

"Get a reply back from Washington, Missouri yet?" I asked.

He nodded. "Early this evening. A long, chatty wire from the chief of police which boiled down to nothing. He verified the story of Carr's confinement to the state mental hospital. Even knew about the threatening letter he sent Mrs. Wolfendon before she was married. His folks discussed it with him when she wrote them about it. But he has no idea where Carr is now. His folks died in an auto accident two years ago, and Carr was back for the funeral. Hasn't been seen or heard from since. At the time he was playing in an orchestra in St. Louis. Played the clarinet."

"Hmm," I said. "Miami police co-operating in the search for Carr?"

"Yeah. If we don't find him soon, I'm going to ask for a house-to-house search."

It was nearly five by the time the body had been taken away and the police had left. Harbor and I made another check of the doors and windows and went back to bed.

dropped by with a nurse, gave Marie another sedative and told the nurse not to let anyone disturb the patient all day. George Harbor retired to his office to make funeral arrangements, and I sat around doing nothing.

At nine I phoned Lieutenant Curry and learned that David Carr was still at large.

At ten I decided to do at least something to justify my fee, and made a long-distance call to St. Louis. I called the Exeter Investigating Service and got hold of Carl Exeter himself.

"Harry Stander from Miami," I told him. "Got a chore for you."

"Fine," he said. "Shoot."

"I want a check on a man named David Carr, last known to be playing clarinet with a St. Louis orchestra about two years back." I gave him the description. "At present he's holed up somewhere in Miami or near by. See if you can track down some former associate who knows his address here."

"That all you got on him?" Exeter asked. "You don't know what orchestra he played with?"

"No," I said. "I know it's not much. I'm playing an outside chance."

"Do the best I can," Exeter said. "Where can I reach you?"

I gave him the Wolfendon telephone number.

At noon the housekeeper prepared some lunch for Harbor and me. The nurse took Marie's lunch

up to her room. Shortly afterward Lieutenant Sam Curry phoned to tell me the inquest was scheduled for the day after tomorrow and ask my opinion as to whether I thought Marie Wolfendon would be sufficiently recovered from shock to attend by then. I told him he'd have to ask Dr. Hudson.

At one P.M. Carl Exeter phoned me from St. Louis.

"This was an easy one," he said. "All I had to do was phone police headquarters."

"Oh? What'd you find out?"

"October sixth last. Just a little over a year ago. He committed suicide."

"What?" I said. "You mean he's dead?"

"Suicides usually are."

"That can't be," I said slowly. "He's been sending letters and making phone calls from Miami."

"Not this guy. Name fits, description fits, and he played clarinet in a local night-club orchestra. Birthplace was Washington, Missouri."

"What were the circumstances?" I asked.

"Blew his brains out. Left a note asking that a woman friend be informed of his death."

"What woman friend?"

"Someone down your way. A Mrs. Marie Wolfendon. The police sent her a routine letter explaining his death."

I didn't say anything for a time. Then I said, "Thanks a lot. Send me your bill."

After I hung up, I sat thinking for a long time. Then I rose, left the house without telling anyone and drove to Miami. I drove to the apartment of Professor Emertis Harlon Manners, who is a retired Miami University Professor, and knows as much about handwriting as anyone in the country.

It took the old man about ten minutes of study with a magnifying glass to come to a conclusion.

"It's a good forgery," he said. "But this second letter wasn't written by the same person who wrote the first. I can show you in detail why, if you're interested."

"Never mind," I told him. "I'll take your word for it."

Back at the Wolfendon mansion George Harbor met me at the door. "Where have you been?" he asked angrily. "You're supposed to be protecting Marie."

"Against what?" I inquired. "She's not in any danger. Except possibly from the law. Let's go talk to her."

He followed me to the stairs, protesting, "Dr. Hudson said she's not to be disturbed."

I didn't pay any attention to him. He followed me clear to her room door, still protesting. I gave the door a gentle knock.

When no one answered, I opened it and looked in. Marie was asleep on the bed, and the nurse was out of the room. I went in, held the door for Harbor to follow me, and closed it behind us. I touched

Marie's shoulder and her eyes popped open.

I took a chair and waved Harbor to another. He glared at me and remained standing.

"Suit yourself," I said. "But you'll take this better sitting down. This was a pretty cleverly executed murder."

Marie's eyes suddenly slitted and George Harbor's face smoothed of all expression. "What are you talking about?" he said.

"The murder you and Marie engineered of her husband. It was a smart idea, getting me in as an impartial witness so that I could testify how the 'accident' happened. It wouldn't have stood up nearly as well with only George to testify. Somebody might have guessed you were lovers and had made up the story."

Neither said anything.

"I'll spell it out for you so you can be sure I'm not just guessing," I said. "Over a year ago Marie got word from the St. Louis police that David Carr had committed suicide. When the two of you decided to dispose of her husband, she got the brilliant idea of making use of that old crank letter he'd sent her three years before. She forged a second letter, or maybe you did, George, and sent it to herself. Then you called me in, ostensibly to protect her from Carr, but really to act as an unsuspecting witness to the 'accident.' You, George, were the voice on the phone. Both times."

"You're crazy," he spat at me. "I was here in the house both times."

"Sure," I said. "You dialed the service number. Every exchange has a number you can dial which makes your own phone ring. It's for the convenience of repair men and isn't listed, but you can find out what it is easily enough. Any telephone repair man could tell you. You dialed the service number from one of the extensions, then disguised your voice."

Harbor started to open his mouth, but Marie gestured him to silence. "What do you intend to do about it?" she asked coolly. "Inform the police?"

I shook my head. "Cut myself in, baby. How many millions do you inherit from Joshua? Twenty? Thirty? I'll be easy on you. I'll settle for one."

"And if we say no?"

"Lieutenant Curry wants those two letters back for evidence, you know. It's extremely unlikely he'd have the handwriting compared. Unless I suggested it. Once he did, you're both finished. A comparison would prove the danger from David Carr was not only a myth, but a deliberate fraud. He wouldn't stop then until he had you both in jail for murder. He'd find out just what happened to Carr, just as I

found out, and discover you'd been informed of his death over a year ago. Then he'd dig for evidence that you two are lovers. I imagine he'd find some. You two didn't come to the point of murder just looking at each other across the dinner table. There'll be tourist-court owners who will be able to identify you as the couple who registered as man and wife on certain dates. And Curry will find them. He'll build a case you couldn't possibly beat."

Marie looked at me silently for a long time. Then she said in a totally calm voice, "I don't see anything we can do except agree to Mr. Stander's terms, George. One million dollars. As soon as the estate is settled."

She looked at him and a message of understanding passed between them. It was a message which meant, "We'll agree now, and take care of him later. Just as we took care of Josh."

I felt a little tingle along my spine. I hadn't expected to make a million dollars in absolute safety. It was going to be a contest. Either I'd collect or die. But it was worth the risk. I was willing to keep one eye over my shoulder.

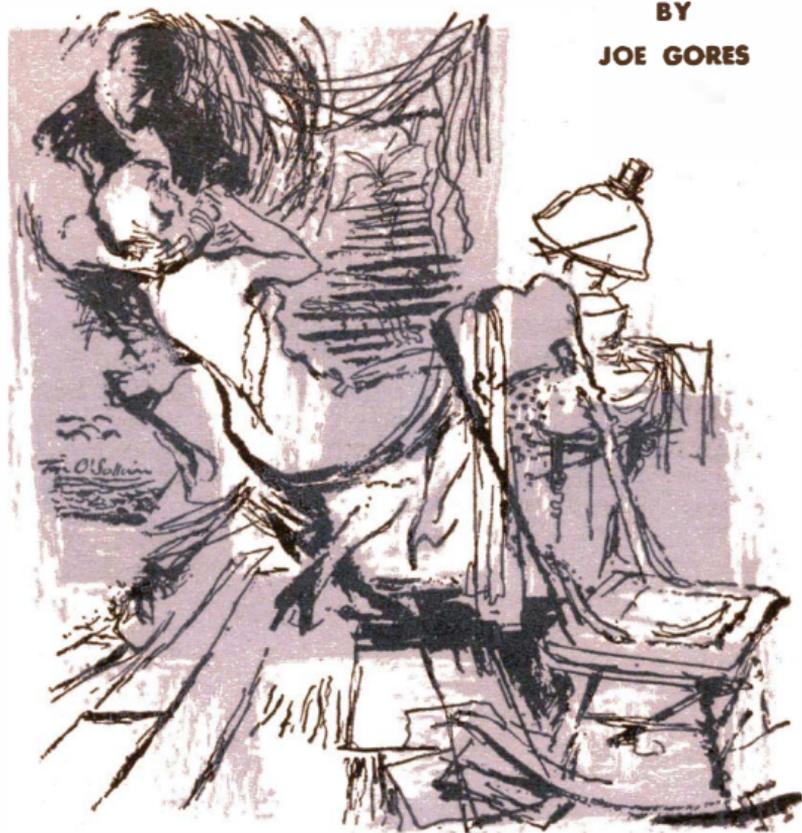
If I could manage to live I'd be a millionaire.



*He was a pleasant-looking guy, this Falkoner.  
He even looked pleasant when he murdered...*

# PRO

BY  
JOE GORES



**T**HE STEWARDESS came by checking reservations.

"Your name please, sir."

"Simmons," said Falkoner. He was lean and dark, with long-fingered hands shaped like a piano player's and cool grey eyes that observed almost everything. A thin

white scar running across his chin made his otherwise pleasant face sullen. In his shoulder holster was a .357 magnum on a cut-down frame and in his bleak heart was death. Falkoner was a professional murderer.

During the thirty-five minute

flight from Los Angeles the lone woman huddled across the aisle aroused his melancholy contempt. She wore a cheap brown hat and had an old straw purse on the seat next to her. Updrafts over the rim of the desert made her tight fists whiten with strain and her eyes burn with fear. She was disgusting: he knew dying was swift and easy.

A slight sandy-haired man took his arm as he left the plane at Palm Springs and said: "Did Mr. David send you down?" His voice was soft and intimate and he wore a red and green sports shirt, khaki pants, and open sandals.

Looking him over, Falkoner nodded coolly. Little men who did not deal in the two great realities of life and death held scant interest for him.

"Fine. I'm Langly. My car's over here in the lot."

It was a blue and white 1957 Chrysler. On the blacktop road beyond the airport the sun was warm but the air dry and fresh; scraggly clumps of dusty green vegetation spotted the flat desert like regimented billiard balls on a giant yellow table. They passed a man and woman on horseback, wearing riding breeches, who waved gaily. A Cadillac Eldorado roared by like an escaped rocket, manned by two bleached blondes goggled with bright-rimmed sun glasses.

"Where's the woman?" asked Falkoner.

"She's got a shack in a date grove

near Rancho Mirage—it's a new section this side of Palm Desert."

"Works?"

"Mex place in Palm Desert. She tells fortunes, goes to work at five—she'll be home now." Langly's voice tingled and his bright eyes sparkled ripely. "I guess Mr. David wants her pretty bad, huh? I just notified Los Angeles last night, and you're here from Frisco today to—"

"Let's go out to her place."

Langly drove swiftly as if stung by Falkoner's abruptness. They passed the plush Thunderbird Club and turned left on to a dirt road before the Shadow Mountain Club. Dry clouds of tan dust swirled out behind them.

"When word came she'd left Scottsdale I thought she might try it here—the country's a lot the same. Then I spotted her at the Mex place from her photo and—"

"Are we close?"

Langly drove across an old wash beyond which the date groves started.

"Next road to the right, first house on the left," he said. His voice was sharp and piqued. "Only house."

"Okay. Drive past."

Down the narrow roadway Falkoner saw the tail of a black Mercury station wagon protruding from behind a palm tree. The shack was hidden by trees.

"That her Merc?"

"Yes. A '55 Monterey with wood panelling. A beauty."

After a moment of thought Falkoner said: "Turn around up here and let me off at the roadway. Then you go back to town."

As he followed directions the other's actions had a slightly feminine quality. Falkoner got out, walked around the car, and dropped a sealed envelope through the window into Langly's lap. The envelope crinkled.

"What sort of work do you do?" Falkoner asked.

"I've been parking cars at one of the clubs." Then the voice got malicious; excitement made it almost lisp. "But I did good work on this and I'm going to make sure Mr. David knows about it and about how you've treated me."

"Stick to parking cars, nance," Falkoner replied. Leaning very close he added confidentially: "You've got a leaky face."

In his steady eyes Langly saw death's cold scrutiny. He rammed the *drive* button hurriedly and the Chrysler swept him away down the dusty road.

Palm fronds tickled the roof drily and something gnawed with cautious haste under the sagging wooden porch. Falkoner's shoes made cat-sounds as he crossed to the screen door. After knocking on the frame he cupped his eyes to peer into the living room. The linoleum was so old it was worn almost white. Across the room sagged a beaten-down green couch, in one corner a red easy chair that

looked almost new. There were three straight-backed chairs and one leg of the wooden table in the center of the floor had been cracked and stapled. A plaque reading GOD BLESS OUR HOME decorated one wall.

Before he could call, Genevieve came through the inner doorway. She was as tall as he, nearly six feet, her face fine-featured: straight nose, high cheekbones, thin hungry lips. A red silk scarf was knotted loosely around her neck and her striking figure was displayed by a tight black dress. There were three hairpins in her mouth and her hands were smoothing her hair.

"Yes?" Her voice was husky.

The screen door was unlocked so Falkoner stepped in. When the light touched his features she went stark white and her mouth dropped the hairpins. She ran against him, slanted dark eyes smoky with terror, but he pushed her back.

"Rather a come-down, Genevieve," he said.

He went through the inner doorway to see a small dirty kitchen with dishes piled in the sink, and a bedroom with a double bed that looked as if two large animals had been fighting on it. The room had a close, intimate smell. As he donned a pair of thin grey gloves he let Genevieve's voice draw him back to the front room.

"What does he want with me? He— whoever killed Max . . . I didn't see who killed Max."

"If you hadn't left Arizona he might have believed you."

"I got tired of the stinking desert and the stinking men with only one thing on their stinking minds."

Falkoner raised his eyebrows. "The men at the Mex place are different? The desert here is different?"

"I had to eat." Her mouth made the next word a curse. "Men. You and Mr. David and all the rest. Money and power and women, that's all you want." Then the strength left her and her hands crawled up the black dress like broad white spiders to her bosom.

"Isn't he ever going to let me live in peace?" she whispered.

Falkoner asked: "Did you really think he could let you live at all?" His quick hands closed around her throat like an act of love.

She scabbled wildly at the iron-hard forearms, reached for his eyes, tried to kick him. She was strong, but the piano-player fingers possessed all the immeasurable strength of evil. A chair was overturned. They went around the table in a slow grotesque dance like cranes mating. He drove her down on the couch and kneed her viciously. The thrashing body, the smell of the sweat and perfume aroused him: it was a pity there was no time to have her before she died. A great pity.

Her face darkened, her movements became erratic, lost volition, ceased. Finally her tongue, pink as

a baby's thumb, came out of one corner of her mouth and spittle ran down her cheek. There was a muted sound like cloth tearing. She sprawled under him in a lewd doll-pose of surrender, eyes staring beyond him into the infinite horror of death.

From the pay phone at a gas station on South Palm Drive, Falkoner reversed the charges to a Tuxedo exchange number in San Francisco. While awaiting his connection he placidly smoked a cigarette. The operator said:

"I have a collect call for anyone from a Mr. Simmons in Palm Springs. Will you accept the charges?"

A flat voice answered: "Put him on."

Falkoner ground out his cigarette against the window of the booth and said "Yes" into the receiver. There was no response so he hung up, paid for his gas, and left Palm Springs, driving west across the desert on U.S. 101. At U.S. 99 he went north to Colton, cut across to U.S. 66 on a dirt road, and again pointed the Mercury at the far thin glow of Los Angeles. He counted bugs as they squashed against the windshield, and at nine o'clock ate Mexican food in a small adobe diner. It had been a clean hit: her body, wrapped in a blanket, was stuffed in the spare tire well under the floor section of the Mercury, and a suitcase full of her personal

things rode beside him. Yet he lacked the usual drained empty peace. Around midnight some instinct made him pull in at a motel near Glendora, two hours from the city.

The single row of white cottages was neat and freshly painted; each unit had a covered carport with a door leading directly inside. Above the first cabin a large red neon sign proclaimed MOTEL with *vacancy* underneath in smaller pink letters. After he had rung the bell twice the office light went on and an old man with a sour face like the taste of lemon came out of the back room rubbing his eyes. An old-fashioned nightshirt covered bowed legs.

"Is your last unit in the line empty?"

Clicking his false teeth together he leaned past Falkoner as if to make sure there was a last unit. He smelled sourly of sleep.

"Yep."

"Fine. I have trouble sleeping if I can hear traffic passing. How much?"

"Five bucks."

"Commercial rates."

"Well— four, then."

Falkoner did the other careful things the years had taught him: wrote 'Simmons' on the register in a slanting backhand script that was not his own, mixed up the license number in a way that could have been accidental, and took Genevieve's suitcase with him before

locking the car. Opening the motel room door he breathed deeply; orange groves flanking the highway made the air faintly sweet. Maybe it was getting to him. Five years ago he'd never considered the possibility of anything going wrong. *Tomorrow I'll dump her with Dannelson*, he thought, *and maybe get lined up with a little piece. I've been living like a monk lately.*

"Let me talk to Danny," Falkoner said, rubbing his eyes and cursing the grey fingers of smog reaching out from Los Angeles. Sunday morning traffic made it difficult to hear.

"Who's calling?"

"Falkoner."

"Falkoner? I'm sorry, Mr. Dannelson is out."

Falkoner squeezed the receiver tightly. The palm of his hand had gone sweaty.

"Is Dannelson out or did he say he was out?" he asked.

"Mr. Dannelson is out."

There were muttered angry words, a click, and Dannelson's voice came jovially over the wire.

"Hello, Jack? That damn fool didn't get your name right. Listen, boy, S.F. said you have a parcel for us. Where in hell are you?"

Falkoner hung up abruptly, returned to the car, and tuned the radio to a ten o'clock newscast. It carried the item for which Dannelson's clumsiness had prepared him.

*Palm Springs police were investigating the disappearance and possible murder of Genevieve Ostroff, fortune-teller at the Green Cactus bar in Palm Desert. Two boys playing near her house had seen a man carrying what looked like a blanket-wrapped body to her black station wagon. Investigating police had found no sign of violence and her clothes had been gone, but there had been over seven hundred dollars in small bills under the paper lining of a dresser drawer. After the first newscast Chester Langly, parking lot attendant at the Blue Owl, had furnished the description of a man who had hitched a ride with him from the airport to a point near Genevieve's house. A man who had called himself Simmons.*

Damn that fairy Langly, Falkoner thought. The police were easy, but Mr. David had given him the contract for Genevieve personally . . . now he was too dangerous to live. The word was already out: lucky Danny'd been so anxious. Los Angeles and Las Vegas and San Diego—probably Tucson and El Paso, too, because they'd figure him to try for Mexico. No place to run: and to run would mean admitting to himself he was afraid. Suddenly his pale morose face cleared. *What if he went back to San Francisco after Mr. David?* That was it. It was what they should expect of Jack Falkoner.

The maid had finished his room.

He paid at the office for a week in advance, then carried the heavy unwieldy package that was Genevieve in through the side entrance and dumped it on the bed.

A light blue 1955 Ford pulled out behind him on the traffic circle at Bakersfield. The tail job was clumsy. Falkoner drove fast: this boy mustn't have time to get to a phone. On the new freeway north of Delano he suddenly floored the accelerator and squealed into the right-angle turn for the Earlimart overpass, swung over to old U.S. 99, and pulled up in front of a little general store he had remembered. It was the run-down country crossroads sort of place occasionally surviving in the San Joaquin valley. The sort of place to do what had to be done.

A short man wearing dirty overalls and chewing a large cud of tobacco came out.

"Fill it up— regular," said Falkoner.

He waited in the store by the vegetable counter. Three dirty bare-footed children slammed through the screen door and began noisily clamouring at the candy counter like puppies worrying a bone. A tall faded lady in a washed-out dress came from the bowels of the store to scream harsh threats at them.

When the blue Ford rounded the corner and braked sharply, Falkoner went out the door and

around behind the store to the primitive outdoor restrooms. Lattice works into which thick vines had grown flanked the entrance. He slammed the lean-to door loudly, stepped out of sight behind the vines, and took the magnum from its shoulder holster. Feet scuffed in the dust and foliage rustled. Door hinges squeaked cautiously.

The young red-haired man had freckles and a homely face and a switchblade knife in one broad paw. As he turned from the empty shanty, puzzled, Falkoner stepped around the lattice work and slammed the magnum down on his hand. Pimples of sweat popped out on his hard young face. The knife fell. He snatched clumsily for the magnum with his left hand, breathing hoarsely, his eyes already sick with the sure frightful knowledge of defeat.

Falkoner's gun rammed him in the stomach, bending him over; then it clipped him across the back of the neck and knocked him to his knees. A knee driven into his freckled face upset him against the wall. The magnum struck his bright hair with a sound like a wet rag slapping concrete. He tipped forward on his face and was still.

Falkoner dragged him around the corner of the shanty and killed him.

The short man was still cleaning bugs from the Mercury's windshield when the blue Ford dug out and sped past the gas pumps.

Night had darkened San Francisco when Jack Falkoner took the down ramp off the freeway at Seventh, crossed Market, and went up Larkin. He drove over the hill to Pacific, turned right, crossed over the Broadway tunnel on Mason, and parked the Ford. His hands shook a little as he checked the magnum: going after Mr. David was something like going up against God.

Turning downhill at Glover, a narrow one-block alley, he walked on the right-hand side, crossed over, and came up the other side breathing heavier from the incline. There were no cars he knew, no people at all, so he turned in at an ornate wooden gate and climbed a series of stone steps. In less than a minute he had opened the heavy oak door with a small metal pick and was prowling the five-room apartment. His rubber soles made no sound on the polished floors and thick carpets. On Sundays Mr. David and the girl he kept there usually watched Ed Sullivan, but tonight the apartment was empty.

*I can wait*, Falkoner thought as he returned to the Ford, and slid in behind the wheel.

A round hard object poked the base of his neck and a smooth voice said:

"Hands on the head, Sweets, and slide over slow."

Strangely, he thought of his first hit. *It had been in a car like this and the man had said: 'I'm not*

*afraid of you.'* He did not say anything. A dark figure came erect in the back seat and another crossed the street swiftly to get in under the wheel and hold a gun on Falkoner while the first one took the magnum. *Later the man had cried and babbled and even prayed. Falkoner had been much younger then and had laughed before shooting him in the back of the head.*

A long black sedan drifted around the corner and crawled up behind them. It was remarkably like an undertaker's car. When the man at the wheel flipped his lights twice the Ford pulled out. The sedan followed. They took Pine to Presidio, cut over to Balboa, and drove out through the dark still Avenues decorously, like a funeral procession. Falkoner's head ached and he felt sick to his stomach. When he looked at the unfamiliar face of the driver the man in the back seat said "Don't try it, Sweets." The driver stayed hunched over with both hands on the wheel. They would not let him smoke a cigarette.

Surf grumbled against the cement breakwaters as the Ford turned left onto the Great Highway at Playland on the Beach. Only a few rides and stalls were open, for a chill March mist had rolled in off the Pacific. The wipers monotonously sucked haze from the windshield. After several miles they swung in facing the ocean on a wide dirt lot where neckers

parked on moonlit nights. The sedan drew up behind them, parallel to the highway, with dimmed lights. There were no other cars. A tangled hedge of dark twisted cypress, bent and gnarled by the incessant wind, screened them from the houses beyond the highway.

The doorhandle felt cold and slippery to Falkoner's fingers. Bitter words flooded his mouth like bile and his lips bled keeping them in: *Jack Falkoner is not afraid, Jack Falkoner is not afraid . . .* He flung open the door and threw himself at the opening. Behind him something plopped twice. Eyes staring in disbelief, he fell dizzily out of the half-open door and crashed down on one shoulder. He tried to say something, he wanted to say it, it was important: the whole significance of his life had been only death. He had meant no more than a casual accident or a mild epidemic that snuffs out a few people by blind chance. If they would just give him a little time for change, another month for living . . . Before he could ask, orange flame spurted and lead ripped his throat, slamming his head into the dirt with an ineluctable finality.

"Pay me," chortled Mr. David in high good humor. The sedan had turned by Fleishaker Zoo and was threading through an expensive residential district on broad Sloat Avenue.

The man in the back seat with

him was dressed in a camel's hair coat and had crisp wavy hair receding from his forehead. He had once been a lawyer but had been disbarred. With obvious reluctance he took a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to his employer.

"I still don't see how you knew he'd come up here. I thought one of the boys along the border would tag him."

Mr. David chuckled richly. He wore too much cologne in a vain effort to disguise the constant odor of perspiration that clung to his obese body like the smell of bad cooking. His heavy features were shadowed by his hatbrim.

"Psychology, Norman, psychology. Jack wasn't afraid of me or the Organization or Old Nick himself. It was his sort of stunt, to try and take me with him. I'm sorry about Red, though. I told him to be careful but you know how kids are."

"How can you be so sure Falconer got him?"

"The Ford. Jack would never have had that car if Red was alive, that for sure. And Jack was a bad one, at that."

"I like 'em bad," put in the man in the middle of the front seat. He was removing a steel cylinder from the muzzle of his .32, his deadly

hands fondling the revolver with the quick and supple movements of a musician fingering his guitar. "And you can't tell me Sweets wasn't scared. I saw his face when he went under."

Mr. David delicately shifted his ponderous bulk and belched. His weight made the seat coils creak slightly.

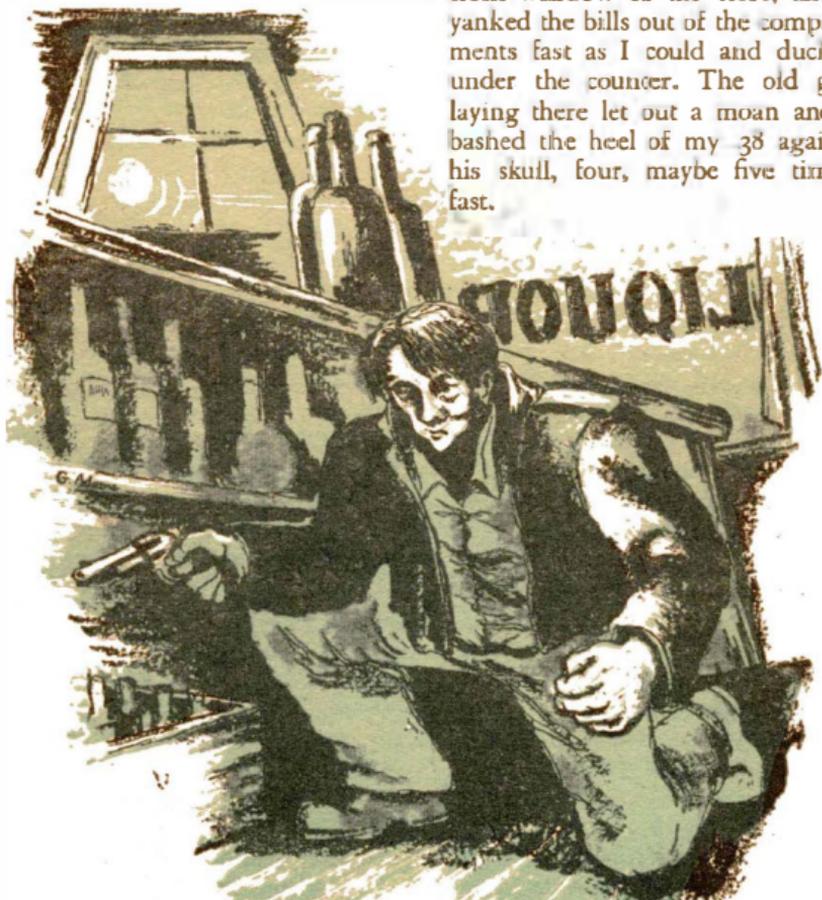
"We'll never know now, will we?" he demanded with unction. As the car stopped for the light on 19th Avenue he added: "Take a left here, Freddie. I've got a date with a new girl."

Down toward Playland a motorcycle siren whined thinly, like a short-haired mongrel in cold weather. The chilled huddle of people could see the flat pink glow of its close-set red eyes coming up at them through the fog. Moaning wind tore their breaths away in grey tatters. Occasional cars whipped past, wet tires hissing on the shiny pavement. By the white empty glare of their prowling car spotlight, two wet-tunicked policemen resembled grave robbers rolling bodies as they lifted Falconer's corpse by one shoulder to see if it bore any life. On his face, almost ferocious in its intensity, was frozen an immutable expression of pure terror.



BY  
NORMAN STRUBER

"Cops!" Punchy yelled. I slammed my hand on the keys and the cash register drawer shot open with a clang. A searchlight flashed in my eyes from the front window of the store, and I yanked the bills out of the compartments fast as I could and ducked under the counter. The old guy laying there let out a moan and I bashed the heel of my 38 against his skull, four, maybe five times, fast.



*Some punks expect miracles. I catch him crossing me, and he expects me to listen when he pleads.*

**"Give me a break"**

"Out the back way!" I yelled, and scooted along behind the counter to the little room in back, tripping over Punchy's heels and falling flat on my face. I scrambled to my feet and gave him a hard shove as a gun exploded out front and liquor bottles crashed and splattered on the shelves over my head. "Move, you dumb jerk!" I screamed at him. "The door!"

Right at that moment I realized more than ever it pays to case a joint before you move in. We got out into the backyard, over to the fence and climbed to the roof of a low, flat-topped brick garage. The string of garages ran clear to the next street and we tore along the roofs, and at the last one we swung over the side and hung by our hands and then dropped to the ground. Just the way I'd figured it. We ran two blocks and ducked into an alley that led onto Fulton Street. It was early yet and most of the stores were open and we eased out of the alley and started walking along slow with the rest of the shoppers. Cool. Like two innocent guys out for a stroll.

Punchy started flicking his head around, nervous-like, and I shoved my elbow into his ribs. "Relax, jerk!" I told him. "Just walk."

Ten minutes later we were in that crummy basement, where Punchy lived with his old lady and six brats upstairs. The old man left nothing but dirty laundry when he kicked off, so the old lady

worked while Punchy's aunt watched the brats. His name was really Poncho, Poncho Santos, but him being a pretty stupid guy it wasn't long before the guys got around to calling him Punchy. It was kind of a natural switch, and he was dumb enough not to care. Me and him got along swell. I told him what to do and he did it. I found out that's the only kind of a guy you can really trust. The smart ones, the wise guys, you never know when they're going to pull a fast one. They give you the slick smile and they act like they dig you as top man, and all the time they're just waiting to slip that knife in your back. Like Manny Kojak.

Yeah. Like Manny.

We went back by the furnace and Punchy pulled the chain on the dirty yellow light. "Jeez!" he said, staring at me with those big black eyes, "I figure we gon get hung up good that time, Rick."

"Yeah, you clumsy jerk."

"Jeeze, Rick . . ."

"Next time I say move, man, you really move! See?"

"But, Rick, there was tha' chair an' . . ."

"Shut up!" I started taking the crumpled bills out of my pockets, straightening them out and tallying the take.

Punchy's eyes lighted up as he watched me. He was a short weasel-like guy with pocky dark skin and thick curly black hair. He

came from the Islands seven years ago with his folks. That time there was only four of them. After they moved the old man must've got inspiration or something. Punchy figured he was seventeen maybe. Same as me. But not in the head.

"Hey, Rick!" he kept saying over and over, watching me count. "Hev, Rick! Tha's something . . ."

"Shut up! . . . two-ninety . . . five . . . three twenty . . . thirty . . ."

"What the loot, Rick?"

There was three-hundred-and-forty-two bucks even. I folded the bills into one big wad and stuffed it deep in my pocket. "Enough," I said.

"Jeez, Rick, we got enough to ride in fancy train, maybe, huh? We gon get lost in style, huh?"

"We don't travel on no trains, jerk."

"You wan me to get car?"

"Later."

Punchy's face screwed up in a disappointed frown. "Rick, we gon cut out like you say, ain't we? Me and you gon leave this lousy town an' . . ."

"We got something to do first."

"Jeez, we better not kill no time, Rick. I see what you done to that old man in the store. Them cops is gon . . ."

"That jerk seen our faces and knew who we were. But he ain't going to see nothing no more."

"Sure, Rick, but we better . . ."

"I told you we got something to do first, jerk!"

Punchy spread his palms and gave me that dumb look. "What, Rick? What we gotta do first?"

"Manny," I told him. "We got to take care of Manny."

"Manny?" The moron really couldn't figure it. "Manny . . .?"

"You were talking to him today, weren't you?" I said tightly.

"Yeah, Rick, but . . ."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Me? . . . tell him, Rick . . .?"

"You told him about our set-up, didn't you?"

"Jeez, Rick, he ask me what I look so happy about, an' . . ."

"And you told him."

"Well, I only tell him me an you gon cut out for good, tha's all."

"That's all, huh?"

"Well . . . well, he ask what we gon use for dough, and . . ."

"Oh, you dumb, stupid, jerk!"

"I . . . I don see what was so wrong, Rick. I . . ."

"You don't, huh?"

His jaw hung open and he kept staring at me with that stupid expression again. It took a long time for his jaw to come up to where he could use it to talk with. "Jeez . . . ho-ly Jeez, Rick, you . . . you don mean Manny went an' . . .?"

"How else did the cops get there so quick, jerk? The old man was just starting to close up. He didn't set the alarm."

He nodded slowly, like it was starting to sink into that thick skull of his. "Yeah . . . yeah . . . I . . . I din hear no alarm."

"No, *we* didn't hear it, but the cops did. Manny was the alarm."

He stuck his hands in his pocket and swallowed, and his eyes dropped to my feet. "Manny! . . . *madre diol* . . . I sure din think he . . ."

"You don't think . . . period."

He looked up. "But . . . but why, Rick? Why he wan do that to us."

"Not *us*, lunkhead. *Me*."

His eyes narrowed, and he was trying to think hard. "'Cause . . . 'cause you knock over his girl, Rick?"

She was a dish, all right, that Lola. Manny's girl. She didn't want no part of me . . . but I mean *no* part. She got it, anyhow. I waited for her in the hall where she lives one night. She wasn't willing, but that didn't matter. Who the hell did she think she was? Park Avenue? But I didn't really give a damn for her, you understand. It was Manny I wanted to show. I wanted him to know he didn't have anything *I* couldn't have, anytime I wanted. Let him know who the better man was. Like PUNCHY knew.

I nodded to PUNCHY. "He figured he'd even it up by calling the cops on me. But he didn't even up nothing. Nothing. There's a whole new score to settle."

PUNCHY looked scared. "Why . . . why don we just cut out, Rick? Hell, we got the money an . . ."

"Shut up! I want you to get your

kid brother, Angel, to get the word to Manny. The cops picked me up, see? But you got away. You got plenty of loot, but you're scared. Plenty scared and you don't know what to do." I looked at him. "You following me, man?"

His jaw was hanging again, but he nodded.

"All right. Angel tells Manny you want to see him down here. You're willing to cut him in for half of the loot, if he helps you duck the cops. You want to cut out. *Clear*, out, see?"

He gave me a sidelong glance. "How . . . how much, Rick? How much loot did I get?"

"Never mind. He don't have to know that." I pulled the wad of bills out of my pocket and peeled off a twenty. "Here," I said. "Tell Angel to give that to Manny. That ought to make the bastard good and hungry."

PUNCHY took the twenty and turned it over in his fingers, grinning. "*Madrel* . . . *madre diol* . . ."

"Move, jerk! Move!"

"Sure . . . sure, Rick." PUNCHY turned and scooped.

I doused the light and stuck my hand in my pocket and clenched the walnut grip of that 'piece.' Man, it felt good. Damn good. Like you was king of the world. Nobody argued with you when you owned a 'piece'. Nobody wanted to get burned. Anybody who crossed you was a jerk.

Manny was a jerk.

Punchy was back in ten minutes. Manny was on his way. I told Punchy what to do and we waited. We heard the foot steps coming down to the basement a few minutes later. They stopped by the door in the darkness. It was quiet for a minute.

"Punchy?" It was Manny.

I nudged Punchy. "That . . . that you, Manny?" he said.

"Yeah."

I yanked the light on and ducked behind the furnace. Punchy waited under the light. Manny came back there and I watched him. Oh, that lousy sharpened-up jerk! Strutting like he was a big politician or something. He was wearing his pants all pressed up, and suede shoes and a new suede jacket, and his blonde hair was plastered down to his head. All dressed up like he was celebrating because he figured I got canned.

Manny came over to Punchy, and he was grinning. "Man, you look scared," he said. He got down to business fast. "How much did you get?"

"P . . . plenty," Punchy started, "I . . . I . . ."

That's when I stepped out behind Manny, the .38 in my fist. "Hello, pal," I said.

You never saw anything spin around so fast. "Wha . . . ?" he choked. His eyes damn near popped out of his head when he saw me. Such pretty blue eyes, too. Only they were all full of white flecks.

"Who looks scared now, pal?" I said.

His jaw dropped open and he looked a little like Punchy. "R . . . Rick . . ."

"Surprised, pal?" Man, was I grinning!

"Yeah . . . I . . . I mean, no. No, Rick, I . . ."

"Oh, sure. You're surprised, pal. You're real surprised, ain't you?"

"Look, Rick . . ."

"You figured I was out of circulation, didn't you, pal?"

"No . . . no, Rick . . ."

"Sure you did, pal. You're smart . . . oh, the shrewdest, man. You called the cops, and you figured you took care of little ole Rick, didn't you?"

He swallowed hard and his Adam's apple bobbed like it was going to bust clear out of his throat. He was a tall, thin, good-looking guy, but his face was all white and twitching now, and you could practically hear them knees knocking. He tried to talk smooth. "Give . . . give me a break, Rick. I . . . I didn't know what I was doing. I swear, I . . ."

"Shut up, jerk!"

"I . . . I'll do anything for you, Rick. You . . . you want Lola? . . . you want her, Rick? Okay . . . okay, she's yours . . . I . . . I'll fix it up . . . sure . . . sure . . . anything, Rick, boy . . . any . . ."

"You can drop dead! Both of you!"

He stared at the gun as it tight-

ened in my hand. "No . . . no . . . no, Rick . . . you . . . you wouldn't . . . you . . ."

"I wouldn't, huh?"

"Give me a break, Rick . . . please . . . please . . . give me a break . . ."

"Rot in hell, you jerk!" I squeezed the trigger and it sounded like a cannon going off down there. My arm jerked back and the shock went clear up to my skull, and Manny, he got a shock, too. Right in the belly. The slug spun him half around and up against the concrete wall, and he hung there for a moment clutching his gut. He screamed and I pumped the trigger once more, and he bounced into that wall again, and then he sagged to the floor like an old sack of flour, part of him still sticking to the wall.

Punchy was standing there holding his hands over his ears, and I grabbed him by the front of the jacket and gave him a shove toward the door. "Let's go!" I yelled.

"Wait, Rick!" He ran back to Manny, went through his pockets and came up with the twenty and four singles, and a set of car keys. I was so excited for the minute I hadn't figured that Manny's Chevy would be outside. I grabbed the money and the keys out of Punchy's hand, and we took off.

Punchy didn't say nothing until we were clear up in Westchester. He had his eyes glued to the gas gauge, then. "We gon need gas pretty soon, Rick."

"We ain't stopping in no gas stations just yet," I told him. I started cruising slow through them fancy streets up there, and then I spotted a convertible. A Buick, real sharp. The top was down and it was parked in the shadows of some trees, and the house was way back off the road. I pulled up alongside of it and told Punchy to go get it. Like I said, he was stupid, but when it came to cars Punchy was in the top class. He got it started in no time, and I signaled for him to follow me.

I found a good spot to ditch the Chevy, and then I hopped into the Buick with Punchy. While we were stopped we got the top up and I took the wheel. I sure wanted to use the Thruway because you could really make time, but there was too big a chance of getting spotted at the toll booths. I stuck to the old highways and headed North, pushing eighty where I could. I kept my eyes peeled for slow-down signs and was careful not to speed through no towns. By the time we had to stop for gas I was pooped, so I let Punchy take the wheel. I got a map at the gas station and told Punchy what roads to take. All I wanted was to get lost for a few days, and the Adirondacks was going to do fine.

After awhile, watching the road and with that steady smooth drone of the engine, I just let my eyes close and pretty soon I dropped off, and then I didn't hear nothing. All

I kept dreaming about was that dough in my pocket, and how I was going to get some fancy clothes and move in on some town where I could really make out. Maybe the West coast. Yeah. I'd heard a lot about California . . . Frisco . . . L.A. . . . yeah, L.A. . . . that was a town, all right . . . L.A. . . . *get rid of the jerk . . . dead weight . . . Poncho . . . Punchy . . . Punchy Poncho . . . jerk . . .*

Something hard banged against my cheek, and I opened my eyes and saw that my head was smacking up against the window sill. It was still dark and the car was bouncing around like there was no road under it. I blinked my eyes sleepily and glanced out the window. There *wasn't* any road. Just a big open field with no houses around, and I could see dark mountains outlined against the moonlit sky. I straightened up suddenly and looked at Punchy behind the wheel. "What the hell are you doing, jerk?" I yelled.

Punchy stopped the car and pulled the hand break. It was then I noticed the car lights weren't on. He looked over at me and grinned, his white teeth flashing in the moonlight.

"You crazy bum!" I said. "Why in hell did you get off the road?"

He shrugged, and kept grinning. "End of the ride, Rick."

I stared at him. "Huh?"

He shrugged again. "I don't need you no more, Rick. Just like you

don't need me." He spread his right hand and jabbed it out at me. "Gimmee the loot, Rick."

"Give you the . . . ? You lousy, stupid . . . !" I jerked my hand up to my jacket pocket and clutched for the gun.

I got a handful of leather.

I froze, gaped at him.

"You looking for this, eh, Rick?"

His left hand came over the steering wheel, the gun muzzle in front of it. "You sleep like my brother, Angel. You don't feel nothing."

My throat went dry. "Wha . . . what'd you want to do a thing like that for, Poncho?"

He laughed, a cold, bitter laugh. "*Poncho*, eh? Now I am *Poncho*. Why you don't call me by my right name, Rick?"

"That . . . that's your right name, Poncho." I tried to smile.

"Sure. Sure it was. 'Till you start to call me Punchy."

"No . . . no, not me, Poncho . . . it was the other guys. You know that. You . . ."

The grin dropped from his face and a crazy look lighted his eyes. "No! *You*, Rick! *You* gimmee that name! Punchy, you call me! All the time you call me *jerk!*"

"Honest, Pun . . . Poncho, I . . ."

"Shut up, jerk!" His eyes glared at me. "How does it sound, jerk? Eh, jerk? Eh, dumb, stupid, jerk? Jerk . . . jerk . . . jerk . . . JERK!"

I bit down on my lip. "Yeah . . . yeah, sure Poncho . . . I . . . I'm a jerk . . . I . . ."

"I wan the loot, jerk!"

I yanked the wad out of my pocket and handed it to him, fast, and right then I was thinking about Manny, and how he was shaking all over just before I blasted him. And I was shaking like that now, and I felt the tears coming to my eyes, and I knew how Manny felt. "I . . . I was going to split it with you, Poncho," I said weakly.

"You're a liar, jerk!"

"No, Poncho, I . . . I mean it, pal . . . I swear . . ."

"Why you bawling, jerk? Manny din bawl."

I stared at that gun and I begged

for all I was worth. "Please . . . please, Poncho . . . gi . . . give me a break . . . huh? . . . please . . ."

"Si. Like you gave Manny. Tha's the best way, eh, jerk?"

"Aw . . . aw . . . please . . . please . . . just give me a break . . . just . . . just give me one little . . ."

*His eyes squeezed narrow, and his lips pulled taut, and his finger tightened over the trigger . . . and then all I could see was the big black hole of that gun muzzle reaching out for me. . . . .*

*The rotten, cold-hearted bum wasn't even going to give me a break!!*



## Cool Customer

In Los Angeles, Good Humor ice cream man, Henry Hodge, 24, became ill-humored after an incident with a stranger. The man stopped Hodge on the street and asked him what flavors were available. As the ice cream man opened his freezer, the man poked a knife against Hodge's back. The stranger fled with \$47 and two gallons of ice cream—assorted flavors.

## Costly Crime

Crime not only doesn't pay for some criminals, it costs them money.

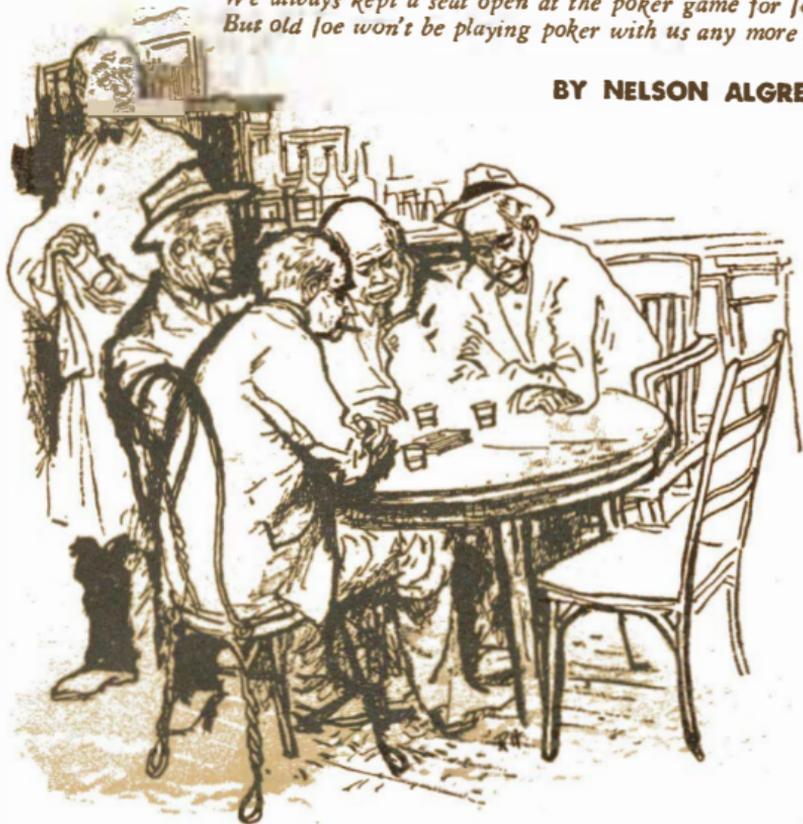
Claude Garette, of Chicago, operator of a downtown shop, was robbed of \$147 by a bandit. As the robber fled down a street, half a dozen onlookers began chasing him. A sailor seized the bandit's jacket, and it came off as the fugitive escaped in a burst of renewed speed. In a pocket was the \$147 loot, plus \$37 more.

In Mound City, S. D., a burglar broke into a service station. He fell into the grease pit, getting plenty of grease on himself. Moreover, the loot wouldn't cover the cleaning bill. It consisted of 80 cents.

# Say a Prayer for the Guy

*We always kept a seat open at the poker game for Joe.  
But old Joe won't be playing poker with us any more ...*

BY NELSON ALGREN



THAT GAME began as it always began, the drinkers drank what they always drank. The talkers said what they always said, "Keep a seat open for Joe."

Frank, John, Pete, and I, each thinking tonight might be the

night he'd win back all he'd lost last week to Joe. Yes, and perhaps a little more.

Joe, poor old Joe, all his joys but three have been taken away. To count his money, play stud poker, then secretly to count it once more

—and the last count always the best—that there is more there than before is no secret.

Joe, old Joe, with his wallet fat as sausage and his money green as leaves. Who needs sports, cats, them like that? That call for mixed drinks and blame God if they've mixed too much? Who needs heavy spenders, loudmouth hollers, them like *that*? Drinking is to make the head heavy, not the tongue loose. Drinking is for when nobody shows up to play poker. You want to make the feet light? Go dancing. Dance all night.

"Here comes Joe," Phil, the bartender, told us, and sure enough, here he came. With his wallet full.

"Joe, you don't look so good," John told him as soon as he sat down, "you look so *peckid*."

"I don't feel so good," the old man told us, "I *feel* peckid."

"You feel peckid, take it easy," advised Frank.

I put a dime in the juke, all on Perry Como. I don't care what Perry sings, so long as he sings. The box coughed once and gave me back my dime. It doesn't like Perry. Well, it was my dime. I put it right back. *I* like Perry.

This time it didn't cough. It picked Elvis Presley singing *All Shook Up*. I got nothing against Elvis. It was just that it was my dime.

But that Frank began humming and shaking along with the song as if it had been his money.

Then the game went as it always went, the drinkers drank what they always drank, the talkers said what they always said, "Looks like Joe's night again."

Yet, just as Joe reached for the deck, as the juke cried out *I Need Your Love*, everything went strange.

The juke coughed on a note, and went on coughing, how it does when someone leans against it. I saw Joe's hands shuffling, but he shuffled too slow. A red deuce twisted out of the deck and dropped to the floor like a splash of blood. Joe fell forward onto the table, without a gasp, without a sound.

Up jumped Frank, the first to realize. "Joe! Wake up!" He seized Joe's wrists and began massaging them. I opened the old man's collar and his head flopped like a rooster's. O, I didn't like the looks of things in the least. Now I wanted the juke to play *anything*.

"Please wake up," Frank pleaded. "Old friend! My one true friend!"

But his one true friend didn't hear.

So we lifted Joe, old Joe, onto the long glass of the shuffleboard. We lay him down gently under the lights that say GAME COMPLETED. Frank began to massage his heart.

"I saw something wrong the second he sat down," John boasted. "I told him."

"Now you look a little peckid

yourself," I told him. He didn't like that.

"You typewriter pounder," He told me, "how some day *you* look," and drew back his lips in a grin almost as bad as Joe's.

"How *you* look, too, someday, old dummy John," little Pete suddenly took my part, and stretched his mouth back and made a horrible face, so that he looked even worse than Joe. Then he ducked under the table to gather the cards.

"Give up," I told Frank, "if he comes to now, he'd be an idiot the rest of his days. When the breath stops the brain starts to melt, right that same second." It was something I'd read somewhere.

"That would be all right," Pete said from under the table, "maybe that way we'd win some of our money back."

"He was my one friend, my *only* friend," Frank reminded us, and went right on massaging. Yet more in sorrow than in hope of winning back his friend. He didn't give up till the pulmotor squad arrived. How they found out I still don't know. I think they just stopped in for a drink on the way home from some job and found another.

They tossed a coin, and the one who lost hauled the inhalator over to the shuffleboard.

"One side, buddy," he told Frank, but our Frank stood his ground. After all, he's from this neighborhood.

"Let him try, too, Frank," I told

him. "We stand for fair play." Actually it wasn't fair play I wanted to see so much. It was just that it had been some time now since anyone raised anyone from the dead and I wanted to be on hand if it happened again.

But that Frank, he wouldn't give up. He went to the other side of the shuffleboard, yet he kept his hand on the old man's heart. I figured he figured that, if the old man did come around, he'd get at least half the credit. If he had we would have given him all of it. After all, he's from this neighborhood.

"If you'd stop blowing cigar smoke in his face," the fireman told me, "he'd stand a better chance."

"Where does it say NO SMOKING?" I asked him to show me. Why should I take stuff off *him*?

After a time, the fireman took the head-piece off Joe's big blue nose and motioned to his friend at the bar. It was all over.

It took them a long time to get through the mob of kids in the door. It was a Spring night, and the kids wanted to see, but were afraid to come all the way in because it was a tavern.

But they made a path for some sort of serious little fellow with a black moustache. "I'm the doctor," he told us as if there were only one in the whole precinct.

Still, he must really have been a doctor at that, because he had a gold watch and didn't in the least mind showing it off. He listened to

Joe's right wrist, gave it a bit of a shake, glanced at the watch, gave the left wrist a shake and looked at the watch again. He shook his head.

It isn't true what they say about pennies holding down a dead man's eyes, because they didn't hold down Joe's. Maybe he's got heavy eyes, I don't know, but the pennies kept rolling off. He tried half a dozen, but they'd slip and roll down the floor. Every time one passed the table I saw Pete's hand come out—there was one penny the doctor wouldn't see again.

"Try a dime," I told him to see if he would think that was heavier, and he did. When he lost that one I said, "Try a quarter."

But he wouldn't go that high. A cheapskate.

"Give me two nickels," he told me, and two was just what I had. But I didn't get a dime for them. "The dime is under the table," he told me.

I wouldn't bend for it. I knew it was no use.

When he got the old man's lids closed under the nickels he wrote something in a little book, and left. "The boys will pick him up shortly," he told us.

What boys? The boys from the Royal Barons S.A.C.? They've buried a couple parties, but not officially.

"He meant the ambulance boys," Phil, the bartender, guessed. "You can't die in a public place unless

you're a pauper. You got to go to a hospital to make it official."

"I think he meant the boys from Racine Street Station," Pete spoke up, and that sounded closest.

"Anyhow, say a prayer for the guy," Frank asked us, giving up his work at last. And began one himself—"Our Father who art in Heaven"—then the whiskey hit him and he couldn't remember the rest.

"Hallowed be Thy name," I remembered, and that was as far as I could go.

"Let's wait for the priest," I told Frank.

The kids in the doorway stood aside to let Father Francis through. He didn't look our way because we took off our caps all the same. He went right to the shuffleboard and did as fast and neat a job of extreme unction as if that old man were lying in bed. Someone brought an army blanket and covered the poor old stiff with that.

Father F. didn't look our way till he'd made the sign of the cross and pulled the blanket up. Then he came to where we waited.

"Oh, *Father*," Frank shouted like the priest had come just in time to save *him*. "I forgot the Lord's Prayer, Father."

"Remembering it isn't your trade," Father F. told Frank, "that's mine. Has the family been notified?"

Nobody had thought of that. But right away everyone wanted to be

the first. John wanted to run straight to Joe's house, Sam said he'd phone. But Phil said, since it happened in his place, it was his job.

Then, it turned out, nobody knew where the old man lived or even what his full name was. Nobody had called him anything but Joe for years. Some said it was Wroblewski, some said it was Makisch, another said it was Orlov.

"Try looking in his wallet," somebody said from under the table.

Nobody had thought of that, either.

"Bring it to me, Frank," Father F. said.

"He was my one friend, let someone else," Frank declined.

Father F. went over and turned the blanket down and reached in and brought back Joe's wallet.

Joe's wallet, fat as sausage, full of money green as leaves. But when he laid it on the bar it just lay there, so thin, so flat, so gone, it looked like it must have had some sort of little stroke of its own.

When Father F. reached in, all there was was one thin single, nothing more.

Everybody pushed to see.

"What was he doing when he went?" Father wanted to know.

"Playing poker, Father," we told him.

"Penny ante?"

"Two-dollar limit."

"Put on Perry Como," I told one of the kids, because I didn't care how I spent just then.

Perry came on singing *Whither Thou Goest I Shall Go*. Oh, he sang it so easy, he sang it so free. And while he sang Phil poured a shot for John and a shot for me. He poured a shot for Father F. and a shot for Sam and a shot for Al and a shot for Frank. Then he poured a shot for himself and lifted his glass.

"To Joe, old Joe," he made a kind of toast.

"Oh, Frank," I heard a whisper from under the table. "How you massage! So good! How God is going to punish!"

## Hopeless Hunt

Bloodhounds have been used in capturing many an escaped prisoner, but Henry Lott, 32, used them in making his getaway.

While serving 60 days in the county stockade at Bartow, Fla., Lott was asked to lay a trail for trainer Carl Andrews' bloodhounds to follow. He was told to walk for half a mile, then climb a tree and wait for the dogs to find him.

The prisoner laid the trail all right. But instead of climbing a tree, he made his way to the nearest highway, hitched a ride and headed for parts unknown.

*"My wife told me what you did," Colby informed his partner. Sit down and write out a suicide note..."*

# DEADLY CHARM

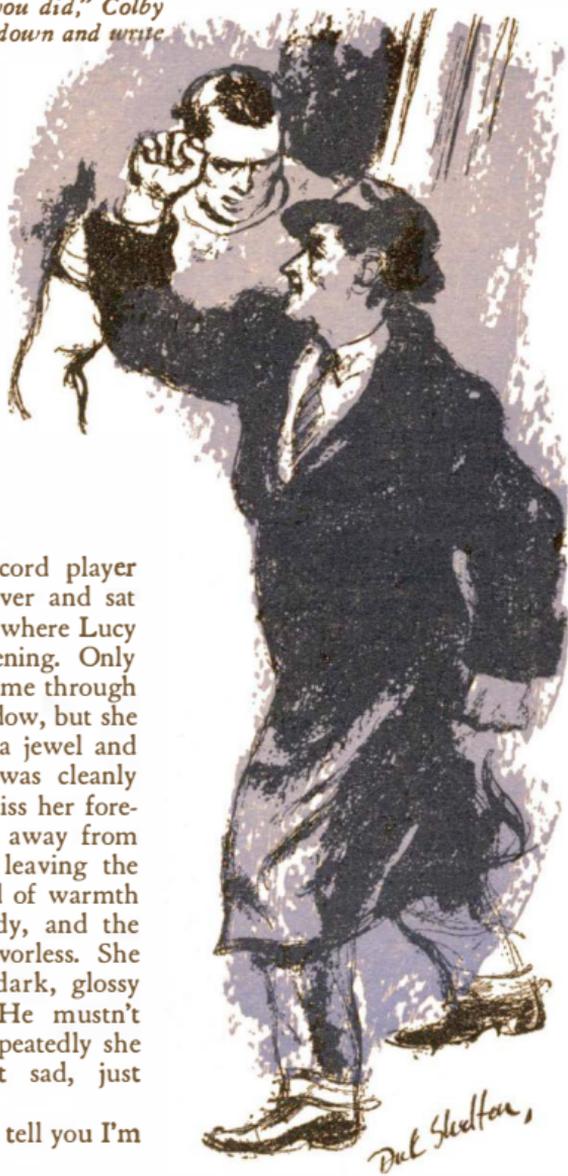
*A Novelette*

**BY  
STUART  
FRIEDMAN**

COLBY TUNED the record player down and went over and sat on the edge of the sofa where Lucy lay on her back, listening. Only a filter of dusk light came through the draped picture window, but she drew light to her like a jewel and her round, pert face was cleanly defined as he bent to kiss her forehead. When he sat up away from her he was aware of leaving the delicately scented cloud of warmth hovering over her body, and the air seemed chilly, flavorless. She blinked, waited, her dark, glossy eyes watching him. He mustn't nag; she'd told him repeatedly she felt fine; she wasn't sad, just serious.

"I—uh—just came to tell you I'm going to shower."

"All right."



He was reluctant to break the contact of his hip against the curve of her waist.

"You're not ready to come in and start dressing for the dinner?"

"There's time. Will you make it a little louder again?"

He returned gloomily to the bedroom. She usually frisked her delicious body around in scanties, tantalizing him beyond endurance, just for the pure hell of turning his logical theory into a shambles. Colby reasoned that because he was homely and dull and bound to be outshone socially by the other junior partners, he needed a certain edge of discontent, a crackle of excess energy. Therefore it would be unwise to make love, for he would feel too good afterward, and look stupidly smug. He had explained it once and Lucy had said: "If you're all done talking you can start loving me, lover." Which he had done. Since then there had been no discussion, and she simply went about the business of making herself irresistible. Colby stood feeling aimless and listened hopefully for the dance sound of her step. Maybe she was just teasing.

But there was nothing teasy about the big, pretty bedroom... no stray shoes, no disarray on her dressing table, no clutter on the chairs. In fact, for a week, the whole house had been tidy and subdued. He went in and turned on the shower and kicked off his slippers angrily. Her chaos exasper-

ated him; but he was secretly proud of it, it gave him a sort of pleasantly wicked feel. Hell, he didn't want her changed. He plodded, she flew. He only resisted her flightier impulses and emotionalism for her own protection. When he took her out he felt like the toad with the precious jewel on its head; she was the magic touch to his life. What hideous irony if instead of Lucy enlivening him he had ground her down to his own dismal, orderly level!

He tested the shower spray without getting in, then dried his hand, frowning. What kind of a man sulked around waiting to be seduced?

He shut off the music and knelt by the sofa. His hand felt coarse, thick, as he groped and found her softly graceful little hand.

"Baby... are you sure you're all right...?"

"Vin, you promised to stop worrying about me. I'd tell you if anything was wrong, you know that."

He suddenly yearned for the easy fluency he scorned in some of his colleagues. He was masterful at building solid cases but totally unable to present them in court.

"Lucy," he began huskily, praying that the depth and sincerity of his feeling would force the words out. "I want you to know, Lucy..." Words, phrases, teemed profusely in his mind...but his tongue failed him, as always, as always...and this was why he was

condemned to drone in the library and stay shunted into the back-ground. "Lucy...I respect...adore...love..." he said, feeling an agony of unworthiness. "You're everything worth anything...I'm nothing..."

She freed her hand, pressed her fingers to his lips. "I don't like your forever criticizing yourself when you're a million times better than you think."

Something in her tone...not anger but impatience...made him cringe. How long before his contemptible unassertiveness turned a high-spirited girl's sympathy to disgust? Maybe it had already happened. Abruptly, he stood on his knees and thrust his hands under her robed thighs and back. She pushed against him as he started to lift her on his arms, and he felt a run of tension through her slim, exciting body.

"What are you *doing*? ... No ... Please ..."

His pulse quickened with the feel of her precious softness against the taut muscles of his arms and chest. He held her tight and got to his feet with her, an exultance of male strength flooding through him like a drug. She began to writhe and struggle and cry out in a sharp little voice.

"You're hurting me ... please ..."

Entering the bedroom there was

a bright glaze over his eyes. He neither knew nor cared if her struggle was genuine, the unaccustomed feel of it keened him wildly. She was holding her robe shut at the throat with one hand and pushing at him with the other, and she began to kick violently, exposing her legs to the knee, and one slipper flew off.

He lowered her to the bed. She clutched her robe and rolled frenziedly away from him. Colby moved with jungle-swift reflexes, pouncing as on a prey. He seized the arm nearest him and she gasped and lay as though felled, unresisting. He started across the bed toward her, releasing his hold on her arm. Abruptly she rolled herself clear off the bed, and scrambled to her feet.

"The light," she said and started for the wall switch. He caught a flying corner of her robe, and felt it come off. He twisted his head, trying to glimpse her, but the light went off. He heard her returning to the bed, panting a little. "Darling," she whispered, seating herself. "Darling ..."

"Just a second ..." He reached cautiously across and suddenly snapped on the bedlamp. Surprised, she tried to pull the overhang of the satin spread over her, while she stared at him.

He looked at her naked body in silent horror. Her upper arms were purpled with bruises; one soft breast was discolored with ugly

marks as though crushed by the vicious grip of a hand; there were heavy slutches on her thighs and on the gentle round of her hip.

He felt suddenly paralyzed and so weak he could barely draw breath. Tenderness and revulsion gripped him alternately. He looked at her face without seeing her and then at the stamp of violence on her, saying nothing, his jaw dropped weakly open. He felt a little dizzy. His face had become very pale, his mouth chalk dry. He couldn't say anything. She lay totally inert now, staring up at the ceiling. There was no sound in the room except the remote sizz of the forgotten shower. Her eyes welled and he saw the tears glide down her temple into the massed dark ringlets of hair, but she didn't lift her hands. She just lay there, abused and shamed, crying silently, hopelessly and he wanted to cry with her and caress her and whisper his love, but there was a coldness in his breast, and he just waited, watching her.

She said nothing, nothing.

"Well?" he said finally. "Well?"

She didn't even seem to hear. He got up, rammed into his robe and went to the kitchen where he poured some whisky. He brought it to her. She shook her head weakly, but he lifted her, made her drink. She coughed and pushed at the glass, then sat up crosslegged on the bed, her head down.

"It was last Thursday night. You

were working on that brief. He came and got in..."

Colby blasted. "And you didn't tell me, didn't report it to the police. Did you get a good look? Lucy, *Damn* it... why did you try to hide this from *me*..." His guts clawed him and he stomped away from the bed, blindly, came back, his fists clenched as he stared grimly down at her crushed figure.

"The publicity... the scandal... what it would do to us, to your career, to have me dragged... dragged naked through the headlines..." She turned an anguished, pleading face up to him. "I thought I could bear it... *save* you from it... honest to God, Vin..." She caught his hand, tried to draw it to her face. He yanked away, then regretted it.

He petted her face, kissed it. "Sorry, baby. I know what you meant to do, and I love you for it. How did he get in?"

"I let him in. It wasn't a stranger..." Her voice dropped so low he had to bend near and ask her to repeat. "It wasn't—wasn't a stranger?"

"Wasn't a stranger?" he repeated stupidly.

"No. So of course I let him in. He'd been drinking, but I didn't know how much. He made a pass. I slapped him. That made him worse, and I hit him harder and ran for the phone to call you, and he knocked it away, and I ran to the door and yelled at him to get

out and he got mean... *mean*..."

"Who?" Colby said. "Who? He... He... *He* you say. WHO!"

"I'll tell you. I'll tell you," she cried desperately. "But first let me tell you how and what happened, so you'll believe me, and know that I *did* fight, that I *didn't* want it to happen. He tortured and overpowered me..."

"That's *obvious* to me. Why are you stalling... why have you been hiding it if there's nothing guilty about it? Who?"

"He was scared afterward. He threatened. He stood over me for I don't know how long, driving it into me what would happen if I let you know. He'd say it was an *affair*."

"Affair!" Colby said contemptuously. "Bluff. I want Dr. Keech to look at you so he'll be prepared to swear..."

"Wait. Listen to me. I did go to Dr. Keech, but he said he'd claim I required abuse from a lover..."

"It wasn't the doctor who said that."

"No, of course. You know who I mean..."

"That's just what I don't know."

"Well... it was Windy. Windy Tearle. That's who it was. I swear that's who it was. I swear!"

"I believe you. Why overemphasize? Go on. Keep talking," he said, turning away. He began to dress rapidly.

"If I let you know and you took him to court he would hire a psy-

chiatrist to explain masochism, and Windy would swear that's what I was. He'd bring friends in to claim they too had... had made love to me... or that I'd tried to get them. Windy said it was common knowledge that men flocked to me at parties, dinners, the country club... and for a better reason than my *public* charm. Vin, that's a lie..."

"I know. Go on," he said tightly, continued dressing.

"He said any jury would take one look at me and see a high-stepper, and one look at you and see—well, a *not* high-stepper... and they'd look at him and snort at the idea he would have to rape any woman..."

Colby nodded involuntarily. Windy was handsome, and the easy charm and magnetism that made him an effective trial lawyer made him damned attractive to women. Unwillingly Colby remembered Windy and Lucy dancing together... a very attractive team. Others had seen it; Colby himself had realized it.

"His defense would hammer on that point," Lucy went on. "That I was a thrill-seeker... and he was the thrill, and that I had pestered him for months on end. He had resisted because he was your colleague, a junior partner in the same firm... he and you worked closely together on many cases, and he esteemed you and considered you friend, and I was, however desirable, off-limits. Then

he'd say he just hadn't been strong enough...he had been weak, weak, weak and human. He had had a rendezvous, then another, and my shocking passion had begun to scare him and he had wanted to break, but I had become venomous, threatening to blow both my husband's and his career sky high, get us kicked out of the firm. He had lost his head and slapped me. It had...that slap, inflamed me and I had begged him to hit me harder...Then gradually I increased my requirements for pain, and he had been trapped in all that morbid ugliness, and scared that he himself might become perverted and begin to enjoy inflicting pain..."

3.

Colby had seen Windy in Court often enough. He had an actor's flair; he could shift from earnest, boyish tactics to deep solemnity with wholly convincing ease. He could seem as incapable of guile as an infant. Colby finished dressing with an air of deadly calm, but there was a cold sickness in his gut, and the insidious, unwelcome thought crept into his mind. He couldn't stand it...he had to have it denied.

"Lucy..." He didn't look at her. "If...I say *if* there was...were any truth to it...that a dull low-key bum like me was too slow, unalive for a lovely, vital girl like

you and the marriage left your hungers unsatisfied...if, I mean...and even though you loved me and pitied me and fought to remain loyal, but couldn't...and if this wrongness in your life drove you somehow into wild cravings...cravings to punish yourself or to be punished, and consequently..." He stopped. She was silent. He turned, half expecting to see that she had thrown herself face down to weep. She sat there staring at him coldly.

"I only meant," he flustered. "Don't look that way, baby." He went near and tried to touch her. She leaned away. "Lucy, I only wanted to say even if every lie of his was true I'd love you...I'd help you...get a psychiatrist...stand by you..."

"If you're so close to believing him, imagine it all in a court. I see I was right in hiding it from you. He *would* smear me, make us so ugly and contemptible, drag me naked through the headlines so successfully we'd have to skulk out of town...even if he went to jail. Furthermore, if you'll look in my vanity case on the closet shelf you'll see a copy of the little document he prepared just in case you murdered him."

There were three typewritten pages. Colby finished reading and sat looking drained. It was a sort of last testament, and it would be effective in court...maybe even effective enough to send Colby up

for life. Even if he should be acquitted, Lucy would emerge smeared.

Lucy had got up and put on a slip. "Now you understand that we can do nothing, and why I concealed it."

Colby nodded weakly, then heaved himself to his feet. He went to the closet, got his overcoat.

She sat on the edge of the bed and began to put on her nylons. "The best thing for us both is to forget it. I can."

"I can't," he said, almost to himself.

"You must. It was worse for me, and if I can, you can. I did my best, Vin, to protect you from knowing ... where are you going in your overcoat?"

"Out."

She stood up. "I want to go to that dinner. I have a new gown ... high at the throat, long-sleeved. Nobody need know."

"He'd be there. He knows."

"This dinner is part of our normal lives ... part of our *future*. I need a future, Vin. I need it desperately now. Now please change your clothes. It's important for us to be there tonight. You've worked too hard, succeeded too well in that firm to let anything ... ANYTHING ... stop you. We'll go and I'll face him down. He can't make *me* skulk."

Colby walked blindly to her dressing table. The blood was throbbing so hard in his head that

his vision blurred with every beat of pulse. Abruptly, his hands spread, gathered jars, bottles. He hurled them smashing into the wall. He let out a harsh sound and swept the table top clean, then looked at the damage on the floor, clenching his fists.

His voice was gritty, low. "Work in the same *firm* with him? My God ... My GOD ... DAMN IT! ..." He thrust his head at her, glaring and red-faced. "If he can intimidate us this way, what's to stop him from doing it again ... and again ... and ..."

She winced; clearly she hadn't thought of that.

"I'm going for a walk. To think."

He was quivering when the cold air hit him. He began to walk at a furious pace, thinking he might think of something. Some legal angle ... some way of striking ... but all he could think was kill kill kill ...

He reached a through street, turned and strode swiftly along beside the speeding lanes of traffic. He came to a filling station, saw a cab company phone. He went to the phone, called a cab.

4

He entered the apartment building, pressed the buzzer beside the card of John Windham Tearle, picked up the lobby phone.

"*Hel-lo...*" Windy's voice had a gay, half-tight lilt.

"Hi, Windy," Colby said, surprised at the easy, untroubled sound he managed. "Listen, you know that Hastings business... I dug up a gem for you... a precedent our esteemed opponents never heard up... I'll bring it up, now, if that's o. k. It got me all excited. I'm late getting home to dress for the dinner, but I can spare a minute more."

"You're a pal, pally. Come right up. I dunno what I'd do without you, Vin, and that's no crap. Furthermore, I let Mr. Mac know that I'm just a fancy mouth, and you're the brains... just in case Vin, you ever think I want to hog the spotlight..."

"Ah, forget it, Windy... push the button..."

He crossed the small, silent lobby, pressed the button of the self-service elevator, feeling a cold calm. A *click* of sound from the shutting foyer door made him start and snap his head around. He frowned, realizing he was far, far from calm. The elevator door opened—he stepped inside—and closed. He jabbed at the "6" button, hit it clumsily at the edge. Yes, he was very far from calm... right over at the edge of fear. There was a heavy pulsing there in his upper stomach, a crowding of his diaphragm... he drew in a long breath of air. The elevator was coming to a stop he had a sick moment of pure objectivity. A mindless rage had driven him here.

He'd eased the hell in him with raw images of himself beating Windy bloody and insensate, making him feel a little of the meaning of the pain and degradation and shame he'd subjected Lucy to, making him whimper cravenly for mercy, for the chance to tuck his tail and leave town.

But in fact Windy was more athletic; he outweighed and outreached him. And a lifetime of easy successes had armored him with confidence so powerful that he had trouble even imagining defeat. How trite and true that nothing succeeded like success... no dark knowledge of many failures lay leaden in his guts to cripple his drive.

The elevator door opened. Colby moved out fast toward Windy's door. If he hadn't moved fast, he thought, loathing himself, he wouldn't have moved at all. Then he saw Windy open his door and stand there with that big, winning smile of his, as confident as the gods. He owned the earth! What he wanted he used... whether it was another man's brain to do his drudging for him... or the other man's woman. And if a smile wasn't enough he took by rape!

Then he saw the big smile shift subtly; the blue-gray eyes alerted. Colby knew he had signalled his own rage, putting Windy on guard, losing the little advantage of surprise. He'd planned to palsy along at least until he could get free of

his overcoat. Windy, in slacks and T-shirt, had his arms free. His first came up and he danced back, feinting rapidly with his left as Colby came into the apartment in a slugging rush.

The smash of Colby's first blow to the body was drained to a thump because Windy was going away, but his second hooked solidly into Windy's ribs with force enough to drain the last of the arrogant bastard's smile off his face. Colby crowded him, giving and taking gut blows, then Colby pistoned one up at his head, but Windy bobbed and took it in a graze along his cheek. Then Windy was away, to the side, and he landed a blow on Colby's temple before he could turn. Colby swung a roundhouse, and knew at once it was wrong. He found himself offbalance, and wide open.

A blow caught him in the jaw, and another, another, and for a moment his vision swirled, and he had to grab and hold on in close quarters till his head cleared, then agony burst like fire in his guts as he felt the knee smash up into his groin. It came again, harder and an involuntary dry, puking sound came out of his throat. He turned, bent, holding himself, trying to get a second's respite, then Windy was at his back, jerking his overcoat down, effectively binding his arms. Then Windy came around and slammed him full in the face, with left, right, left, following him

around as he tried to turn, following him down as he backed and stumbled over an ottoman and crashed to the floor.

Windy's lips were drawn back tight against his teeth in an ugly deadly expression as he leaned down. He kicked his head, then struck his face again with his fist. Colby felt the blood, knew his face was cut open, and one eyelid was twitching uncontrollably, and he could taste the saltiness and sliminess of blood and saliva in his mouth, and he knew his lip was open, but he barely felt the pain in his face under the overwhelming intensity of the pain in his groin.

He rolled and pawed out toward Windy's legs to bring him down. But there was a slow-motion nightmarishness about his action, a hopeless celerity to Windy who evaded him with ease.

Windy moved in at will to strike and kick viciously wherever he chose. Colby found all his force used up in protecting his groin, his head, stomach. He tried to get up three, four... he didn't know how many times... and each time he was kicked sprawling, or battered down or flattened by the smash of Windy's body on his back. Then he was slugged at the base of the skull and his face mashed to the floor and his senses bleared, darkened, and all the fight in him was turned against losing consciousness. He got his head up and his forearms under him and sucked air dizz-

ingly into his lungs, and prepared himself for the mighty heave that would bring him miraculously storming to his feet...and then he saw Windy ahead and out of reach, watching him. Windy wasn't angry or alert now. He looked almost playful, as if it wasn't a fight any longer, just a victor and a vanquished...and that was the worst horror of all. Colby heard his own enraged roar come out of his throat sounding more like a sob as he willed himself up...and he was making it! making it!...he was halfway up...but then his leg was yanked from behind and he was being flopped helpless onto his back by a toe-hold. His free leg drove up at Windy's head, but Windy was no longer there. Windy's heel crushed down into the muscle of his bicep, then the barrage of blows started on his head....

"You had enough?"

Yes...no...never...never...never...The question came again, again, eternally, and Colby tried to remember the reason for this... Lucy...the thing that had happened to her...the reason he must never, never, never, NEVER submit...but she faded under the mounting pain, faded and vanished, and then there was only the pain and the craving in him to stop it at any cost....

He *hadn't* spoken, he told himself, he *hadn't* begged for mercy, he *hadn't* broken...but the blows

had stopped, and he knew he had said the words to stop them, and he could feel tears crawl down his face, cutting like fire as they touched the raw open injuries. He was sitting and Windy was standing looking down on him and Colby couldn't raise his head. Then, Windy was helping him to his feet and for a sickening instant Colby was aware of a feeling of *gratitude* toward the son of a bitch and he wished he could die. Then Windy was standing in front of him, saying with a taunting pretense of sporty good-fellowship.

"Up and at 'em again, huh, Vin? Ready for round two! Throw one." He cocked his fists, waited and grinned.

Colby just stood, dreading the thought of more pain, unable to lift his arms...or his head. He worked up some bloody saliva and forced himself to lift his head and stare at Windy. He was beaten, he told himself, but not intimidated, and he was still man enough to spit in his face...and then he knew he didn't dare.

"O. K., then, pal. No more stomach for the sport..." Windy thrust out his hand, clasped Colby's. "So we shake, and no hard feelings. And I'm always open for a return match. But, meantime, let's get your face cleaned up and have a smoke and a drink. Now we're calmed down, Vin, fercrissakes, maybe you can tell me why you come charging in here at me like a

mad bull when I thought we were friends.”

Before his groggy senses could absorb what he'd said Windy moved away and returned with a double shot of whisky in a water glass.

“This is what you need, Vin,” Windy said with an air of concern.

It hurt his cut mouth but Colby drank it off, and after a few seconds it began to help. Windy was offering him a lighted cigarette and saying:

5.

“Pal, you're about the toughest customer I ever tangled with...”

Colby knew he was being patronized, but it felt better to accept it as a compliment.

“The only hell of it is, Vin, you're a little rusty, and I've kept half-way in training ever since I used to box for Alma Mammy. Look, I want you to see Casey down at the City Club...you know the athletic director, and take some private boxing lessons. The main thing he'll help you with is to stay cool...never go into a fight mad, Vin...and by the way, what the hell *was* it that got you riled at me? Hell, I thought you and me hit it off.”

Colby just stared. This son-of-a-gun was positively incredible. Not only was he carefully diminishing the sense of Colby's humiliation, he was giving an entirely plausible picture of innocence.

“Lucy. She's why...and you know it damned well!”

Windy's eyes widened. “Lucy? What did I ever do to make her sic you on me...” He paused, narrowed his eyes. “Vin, you don't mean you think I—I made a pass... at *Lucy*? At *your* wife...at the wife of my closest colleague and friend. No, you can't mean *that*.”

Colby stared at him, feeling some of his certainty ebb.

“*I do* mean it. You *raped* her...” The simple word drove him like a fool and he smashed out at Windy's arrogant face. He missed, stumbled...and Windy's hands helped him regain balance.

“*Please*, Vin...don't hate me, don't be my enemy. This is a dreadful misunderstanding, if she thinks *that*...Lucy's a wonderful girl, Vin, we all know that, but so romantic, and dramatic...and, don't get sore again...and foolish. She goes farther than she realizes sometimes...I poked a guy's mouth shut for him not two weeks ago, Vin, because she claimed... Well, it was a lie...that girl adores you, and she'd never let you down...”

“She's bruised, hurt...she was *raped*...”

“We're not going to be enemies, Vin. A woman is not going to come between us.” Windy clenched his fist. “I say she's lying to you if she accuses me.” This fist, he was saying, says that she is the liar. “I want to be your friend, not your enemy, Vin.”

And I, Colby told himself, prefer to believe him. Because he is stronger. Colby turned brokenly and walked into Windy's bedroom, thinking that he had found the way out. He had only to obey Windy and he wouldn't get hurt any more. If he didn't quite fully believe him now, he would convince himself in time. If Lucy had lied and betrayed him he could forgive her, and he would, in addition to winning Windy's goodwill, managed also to keep his precious jewel. He wandered as though dazed, purposeless. Windy watched from a distance, his eyes wary. When Colby neared the bureau Windy moved swiftly toward him, and Colby knew he was right. Windy still kept his gun in that top bureau drawer.

Windy came flying and his hand dove into the opening drawer with Colby's.

Colby got the gun. He rammed it into Windy's gut and turned his bloodied face to Windy.

"You're done!" he said. "You're done!"

"Wait...use your head, Vin

"I know. If I kill you there's a dead man's statement waiting to smear Lucy and convict me. I read it. But I don't give a damn, a damn, not now..."

"Please. Think! You can't, you can't shoot me down in cold blood...Vin, I had you beat; I could have come and got this gun and

murdered you. You can't murder either. Think! I'll resign...leave town...Vin, are you hearing me?"

"You raped her. You smeared her. You called her a liar. You wanted to cow me into hating her, into living like a whipped cur... I'd rather die...but not before you do...Ask your God for mercy, not me!"

"I was drunk! I didn't mean to, didn't want to...so help me God I'd give my arm to wipe it out... Give me a chance to go, to run, run like the whipped cur, out of town...give me a chance... That paper I wrote. I'll give you the original. Let me get it. We'll burn it. As a sign of my intentions, the truth of them..."

He wavered. "Don't stall..."

"It frees you to kill me. It puts me helpless at your mercy. It shows what I think of your integrity, your honor. Vin, for God's sake..."

"Where is it..."

"Lockbox. Closet shelf."

"Get it down. Move very carefully, Windy."

"Yes, yes...I'm no fool..."

Minutes later the lockbox was down and open. Colby scanned the statement after Windy took it from its sealed envelope. It was the one Lucy had a copy of. Colby stared silently into Windy's eyes, and asked:

"No other copies."

"None."

They went to the bathroom, wadded each sheet of paper and set

it afire. Watching the fire and the shaky anxiety on Windy's face Colby began to chill at the thought of killing in cold blood. Windy's stall for time had worked. Something of his rage and hate had weakened under the look of Windy's terror. It was not impossible to believe he *did* feel remorse... Gah! He began to despise himself for weakness. Windy was being either very clever or intensely sincere at the moment... too wise to say a word. He was letting Colby work it out in his own mind, letting him too realize the awesomeness of death.

"We'll go into the phone. Dial my number. Then let me talk to Lucy."

Windy nodded gravely, moved to comply. When Lucy answered Colby continued to cover Windy with the gun. "Sweetheart? I'm at Windy's. Dress and come here as fast as you can, and bring my gun... don't ARGUE with me... I've got his gun and I'll kill him this instant if you... Windy, you tell her!" He pushed the handset at him.

"He means it! He's got me covered. Do as he says."

Colby replaced the handset, pointed to the small desk.

"Sit down. Get paper and pen. We're both going to write suicide notes. Then we're going to Tarleton Park. A gun for each of us. I don't want you on my conscience the rest of my life. I haven't the guts to just blow your brains out.

You'll have an equal chance to blow mine out."

"A duel? You mean a duel?"

"Something like that?"

He saw the flicker of hope... and slyness... in Windy's expression. "I knew you were a gentleman, Vin. This is the gentleman's way. I know just the place, secluded. We stand back to back, walk ten paces, turn and fire."

Colby nodded. "The only thing lacking will be seconds. We'll be alone. Not even Lucy will be there."

Windy sat at the desk and wrote the suicide note. Colby read it, nodded.

"Now you stand there, back to me, your hands up on the wall, while I write my note. Remember, I've still got the only gun."

"Of course."

Windy could scarcely conceal the lifting of his spirits. No fear of death in him now, Colby noted. Windy imagined that Colby was going to be the proper gentleman and march ten paces with his back turned, and Windy was counting on that turned back. If he hadn't counted on it he would never have written the suicide note.

Colby finished his own note, let Windy read it. Then they sat across from each other, waiting for Lucy.

When she arrived he got rid of her as quickly as possible.

Forty minutes later he and Windy got out of Windy's car, and headed on foot to the isolated little

green. Reaching it Colby emptied each gun of all but one cartridge.

"What're you doing?"

"There'll be a slight change in procedure. I wouldn't want you to worry, Windy, that when you walked ten paces with your back turned I might turn and shoot you in the back."

"You're a cute son-of-a-gun, aren't you?" Windy raged.

"Very. Now, you take my gun, I'll take yours. I'll put your gun to your temple, you'll put my gun to mine. Then we'll pull triggers ... until one of the bullets comes under one of the hammers."

Colby spun the chambers several times on each gun. He solemnly handed Windy his gun. Windy seized it and began to pull the trigger wildly as fast as he could,

before Colby got the gun in his own hand up to Windy's head. Windy ducked away from the feel of the muzzle the instant Colby placed the gun at his temple, and he struck out, trying to throw Colby off balance. There was an explosion that almost deafened him ... Windy's one bullet had gone wild. Windy yelled and fell, scrambling to get away, and Colby, with infinite patience, followed him down, holding the gun near his head, and pulling the trigger one, two, three, four ... the revolver tugged at his arm as the bullet fired. ...

He crouched after awhile to make certain Windy was dead. Then he wiped Windy's gun, tossed it down, pried his own gun free of Windy's death grip and walked away.



## *Burglary Binge*

In Ventura, Calif. John Ashburn opened his liquor store and discovered that there had been an intruder during the night. Bottles on the shelves were in disarray. In the center of the floor was a broken bottle of champagne.

Ashburn searched the store and found a possum asleep on a shelf. "He was dead to the world," Ashburn said. "I had to carry him out of the place and give him a shove toward the foothills. And he was staggering as he started out."

## *Passout*

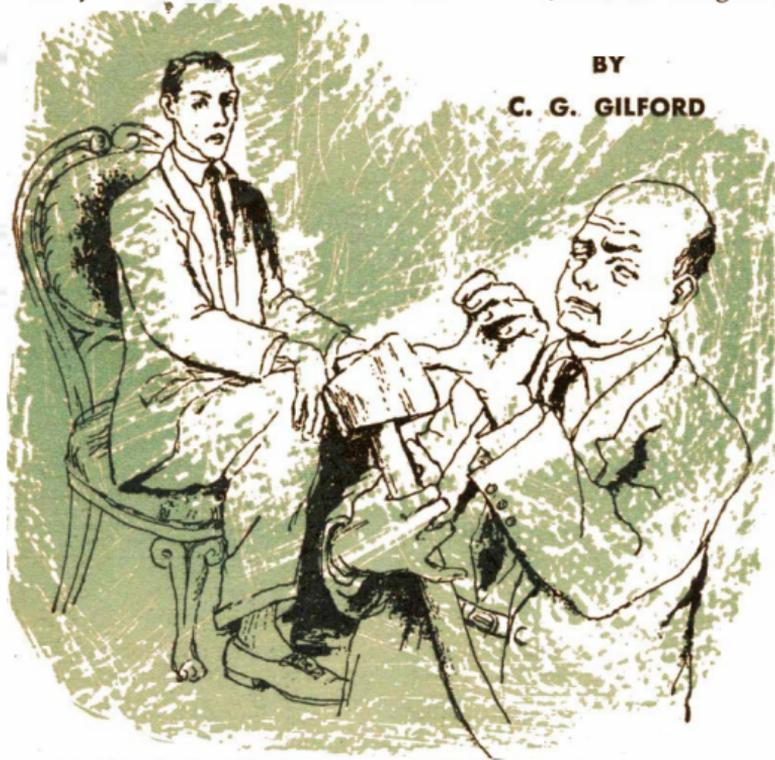
Carl Henn held up a theater cashier in Toronto, Ont., and fled down the street, holding \$100 in one hand and a gun in the other. Two bystanders gave chase and captured Henn four blocks away. Henn fainted.

"DAMNED NONSENSE," Miles Ramey's Uncle David said irritably. He still knelt there in the grass where he'd been pruning the rose bush. The pruning shears were in his right hand. And on the ball of the thumb of his left hand, where a thorn had pricked him, was a tiny bubble of fresh blood.

But his irritation wasn't directed at the slight wound. At his nephew rather. Miles Ramey had been standing watching his uncle and dutifully listening to his discussion of horticulture. But now Miles' face had gone suddenly a greenish white, a clammy sweat sprang to his forehead, and he clung to the

BY

C. G. GILFORD



*He had a phobia about blood — fainted at the sight of it. So how could anyone suspect him of the bloody murder of his uncle?*

## The Sight of Blood

rose trellis for support. He rolled his eyes and glanced away. He looked as if he were sick.

"What's the matter with you?" Uncle David insisted upon knowing, although he knew quite well.

"Would you excuse me a minute?" Miles pleaded and tried to walk away.

But there was a devil in the old man that day. He had a grouch on, which was not unusual for him. But he was peskier today than even he had a habit of being. He struggled up from his knees, dropping the shears, and grabbed Miles' arm before the latter could escape.

"Don't like the sight of blood, is that it?" Uncle David could be almost gleeful about other people's infirmities.

"You know I don't," Miles said, grimacing. "Let me go please."

But the old man hung on. "Lot of damned nonsense," was the judgment he rendered again. "You better cure yourself of that, sonny. Nobody minded when you were little, but it's damned foolishness in a grown man. What you need is a shock, like seeing a lot of blood at one time. Too bad you never got in a war. Or seen a nice juicy highway accident. Bet something like that would cure you once and for all."

Miles' head felt dizzily empty except for the great gory visions his uncle had put there. He was weaker than Uncle David now, too weak to pull away and run.

"Too bad," the old man said, "that we haven't got a war or an accident handy. But we'll try this . . ."

He dropped Miles' arm and thrust his wounded thumb into Miles' face. Somehow Miles couldn't close his eyes. He had to look. The gnarled old brown thumb with its glistening red bead ornament, like one tiny sphere balanced precariously on a larger one, was just inches from him and filled his vision. Then as he watched in horror, Uncle David reached up with his other hand and squeezed that thumb. The blood welled, burst from its tiny spherical shape, and trickled down the skin.

To Miles it seemed like a vast, rushing, drowning torrent. He screamed.

And screaming seemed to summon strength back into his body. He wrestled out of Uncle David's grip and ran. Like a man running away from death, and with the devil behind him. He ran the length of the path, and around to the front of the house. But he didn't stop there. He ran down the slope, through bushes and over grass, past the low scrub trees that whipped their branches in his face. He ran out onto the dock to the far end. There, alone and gasping for breath, he threw himself down on the boards, put his head over the edge, and surrendered to his nausea.

Then he lay for a long time resting, listening to the lake water lapping against the piles, letting the fresh air seep into his throat like balm. Slowly the ugly thing seemed to wash out of him, out of his insides and out of his mind. But he still trembled from the memory, like a frozen man who cannot stop shivering even in front of a fire.

I hate him, he thought.

And his other thoughts were tumbled and incoherent for a while. Till finally, in a sudden burst of light within his brain, they all arranged themselves. He had long wanted what part of Uncle David's estate he would inherit. And he had hated the old man for just as long. Today wasn't the first time the old man had been impossibly overbearing, insensibly cruel. Today was somehow only the worst.

But he knew now that he wanted to kill him. And he knew exactly how he would do it.

Miles Ramey went to work on his secret project slowly and methodically. There was an impression to be reinforced in the popular mind. Everybody in Minochee knew, of course, about Miles' tender feelings and his utter inability to cope with a display of gore or even to discuss gory subjects. But now it became important that their memories be refreshed about the existence of this fact. So that they could call it to mind at

the proper time. And bear witness . . .

In this project luck favored him with several opportunities. And he didn't have to act or pretend.

First there was the lecture on civil defense and first-aid at the town hall. If he had had anything less than murder in mind, Miles would never have attended. But now he professed concern and patriotism. He had to leave in the middle of the lecture, white-faced, down the center aisle for everyone to see. Then he was sick on the town hall steps.

A few days later Mr. Cromwell the painter fell off his scaffolding and broke an arm. Miles had never run morbidly to accident scenes, but he ran to this one. Friendly hands had to escort him to a shady spot under a tree and make him lie prone to keep him conscious.

And finally came the best chance of all. An outbreak of typhoid made it necessary for the whole town of Minochee to be innoculated against the fever. Miles Ramey stood in line with the others, but he fainted before his own turn came. The incident was noted and commented upon by quite a few people.

So it was time to begin.

Miles would need the proper alibi, of course. But he had provided for that. He lived with his sister Stella and her husband Robert. Relatives would be prejudiced in one's favor naturally. But that

was all right. An airtight, unshakable alibi might look too planned.

Miles chose a night when Robert and Stella were staying home. He ate dinner with them in quite normal fashion, watched a television program with them, even listened to Robert discuss his favorite topic, trout fishing, for a while. But about nine-thirty he said he was tired, retreated to his second-floor bedroom, and locked the door. He always did that.

Once alone, he didn't hesitate, for he'd made up his mind long ago. He undressed, but not for pajamas and bed. He put on his swimming trunks. Then he brought out of the closet the necessary items he had accumulated for tonight's work—his tools, he called them.

There was the old pair of sneakers, three sizes too large for him. He'd found them on a trash heap, because he hadn't dared to arouse curiosity by going into a store and buying shoes so obviously unsuited for wearing. Then there were the three articles that he had purchased in stores, but each at a different store, and none in Minochee. A pair of cotton work gloves, a metal cash box with a key, and a bottle of smelling salts.

He put the bottle, the shoes, and the gloves all inside the metal box for convenience in carrying. Then he turned out the lights, opened the window quietly, and climbed out on the roof. The roof sloped to a

low point over the attached garage. The cash box landed on the ground with a soft thud. Miles followed. It was a jarring fall, but he managed it without injury.

He gathered up the box and picked his way in the moonless darkness toward the lake. The rowboat, he knew, would be tied up at Robert's dock, and Robert wouldn't be using it or come looking for it at this time of night, so it would never be missed. Miles entered the boat slowly and stealthily, untied it, and pushed silently away from the dock.

Uncle David's cottage where he lived completely alone was around the little point, half a mile by water, a bit more than half that distance by land. Miles had never in his life rowed over to see Uncle David. Neither, then, would anybody ever expect him to row over to murder Uncle David. That fact was but one advantage of Miles' plan. But the rowboat was necessary besides. A lot of extra clothing would be a handicap on this expedition. The swimming trunks would be sufficient attire in a rowboat, but hardly if he met anyone on the footpath or the road. And as a matter of fact, he didn't want to meet anyone.

He was content to proceed slowly, so as not to make any noise with the oars. He was sure no one noticed his passage. Lights were burning in cottages all along the shoreline, but the occupants were

staying indoors. From somewhere far off in the night, an outboard motor buzzed, down the lake. No other boats were in the immediate vicinity, for the night was really too cool for pleasant boating.

A light in Uncle David's kitchen finally shone out as a beacon for Miles. His boat glided silently into Uncle David's dock, and he tied it there. Then he divested himself of the swimming trunks, and put on the sneakers and gloves. He left the trunks and the metal box in the bottom of the boat, but he took the smelling salts with him as he climbed out.

He approached the house cautiously but not timidly. On the way he made a point of leaving the footprints of his oversized shoes in several places where there was soft earth, such as among Uncle David's freshly cultivated roses. He also stopped at the little tool shed where Uncle David kept an axe for cutting firewood. He took the axe.

He paused outside the kitchen window to locate Uncle David. He saw the old man, alone as always, sitting at the kitchen table. He had something that looked like garden catalogues spread out on the table in front of him, and he was quite engrossed in them. He wasn't aware of any other presence until Miles burst through the unlocked door.

Then he jumped up at the noise, only surprised at first. But the sur-

prise quickly changed to awe and wonder, and finally to the cantankerous anger so habitual with him.

"What in thunder are you doing?" he wanted to know.

Certainly he had a right to ask the question at least. His nephew presented a strange spectacle indeed, naked except for the white gloves and the old, obviously huge sneakers, and with an axe in his hand.

But Uncle David didn't wait for an answer. "I knew you were crazy all the time," he stormed. "What do you think you're doing in that get-up? Don't you wear clothes any more?"

He didn't seem to be aware at all of the lethal intentions of his visitor. Perhaps he considered the axe to be only a part of the costume, or the lack of costume. And he certainly seemed to have misread the gleam in his nephew's eyes.

"Now you get home," Uncle David railed on, "before I call Stella or the police." He was thinking of calling the police, of course, on a matter of indecent exposure, not of murder.

Miles didn't pause to argue or explain. He advanced three steps, which was the distance separating them. Uncle David still didn't seem to understand, because he still wasn't afraid. Which made everything much simpler. Miles lifted the axe, aimed it at Uncle David's head, and swung. The tar-

get remained immobile, and that even allowed Miles to close his eyes at the last moment. He only heard the impact therefore, without seeing it.

But the sound, like the sounds one can hear in a butcher shop, was enough for Miles' imagination. His mind instantly conjured pictures worse than any reality. A river of blood seemed to gush at him, suffocating, drowning him. The floor under his feet began to gyrate crazily. The thought of fainting here, in Uncle David's gore, spurred his hand working at the top of the smelling salts bottle. And then, just in time, the strong ammonia scent rushed into his nostrils.

His head was light and empty, his stomach churning, but he was still conscious. He kept his eyes closed a bit longer, and took further sniffs from the bottle, till the odor was painful inside his nostrils. And he listened for further sounds. There were none.

Only then, after perhaps a full minute of silence, did he dare to look. He had to look. There was still work to be done.

Uncle David was in a crumpled heap on the floor. His head was unrecognizable. There was blood on everything, the corpse, the furniture, the axe, Miles himself. *Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?* Miles had to seek the comfort of the ammonia again.

But he went to work doggedly.

He could afford only one hand for the axe. The other kept the smelling salts under his nose. He knelt on the wet floor. Actually, he found, he could wield the axe without looking at what he was doing. It didn't matter where he cut. I forgot one thing, he thought, I should have brought cotton to stop my ears.

He didn't count how many times he lifted the axe and let it fall again. Perhaps he couldn't. Perhaps his brain wasn't capable of arithmetic at the moment. He continued on instinct, letting old hatreds be his dynamo. Lift the axe . . . let it fall . . . crunch like a cleaver . . . stuck fast . . . wrench it out again . . . lift . . . fall . . . I can't get sick . . . I ate too much for dinner though . . . lift . . . fall . . . but if I hadn't eaten Stella would have been suspicious . . . lift . . . fall . . . this is enough . . . he was dead a long time ago . . . lift . . . fall . . . but the maniac whom I'm impersonating would go on and on . . . lift . . . fall . . .

His arm tired finally and he had to stop. He staggered to his feet, lost his balance once on the slippery floor, made it on the second try. He left the axe where it lay. He still had the bottle. It had stayed clamped to his nose. But the cap had rolled away. He searched for it wildly, found it under the table. He saw that he had left red marks on whatever he touched.

I've got everything I came with,

he told himself. But he double-checked. The axe was Uncle David's, leave it. The bottle. Both gloves, red and wet. Both shoes, the same. All right. He lurched out the way he had come.

The fresh night air was the most wonderful thing he had ever smelled. It kept him alive and rational. He stumbled half-blindly down toward the dock. I'm getting blood on the grass, and every bush and tree branch, he thought. But that's all right. Leave bloody footprints too, footprints bigger than my own.

When he reached the water, he had sense enough not to touch the boat. No blood on Robert's boat, he remembered. But he walked straight into the water himself. It was colder than the air. It shocked him. A needed shock. His brain cleared a little more.

And it was fortunate that he could think a bit. Because it was important that he be thorough now. No blood on Robert's boat and no blood on himself. This was another reason why the lake had to be part of his scheme. The lake would wash him clean.

He ducked his head beneath the surface and swam out a few strokes. He could almost feel the filthy red stuff flowing off his body. He came up, gasping for air, and swam some more. Then he circled back to the boat. There, treading water, he scrubbed at the bottle till he knew it was clean. Then he

tossed it into the metal box. Secondly the gloves. He kneaded them like a washerwoman, wrung them out, kneaded and wrung them again. They went into the box too. Finally the shoes, much rinsing, and into the box.

He gave himself another last inspection. He went underwater again, and brushed his hair. He felt all over his face and body, could detect no foreign substance anywhere. Then, with a tremendous, killing effort, he hoisted himself into the boat.

He sat there, naked and shivering, for several minutes before he could even lift the oars. But eventually, because he had to, even without the strength, he untied the boat and began to row.

He went to a place where he knew the water was deepest. He locked the box then with its contents inside, and gave both the box and its key to the friendly lake. It made him feel good, hearing that box sink with tiny gurglings. He started home.

He had to stop to rest often and let the boat drift. He had lost all notion of time. His muscles ached, but he wasn't nauseated any more. He didn't need smelling salts. All he needed was rest. Tomorrow morning he would feel very good. The thought of rest kept him rowing.

When he got to Robert's dock, he tied up the boat. His body was dry now, so he could put on the

swimming trunks. He climbed up on the dock and walked carefully to the house. A look through the window showed him Robert and Stella playing gin rummy together. They wouldn't have been doing that if he had been missed.

Climbing the low roof of the garage was possible with a small running leap, but it required the last ounce of the strength in his arms to lift himself up from a fingerhold. He crawled to his window, and through it into his own room.

There he pulled the blinds and turned on the lights softly. Then he inspected every inch of his own body and found no telltale signs of blood. He congratulated himself. Everything had gone precisely, exactly, according to plan.

He turned out the lights and slept soundly.

Scotty Harris was pretty new in the job of sheriff's first deputy, having just come to Minochee less than a year ago after being a big-city detective most of his life. So he didn't know too much of the background of Miles Ramey's special weakness. But there were plenty of people to tell him about it.

"Miles certainly could never have killed his Uncle David," Aunt Marian for one said. "He's too chicken-hearted. Can't stand the sight of blood."

"I wasn't suggesting that he

committed the murder," Harris said defensively.

"Then why are you asking him where he was at that certain time?"

Harris was professionally polite and patient. "It's my job, ma'm, to ask questions, especially to those people who might benefit by David Ramey's death. And anyway, it doesn't look as if Miles Ramey has anything to worry about anyway. His whereabouts last night seem to be pretty well established. He was home all evening."

"Certainly he was home."

"Yes, ma'm."

"But even if he wasn't, he couldn't have done it. Why, I saw all the blood in that kitchen. Miles would have fainted and never come to if he'd ever seen that much blood. Why, I remember when Miles was a little boy and I'd be killing a chicken . . ."

"Ma'm," the deputy interrupted, "I think you've made your point."

"A maniac must have killed old Dave."

"Very likely."

Harris turned his back on Aunt Marian and looked around at the rest of them. They were all here in David Ramey's parlor, all of David's local relatives and a couple of his very few friends. Stella and Robert, Miles himself, Aunt Marian, and Cousin Edward. Then there were Sam Ballas and Thad Denton.

"Well," Harris said, addressing all of them at once, "it looks like

we'll have to accept the maniac theory for the moment at least."

Miles sat rather alone in a corner. He hadn't been in the least afraid, but he found additional comfort in the deputy's verdict. Harris was just coming to a conclusion about something everybody else had known all along. If Miles Ramey was to murder anybody, an axe would be the last thing in the world he'd choose to do it with. Harris was obviously pretty smart, but not even Harris could get around a known fact.

"Can we go then, Mr. Harris?" Sam Ballas asked.

"I guess so," Harris said, sounding like a defeated man.

Everybody started to get up to leave when Harris cleared his throat and stopped them. "Just one more thing," he said.

Everybody waited while he went out into the kitchen. When he came back he was carrying the murder axe. But it didn't look like it had when Miles had last seen it. It had been pretty well cleaned up and was shining again.

"This is what killed David Ramey," Harris said matter-of-factly. "We've already examined it for prints, of course. Nothing there. But I'd like to be sure of just one thing. Can anybody say for sure whether this axe belonged to David Ramey?"

Sam Ballas and Thad Denton gave positive identification.

Harris looked even more glum.

"That's too bad," he said. "If the murderer had brought it with him, it might have been a clue."

They waited, but he didn't dismiss them. He ran his fingers meditatively along the business edge of the axe. "Still plenty sharp," he commented softly. Then his hand seemed to jump, as if something had bitten him.

Harris moved swiftly then, too swiftly for Miles to predict his intentions. Then there it was, Harris' right hand in front of Miles' face, and a finger cut by the axe. The sight of blood.

"That shows you how sharp it is," Harris said.

Miles waited confidently for the usual reaction, a sickness in his stomach, a whirling emptiness in his head. But nothing happened, absolutely nothing. He stared at the cut finger, at the red liquid oozing gently from the slice in the flesh, stared hard. He wanted to become ill . . . and he couldn't.

And he found himself remembering that conversation with Uncle David—was it irrelevantly? Uncle David had been so sure of how to cure his nephew . . . a lot of blood . . . like a war . . . or a nice juicy highway accident . . . "There'd been another possibility. A nice juicy murder.

The detective was looking at him, calmly, but with new interest. "Mr. Ramey," he said, "they tell me you get sick at the sight of blood."

# A FIRE AT NIGHT

BY  
LAWRENCE BLOCK



*It was a nice fire, the best he'd ever set. And to make things better, there was a woman trapped in the burning house...*

HE GAZED silently into the flame. The old tenement was burning, and the smoke was rising upward to merge against the blackness of the sky. There were neither stars nor moon in the sky, and the street lights in the neighborhood

were dim and spaced far apart. Nothing detracted from the brilliance of the fire. It stood out against the night like a diamond in a pot of bubbling tar. It was a beautiful fire.

He looked around and smiled.

The crowd was growing larger, as everyone in the area thronged together to watch the building burn. They like it, he thought. Everyone likes a fire. They receive pleasure from staring into the flames, watching them dance on the tenement roof. But their pleasure could never match his, for it was his fire. It was the most beautiful fire he had ever set.

His mind filled with the memory of it. It had been planned to perfection. When the sun dropped behind the tall buildings and the sky grew dark, he had placed the can of kerosene in his car with the rags—plain, non-descript rags that could never be traced to him. And then he had driven to the old tenement. The lock on the cellar door was no problem, and there was no one around to get in the way. The rags were placed, the kerosene was spread, the match was struck, and he was on his way. In seconds the flames were licking at the ancient walls and racing up the staircases.

The fire had come a long way now. It looked as though the building had a good chance of caving in before the blaze was extinguished. He hoped vaguely that the building would fall. He wanted his fire to win.

He glanced around again, and was amazed at the size of the crowd. All of them pressed close, watching his fire. He wanted to call to them. He wanted to scream out that it was his fire, that he and

he alone had created it. With effort he held himself back. If he cried out it would be the end of it. They would take him away and he would never set another fire.

Two of the firemen scurried to the tenement with a ladder. He squinted at them, and recognized them—Joe Dakin and Roger Haig. He wanted to call hello to them, but they were too far away to hear him. He didn't know them well, but he felt as though he did. He saw them quite often.

He watched Joe and Roger set the ladder against the side of the building. Perhaps there was someone trapped inside. He remembered the other time when a small boy had failed to leave the building in time. He could still hear the screams—loud at first, then softer until they died out to silence. But this time he thought the building had been empty.

The fire was beautiful! It was warm and soft as a woman. It sang with life and roared with joy. It seemed almost a person, with a mind and a will of its own.

Joe Dakin started up the ladder. Then there must be someone in the building. Someone had not left in time and was trapped with the fire. That was a shame. If only there were a way for him to warn them! Perhaps next time he could give them a telephone call as soon as the blaze was set.

Of course, there was even a beauty in trapping someone in the

building. A human sacrifice to the fire, an offering to the goddess of Beauty. The pain, the loss of life were unfortunate, but the beauty was compensation. He wondered who might be caught inside.

Joe Dakin was almost to the top of the ladder. He stopped at a window on the fifth floor and looked inside. Then he climbed through.

Joe is brave, he thought. I hope he isn't hurt. I hope he saves the person in the building.

He turned around. There was a little man next to him, a little man in shabby clothes with a sad expression on his face. He reached over and tapped the man on the shoulder.

"Hey!" he said. "You know who's in the building?"

The little man nodded wordlessly.

"Who is it?"

"Mrs. Pelton," said the little man. "Morris Pelton's mother."

He had never heard of Morris Pelton. "Well, Joe'll get her out. Joe's a good fireman."

The little man shook his head. "Can't get her out," he said. "Can't nobody get her out."

He felt irritated. Who was this little jerk to tell him? "What do you mean?" he said. "I tell you Joe's a helluva fireman. He'll take care of it."

The little man flashed him a superior look. "She's fat," he said. "She's a real big woman. She must weigh two hundred pounds easy.

This Joe's just a little guy. How's he gonna get her out? Huh?" The little man tossed his head triumphantly and turned away without an answer.

Another sacrifice, he thought. Joe would be disappointed. He'd want to rescue the woman, but she would die in the fire.

He looked at the window. Joe should come out soon. He couldn't save Mrs. Pelton, and in a few seconds he would be coming down the ladder. And then the fire would burn and burn and burn, until the walls of the building crumbled and caved in, and the fire won the battle. The smoke would curl in ribbons from the ashes. It would be wonderful to watch.

He looked up at the window suddenly. Something was wrong. Joe was there at last, but he had the woman with him. Was he out of his mind?

The little man had not exaggerated. The woman was big, much larger than Joe. He could barely see Joe behind her, holding her in his arms. Joe couldn't sling her into a fireman's carry; she would have broken his back.

He shuddered. Joe was going to try to carry her down the ladder, to cheat the fire of its victim. He held her as far from his body as he could and reached out a foot gingerly. His foot found the first rung and rested on it.

He took his other foot from the

windowsill and reached out for the next rung. He held tightly to the woman, who was screaming now. Her body shook with each scream, and rolls of fat bounced up and down.

The damned fool, he thought. How could he expect to haul a fat slob like that down five flights on a ladder? He was a good fireman, but he didn't have to act like a superman. And the fat bitch didn't even know what was going on. She just kept screaming her head off. Joe was risking his neck for her, and she didn't even appreciate it at all.

He looked at Joe's face as the fireman took another halting step. Joe didn't look good. He had been inside the building too long. The smoke was bothering him.

Joe took another step and tottered on the ladder. Drop her, he thought. You goddamned fool, let go of her!

And then he did. The woman slipped suddenly from Joe's grip, and plummeted downward to the sidewalk. Her scream rose higher

and higher as she fell, and then stopped completely. She struck the pavement like a bug smacking against the windshield of a car.

His whole being filled with relief. Thank God, he thought. It was too bad for the woman, but now Joe would reach the ground safely. But he noticed that Joe seemed to be in trouble. He was still swaying back and forth. He was coughing, too.

And then, all at once, Joe fell. He left the ladder and began to drop to the earth. His body hovered in the air and floated down like a feather. Then he hit the ground and melted into the pavement.

At first he could not believe it. Then he glared at the fire. Damn you, he thought. You weren't satisfied with the old woman. You had to take a fireman too.

It wasn't right.

The fire was evil. This time it had gone too far. Now it would have to suffer for it.

And he raised his hose and trained it on the burning hulk of the tenement, punishing the fire.



*She was such an innocent little girl. And yet such strange things happened when she was around . . .*

BY  
D. E. FORBES

## STAGE FRIGHT

CAROLINE PINCHER could have brushed her daughter's hair for hours. The pleasure she felt from stroking the silky locks was a personal thing, something like a feeling she had known as a child when she had carried a fine flannel blanket held to her face. But now Caroline was a woman and the feeling had gone . . . except when she brushed Margot's hair.

She wound a golden curl around a fleshy finger. It was truly golden,



she thought, not blonde or yellow, but real shimmering gold. She remembered before Margot was born, how she had prayed for a beautiful little girl with blue eyes and golden curls. All the time she had prayed and when Margot was born she knew her prayers had been answered.

Margot moved her head quickly and made a little sound when the brush caught.

"I'm sorry, darling. Mother wasn't paying attention. Mother was thinking about something else."

The young voice, clear as a church bell from a tower, answered.

"Isn't it about time to go, Mother?"

Caroline looked at her small watch, purchased last year from Margot's earnings. "You're right as usual, Kitten. We must fly." She got up from her chair, struggling a little to raise her heavy body. "Now, you remember everything I've told you?"

Her daughter, slim and petite as a fairy, rose. She looked like a young princess in her rose velvet frock and her small ermine hat. Her slender feet wore black patent slippers and little white socks. Every gesture, thought Caroline, full of grace.

They put on their coats. Caroline's was a Persian lamb which she knew tended to make her look heavier, but, my dear, so elegant. Margot's matched her hat. Some

of the other mothers, she knew, thought Margot was overdressed. But then they were just jealous. And besides, their daughters (no matter how talented) would never be a star.

But Margot would. Oh, yes. Caroline had known it the moment they placed the newborn baby in her arms. She had looked up at the little man she had married and breathed the words.

"Herb, she's so beautiful. She's destined, Herb. That's what she is. Destined."

Only of course then she hadn't known what Margot was destined for. All through Margot's babyhood Caroline had been watching for the signs. When she had mimicked the words of a popular song at the age of three, Caroline had thought, A singer. That's what she'll be. Metropolitan or musical comedy. Which shall we plan for?

At four she had sent Margot to a progressive school where one of the subjects taught was modern dance. Miss Hildgard was most entranced with Margot's talents. The ballet, Caroline had wondered, is it to be the ballet? And she had hugged the little girl to her, whispering, "Oh, you marvelous, talented angel. There is no one like you in the whole world."

But at five the real talent had emerged, plain and positive, for all to see. A kindergarten drama, where the little thespians had made up their own lines, emoted as they

pleased. The star, the shining glorious star, was Margot. And didn't one of the fathers present turn out to be a theatrical agent? And didn't he come to Caroline with the suggestion that her daughter might do a small part in a Broadway production seeking a pretty little girl? Destined? Destined, indeed.

But there had been obstacles. Herb, for instance.

"Now, Caroline," he had moved his little head in that peculiar bird-like way that he had, "I just think that you should consider this thing—very carefully. Margie," Caroline shuddered whenever he called her darling by that common name, "is only five years old. You're all set to put her on the stage, to toss her into competition with children years older—yes, and adults, too—who must earn their living in the theatre. It seems to me that that's an awful tough proposition for a five-year old child."

Caroline had been studying the script containing the two lines that Margot would speak. They consisted of, "Good morning, Mama," and "I am a good girl, Mama." Caroline was busy planning ways and means for her daughter to be noticed—really noticed.

"Nonsense, Herb. What you say might be true for an ordinary child. But you know yourself, Margot is no ordinary child."

The angel in person had come in then, perched herself on her

father's bony knee, requested money for an ice-cream cone.

"And that's another thing," Caroline had been anxious to drive the point home, "we could use the money. Sixty-five dollars a week, Herb, just for Margot to go to the theatre every night and say two lines and come home. Sixty-five dollars a week. Why, that's almost as much as you make."

Herb had produced a dime, patted his daughter's head. "Let's not discuss it—in front of the child."

Caroline had bristled. "Not discuss it in front of the child! It's her future, isn't it? She's the one most involved, isn't she? Do you think she wants to be a part of—" she groped for words, "the common herd? We were awarded a precious gift when Margot was born. Made custodians of it. And you want to throw it all away when she gets her big chance."

And then Margot, the little minx, had looked up into her father's face with all her charm and said, "Daddykins, I'd like to. I really would. Please, daddy. Just this once, daddy. Please."

And that had been that—for the moment. Margot had been noticed. Perhaps it was the fact that the other children were such clods and Margot such a dainty little miss. Perhaps it was the cute way Caroline taught her to say "Mama", not quite the European way, not quite the American way either. The director had asked her to say

it like the rest, but Margot, as sweet and docile as an angel, would forget and slip right back into her original pronunciation. And after she got a hand the first night, the director hadn't corrected her again.

When she got the part in "Avenging Angel", a really big part with a whole scene to herself. Caroline had switched her to the Professional Children's School. And Herb had interfered again.

"Didn't I hear Margot crying in her room?"

Caroline had been preparing dinner and wondering if Margot's raise in salary would warrant her hiring a part-time maid.

"Oh—that's nothing. Temperament. She had a quarrel with one of her teachers in school. She's just letting off steam."

"What do you mean, she had a quarrel with the teacher? What happened?" Herb had looked so small, so bewildered, Caroline had felt almost like laughing.

"Oh, don't worry. I gave her what for, I can tell you. She lit into Margot about some little fib she claimed Margot had told. I told her, I did. I told her my daughter was no liar and if Margot said Sarah Lane was the one who spilled the bottle of ink, then Sarah Lane was the one who did it. By the time I was through, the woman backed down."

Herb ran a hand over his balding head.

"But why did the teacher say it

was a fib? Surely she must have had some basis for making such an accusation."

Caroline had peeled a potatoe with a vengeance. "That's just it. She had no reason, except that she claimed the other child had been, as she put it, 'more reliable'. More reliable. More reliable, indeed." She threw the potatoe into the pot.

"I knew this would happen." Her husband sat wearily at the kitchen table. "It's just what I was afraid of."

Caroline remembered, even now, her surprise. "You knew what would happen?" Her tones had been as sharp as the paring knife she held. "Just what, such a terrible what, has happened?"

"It's just—," Herb's little mouth stretched, searching for words, "she's too young for such an atmosphere, such competition. They're at each other tooth and nail, these babies, on stage and even off. There was that incident when Margot and that other little girl were found fighting back stage, physically fighting, and had to be pulled apart. Each claimed the other had slapped her. A fine thing, a little lady her age involved in a brawl. I tell you, Caroline, my mind's made up. We're going to stop this thing before it goes too far."

Caroline had stood very still, kept her voice controlled. "You're mistaken, Herb. We're going to stop nothing. She's just beginning to get someplace. And you're not

going to throw a monkey wrench into the works."

Herb had drawn himself up to his full five-foot-six. "I'm sorry, Caroline. I know how much pleasure you gain from it. But I am Margot's father—and I say she is going to quit."

And then she had called a halt to it. She hadn't wanted to, but she'd had to. "And do you know why you're her father—do you? Because you would marry me. You were available and I accepted you. Not because I wanted you, heaven knows I didn't, but because I wanted a child. That's all. And that's the truth. Margot was the answer to my prayer," she had stood over him then, the paring knife still in her hand, "and before I'd allow you to ruin her life, I'd . . . I'd," she drew in her breath and hissed, "I'd kill you."

She looked up then to see Margot in the doorway and after searching her daughter's face to read her reaction, Caroline decided she was glad that she had heard.

That had been the last obstacle. From then on the sailing had been more or less smooth. In the three years that had passed Margot had, to be sure, lost a few auditions, but she had appeared in two long-run productions and gotten excellent notices.

And now—today—she was to audition for the juvenile plum of the year. The part of "Kathy" in "The Changeling".

Caroline had explained the part. Slowly and carefully. "This little girl is, on the surface, a lovely little angel. But inside she is capable of anything, anything to get what she wants. Do you understand?"

Margot had watched her with wide eyes, nodded her shining head.

"So you must remember to contrast the lines. When Kathy is with other people she is sweet, charming, an old-fashioned tintype of a child. When she is alone, she is capable of the worst sort of violence."

Margot had smiled, such a beautiful smile, such perfect teeth, jumped up and kissed her mother. "Oh, Mummy, you're such a help to me. I don't know what I'd do without you." And then they'd hugged each other and Caroline had answered fervently, "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Caroline looked down at her now, the sedate little figure sitting beside her on the straight chair. Of all the children grouped around them, none could compare to Margot. Of that she was sure. She sat back and watched the try-outs with a professional eye.

When it was all over they took a cab home by way of celebration. "Not a one of them could hold a candle to you, darling. You'll be magnificent as Kathy and unless I miss my guess this is the sort of thing the movies will pick up. Just think, Margot, we'll go to Holly-

wood and you'll be a movie star!" She kissed the top of her head. "My own little Shirley Temple. Just imagine!"

It was the next morning when the news came. She twinkled at Margot as she answered the phone. "Yes, this is the residence of Margot Parks." They had thought it wise to change Pincher to Parks. And then to Margot, "It's them. It's they. Oh dear," and she giggled. "Yes. Yes, we're available." They had long ago abandoned the agent. He had turned out to be third rate. "Yes . . . oh, I see." Her words were slower now, the twinkle had gone. "Yes. Of course." She tried to make her tone pleasant again. "Certainly. We're delighted. Monday at ten. Of course. We'll be there. Thank you. Thank you, very much."

"We got the part, Mama? We got the part. Oh, I know we did, Mama. We got the part." And Margot began a wildly graceful series of pirouettes.

Caroline clutched the door jamb. "Stop it, Margot. And stop saying 'Mama' in that ridiculous way. Stop it. Now."

Margot halted on one toe, her blue eyes enormous. "But . . . they want us at rehearsal. So we did get the part. What—"

Caroline sank into a chair. "Vivian Maynard got the part. You're her . . . understudy."

Margot wrinkled her smooth young brow. "Understudy!"

Caroline could only nod.

Margot stamped her tiny foot. "Well, I won't, I tell you. I won't! That's as good as being dead and buried, and I won't do it."

"That's what I thought at first, baby. I almost told them to get somebody else. But then I remembered—if anything ever happened to Vivian, you'd still get your big chance."

Margot's pretty pink mouth drooped in a pout. "You know nothing will happen to Vivian. She's as strong as a horse. And looks like one as well."

Caroline sighed, reached out to gather her in. Margot moved away.

"You must have told me to do it wrong. They didn't like my interpretation and I did just what you told me. You coached me wrong. It's all your fault!"

Caroline's mouth dropped open and she stared at the gold and pink package of fury confronting her.

"Margot," she said and stopped. Her pale eyes filled with tears. "I'm so sorry."

They stared at each other, mother and daughter, and then Margot let out an anguished cry, turned on her patent leather heel and ran from the room. Caroline heard her door slam in agony. Margot stayed there the rest of the day. Caroline suffered.

But by Monday morning the world had turned right-side-up. They went, in harmony, to rehearsal and Margot behaved ex-

actly right with just the right amount of deference for Vivian Maynard. Caroline breathed a sigh of relief and began a series of daily prayers.

"Measles. Or a broken arm. Nothing too serious, please. Just enough to keep her out of the play for awhile. Please. I know Margot's future was plotted in the stars. I know something will happen. Because Margot was born to be a star."

She was very sure, but as first night opening drew near it seemed as though the gods had forsaken them. Vivian bloomed in the part. She played it in a much lower key than Caroline would have preferred, but Al Peters, the director, seemed absurdly pleased. Margot didn't seem to care—at all.

And then—bolt from the blue—it happened. At dress rehearsal. Peters was struggling with a difficult bit between husband and wife that had never come off well. Vivian had gone to her dressing room and Margot was sitting quietly in the wings, watching. Caroline took the opportunity to go to the ladies' room and freshen her face.

She was just coming out when she heard it. A shrill childish scream, starting out full-bodied and thinning as it rose up and up. It ended in a crash, a thump, and dead silence. Then there was movement from all around. People ran from the stage, from the dressing rooms above. And, while Caroline

stood rooted, there were more screams.

She moved forward and suddenly Margot was at her side.

"What is it, Mama? What happened?"

Caroline shook her head and they moved more quickly, came upon the circle of spectators, saw Vivian Maynard's mother, sobbing, being led away.

"Call the ambulance." Al Peters' face was grim.

The circle parted then and Vivian lay on the floor, in an awkward position, still and white. One braid lay stretched out from her head. Like a big, broken doll, dropped and discarded.

Caroline tugged at Peters sleeve. "What—what happened?"

He turned dull eyes on her.

"She fell. God know how. She fell from up there."

Caroline looked up to the winding metal staircase, to the narrow balcony that edged the dressing rooms. "Is she hurt bad?"

Peters shrugged. "I'd say it didn't do her any good."

Caroline was surprised to hear Margot's voice, firm and clear. "She looks dead."

Peters turned slowly, looked down at her. His face was inscrutable. "Get ready," he said. "We'll call a special rehearsal this afternoon. You'll have to go on."

Margot smiled up at him, her most winsome smile. "I'm ready," she said.

Peters' eyes narrowed for a moment. "Incidentally," he said and his voice was low, "Where were you when it happened?"

Caroline felt her heart stop.

"Why—," the blue eyes were wide, "I was in the ladies' room. With Mama. Wasn't I, Mama?"

Caroline felt her head move up and down. Inside a blackness was spreading and the lights grew dim. Then, after a long time, her heart beat again, but not the way a heart should beat at all. Oh, so slowly. Oh, so hard. Somehow it felt as though it were incased in ice.



### *Bitten*

An Indianapolis thief spotted a messenger with a black satchel as he left a business building and approached a nearby bank. He seized the satchel and sped away in his car. The messenger told police the bag contained a number of sets of false teeth that he was taking to a dentist down the street.

### *Switch Trick*

A Shipshewana, Ind., farmer, Sherman Schrock, turned the tables on four youths who had been stealing his gasoline. Schrock filled the gasoline barrel with water. When the boys returned and filled their car, the vehicle stalled a short distance away. Schrock reported the abandoned car to state police, who checked its registration and arrested the youths.

### *Prisoner Dicks*

Two Becker County, Mich., jail prisoners shared a \$5 reward for identifying the thief who had been looting cars parked in a lot beneath their cells. Sheriff David Wennerstrom had offered the sum to any prisoner spotting the culprit.

### *Lesson Learned*

William A. Peak, of Galesburg, Ill., told police that his kayak had been stolen from his back yard. Newspaper accounts quoted Peak as stating that a kayak was "a very tippy canoe." A few days later the kayak was returned to the yard. Attached to it was a note: "You're so right."

### *One Way Trip*

In the Miami, Fla., jail, Michael Rush, 29, let himself down on a rope made of mattress covers from the 22nd floor to the jail's kitchen on the 15th floor. But the kitchen doors were locked for the night.

“PUNK!” THAT’S what she called me. “Punk! You’re nothing but a two-for-a-nickel punk! That’s all you’ll ever be. Punk! Two-bit punk! Pushing dames around, because that’s all you’ll ever have: two bits! Punk! P-u-n-k!”

I let her have it, my hard fist, right in the kisser, and she went

down; she came up with a busted lip and bloody nose.

I hated it when she came up bleeding and cut like that, because in that condition she refused to go to work, and when my broad didn’t work, I often didn’t eat.

Now I wondered what she would say when she saw me with eight thousand smackeroos in my pockets. Ha! Ha! I rushed along over the broken, slippery wet cement pavement. Tall, dirty, gray



BY  
WILFRED  
ALEXANDER

## the chips are down

*His dame had called him a punk, but she wouldn't be calling him that any more. Not after he'd clipped a hard guy for eight grand...*

stone tenement buildings towered over me. I met sleepy-eyed men and women who had left their homes at five o'clock in the morning to go to work. The crisp and wrinkled bills of money, genuine U.S. currency, of various denominations to total more than eight thousand bucks bulged three of my pockets: legal tender, none of it counterfeit or hot.

I plunged down the street at a pace faster than walking, but I did not run. Every half dozen steps or more, I turned my face over my left shoulder to see if Raven's men were following me. Soon as he caught on to the cross, he'd be hot on my tail with his goons. No one tailed me. Several times I stumbled on the broken sidewalk and my legs kicked wildly about under me. Passers-by turned to stare at me; no doubt, they believed I had been out all night on a spree and was now too drunk to go to work.

But I didn't care what they thought. A man with eight thousand dollars in his pocket was above the suspicions of these stupid slum faces, these dumb punk faces. I turned off the street and burst through an apartment house vestibule door. In the vestibule I hesitated. I had to be sure. I stuck my head out the door and looked up and down the street. I detected no one following me and murmured, "Good," to myself.

Turning, I ran up the stairs and beat on the door marked B2 at the

top of the stairs. I hammered on the door with my fist and kicked it with my feet. Where was that dumb broad? I hadn't all day. She usually woke up easier than this.

"Anna!"

An impatient voice sang out to me in a grumbling tone.

"Wait a Goddamn minute, will you?"

When she opened the door, she was wearing a pink pajama top. She never wore the bottoms. Her long bare legs always seemed much longer than they actually were when she wore just the pajama top, with her breasts holding the material out in front. She had gone to bed without putting her hair up and it was falling over her face. Her red toe nails turned up, as if to point at me, and for a minute, as if I really were a punk, I forgot that I was on the run. I imagined what those wide hips of hers would look like draped in the silk I was going to buy her, a dress cut so low at the neck that it showed off her magnificent breasts. A pretty pair of shoes for her tiny feet would make all the guys stare.

"Don't just stand there panting, out of breath, like the cops are after you," she said. "Come in."

I stepped in, kicked the door close, and grabbed her shoulders, squeezing them tightly. I quickly forgot her body, concerned with myself.

"We've got to hurry," I said. "We've got to go away."

She knocked my hands off her shoulders, pushed me back, and picked up a pack of Camels from the dresser.

"I ain't got to go nowhere with you, punk!"

The words cut me deep, and I bled inside. I grabbed her wrist, the wrist of the hand in which she held the cigarette, as she tried to climb back in bed, and fire from the cigarette fell on the sheets, burning a hole in them.

"You're going with me!"

She stood on her knees in the bed. "Going where?"

"Chicago first."

"I'm not going to any Chicago. I'm staying right here in New York. Now either come to bed or get out. I'm tired after slinging drinks in a tavern all night."

I had no time to argue. But she was my girl, and a guy's girl is supposed to do what he says. I slapped her face. That's the only kind of arguments some broads understand. Anna's one of them. Her cigarette went flying across the room. I grabbed her pajama top and ripped it off her back. She didn't try to cover up, but she got mad. Before she could open her mouth, I had jerked her off the bed and sent her sprawling over towards her closet.

"Get some clothes on and let's get out of here!" Her flesh was trembling. "Look!"

I pulled the crumpled bills of money from my pocket, first from

this pocket, then from that pocket, now from another pocket, and threw them in a pile on the bed. She approached the bed slowly, and picked up one of the bills gingerly, as if it contained a deadly contagious poison. "Dick!" she whispered. So much money frightened her. I searched my pockets for more money.

"You still think I'm just a punk, huh?"

I sat on the bed beside her. She put one hand on my shoulder and spoke with her face so close to mine that her breath tickled my face.

"You won all that in one night?"

I began to smooth out the crumpled bills, putting them in a pile on top of the straight ones.

"I'm taking you with me," I said. "I'm not asking you if you want to go. You're my woman, so I'm taking you. Now if you got nothing you want to take, put some rags on your bare tail and come on. Any other skirt'd be glad I even considered taking them, but no, not you. Not Miss Anna!"

She stared at me suspiciously, then at the money. Her voice quivered.

"You cheated Raven with crooked dice!"

"I won!"

"He'll kill you!"

My fist lashed out and caught her in the mouth. A shock went through me as though I had struck myself. Quickly I picked her up

and looked at her face. I didn't want her bruised up, not when I had so much money and we could really live a while. Luckily, I hadn't hurt her. I held her in my arms. Slowly her smooth, soft arms came around my neck, embracing me like a chicken's wings embraced a chicken's body. I felt her cheek against mine. Her face was hot.

Within a few minutes we were hurrying along the wet streets down which I had fled not half an hour ago. Near the subway entrance, a Pontiac, blue over white were its colors, with white walled tires, pulled up besides us. A short, stocky man in need of a shave jumped out in front of us. He kept one hand in his pocket.

"Blackie!" I said.

Anna carried the largest suitcase; I carried the smallest. I felt her other hand squeeze the muscle in my arm.

"Raven wants you," Blackie said.

I knew the driver, too: Slim. He kept the engine running. I measured the distance to the subway entrance. I could probably knock Blackie down and beat it down the stairs before Slim got out of the car. But then where would I go? A goon like this Slim or Blackie had no better sense than to fire in a crowd.

"I've got to take my girl to the train," I said. "I'll be right around."

"We'll take her down."

The goon took my arm and pushed me toward the car. I was

ready to take my chances on belting him one and sprinting it a bit, when Anna spoke.

"Give me my bag, Dick. I'll take the subway alone."

Anna was a stubborn broad you had to hit on the head before she obeyed you, but she wasn't dumb. I carried the suitcase with the money in it. I gave it to her and got in the car. Slim leaned out the window.

"Better bring the girl, too," he said. His eyes were on the two pieces of luggage Anna carried.

"Now wait a minute!" Anna said. "I'll have you arrested—"

"Shut up!" Blackie shoved her into the car and threw the luggage in after her. He crowded into the back with Anna and me and the luggage and slammed the door.

Slim kicked the car into gear with the heel of his right hand, raced the motor, and sped down the street. The tires made a sizzling noise on the wet pavement. Blackie smiled in the mirror at the face of the driver. I held Anna's small hand. Her nail polish had chipped. She trembled. Her hand was cold. Blackie opened the small suitcase and discovered the money.

"Hey, Slim."

"Yeah."

"Ace here is really loaded. Old gentleman trick with his lady traveler by his side."

"Wonder what Raven would say if a grand was missing when we got there?"

"He'd probably beat hell out of Ace here until he coughed it up."

I looked at the side of Slim's face and saw that Slim was smiling. An idea began to ferment. I turned to Blackie.

"What does Raven want with me?"

"Raven wants his money back. Queer bird, that Raven, wanting his money back."

"I won it."

Slim laughed. "I guess that makes Raven a sore loser. He'll be sorry to hear that."

Blackie sat the suitcase on the floor and took a revolver from his coat pocket and began to inspect it.

"I'll split with you," I bargained. "I'd rather split with you than give it all up to a sore loser. Tell him you couldn't find me."

Blackie was preoccupied. Slim did not answer.

"You could tell him you never found me."

They were each thinking over my proposal. Quickly I divided eight thousand dollars three ways. A pretty good haul, I thought. But neither of the goons knew how the other felt; both were willing to cross Raven but who would speak first? I could read their minds. The silence was revealing. When Blackie looked up, I thought, "This is it!"

"Hey, doll;" Blackie said. "What's your name?"

"Just call me Anna."

The goon reached over and felt

her bare knee. She pinched his wrist and bent his thumb back.

"Ouch!"

Slim laughed. "You let him do that to your girl, Ace?" He winked. "How did a punk like you get a broad stacked like that?"

I leaned forward, over the front seat. What could I do? I couldn't face Raven, get roughed up, and lose all the money. I'd lose the girl, too, because I did nothing when the men talked to her this way or put their hands on her. Now where did that leave me, up the creek without a pot to pour. She wouldn't stand me a meal or throw out a drink to me on the cuff when I dropped into the joint where she worked. Raven would spread the word that I was poison; my name would be mud all over the city, if I survived with my life.

"What's Raven going to give you when you bring me in?" I was desperate.

Blackie leaned in front of Anna, pointing the Revolver at my stomach. I pushed back into the seat as far as I could.

"Listen, thief! One more word out of you, and I'll let you have it. If we wanted to cross Raven, all we'd have to do is tell him you put up a fight and got hit too hard, croaked, and we couldn't find the money. We don't have to split nothing with you! We owe you nothing! Now shut up!"

He pulled the trigger of the revolver. I nearly fainted when I

heard the hammer snap home. The snap was like an explosion to me. Pleased by the sound, Blackie put the revolver in his pocket and offered me this advice.

"Never try to corrupt an honest guy, chum."

I had nothing more to say to these studs.

Slim turned into the parking lot of the Congo Club and stopped the car outside of Raven's garage. Blackie picked up the small suitcase and got out. He held the door for Anna and me. The rock graveled earth made a crunching sound under our feet as we moved toward a rear entrance of the club. Anna trusted no one, with her woman's mind; she carried the suitcase which contained her clothes. We went through the kitchen, into the club with the chairs on the table, and toward their boss's office. Raven's door was cracked. A light shone through the opening.

"We found them, boss." Blackie threw the suitcase on Raven's desk. "Just before they flew the coop."

Raven was growing to be an old man. Already his hair had turned grey and his shoulders drooped. He stood behind the desk, a short man of five feet-five inches tall. He wore a gray suit. The collar of his white shirt was open, without a tie. He was sweating, though the office was not warm. Without replying to Blackie, he opened the suitcase and took the money out, placing it in piles on the desk.

"What's the meaning of this?" I asked. "Are you a sore loser?"

"Under the circumstances, I'm a vengeful loser," Raven said.

From his desk he took a silver cup. In it were six dice, three pair. He rolled the half dozen squares on the desk. I recognized the loaded pair and stared at them.

"Pick up one pair," Raven said softly.

My breath was short and difficult. I leaned across the table, my face close to his.

"Why do you think I cheated?"

"Nobody's accusing you."

"You act like it."

Raven pointed at the Dice. "Select a pair."

Gingerly I picked up two of the dice. Anna stared at my face; instead of being afraid now, she seemed confident but bored, impatient.

"Now roll them," said Raven.

I dropped the dice into the cup, shook them, and emptied the cup on the table.

"Pretty good point."

He picked up the two dice, leaning forward against the table, and said: "Now once again. Two more."

"What're we playing for?" I tried to sound poised.

"The jackpot." He pointed at the money.

"That's my money. What do I get if I win?"

"Your life," he said. "I'm giving you the odds."

Taking a chance, waiting for a

clue how to play my hand, I picked up two more dice. "I never cheated you, Raven." I shook the dice in the cup and rolled them on the desk.

"Hummmm!" Raven sucked his teeth. "Not so good this time." He picked up the second pair of dice. "You get one more chance."

I stared at the loaded dice. The dice stared back at me, black eyes glaring out of white faces, many eyes on many faces that seemed to stare in every direction of the room. But I could not touch them. Every spot on the dice was an eye accusing me of cheating, ready to betray me. I could not touch the dice. I raised my hands, but the dice frightened me. Raven stared across the desk into my eyes. He leaned toward me slightly.

"Roll the last pair!" he shouted. His face was drenched with sweat.

I backed away from the desk. Raven picked up the crooked dice and ran around the desk.

"Why did you save these? Because you know about them? Because they belong to you and you didn't get a chance to take them with you?"

He shook the dice in my face. They knocked against one another, rattling in my ears, like the devil knocking at the door of a doomed man's heart.

"You damn crook!"

He raised his knee into me and when I bent over, he uppercutted me in the chest. In pain I sank to

the floor. Agony made me double my knees up against my chest. I clenched my teeth together to keep from crying out in pain. Every beat of my heart seemed to send a pain through my stomach. Raven kicked me. I grabbed my side, groaning on the floor. My one thought was that if I did not fight back, he might let me go lightly. If I fought back, I hadn't a chance against his goons. I lay on the floor waiting for him to tell me to get up.

"Get up!" he said. "Stand up like a man!"

He slammed the top down on the suitcase and threw it across the room. Anna ran to pick it up. Her pocketbook dangled from her shoulder by a long strap. I pulled myself to my feet. Blackie and Slim stood watching me.

"You mean I can go now?" I asked.

"Go? You're going all right," Raven said. "When you go, you'll be so marked up, the whole world'll know not to trust you." He turned to Anna. "Don't you think guys like him ought to be marked, so people will know how to be more careful?"

"What about the broad?" Blackie asked.

"She can keep me company while you take smarty pants here down to the cellar and put some identification marks on his face."

They seized me by my arms. Anna ran up to Raven and grabbed

his arms, pleading into his face.

"What are going to do to him?" she cried. "Don't hurt him. He didn't mean to cheat you or anybody. He did it for me. He was only trying to be a big guy for me. Please! Please, Mister! Let him go! I made him do it by nagging him and driving him. I'll take him away, anywhere, only let him go. I—I'll do anything you say!"

The tears running down her face, the whimper in her voice, gave me strength; I could take anything they gave me. They couldn't hurt me.

"Don't beg for me, Anna!"

That hurt me more than anything, having her beg like that, and offer to do anything. How many guys had a girl like that?

I was sorry for all the times I'd beat her.

"Go ahead, you idiots!" screamed Raven, as if he had not heard her cry. "What are you waiting for?"

They turned me around and pushed me toward the door. There was a noise behind us, a cry from Raven, and a cry from Anna. The goons turned me loose; we all whirled around. Raven lay on the floor, and Anna was pulling at the drawers of his desk. The goons each went for their rods, but I was behind them. I grabbed them and knocked their heads together, before they got the rods out of their pockets. By that time, Raven was on his feet, and Anna had found a revolver in his desk, and was

pointing it, waving it wildly about the room.

"Over here! Over here with your boss!" She ordered them around like a cop might do. Then to me: "Get their guns."

I lifted their rods.

"Now hunt around to see if you can't find something so we can tie them up to keep them for a while."

I searched around the office but could find nothing.

"Try the cellar," she said.

Raven and his boys stood against the wall with their hands hanging loosely at their sides.

"You don't get away with this," he said. "This is robbery."

"Move," Anna said, "and I'll shoot you."

Even though she'd never picked up a bottle or drew a knife or pulled a gun on me when we fought, I knew she'd shoot.

Somehow, though, I didn't believe I'd ever have the nerve to bust her one in the mouth again.

On the train, she turned to me; the soft pressure of her thigh increased against my leg.

"Darling," she said, "you were going to let them beat you and take the money, weren't you?"

"What else could I do?"

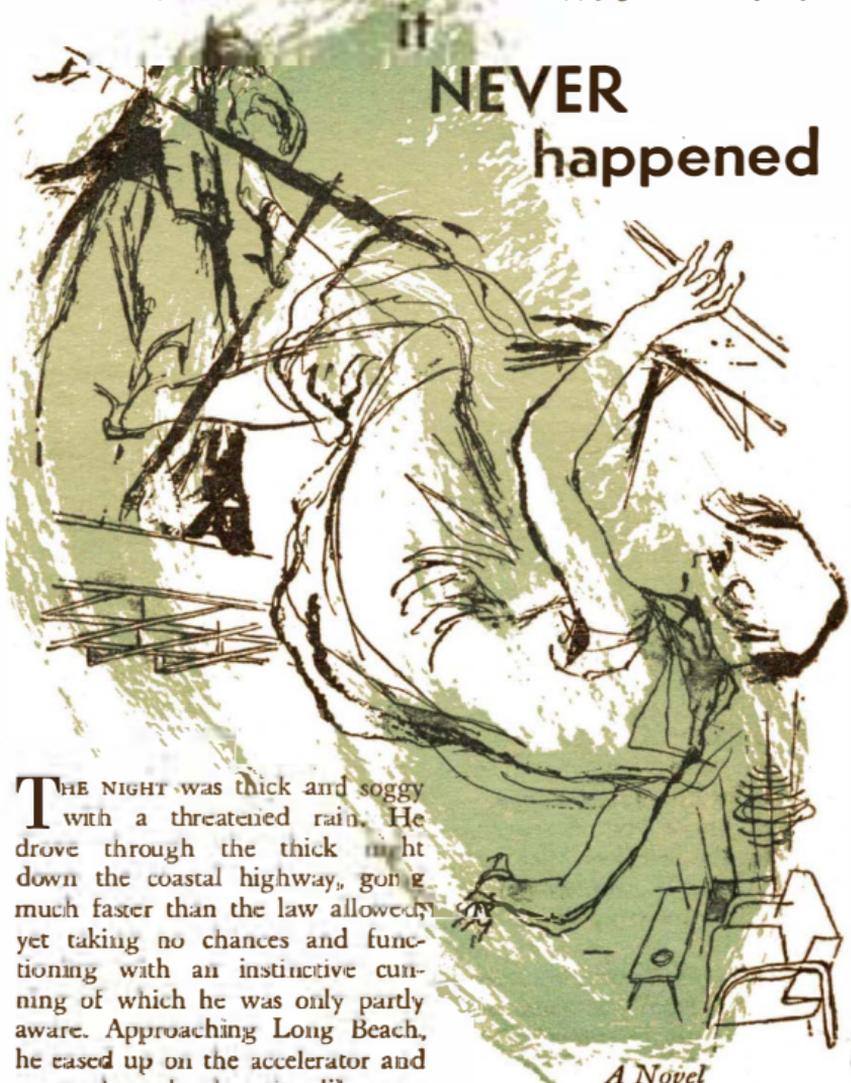
"But it was your money. You won it. You did win it, didn't you?"

"Of course." We both smiled.

"I hate a sore loser," she said. "I hate a sore loser worse than I hate a two-bit, two-for-a-nickle punk."

*His name was Welles, but it wasn't. He came from Louisiana, but he didn't. He looked like a bum—but he had a hundred and fifty grand in his pocket...*

it  
**NEVER**  
happened



**T**HE NIGHT was thick and soggy with a threatened rain. He drove through the thick night down the coastal highway, going much faster than the law allowed, yet taking no chances and functioning with an instinctive cunning of which he was only partly aware. Approaching Long Beach, he eased up on the accelerator and went through the city like any other late driver going home. Only when the car had again nosed out

*A Novel*

**BY**  
**WILLIAM O'FARRELL**

on the open highway and was headed south toward San Diego did his foot sharply feed gas into the carburetor again.

No red light blinked behind him. No siren shrieked him to a stop. A little after midnight, thirty-five miles north of San Diego, he saw a house. It was a house that he had never seen before but he knew instinctively that it was empty. There were no lights in the windows. He turned the car into the drive.

A double garage was at the driveway's end, and that was empty too. He forced it open with a tire iron, ran the car inside and shut the door. Then he climbed behind the wheel, let his head fall back and closed his eyes. For a while he rested.

For a little while.

But pictures formed in his mind, nebulous figures like gray, accusing ghosts. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of them. They pressed in closer. He sat up straight, opened the glove compartment, took out a pint of Scotch. He drank, the whiskey trickling over his chin. It warmed him, pushed the ghosts away. Presently he slept.

His head was throbbing when he awoke and there was nausea in his stomach and his mind. The ghosts were back again, and in the instant between sleep and waking he saw a woman's face. Her reproachful eyes looked directly in-

to his. He groaned, fell over on the seat and vomited. As suddenly as she had come the woman disappeared.

There were a couple of drinks left in the pint. He took a white pill from a bottle in his pocket and washed it down with whiskey. When his headache grew a little less intense he began acting in an orderly, decisive manner as though according to a pre-arranged plan. From the glove compartment he took a second pint and put it in his pocket. He felt his wallet but did not open it. He knew how much money it contained. He knew how much was pinned to the inside of his shirt. He opened the door at his side and climbed out of the car.

He started to leave the garage but turned back, unstrapped the car's registration from the driving shaft. He unscrewed the license plate and took it with him when he went outside.

Inland, the sky was growing light. In another hour it would be dawn. He hurried to the road, walked quickly toward a cluster of lights a quarter of a mile away. The license plate he threw into a ditch.

The lights came from an all-night eatery. Three trucks were parked in front, two of them headed north. The third was headed south. He approached the cafe's plate-glass window, cautiously looked inside. Three truck drivers drink-

ing coffee at a counter. A languid fry cook with a toothpick in his mouth. He turned away, feeling a faint distaste.

The body of the southbound truck had high sideboards and a canvas top. He parted the canvas at the rear and crawled inside. The truck was not carrying a load. When his eyes had adjusted to the denser darkness, he made out an empty fruit crate. He sat on it, put his arms around his knees and held them tight. Gradually his trembling lessened. He opened the second pint and took a drink.

A screen door slammed and footsteps crunched toward him. He sat very still as the driver climbed into the cab. The motor started and the truck gave a sudden lurch ahead. Although he had been expecting that, it startled him. Then, as they reached the smooth bed of the highway, he settled back into a state of dull acceptance. He focused his eyes on the canvas sidewalls, watched them slowly grow light.

A limp, dark object dangled within his range of vision. Narrowing his eyes, he identified it as a suit of coveralls. Minutes passed before he removed it from its suspending hook. More time went by while he did nothing but sit quietly, holding it in his hands. Then he pulled the coveralls over his own clothes. He rubbed his hands on the floor and smeared his face with dirt. After that he sat and waited while the miles un-

wound and the dawn turned into morning.

The truck bumped over tracks. He parted the canvas and looked out. San Diego. Another quarter of an hour, at the first stop light . . . no, the second stop.

## 2.

They stopped, went on for ten more minutes, stopped again. A quick look out the rear showed a deserted street. He dropped from the truck as it was getting under way again. He went quickly to the first corner, rounded it, and rounded two more before he slowed down.

The first used car lot that he found was closed. He entered a lunch room across the street and sat down in a booth.

"Coffee, black," he told the waitress.

"Juice, eggs, Danish pastry?"

"Just coffee. Wait," he said. "I'll have one doughnut, please."

The doughnut was stale, but the hot coffee gave him strength. He drank two cups. Meanwhile he watched the car lot and went through the pockets of both the coveralls and his own clothes.

His own pockets contained a wallet packed with bills of large denominations, plus a number of more readily negotiable smaller bills. There were also cigarettes, matches, keys, a driving license and the registration of the car he had

left behind. That, with his whiskey and the bottle of pills, was the lot. In the coveralls he found a driving license and more cigarettes. The license was in the name of Peter Jarvis Welles—home address, Oxnard. He put it in the breast pocket of his coat. He also saved the two bottles, his money and the cigarettes. The other things he set before him in a little pile.

There was movement in the lot across the street. He picked up the things on the table and went out. He paused at the curb to shred his own papers into bits and drop them with his keys into a trash disposal can. He crossed to the used car lot and stopped before a last year's Cadillac.

"Yes, sir?" It was a stocky, balding salesman. "Nice job."

He grinned. "Ain't for me, mister." He had spoken to the waitress with no perceptible accent. Now he had an exaggerated southern drawl. "Just figured on something might hold together long enough to get me home."

"Where's home?"

"Pine Ridge, Louisiana. Just a little place."

"Mister, I got just the car for you," the salesman said.

An hour later he drove an old Pontiac off the lot. It rattled, and there was evidence that at one time it had been wrecked. But it ran, and it was registered in the name of Peter Jarvis Welles. He turned south on the Tia Juana road.

But only for about six blocks. Then something slowed him. Panic, combined with the same sure instinct that had governed his driving the night before. Suddenly he made a right turn, circled the block and sped back the way that he had come. When he left town three quarters of an hour later he was headed east toward the pass through the mountains, toward El Paso and Juarez.

Then for a week he disappeared.

Seven days later a man who identified himself as Peter Jarvis Welles applied for a tourist permit at the Mexican Information Service on the outskirts of Laredo, Texas. His identification was an Arizona automobile registration and a driving license from the same state. His home address was Yuma. The car he drove was a new Buick convertible and its rear end was packed with expensive luggage. He had five thousands dollars in cash and eight bank books showing deposits totalling over one hundred and forty-five thousand dollars. He intended, he said, to run down to Monterrey. Because of the rainy season, which would be coming along shortly, he didn't think he would go farther. The permit was made out.

That was in the afternoon, and he checked in at a motel to kill time until the following morning. Some previous guest had left a newspaper on the closet shelf. He glanced at it casually.

The usual scare headlines. Two airliners had crashed. A boy had murdered his sleeping father with an axe. Police still wanted a man named Richard Hammet, described as a California chain-restaurant magnate. A picture of Hammet accompanied the story. He studied his own features for a moment before crumpling the paper, throwing it away.

Early in May at four-thirty in the morning he drove across the International Bridge to Nuevo Laredo. As dawn was breaking the Buick rolled out on the highway and started on its long trip south to the high mountains.

To the man who called himself Pete Welles, it was as though a thick miasma which had hovered over him for many days had lifted, leaving his mind and breathing free and clear. He turned on the radio. Mexican music blared from the loudspeaker. It was exhilarating. It sounded good.

### 3.

The road descended from the mountains at last, the plateau was left behind. The last turn in the highway was just ahead. The Buick rounded it, coasting down hill, and there below was Acapulco. The houses were pink, yellow and vanilla white; the sea was blue, the setting sun was red. He drove through town and checked in at an unpretentious hotel on a

hill overlooking the Pacific. His room had a view of a crescent shaped beach lined with cafes and magnificent hotels. Caleta Beach.

Pete looked down at the warm, white sand. It was evening, but tomorrow the sun would rise again and he could think of nothing he wanted more to do than to lie on that warm sand and forget. His nerves were ragged; he'd been on the run too long. He would crack up if he didn't get some rest. He crossed to the dresser and studied his reflection in the mirror.

Except for a twitch in the left cheek, the face he saw could have belonged to anyone. The hair was brown, the nose was the usual straight nose. Scattered throughout the town there must be hundreds of Americans who looked like that.

He stood at the mirror, frowning, undecided. South of Acapulco was a remote village named Emancipación. In the rainy season only burros could struggle over the primitive road. He would be safe there until the rains had ended, but after that? Someone would be sure to talk about the eccentric foreigner. The news would spread.

But here in this resort town he could be just another American tourist. It shouldn't be too hard to act like one. He would have to hole in somewhere, find a house. A hotel, any hotel, was too exposed and dangerous.

Suddenly he went to the door, ran downstairs and out to the car.

When he returned a gun was in his pocket, a Smith & Wesson thirty-eight. He did not leave his room again that night, and when he fell into a restless sleep the revolver was on the table by his bed.

He was lucky. The hotel proprietor owned a small house in the hills above Caleta. It was for rent and Martín, his young son, drove Pete up to see it. They climbed a steep road scarred with chuckholes and stopped before a green, heavily padlocked gate. An old man opened the gate and they drove into a car port, parked beside an open porch. Beyond the porch, a footpath ran through a garden to the edge of a steep cliff. From there it zigzagged down to the sea two hundred feet below. The green gate, Pete had noted coming through, was strong, and the house was surrounded on three sides by a high wall.

"The old man came with the house?" he asked.

Martín nodded. "Pedro. He is gardener. Also he sleeps here on the porch to guard. Juanita, his wife, is cook."

Juanita came out of the tiny servants' quarters before Pete went upstairs. She was as old and withered as her husband, and very deaf.

The second floor consisted of another porch and two bedrooms. It was a good, safe house. The only other residence of any size was halfway down the hill. Pete

took it, paying three months in advance.

That night he stood on the upstairs porch and looked through darkness toward the sea. The electric bulb that was the porch's only illumination was colored a dull orange. He turned it off.

Going back to the rail, he leaned against it and let the quiet of the night seep into him. Here, this house, was where he would start to live again. No one knew him in Mexico. There would be no more starting awake in the middle of the night, no more bad dreams—

*Nice, isn't it Dick?* a woman's voice said quietly from behind him. *So peaceful. But do you think you really deserve peace?*

It was Mary's voice. He turned, almost expecting to see his wife standing there.

But of course she wasn't. She was dead. Murdered, according to the police.

Mary . . .

He had been deeply in love with her when they had married. He'd worked hard for eight years to give her security and a home. So that today, coming home unexpectedly, he could see a familiar Cadillac on the drive, and hear Bob Cunningham talking in the living room.

He heard his partner's voice the instant he opened the kitchen door.

"Damn it, Mary—I don't want to go! You know that. But what excuse could I give Ethel?"

He stood motionless and listened to her more softly voiced reply. "Is that important? Doesn't it mean anything to you that I'll be left here for six months—alone with Dick?" Silence, followed by a penetrating whisper. "Oh, for God's sake—there's his car!"

Maybe he still loved her, in a way. She could hurt him, certainly, if that is any proof. He opened the kitchen door again, and slammed it shut. He walked into the big front room that stretched the full length of the house. Mary sat in a window seat and Bob Cunningham stood facing her. They both turned.

"Forget something, darling?" Mary jumped up and came toward him. She was blonde with a complexion so clear it seemed translucent. She looked delicate and pliable, but so does a blacksnake whip.

"That's right. Forgot the specifications for the new drive-in." He crossed to the liquor cabinet. "Drink, Bob?"

"Why not?" His partner was a big man, an ex-athlete who had put on weight. He had a booming voice.

Mary frowned. "Liquor at ten in the morning?"

He looked at her expressionlessly, poured two drinks and handed one to Cunningham. "To you and Ethel, and your trip."

Bob choked on the straight whis-

key. "Doesn't seem right, going off to Europe while you stay here and do my work. Well." He shrugged, reaching into his pocket for an envelope. "Here's that power of attorney. That's why I came by—to drop it off."

He opened the envelope and glanced at the paper it contained. "Looks okay."

"What's this power of attorney business?" Mary asked.

"Let Bob tell you." Stairs led up to a narrow landing where the bedrooms were. He climbed them as Cunningham fumblingly explained.

"Well, I won't be here to sign contracts and such for this new restaurant, so now Dick can do it for me. It's legal and—"

Dick Hammet closed his bedroom door and leaned against it. Anger, too long repressed, tore loose in him. Oddly, it was triggered less by this evidence of Mary's cheating than by Cunningham's bungling explanation. The man was nothing but a stupid slob. It had been Dick's brains and work that had prodded the firm of Cunningham & Hammet to success. Cunningham only shared in the profits and, it now appeared, in the favors of Dick's wife.

He got a bottle from his dressing table, went into the bathroom, poured a drink. Swallowing, he remembered that Mary had once called him a bathroom drinker. Mary was right. She always was.

She had been right eight years ago when, before their marriage, she had introduced him to Cunningham and urged the two to go into partnership. It was a good deal, for her. Bob had just married an enormously wealthy woman. This business arrangement had kept him handy. Dick knew the restaurant business. She'd figured he would make out all right. He had. Cunningham & Hammet owned six drive-ins now.

His glass was empty. He slammed it against the wall. It broke and the pieces tinkled to the floor. Unconsciously he must have known of this affair between his partner and his wife for a long time, and unconsciously he had prepared for it. He had Cunningham's power of attorney and knew exactly what he was going to do.

His headaches had always been bad, but they were getting worse. He had found a buyer for the drive-ins but negotiations were slow. A doctor told him that he was suffering from a walking nervous breakdown, gave him some pills and advised a long rest. Well, he would be taking a vacation soon.

The chain was finally bought by a man named Wallace for a hundred and fifty thousand. Wallace knew there was something shady about the deal, but he also knew that he was getting a bargain. Once he had assured himself that the

sale would stand up in court, and that any repercussions might hurt Dick Hammet but not him, he handed over the money.

The night for leaving California was chosen carefully. Mary was having dinner in Pasadena. The house was empty when he got home at six o'clock. He put five thousand dollars in the wall safe of her bedroom, went to his own room and packed. He didn't hear Mary when she came in. He didn't know she was in the house until she spoke.

"Going somewhere, Dick?"

She was standing in the doorway. Behind her he could see the railing of the balcony. Frustration rose in him. He gagged on it, bitter, greenish-yellow, in his throat.

"Yes, I am—permanently," he said. "I've left some money in the safe. With your talents, and a little help from Cunningham, you'll get by."

She ignored his reference to Cunningham. "How much did you leave?"

"Five thousand."

"Five thousand," she said thoughtfully. "I wonder how many thousands you're taking with you. And where you got it."

Her voice was a painful, gradually increasing pressure on his ear drums. He turned to face her. "I sold the business. I built it, and I'm entitled to anything that I can get."

"You don't call that stealing?"

He shook his head. "I figured the same way Cunningham did when he started sleeping with my wife."

She winced as though he'd slapped her. Then she caught hold of his arms. "Don't do it, Dick. You're making a terrible mistake. Don't leave me!"

"Why not?"

"Bob means nothing to me; he never did. They'll arrest you. What will happen to me then?"

"You may find it hard to believe, but I don't care. Now, shut up and get out!"

He pushed her from the room, knowing that he'd lied—knowing that he did care—and locked the door. She pounded on it, but he paid no attention. He went on packing—frantically.

The pounding had stopped but she was still outside the door. He could hear her talking, partly to him and partly to herself. The words came in disjointed phrases. He tried to stop his ears.

"What can I do? What *can* I do? If only you hadn't been so hard! They're sure to catch you, and it will be too late—"

He heard a far-off roar that rapidly came nearer. Her voice grew louder and had an hysterical undertone.

"The police will stop you. I'm going to call the police—!"

The roar was deafening. He unlocked the door and ran out on the balcony. She came back from the stairs, held out her arms.

"Oh, darling—please!"

He pushed her. She fell against the flimsy railing. There was a splintering sound. She screamed once as she fell.

It was an accident. That's what he told himself as he went down the stairs. She lay on the tiled floor, her neck flung back at an impossible angle. He looked at her, and knew what had happened—and somewhere, something burst . . .

It was morning. Juanita brought him fruit juice, and he dressed in swimming trunks and a sports shirt. The padlock had been removed from the green gate when he went down to the car port. He backed out the convertible.

The road ran downhill toward the boulevard. Halfway down was the house he had noticed the day before. A man ran out of it and waved him to a stop.

"You're an American, aren't you? For God's sake, keep your gate locked. Last night I was robbed for the third time in a month!"

He was like an excited, mammoth baby, fat and pink and bald. The infantile appearance was heightened by his lack of clothes. He was barefoot and wore only a pair of brief white shorts.

"Thieves everywhere! The lousy *ladrones* can steal the tongue out of your mouth!" His naked torso

was half-inside the car. A horn tooted. A beer truck wanted to get by. The bald man called, "*Un momentito!*" and turned back.

"Where you from?"

"Arizona. That truck's going to blast me off the road." Pete nervously let in the clutch.

"How long you going to be in Acapulco?"

He stepped on the accelerator in reply. At the foot of the hill he turned right into the boulevard. He left the car in a parking lot at Caleta Beach. There was a line of cafes on the ocean side of the lot. He sat at a rickety table under a palm tree, and three waitresses in flowing skirts converged on him.

The first to reach the table was pretty in a bosomy, broad-hipped sort of way. "I talk you *inglés*, boy," she said, and shrieked at the other waitresses. "Is mine! *Largo de aquí!* Go 'way!"

"Black coffee and toast, please."

"No *tostados*, boy. You like *torillas?*"

"Just coffee."

"Okay, boy." She left him alone with a swarm of flies.

The mosquitos were bad, too. He was ready to leave when the waitress returned with a thick cup. She put it in front of him and sat down herself. The day was hot and she did not use a deodorant.

"Chucha, me. Who you, boy?"

"Pete." He sipped the coffee.

"Pete. Is pretty name. You think me pretty?"

"Gorgeous."

"You talk me *inglés* so I talk good?"

"Sometime." He put the money on the table and got up.

Chucha was surprised. "You no like coffee?"

"Changed my mind," he said, and walked away.

Crossing the parking lot he looked back. Chucha still sat at the table. She was drinking the rejected coffee and staring moodily out to sea.

Then he noticed a cafe he had overlooked before. The walls were of bamboo, the roof was thatched. The interior looked dark and cool. A sign above the entrance read *Tahiti Bar*. He opened a half-door and stepped inside. Directly ahead was a flagged terrace. It was spotted with low tables around which only a few people lounged. Beyond the tables was an azure cove reached by a stretch of clean, white sand. More people were on the sand. Surfboards and kayaks were sprinkled over the water, and far out he saw the sails of a white yacht. There were no mosquitos and no flies.

He sat as close to the beach as he could get, and ordered toast and coffee. Both were hot and good. He killed time for an hour and watched the place fill up.

A man sat down beside him. "See you found my hangout." It was the baldheaded man who had been robbed. "Bohemia," he told the

waiter, and looked at Pete. "Have one? Better beer than we get in the states."

"No, thanks." Pete braced himself against the questions sure to come.

They came and he answered them consistently. His home was in Yuma and he expected to be in Acapulco about three months. He was in the trucking business. That last, he thought, was a neat touch.

The fat man introduced himself as Jack Pascault. He knew everyone in town and was a self-admitted gossip. Pete listened to his mildly ribald stories for a while, then suddenly lost interest. His attention had been caught by a girl who was coming up the beach. She carried a straw mat and wore a dark blue swimming suit. She spread the mat on the sand and sat down not more than fifteen feet away.

Pete had never seen the girl before, but there was something familiar about her. She was slender, with lovely, long, brown legs. Her features were delicate and her fair hair, swept straight back from her forehead, was secured by a fillet of black ribbon.

Pascault was grinning. "Nice, isn't she?" he said, and Pete found that he disliked him intensely. On the other hand, nothing so stamps a vacationing businessman as an amatory interest in a pretty girl.

"Very nice. Who is she?" he asked.

"Karen Brewer. That's her aunt, the one with the musclebound Adonis in red trunks."

He indicated a woman who had followed the blonde girl at a more leisurely pace. She had a forty-year-old face and an eighteen-year-old body, and she wore a yellow play suit puffed out at the hips. Her hair was short and unnaturally bronze. Her hand rested on the forearm of a sullen young man, but with no effect of clinging. She seemed to be steering him as though he were a rather stupid horse.

The young man was decorative, but not much else. He had a deep chest, small hips and thick, sloping shoulders. His light, curly hair looked as though it had been carefully set in the morning and expected to stay in place all day.

She dismissed him as they neared the terrace. "You're still hungover, Andy. Go take a nap." The young man scowled at her and went back the way that he had come. The woman saw Jack Pascault, climbed to the table and sat down.

"Hi, folks." Her accent placed her as having come from Texas. "Scotch," she told the waiter. She smiled at Pete. "Hello." She had an unexpectedly youthful and attractive smile.

"Pete Welles, Fran Garvey." Pascault called the waiter back. "Make that two Scotches."

"Make it three," Pete said.

Karen Brewer came up from the

beach. She stood beside her aunt. "Do I rate a chair?"

Pete rose quickly and pulled one out for her.

6.

Karen lay on a surfboard and studied the man she had just met. He was smiling up at her, his compact body half-in, half-out of the water. He was attractive, all right. A little nervous, perhaps. He had a funny twitch in his cheek and seemed to be under some kind of strain, but so are lots of men when they first come to Acapulco. They get cured. The sun baked the strain out of them, the sea washed it away.

Pete Welles. He was a widower; that had been one of the first things he had told her about himself. She had filed the information for possible future references. She smiled. It was amusing—the thought of keeping a file on eligible males.

"It's not polite to laugh at a man who's pushing you," he told her. "Furthermore, you're getting lazy. Time you had a swim."

She lay on her side, one hand in the water. Shaking her head,—"Too tired"—she flicked a little water in his face.

"That's disrespectful." He tilted the board, let her slide into the sea. His arms encircled her as she went under the water. She let him hold her, let him lift her up . . .

All morning he had been

troubled by a headache. He remembered it now, saying goodbye to her, and was surprised to find that it had gone. She walked away, and he watched until she'd disappeared.

Chucha called to him as he crossed the parking lot. "You come back *mañana*, boy? *Talk me inglés?*" He pretended not to hear.

On the way home he stopped to lay in a supply of Scotch. Four fifths and, for more immediate consumption, an extra pint. He had lunch when he got back to the house. Then he lay down for a nap.

He awoke refreshed and thinking of Karen Brewer, remembering the curve of her full lips when she laughed. He walked over to a window and looked down at the road.

A car was coming up the hill. Its paint job was light khaki, the official color of the Acapulco police. He backed quickly to the center of the room, and stood there listening to the approaching motor. It grew louder until it was directly below the window—and then it passed. The car had gone on up the hill.

The pint bottle was on his dresser. He took a drink.

The bottle was empty when he went to bed that night. About midnight he was roused from sleep by the sound of a closing door. There were footsteps in the car port down below. He got his revolver, took a flashlight and tiptoed down the stairs.

The moon was bright. He could clearly see Pedro sleeping on his cot, the handle of a machete projecting from under his pillow. No one was in the kitchen. Moonlight flooded the area around the dining table. No one was on the porch. He went to the car port.

A bicycle leaned against the open gate. A slight figure was putting something in the basket strapped to the handlebars. Pete raised the flashlight, clicked it on. The beam fell on a boy's frightened face.

It was Martín, his landlord's son.

Pete let out his pent-up breath. "What's going on?"

Martín was frightened. "It is my father, *señor*. He forget. He leave things here in kitchen closet. He say to me, when you finish work, go get them. You are sleeping and I don't like waking you. I have key."

"Okay," Pete said. "You get the stuff?"

"You want to see these things I take?"

"Of course not. Sorry I scared you."

"I am not scared. Good night, *señor*."

Pete watched him lock the gate and push his bicycle down the road. He was wide awake now, and went into the kitchen for a drink. He opened the closet and felt on the shelf for the four bottles of Scotch he had bought that afternoon. The bottles were gone.

He ran to the gate. Down the

road he saw a moving shadow. "Come back here!" he yelled.

The shadow hesitated, then kept on moving down the hill.

"You little thief! I ought to bear the hell out of you. Tell your father I said so. Tell your father—!"

The shadow mingled with other shadows and was lost. Pete went angrily to the stairs. Pedro was sitting on his cot. He spoke to the old man.

"Tomorrow I will buy a new padlock for the gate. You will have one key and I the other. No one—understand me?—absolutely no one is to enter this house without my permission."

"Sí, *señor*. I understand."

## 7.

Jack Pascault's lower lip projected like a segment of ripe orange. It was late afternoon, and he sat with Pete on a stone wall above the bay. Below them some of the world's most expert swimmers and water skiers were putting on an exhibition. Jack paid no attention. A girl had promised to meet him here, and had failed to keep her date.

Pete had watched impossible jumps, astounding acrobatics and a graceful water ballet. Now the feature attraction of the afternoon was coming up. It was a man who started off on a single ski. Pulled by a speed boat, he gingerly lifted his left foot from the ski and put

it in the water. He was drawn for fifty yards like that; then, so quickly that it was impossible to see how it was done, he kicked the ski away and dropped his right foot, too. The crowd rose to applaud as he sped past, skiing on the soles of his bare feet. Pete rose with the others.

Jack got up, too, and stretched. "Let's get some beer," he said.

They made their way through the crowd and climbed to the clubhouse. There were tables on the veranda, and Fran Garvey was at one of them. She tried to catch Pete's attention but he was purposely looking the other way.

Jack caught the small by-play. He got bottles from the bar and drew Pete inside out of sight. "That's using your head. There are times when Fran's a little too rich for the ordinary palate."

"Thought she was a friend of yours."

"I like her. I like butter, too, but a steady diet would harden my arteries." Jack sucked at his bottle. "Got too much money, for one thing. She spends it collecting beautiful boy friends."

"Such as the guy who was with her yesterday?"

Pascault nodded. "Andy Shultz. He's about due to be replaced. Poor fellow'll be on the beach without so much as a swan's-down pillow on which to lay his curly head."

"Tough."

"Tougher than you know. Fran

likes you. She's got her eye on you for next in line."

"Not in the market, thanks." Pete drank his beer. "Where does Karen fit into that kind of set-up?"

"She's just visiting. And looking for a husband, incidentally."

Pete shrugged. "A husband should be easy for her to find."

"Not in Acapulco. The men here, myself included, think in terms of less permanent arrangements. But Karen's a romantic." Pascault gave him a knowing grin. "Given to moonlight strolls along the beach. I'm fair. I tell you that much so we can get off to an even start."

Pete stiffened. "Devoted a lot of study to her, haven't you?"

"Why not? She's worth a little spade work." Pascault finished his bottle. "More beer?"

"No."

"How about some Scotch?"

"No." He said it brusquely.

"Hey!" The fat man frowned at him, surprised. "I didn't know you were serious about the girl. Don't get sore."

"I'm not sore. I have a headache. For Christ's sake, is that a crime?"

It was Pascault who was sore now. "It's your head. I don't give a damn if it falls off."

He turned away, and Pete went out to his car. He drove to the Zocalo. Sitting outside a cafe he watched the sun go down. It was dark when the waiter brought his check. Paying it left him short of cash. His money, with only a small

part of it converted into pesos, was hidden in an olla hanging on his bedroom wall. He returned to the house, took three hundred pesos from the olla and drove down the hill again. Passing the parking lot behind the Tahiti, he impulsively turned in.

The Tahiti was primarily a swimming club and closed at sunset, although the second-class cafe next door stayed open all night. Pete walked around to the ocean side. A full moon lay on the horizon like an ivory cue ball on a pool table. He sat on the sand and listened to jukebox music coming faintly from far away.

Presently a girl walked between him and the moon. It was Karen. She moved slowly, and after she had passed he could still make out her figure on the beach. She went to the end of it and turned back, walking higher on the sand. When she came near enough he saw that she was carrying her straw mat.

She spread the mat on the edge of the terrace and sat down. He didn't move, and for a full half-minute she did not move either. Then she raised her hand to smooth a straying lock of hair, and it was a gesture he had often seen Mary make when he'd first loved her and been watchful of the slightest of her gestures. Mary was dead, but this girl—

He rose silently, and stepped around to stand in front of her. She looked up, startled. He caught

her wrists, pulled her up and kissed her on the mouth. He did not mean to frighten or to hurt her. She fought him savagely, and he let her go.

"Karen," he said, "I only—"

"What's the matter with you? I think you must be crazy!"

"Now, wait!" He tried to catch her wrists again. "Wait a minute!"

But she was no longer there. She was down near the water, running, stumbling away from him across the sand.

He was running after her. She heard him and went faster. "Wait, damn it!" he shouted. "Stop!" She did not stop. They ran past stacked deck chairs and piled-up beach umbrellas. The lights of a hotel were coming near. He saw her push inside.

8.

His head was pounding when he returned to the Tahiti. She had left her beach mat on the terrace. He carried it to his car. He opened the luggage compartment, tossed in the mat and started to lower the top again. When it was halfway down he stopped, abruptly pushed it up. The moon lit up the interior of the compartment. He was shocked by what he saw inside.

A paper bag from which the necks of four whiskey bottles protruded. It was the Scotch he had accused Martín of stealing, and which he was sure he remembered

putting in the closet of his kitchen. He did nothing for a count of five.

Then he carefully withdrew one bottle, opened it with the corkscrew which was an attachment of his pocketknife, and took a deep, long drink. He waited a quarter of a minute, then lifted the bottle to his lips again.

Pain thudded through his forehead at regular, short intervals. It was blinding. He took another drink and climbed behind the wheel.

Footsteps approached the car. "No work tonight, boy. Is *Domingo*—Sunday. Is pretty, no—the *automóvil*?"

It was Chucha. He didn't look at her. He held the bottle on his lap.

"You got whiskey? I like whiskey. Is more better as tequila. We go for ride in *automóvil*, drink whiskey, have good time?"

"No."

"No? You *loco*. Good girl, me."

He turned his head. He saw her foggily, as through a reddish mist.

"*Loco*?"

"Oh, yes! Why we no go for ride?"

Someone said, "Get in the car." It sounded like his voice.

The beach lobby was deserted when Karen entered the hotel. Already she had recovered from the shock that Pete had given her, and which, now that she'd had time to consider it, turned out not to have been such a great shock after all.

She wondered why she had reacted so violently. Pete Welles had kissed her but, after all, she *had* clowned around with him on the surfboard, and he probably had thought—

It made no difference what he thought. Next time she saw him she would be polite but, at first, a little distant. What might develop later would depend on how he took the arms-length treatment.

She took the elevator to the lobby at street level. The wide entrance to the bar was on the right. Fran was in there with her usual crowd of free-loaders. Andy stood on the outskirts of the group. His eyes met Karen's, and she quickly turned away. She went outside and stood under the porte-cochere, facing the boulevard.

A Buick convertible drove past. Pete Welles was at the wheel. A woman sat beside him, but Karen couldn't see her face. The convertible passed under a street lamp, went on into the darkness on the other side.

For no reason she could understand, Karen suddenly felt shaken and alone. She went back thoughtfully into the crowded lobby of the hotel.

The moon was no longer an ivory cue ball. It looked more like a shrunken lemon hung by invisible wires up in the sky. He lay on sand, and the lights of Acapulco glittered across water at least

five miles away. He must have circled the bay and gone to sleep here on the beach. He had no recollection of anything that had happened since he'd found the whiskey. There was a bottle by his side.

His headache was gone, and he felt alert and hungry. He got lightly to his feet, brushed sand from his clothes and looked back at the road. The Buick was there. His ability to drive quite normally when he had been drinking had always amazed him. Carrying the bottle, he walked back to the car. The clock on the dashboard showed ten minutes after twelve.

At twenty-five to one he parked in front of a low, blue building loud with dance music. He left the convertible and went inside. In the crowded bar he found a vacant stool. He ordered Scotch and asked to see a menu.

A waiter came and Pete described the steak he wanted—very rare. Waiting for it, he sipped his whiskey and wondered what had happened to Chucha. It was curious, he thought, that until this moment he had forgotten having been with the waitress earlier that evening. Even now he couldn't remember what they'd talked about, if they had talked....

9.

A man at the end of the bar was staring at him with an odd expression. Pete recognized him:

Andy Shultz. Andy's expression was more difficult to place. It was too detached to be called hatred, but it was deeper than the instinctive dislike one human being might feel for another at first sight. Andy must have seen him at the Tahiti with Fran Garvey. The damn fool probably thought he was interested in Fran.

The waiter served his steak. It looked delicious, red under a thin layer of charred black. He cut off a corner and tasted it. Perfectly seasoned. He started to take another bite.

Then he noticed that the noisy chatter at the bar had suddenly been silenced. Everyone was looking toward the door. Four heavily armed policemen had come in. The head waiter was talking to them; he shrugged and spread his hands. It was an expressive gesture, indicating that he was helpless if the police insisted on coming further but that it would do no good and that he would appreciate it if they went away.

To Pete's intense relief they nodded and backed out. He took a drink and listened to the exited murmur that swelled up.

A man said, "Same damn cops stopped me on the road a while ago."

The woman beside him lit a cigarette. "What do you expect? When there's a murder—"

"So what? Another Mexican girl gets knifed by her boy friend."

"But this was a particularly brutal murder. They say the blood —"

The woman's voice fell to an inaudible whisper. Pete stared at his plate of meat. It was nauseating. He pushed himself to his feet. Andy grinned at him as he went out.

Pete leaned against his car, inhaling the clean night air. It had been hot in the night club. Cigarette smoke and the odor of food must have made him sick. He started for Acapulco, and a few minutes later three policemen flagged him down.

It was a road block. Two policemen remained beside it; a third approached the Buick.

"Your name?"

Pete fumbled for his tourist permit. The policeman only glanced at it. "Norteamericano? Pass," he said.

The new padlock was on the gate. He undressed quickly, took the Smith & Wesson from its hiding place and laid it on the bedside table. He emptied the pockets of his slacks.

Everything, as was his habit, went into the small drawer of the bedside table. Keys, a handkerchief, his wallet and some change. He tossed the slacks on the adjoining twin bed, and emptied the breast pockets of his shirt.

Cigarettes and matches, and finally his pocketknife. That should not have been in the shirt pocket;

it was much too heavy. He put the knife with his other belongings, and pulled down his bedclothes. He reached for the light.

But he didn't click it off. He stood with his hand on the light switch for a moment, then turned back to the bed. There was a stain where his hand had touched the sheet. It was a dark stain, reddish brown. He looked down at his hand. After a long while, moving very slowly, he picked up his knife. He pried open its long blade.

Both blade and handle were sticky, smeared with a brown viscous fluid. The knife fell as memory spurted into his mind. Memory came back, not in a flood, but in a thin, hard intermittent stream. . .

*He stopped by the roadside and opened the car door. "Come on. End of the line."*

*"Why for you stop, boy?"*

*"You'll see. Get out."*

*She climbed from the car. The underbrush was thick. His knife was in the left-hand pocket of his slacks.*

*"You loco, boy. What we do here?"*

*"You'll see." The blade was sharp. He could feel its sharpness, shifting the knife to his right hand . . .*

Nightmare.

The sheets were wet with perspiration. He knew he'd had a terrible and vivid dream but his wak-

ing mind rejected the details. He got up and went into the bathroom. By the angle of conjoining shade and sunlight he knew it was late.

The water in the shower was tepid. He still felt sweaty when he dried himself. A glass and a bottle of whiskey were on the floor. He poured a drink and choked it down.

It made him sick. He carried the bottle to the bathroom, put it in the shower stall out of sight.

The screen door opened and Pedro came in. "A man *señor*. He says to give you this."

Pete took the card. On one side had been scrawled, "Party tonight. Come on over. Please?" The last word had been underlined. On the other side were printed directions for finding Fran Garvey's house. Pete tossed the card on his dresser. He sat on the bed and stared at the drawer of the bedside table.

He did not open it. Last night he had dreamed of putting his knife in there. It had been a confused and frightening dream, and his memory of it was vague. Let it stay that way. There was something he didn't want to remember about the knife.

The evening came at last. He lay on his bed, staring through darkness at the ceiling. There was a lizard on the wall. It would stay as lifeless as a broken twig until a mosquito came within striking distance. Then its long tongue would flick out and the mosquito would

disappear. The lizard would make a *chucking* sound like laughter. Another lizard on the porch would *chuck, chuck* back at him.

It takes time to learn to live with lizards. Mexicans like them. They say they bring good luck. But suddenly Pete couldn't stand the *chucking* another minute. He had to get out. He dressed and went down to the car port.

Fran Garvey lived in a huge house overlooking the bay. He drove the Buick up a steep hill and parked among approximately thirty other cars. It was a big and noisy party. He could hear it through the house, coming from somewhere on the other side.

He entered the house, passed an improvised bar and went out on the terrace. The lawn was crowded with Fran's guests. Waiters circulated among them, collecting and refilling glasses. Beyond a swimming pool, four men in black trousers and pink silk shirts beat energetically on a marimba. Submerged lights glowed in the kidney shaped pool. On his right was a small guest house. He looked for Karen but could not find her. He walked toward the pool.

As he neared the guest house Andy Shultz came out of it. He passed in front of Pete and went to speak to Jack Pascault who was standing a few yards away. Pascault looked up, and saw Pete.

He frowned, said something in an undertone to Andy. Then he

walked over to a middle-aged couple at the far end of the pool. He spoke to them and went on to whisper to several others. Pete felt his face grow hot. He walked quickly toward the fat, baldheaded man.

The first couple fell silent as he passed. The same thing happened when he neared the second group. It seemed to him that all the people on the lawn had lowered their voices to one insinuating funneled whisper. Even the marimba music was subdued. His feet slowed to a stop. Everyone was staring at him. He could catch no one actually doing it, but there was a tingling sensation up and down his spine. He turned, retreated to the terrace, went inside the house.

He stood at the bar, glass in hand, and asked himself what the hell he was doing here, at a party where people talked about him and where he was obviously unwelcome. He set the glass down and walked to the front door. Someone called him but he didn't answer. He was going somewhere. Maybe he was going home.

"You're not leaving, are you, Pete?" a light voice asked.

He had already started down the steps. He stopped, turned back. Karen stood in the doorway. Light streamed past her, outlining her slim figure, touching her pale hair with bronze.

She came slowly to the steps. "I'd like to talk to you," she said.

"Provided you're not...excitable, the way you were last night."

He smiled. "If I do get excited I promise not to let it show." Behind Karen, he saw Andy at the bar. Andy was watching. "Too many people at this party. Let's go for a ride."

She went with him to his car. He helped her in and walked around to climb behind the wheel. But he didn't start the motor. He caught the clean scent of the perfume she was wearing. A cool breeze carried the tinkle of marimba music from the pool.

He put his arms around her and she did not resist. But when his kiss became demanding she pulled away.

"They can see us from the house."

"Who cares?"

"I do. Andy's on the porch."

He released her. He sat studying her profile for a full quarter of a minute. Then he pushed the starter button. The motor sounded sullen as it caught.

## II.

Andy returned through the noisy room and went into the library at the far end. He picked up the telephone and told the long-distance operator that he wanted to speak to a man named Stewart Winslow in Beverly Hills, California. The operator said that she would call him back. He pushed a button on the desk. The door

opened after a moment, and a man in a white jacket came in.

He was young and good-looking. His complexion was dark but his hair had been bleached light brown by the sun. All except one strip across the top which was peroxide blond. He stopped abruptly when he saw who had rung the bell.

Andy grinned. "Get me a drink, Eddie. Bourbon on the rocks."

Eduardo nodded and went out. The door slammed, and Andy shrugged. He didn't blame Eddie for hating him. If the circumstances had been reversed he would have hated the young Mexican. But at present he was on the comfortable inside looking out. Looking out and back to what he had been in Beverly Hills less than a year before.

Broke. Things were so tough that he'd been forced to take a job as night counterman in one of the Cunningham & Hammet drive-ins. The manager was an easy-going sort. As long as Andy did his work he was left pretty much alone.

Cunningham never showed up in the place. The only time the going was likely to get rough was when Hammet would unexpectedly make the rounds. Then everybody had to look bright and eager and super-efficient, particularly when, as often happened, the boss was carrying a load.

Then there was no telling what might happen. Hammet got funny

ideas when he was drinking. Like the night Andy had saved him from being run in by the cops....

Andy saw him when he parked, and sent a car hop back to warn the kitchen gang. Everything was going nice and smooth when Hammet came in and sat down at the counter, playing that worn-out incognito routine. The dipso thought that, because he didn't know the people on his payroll they couldn't possibly know him.

Andy brought the special hamburger that the cook had fixed, and served it with a little flourish. Hammet was potted, all right, but the only way you could tell it was by his eyes. The girl on the next stool was talking to him, and he was nodding and occasionally saying a word or two, the way you'd treat anybody who was trying to start a conversation, but he didn't know what she was saying. He didn't really know that she was there.

When it happened, it came so fast that seconds passed before Andy could piece it together. All of a sudden the boss looked hard at the girl. Then he hit her in the face. After that he took a sip of coffee. He went on eating his hamburger as though everything was perfectly all right.

The girl sat staring at him, her mouth open and her left eye getting red. Everybody else was staring at him, too. The cook came out of the kitchen to see what was

going on. The girl got up and ran to the phone booth in the corner. She put in a dime and dialed, "O."

Andy leaned over the counter. "Better get out of here," he whispered. "Get out fast!"

"What are you talking about?" There was a stupid frown on the boss's face.

"That girl you hit is calling the cops."

"I hit—?" Hammet looked at the phone booth. "Why should I hit her? I never even saw—"

"Don't ask me why. You only got a couple of minutes, Mr. Hammet. I'd go out through the window in the men's room if I was you."

Most of the crowd had vanished before the police arrived. The cops asked Andy what had happened. He told them that he hadn't seen anything personally but that the guy they were looking for was probably in the men's room. They looked in there but the room was empty and the window open.

The manager spoke to Andy as he was going to work the following night. "Sorry, fellow, but the head office called this afternoon. They're cutting down expenses. You're the last hired, so you're the first to go."

Andy's smile was humorless. "And they tell you that hard work and loyalty to the boss is the way to get ahead."

"Did he know you recognized him?"

"He couldn't help but know it. I called him by name."

The manager sighed. "Well, there's your answer. Wouldn't surprise me if we all got fired now, one by one..."

The telephone rang. Andy picked it up. "*Bueno*," he said to the operator. Then, "Stew? Andy Shultz... I'm fine, but listen. Remember that drive-in I used to work for? Well, one of the guys that owned it was named Hammet. I was wondering—"

An excited squawking came out of the telephone. Andy smiled. "Yeah? ... You don't say! ... Well, what do you know. What *do* you *know!*" he said.

## 12.

They called it Brewer's Guided Tour, and laughed because that sounded funny. They laughed at a lot of things that night. They went to three night clubs, and danced and drank champagne. They had precisely the right amount of champagne to impart a glow to everything they saw and a febrile excitement to everything they heard. And some time after midnight they found themselves in the parking lot behind the Tahiti. The cafe next to it was open, but they passed it and pushed open the half-door of the Tahiti, and went inside. They sat on the terrace, their feet resting on the sand.

"Remember last night? I must have given you a bad scare," he said. "Where did you go?"

"Into the hotel. And I wasn't really scared. I saw you again."

He frowned. "You did?"

"You drove past." Their shoulders were touching and she felt him suddenly grow rigid. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He lay back on the terrace, using his forearm as a pillow.

"Nothing?" She turned to face him. "Was she attractive?"

"Who?"

"The woman you were with?"

"I don't remember any woman. I must have been drunk."

There was silence between them. The tide was on the ebb. "You know what I'm thinking?" Karen said.

"Maybe."

"About liquor."

"Yeah."

"We all drink too much. It isn't a method of relaxing any more. It's a way of life. And the next day we don't remember half of what happened. Look at all the fun we lose."

"I couldn't agree with you more. That's one of the reasons I'm going to cut it out."

"You are? I'm glad," she said.

He sat up and pulled her to him. "I'm going to tell you the truth." His voice was low and utterly sincere. "There was a time when I needed liquor. It blunted all the

jagged edges, and I used to be full of those. But I don't need it any more. That's finished. See—?" He kissed her. "Finished as of now."

They lay back on the terrace, and Karen's fingers were gentle on his cheek. A jukebox started to play next door. She shook her head and sat up straight.

"Know what I'd like to do? I'd like to take a swim."

He laughed. "There's a little village south of here—Emancipación. Wonderful beach, a few fishing boats—that's all. If we leave now we can get there for breakfast."

She looked away, said nothing for a moment. Then quietly she turned back. "All right."

He got to his feet, elated. "I've never been there, but I feel as though I were going home. It's where I was headed when I got side-tracked here in Acapulco."

"I'll have to change my clothes."

"Of course. And get a swimming suit." He took his money out and counted it. "Only a hundred and ten pesos. Have to get some more. We'll pick up your stuff first."

"And have you roped in by Fran?" She put her hands on his shoulders, pulled herself up. "I'd never pry you loose. I'll take a taxi and meet you here."

"Make it next door. Don't want you waiting in the dark."

They went through the half-door and back across the parking lot. Pete hailed a taxi on the boulevard. He helped her in.

"Half an hour be time enough?"  
"Plenty."

"Something I want to tell you, Karen." He lowered his voice, leaning into the cab. "I've had a rough time lately. Give you the whole story one of these days. But I'm coming out of it now, thanks to you. I'm very grateful."

She leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

The taxi made a U-turn on the boulevard. He got in his car and started up the hill. Coming in sight of his house, he saw that all the lights were burning, both upstairs and down. The green gate was standing open. He parked beside it, walked rapidly through the car port. He went even faster when he heard Juanita's high-pitched voice. He rounded the corner near the stairs.

Pedro sat on his cot. Juanita stood above him, putting a bandage on his head. There was blood on the bandage and more blood on a towel on the floor. The old man saw Pete and tried to rise.

"Bandits, *señor!* They come when I am sleeping. Call the police!"

Juanita pushed him down. "Be still, *viejo verde!* Three *ladrones*, all giants," she told Pete. "They hit my brave Pedro on the head."

"Let me see." He examined the cut. It was clean and not too deep. "I'll take you to the hospital."

"No hospital! Hospitals are where people go to die!"

Pete let it pass. The wound wasn't serious; Juanita could attend to it. He ran upstairs and went into his bedroom. It was a wreck. Both beds were torn apart. Clothes had been removed from the dresser and the closet, and what had not been stolen was scattered on the floor. The broken remnants of the olla in which his money had been hidden were at his feet.

He thought dully that this had been the pattern of his life. A little happiness followed immediately by violent disruption. He stepped on a fragment of the olla, ground it into powder, turned away.

In the bathroom he found something the thieves had overlooked: the bottle of whiskey he had put in the shower stall. He took it back to the bedroom, drew the cork. But before he drank he went inside the closet, ran his fingers along the ledge above the door. The Smith & Wesson was in its hiding place. He stood with the revolver in one hand and the whiskey in the other. He took a drink and tried to plan what he should do.

The strong liquor ran screaming through his blood stream, re-awakening all the alcohol he'd had before. He would have to meet Karen. If he scrimped like hell they could still make the trip. Tomorrow he would wire for money. Karen mustn't be disappointed, but

already he was disappointing her. He was drinking, although he hadn't meant to drink. He would have to go now, keep his date.

He drank again. The *ladrones* had done a thorough job, all right. He wished he'd been here and that he'd had a chance to use the thirty-eight. Damned gun wasn't much use now. Tossing it on the bed, he started for the door.

He stopped, and slowly turned around. He stared at the bedside table, walked to it and deliberately took hold of the handle of the drawer. He pulled it open, looked inside.

The drawer was empty but there were dark brown stains on the wood. He looked at the brown stains, and sat down on the bed.

The bottle was half-full. He held it for a long time to his lips.

The bottle was empty. He opened his hand and let it fall. It smashed on the floor but that didn't make much difference. The floor was already littered with broken trash. He looked at his watch. More than an hour had passed. He got up, lurched out the door.

Five minutes later the Buick raced into the Tahiti parking lot. He jumped from the car, ran into the Mexican cafe. Karen wasn't there. He hurried through the cafe and scanned the tables under the palm trees on the other side. He didn't see her. He went back inside. Leaning against the bar, he ordered Scotch.

Someone put a fifty-centavo piece in the jukebox. The jangling music grated on his nerves. He slammed his empty glass down on the bar and told the barkeep that he wanted another drink but that it was too damned noisy here. He wanted it outside.

He lost his balance going through the door, and saved himself from a fall by catching at a chair. A girl was sitting in the chair, and he saw that it was Karen. He sat down heavily.

"Where you been? Looked all over. Came out here," he said.

"I know. I spoke to you."

"Didn't hear you. Terrible thing happened. House was robbed."

She was silent.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything? I was robbed! *Ladrones* cleaned me out."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "What did they take?"

"Everything. Took my money. Took my knife."

"Your what?"

"Knife!" He was shouting at her. "Bastards stole it. Stole it out of drawer. What's the matter? Can't you understand?"

A shapely brown arm came before his eyes. Attached to it was a woman's hand. In the hand was a shot glass of Scotch. He looked up at the waitress. She smiled down at him.

*You think me pretty, boy? We go for ride, drink whiskey, have good time?*

He knocked over his chair as he got up. He fell against the table, spilled the Scotch. Chucha backed away, and with each step she changed a little. At a distance of two yards she was no longer Chucha. She was a waitress he had never seen before.

Karen had risen, too. She was staring at him. There was a beach bag on the table. She picked it up and walked away.

14

Last night he had reached dead end. He put his clothes on slowly, his fingers nervous with the buttons of his shirt. Fully dressed, he tried to reconstruct as much as he could of what had happened. The house had been burglarized. He had gone back to the beach cafe and talked to Karen. After that, a blank. He went down to the car port.

The Buick was parked nearly in the center. The gate was still open, and he saw that the padlock had been forced. With no preliminary warning, he began to shake. He went into the kitchen, got a bottle from the closet and carried it upstairs.

But he did not drink. He stood with the bottle in his hand, and after a moment put it in the bedroom closet on the shelf. It was eleven-thirty, the time when Karen was usually at the beach. He did not feel up to facing a lot of people,

but there was a chance that she might be at home. He returned to the car port and drove to the nearest public phone.

Fran Garvey answered. "You as corpselike as I am?"

"I'm pretty dead. Is Karen there?"

"Hear you got took last night. Need any cash?"

"I'll get by. Is Karen—?"

"She's at Caleta. Just getting by's no fun. Come on over?"

"I can't right now."

"Look, Pete," she said. "Let's stop this horsing around. I like you—know what I mean? Come on over, and let's talk."

"Sorry. I've got a lot of things to do."

He hung up, drove to the post office to send a telegram, then went straight home. A police car was parked at the green gate. Pedro stood beside it talking to the driver. The driver hadn't seen him yet, and Pete slammed on the brakes. His hands grew wet with perspiration as he tried desperately to think. His mind was frozen. He needed a drink to thaw it, start it functioning again...

Once when he was eight years old he had been awakened by the soft click of a closing latch. He was lying on the couch in the living room of his parents' house. His father was asleep in the big chair across the room. He could see his father, and the bottle on the floor beside him, by the light of a street

lamp through the window. His mother—

His mother was in the room, too. It was she who had clicked the latch shut and awakened him. She was not alone.

"Dead to the world," he heard her whisper. "Didn't I tell you, honey? Didn't I tell you it'd be okay?"

The shadow of a man, a stranger with his hat on, showed against the dimly lighted window. "I ain't so sure. Maybe we better—"

"He's passed out, hon. Nothing to be scared of. Come on."

"How about the kid?"

"Slept right through an earthquake once. Door's over here, hon. Anyhow, the kid's too young to know—"

He was not too young. He lay on the couch after they had gone into the bedroom, shivering. He stared through down-pressing gloom, telling himself it hadn't happened, that what he'd seen and heard had been a dream. Across the room his father muttered in his sleep. The bottle beside him reflected the light from the street.

He got out of bed, tiptoed to the big chair. When he returned he had the bottle. It was sherry. He lay in bed and sucked the strong, sweet wine. It made him warm and comfortable. His body was so light it seemed to float. He giggled quietly.

In the morning everything was as it had been before. His mother

was in the kitchen, his father in the bathroom. The bad things he had dreamed had been just that, parts of a bad dream. Everything was exactly as it had always been except that under his bedclothes he found an empty sherry bottle.

He got rid of that by putting it in the trash. Then the memory of it, too, assumed a misty quality. It had never happened...

Pete started the convertible and ran it into the car port. He climbed out, nodded stiffly to the police lieutenant on the porch. "Just a minute, please." He went upstairs. When he came back he was smiling and at ease.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Mr. Welles, my name is Gomez. I must ask you a few questions."

"Sit down, Lieutenant."

Gomez sat on the far side of the table. He was about thirty, slender and with thin hands. "I have come to inquire why you did not report the robbery of last night."

Pete took a chair opposite him. "How did you hear about it?"

"One learns these things. Is it true your house was robbed?"

"It's true. My gardener—"

"Pedro was asleep when these men came. His identification would be worthless. His wife describes ten giants. And you?"

"They'd cleared out by the time I got home."

"What did they steal?"

"A little money," Pete said. "Some clothes. That's all."

"How much money?"

"Approximately five hundred pesos. Not a great deal."

The policeman shrugged. "Not to you, perhaps. To many of my countrymen it represents two months hard work. This money was in pesos?"

"All pesos. Why?"

"A man was arrested this morning," Gomez said. "A known thief. In his possession we found money. Hundred and five-hundred dollar United States bills. But that, of course, could not be yours."

There was only the slightest hesitation before Pete shook his head. "Afraid not."

Gomez produced a manila envelope. He held it upside down above the table. A pocket knife dropped out. "Did you ever see this before?"

Pete quietly said, "No."

Without touching the knife the policeman scooped it back into the envelope. He got up briskly. "I thank you for your help." He started for the car port, stopped, turned back.

"It now occurs to me that there is one thing more. It is in connection with the murder of a waitress."

"Yes?"

"Road blocks were established immediately after the body was discovered. All cars were stopped and their license numbers taken. One of them had an Arizona license, as yours does. I do not have the list—"

"As far as I know," Pete said, "mine is the only Arizona car in town. And I was stopped by a road block."

Gomez made a little bow. "You save me the trouble of a second visit. Where had you been before you were stopped?"

"Some night club. Couldn't tell you its name. A blue building on the other side of town—"

"I know it well. How long had you been there?"

Pete frowned. "Quite some time. Long enough to order and eat dinner. This tied up in some way with that knife?"

"Who knows? The knife was found in the pocket of the thief. If the blood on it is of the same type as that of the young woman—then we have learned a little something, yes? Also there may be fingerprints." Gomez bowed again. "*Muchas gracias.*"

"*Por nada.*" Pete watched him walk toward his car, hoping that the policeman would not look back. He was breathing heavily, and was in no condition to answer further questions. A shadow fell across the road. He looked up. A dark cloud had obscured the sun. Far away to the west, the sky was black. There was a rumble of distant thunder. The rainy season had begun.

15.

The rain fell almost vertically at first, but at half-past two the wind

rose and the heavy drops came slanting out of the Pacific and across Acapulco Bay from the southwest. The zócalo at three o'clock was an island in the middle of a lake. There were few cars on the streets. Pete jumped from the Buick and ran into a cafe. He called Karen from the telephone on the bar. It was the fourth time he had called.

A servant answered. "The *señorita* is no here."

"Will she be there for dinner?"

"I don't know. Tonight is dinner party at the house of *Señor Pascault*. You talk with the *señora*?"

He banged the telephone into its cradle. Two American women were sitting near him at the bar. As he walked toward the door, one of them let her handbag slip down on the floor. Pete stopped, looked at the bag and at the woman. Then he deliberately brushed it aside with his foot and went out in the rain.

He walked to the boulevard, entered a small cantina and ordered Scotch. "Bring the bottle." An hour later, he was wandering up and down the sidewalk. His clothes were soaked and he couldn't find his car. He stopped looking after a while, went into a grocery store and used the telephone.

He opened his eyes on a world of whispers that he could almost, but not quite understand. Wind and rain beat against the window.

It was night. Getting up, he felt along the wall until he found a light switch, flicked it on.

He was naked and in a strange, elaborately furnished room. Women's clothes were scattered about. He found his own clothes and put them on.

A woman's slip was lying across a chair. He finished buttoning his shirt, not taking his eyes off the undergarment. He picked it up, methodically twisted it into a nylon rope. He looked at his watch before he went out into the storm. It was twenty after seven.

Passing the kidney-shaped pool, the wind blew him to a stop. He had to take shelter behind a palm. It was then that he realized that he was still holding the slip. He had meant, he thought, to leave it on the chair.

Thirty yards away a light flashed on. He looked through a window, and saw the woman. She came to the window, peered out, and disappeared. Lightning flashed as he took a forward step—and he saw with no particular surprise that he had left the palm tree far behind. He was crossing the terrace; french windows were directly ahead. There was a crack of thunder as he pushed them open and went in.

She was in the library. She was reading, and her back was turned. He crossed the room and raised the twisted slip. A rug muffled any sound he might have made. He took the final, cautious step—

And stopped, knowing with sudden certainty that he was being watched. He looked up. A young man with blondined hair and a white jacket stood in an open doorway.

"You want something, *señor*?"

Pete shook his head.

"On your feet again?" The woman looked over her shoulder, put down her magazine. "Eddie, get us a drink."

The white jacketed young man backed out reluctantly.

She chuckled. "Still carrying a load, aren't you? Thought you'd have slept it off by now."

"How did I get here?"

"You telephoned me. Anyway, I got the call. I picked you up in the *zócalo*. Passed up a dinner date to do it, too. Hey—!" she said. "You're twisting hell out of my slip."

He looked down at his hands and saw the nylon rope. He threw it in her lap. The blond Mexican came back with a loaded tray. He left immediately, and the woman mixed two drinks. She offered one to Pete. He shook his head.

"Go on. You picked me up. What happened after that?"

She grinned. "Forgotten? Galantry's certainly not your strong point, dear." Still grinning, she got up and strolled toward him. "This storm will wear itself out by morning. You might as well stay here. Take Andy's house." She pressed against him, put her arms around his neck. "He's moving out."

"I'm going now." He pushed her away.

She looked uncertainly into his eyes. For an instant she seemed puzzled. Then she gasped. "Yes," she said quickly. "You get out of here!"

He turned and walked out of the room.

The young Mexican was standing within two feet of the front door. He made no move to open it. Pete did that himself. Until the door had been firmly closed behind him he felt the servant's eyes penetratingly on his back.

Rain stung his face as he followed the driveway to the gate. On the boulevard he hailed a taxi. His car was where he had parked it in the afternoon.

He walked past the car and into the cantina where he had been earlier. He had two quick drinks and used the telephone.

16.

Karen caught Jack Pascault's signal. She broke away from the people she was talking to and went toward him.

"It's that weird friend of yours, Pete Welles." He indicated the phone.

"Thanks." Frowning, she crossed to it and picked it up. "Yes?"

"That's impossible," she said, a moment later. "I can't just leave—" She lowered her voice. "That's an odd way of putting it. Why so

melodramatic?" She shrugged, presently. "Oh, all right—if you insist."

She hung up. No one was looking at her. She got her raincoat, let herself out and waited on the porch. The storm had grown more violent, and she wondered if she were doing the right thing. Right thing or not, she was doing what she had to do. Something in Pete's voice had told her that he needed help.

The headlights of a car came up the road. She ran out and climbed into the Buick. The windshield was a solid sheet of rain.

"Know someplace where it's dry?" she asked. "Let's go there fast."

He didn't look at her. "We're going home." The Buick jumped ahead. He drove carefully and stopped before a gate. An old man came running to prop it open. Pete drove into a car port.

"Wait here," he said. He left the car and spoke in an undertone to the servant. Karen moved over on the seat.

"Tell Juanita to bring two breakfasts in the morning," she heard Pete saying. "You sleep in your own quarters tonight."

He returned to the car. "Come on." Karen got out and found herself standing on an open, unprotected porch. The wind had torn the awning into shreds. He guided her to a partly sheltered stairway.

"Up here."

"Let's get one thing straight,"

she told him. "About those breakfasts—"

He wasn't listening. "Upstairs, my dear." He took her by the shoulders, turned her to face the steps.

She climbed reluctantly. She had the feeling that, if she'd refused, he would have forced her to do it anyway. He seemed sober, but there was something wrong. The awning on the upstairs porch was still intact, bulging in like a full sail. Wind and rain spilled through at the corners. He steered her to a door. It banged open when he turned the knob. He steadied her through the doorway and pushed the door shut. She heard him grope along the wall.

Light flashed on, disclosing a bedroom with twin beds. It had the look of a room not currently in use. Karen leaned against the wall, raincoat dripping, hair tumbled over her forehead.

He touched her hair. "You're wet, Mary. I'll get a towel."

"Oh, that's all right—"

"It's not. I must take care of you," he said.

He went into a bathroom, came back with a towel. She let him unzip the raincoat, slip it off. She sat on one of the beds and dried her hair. He stood above her, silent and motionless. She put the towel aside, smiled up at him. The smile faded. Panic gripped her like a steel claw when she saw his face.

Before she could speak, a gust of wind tore the awning loose out on

the porch. Its wooden frame crashed through a nearby window. There was a tinkling fall of glass.

He said softly, "It was in the other bedroom, Mary. We're safe. Nothing can hurt us here."

She was still staring at his face. Something had happened to it. It seemed shrunken and had turned a leaden gray—and it was unnaturally calm, expressionless. She saw all this before she reacted to the name that he had called her.

"Who is Mary?" She got up nervously. "Is this a joke of some kind? I don't think it's funny. Frankly, I don't understand—"

He smiled, but it was less smile than mechanical grimace. "Of course you don't." He came toward her slowly. "You're tired. I'll explain it later. After you've rested for a while."

"I don't want to rest! I want to get out of here!" She backed away, between the beds. "I'm not Mary, Pete. I'm Karen. Please don't touch me. Please—!"

His hands closed on her arms. His lifeless face swooped down on her. It was the only thing that she could see.

"Don't look at me like that!" he muttered. "For your own sake—don't!"

"I won't. I promise." She looked over his shoulder. She turned her eyes anywhere except straight ahead.

His hands relaxed a little. "You're shivering, dear."

"I'm cold. I'm very cold. Get me—get me a blanket."

He stripped the cover from a bed. Under the cover there was nothing but a mattress. He looked at the mattress as though he didn't understand. "No blankets here," he said.

"Then get me one. Get something. Don't you see how cold I am?"

He studied her. The pupils in his eyes had shrunk to mesmerizing points. "I couldn't do that." His voice was high and crafty. "You might go away."

"Why should I?" She forced a smile. She willed her hand to reach out and touch his.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know why you went away before. Don't make me look for you again. I'd find you, Mary. You know that."

She nodded. "Yes. Now please get me a coat."

"All right." He raised her hand and kissed it. "There's nothing to be afraid of any more. You've had a hard time, but you're home." Again his lips made that mechanical grimace. "I'll get my bathrobe. It's in the other room."

Wind plastered him against the wall as he made his way along the porch. He left the door of his bedroom open. Rain came through it and through the broken window. He turned on the light.

The bathrobe was in his closet. There was a bottle of whiskey on the shelf. He got a glass and poured a drink. He was raising the glass when all the lights went out.

The voice spoke to him from the darkness. *For why you kill me, boy?*

"Go away," he said aloud.

*You talk me pretty. You say we go for ride.*

"Go away. Go away!"

*I no do nothings, boy. For why I'm dead?*

"Mary!" he shouted, and ran out on the porch.

The other bedroom door was open. The lights flashed on for an instant as he ran in. Just long enough for him to see that there was no one in the room. He stumbled down the stairs. He got in the Buick, backed up and raced downhill.

The lights gave him a wide radius for searching. Halfway to Pascault's house, he thought he saw her running far ahead. The convertible's reckless speed increased. It hit a chuckhole, bounced, and something cracked. The side of the road moved over in slow motion. It seemed minutes between the time when he saw the concrete wall and knew that he was going to crash, and the time when he actually did.

Consciousness returned slowly. He thought at first that he had gone to sleep one night and awakened on another, entirely different

period of darkness. He did not know where he was or in what way this particular night was different. It came back to him in snatches.

The storm had passed. Trees dripped wetness but otherwise the night was still. He rested a few minutes before climbing out. Reflected light burned steadily in the sky. The city's generator had been repaired. As he climbed back toward his house a taxi jolted past. It was headed for the boulevard. Then he saw lights ahead, and saw a shadow cross the window of his second bedroom. He started to run. She hadn't left him, after all.

He ran through the gate and up the stairs. He started calling from the bottom step. His heart was pounding when he reached the top. He had to lean for an instant against the wall.

A hard object jabbed him in the back. "It's a gun," a man said. "Walk ahead of me into the bedroom, Hammet. Make it slow."

He looked back over his shoulder as he walked to the second bedroom. The man was tall and handsome with light curly hair. He had seen him before. Vaguely he even remembered his name.

It was Andy . . . something. Andy Shultz.

He wore a blue shirt open at the neck, sandals and beige slacks. He held the gun in his right hand, more relaxed now than he had been at first, and sat on the bed

where Karen had sat earlier that night.

*Karen?* Dick Hammet frowned. *Mary?* He wasn't sure. There were a lot of things about which he was confused. On the floor between them was a bottle and two glasses. There wasn't much left in the bottle. That was all right; there was another one downstairs. He picked it up.

"Drink?"

Andy nodded. "But take it easy." He waited until both drinks were poured. "So about it, Hammet? Let's get this over with."

"Let's do that." He listened to his own voice, surprised that it should sound so high and thin.

"Fifty thousand. I could ask for more and get it, but I'd rather play it safe. Give me the fifty and you won't see me again."

He was silent, thinking. The rain had stopped. It would be pleasant in the morning, in Emancipación.

Andy was talking again. He seemed angry. ". . . pay attention or you'll force me to get tough. You want me to tell the cops your right name, and what happened to your wife?"

Dislike for the handsome man was growing in him rapidly. "Have you noticed how still it is after the rain?"

"Oh, for God's sake—"

"It's more than still. It's death-like. The bottle was beside him on the floor. His right hand closed around its neck.

"Okay, okay." Andy leaned forward. He sat on the edge of the bed, the gun held negligently. "Come off it, will you? Now listen. I'm going to tell—"

Maybe he didn't realize what Dick was doing. Maybe he thought that Dick was only going to pour another drink. The bottle splintered over his head before he finished the sentence. He continued leaning forward for a moment before crumpling to the floor.

18.

The sunshine streaming through the window was golden bright. There was a churchbell ringing and music was playing somewhere, as it always was. The bottle on the bedside table was still half-full, and he was warm and comfortable. He swung his feet to the floor and wondered why his Smith & Wesson was lying beside the bottle. He did not remember having put it there. He didn't need a gun. The night's bad dreams had ended with the night, and it was day.

It was a day like any other day. Downstairs he could hear Juanita in the kitchen. The lizard was on the wall again and chuckling. Mexicans say that lizards bring good luck.

"Wish me luck," he said aloud. "Wish Karen and me the best of luck."

The lizard shot its long tongue out and wished him luck.

Nothing had happened. Everything was as it had been before, would always be. Juanita would bring up Karen's breakfast pretty soon, and then bring his. He would carry his tray to Karen's room. They would have breakfast together. Afterwards they would drive south to Emancipación. He hoped the road wouldn't be too bad after the storm. If there had been a storm.

Juanita was coming up the stairs. He must remember to leave her a little something extra when they went. For her and Pedro. He could hear her on the porch now, plod-

ding toward Karen's bedroom. She was opening the door.

The car needed a grease job, but that wouldn't take too long. They ought to make Emancipación in time for lunch. Why had he put the revolver on the bedside table? He picked it up. He was looking at it when Juanita screamed.

A few seconds later her continued screams were drowned out by a loud explosion. He heard it only faintly. It was as though a door had been closed in a remote section of the house. His body was so light. It seemed to him that he was floating even as he fell.

## *Tapped and Trapped*

Lawrence Comiskey, 50, was arrested in New Orleans for bookmaking. Detectives said Comiskey had an amplifier at his address that blared racing odds into six illegally tapped telephones in establishments that were accepting bets. But officers had no trouble finding him. One of the lines he tapped was inadvertently connected with police headquarters.

## *Inside Job*

Luis Eduardo Shelly, serving seven years for counterfeiting, got eight more years added to his sentence in Mexico City's National Penitentiary for a little sideline work in his cell. Officials said he had been running off bills on a portable press and selling them to departing prisoners.

## *Well, Have You?*

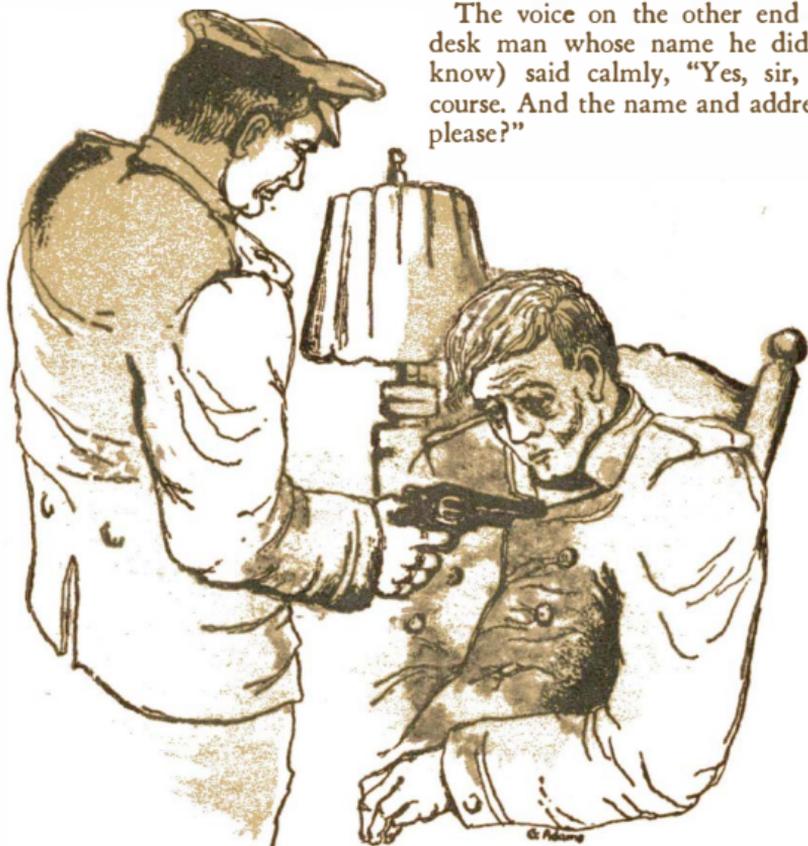
Classification tests are given new prisoners at the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison. The tests include the question: "Have you ever felt the urge to commit a crime?"

**P**ENNER dialed the number at his usual speed, not faster, not slower. His heart was beating normally. His eyes hurt a little, pinch-

ing at the corners somehow, but that was the only strain.

"Hello? I've just killed my wife. Send a man out here."

The voice on the other end (a desk man whose name he didn't know) said calmly, "Yes, sir, of course. And the name and address, please?"



BY

ARNOLD ENGLISH

## KILLER COP

*Things were hot enough in town—what with all the editorials about police brutality. And then a hero cop like Penner had to beat his wife to death...*

Like a store clerk asking where to make a delivery! Penner almost smiled.

"Robert Penner, 1218 Locket Drive, I," he paused, "I'm attached to the 30th precinct."

The desk man said only, "We'll have a man right out."

Penner nodded uselessly and hung up. He knew what would happen now. The Signal 32 would be passed to a nearby squad car, and a couple of cops would come right over. He had answered plenty of calls like that.

In his left hand he still carried the nightstick, red-tipped now. The uniform wasn't stained, as he saw, looking down at it in sudden concern.

Outside, softly, a car pulled up. Penner looked thankfully at the door. He hadn't known the tension in him that seemed to dribble out of his body as he heard firm steps up the drive followed by gentle knocking at the door. He opened almost gratefully.

The cop had retreated to one side after knocking, of course, just in case the self-admitted killer was crazy enough to try for another victim; but when Penner stood in the doorway, hands outstretched, the cop loomed up large.

The newcomer asked, surprised, "What the hell are you doing . . . Penner? You?"

"That's right, Fred. Tell your partner to come in, too."

Fred turned and signalled with

a hand to the blue uniformed man back of the wheel of the white-and-green police car. It was a cool clear night, and a wafer-thin moon seemed to follow the second cop as he approached quickly.

"What's the story?"

"My wife, Magda. She's dead."

Fred Garfein glanced down at the nightstick. He grew rigid and, oddly enough, the tips of his ears reddened.

"Inside."

Penner looked surprised at the tone of voice, but turned and led the way into the hall. When the door was slammed shut back of him, he turned.

"Keep your gun on him," Garfein told his partner. "Be right back."

Fred Garfein's big boots clumped into the other room, the living room. The other cop, a young guy, drew out his gun and looked Penner up and down for signs of gun-bulges. Finally he nodded and rested his own gun almost negligently in a hand.

Penner ran his tongue over dry lips. "Let's get it over with. I just want to lay down someplace. I'm tired." No reaction. Penner looked at the youngster's firm chin and narrowed eyes. "Your name's Crisp, isn't it? I remember hearing the captain talk about you. Joe Crisp, that's right."

Crisp said nothing, but brought up the gun as Penner ducked a hand to his uniform.

"Just going to prove I'm not carrying my gun." And he added foolishly. "You should've searched me before this."

He sounded angry about it. From the living room came the sound of a phone receiver being set back on its cradle, and heavy steps announced Garfein's return. His eyes were shaded with faint worry. He talked to Crisp.

"It's a mess. Ramsey's coming down in person."

"The captain?" Penner's hands went automatically to his uniform, open at the throat, then he put them down. He had already set down the nightstick on the small table nearby.

"Why can't we get it over with by ourselves? Take me downtown and book me."

Garfein didn't answer, but talked to Crisp, instead.

"Trouble is," he said heavily, "you know the way the newspapers been riding us lately. All cops are sadists, that kind of guck. You can see how this is going to look in the papers: cop bashes in wife's head with his nightstick."

Crisp, eyes always on Robert Penner, nodded slowly. They were light eyes, blue.

Penner was out of it, of course. Whatever the papers said about cops in general, that couldn't be any of his business from now on. He coughed, cleared his throat.

"I'd like a glass of water."

He wasn't thirsty at all, but he

knew a grim pleasure in seeing Garfein turn and clump into the kitchen for it.

A faint smile touched his lips when Garfein, coming back, was suddenly attracted by a small table and what lay under its glass covering. The cop stared and moved his lips in a slow count, then looked up almost awed.

"Christ Almighty! I forgot about the citations."

"What's that, Fred?" Crisp asked, gun still up.

"Five citations for bravery here. All of 'em handed out by the captain himself, I remember."

"This is going to make a big stink."

Garfein handed over the water glass, wet on the outside as well, and wiped his hand with a dirty handkerchief. Penner waited for the clouded water to clear before drinking up. His hands were steady.

Garfein talked to Crisp as he moved around, and Crisp answered. Nobody spoke to Penner.

The sound of a television set warmed on in a nearby house, came through to them. A singing commercial. A weather broadcast. Every word was clear.

Garfein drew a deep breath at the sound of a car approaching outside and slowly parking. Crisp ran a forefinger under his collar. Only Penner didn't seem to care, staring into space.

"The captain," Crisp said.

Setting down the drinking glass on a nearby table napkin, so as not to leave a ring, Penner looked up wearily at the door. It opened so quickly that he was caught by surprise all the same. For a second or so, Captain Ramsey was silhouetted against the darkness cut by a slice of moon in the doorway at right of his head. Then he closed the door back of him.

He turned to Garfein. "Where is it?"

"Living room, captain."

Ramsey grunted and walked in; like many heavy men, he walked slowly. Penner felt moisture on the palms of his hands but didn't want to wipe them as it meant drawing young Crisp's gun.

Ramsey came back. He took off his hat and sailed it onto a peg on the clothes tree.

"You son of a gun, Penner, I could kill you!"

Penner was so startled at being spoken to that he drew a loud breath that was almost a whine.

"With my own hands I could kill you!" Instead, Ramsey patted his stomach furiously, then a little more slowly. His voice became more reasonable. "What happened?"

Nobody had asked him yet, but he hadn't expected the question so soon. He shrugged. Ramsey's eyes narrowed in renewed anger. Penner cleared his throat.

"I don't know, Captain, honestly. I got home and Magda, my wife,

began to argue with me. You know the way it is between man and wife sometimes, Captain."

Ramsey jerked his bullet head toward the living room. "Not that way."

"Well, she started yelling at me about how I should give up the cops. It seems she's got a brother in the real estate business and he's doing good. She wanted me to go into it, too."

He could hardly remember the argument. He couldn't even recall Magda's face or voice. He was close to swaying where he stood.

"So you let her have it with the nightstick," Ramsey said softly. "Why?"

"I don't know, Captain. It's just one of those things you do. For years I've had it drilled into me to keep the peace with my nightstick. Keep the peace, keep the peace, there's more law at the end of a nightstick . . . you know the way that goes. And there was Magda yelling at me, screaming in my ears so I couldn't hardly think any more."

"Wait till the newspapers get hold of this." Ramsey took a stiff chair. Again a hand tapped his stomach. "They're after my skin and if they get it, they'll get drunk with power and if the next captain doesn't kiss a reporter's feet they'll go after him, too."

He drew in his breath sharply, as if in pain.

"They want us to stop using

nightsticks on the beat. They don't know that nightsticks on cops have prevented God knows how many crimes because a lot of punks know that cops have got 'em. They're even saying cops ought to be off Civil Service because cops are so brutal."

He put up a hand to shade his eyes. Suddenly he smashed the hand down hard on his lap.

"They want to aggravate cops so that morons will have what to read in the papers every morning. That's what they want. And you, Penn, you do a thing like this and you help the newspapers. Some bright reporter's going to win himself an award out of this story, I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

His eyes narrowed as Crisp glanced toward the living room. "I know she's dead, fella," he said softly. "It's been rougher on her."

The television set next door was turned slightly louder to a quiz program. Outside a horn blared. Somebody played chromatic scales on a piano. An ice cream vendor's truck stopped nearby, its presence announced by tinkling bells. Voices of children grew louder, then lower. The television set was lowered in volume; apparently there was a quarrel next door about how loudly it should be turned on.

The normality of it all caught at Penner more than anything else that had happened so far, since he had done it to Magda. He looked around wistfully, eyes lingering on

every piece of hall furniture as if he was memorizing its position.

"We take him downtown," Ramsey said heavily. "We fingerprint him, put him on the line-up, maybe the PBA gets him a lawyer—and the papers start to scream for *our* heads."

He rose, hands behind his back. Garfein, wide-eyed, stared at him.

"For all I know," Ramsey said, "this could spark the governor into signing some crazy law to get at every cop in the state. The governor's no friend of ours."

Ramsey fumbled in his pockets for a cigar, drew it out of the cellophane, looked at it sourly and put it away.

"On this man's police force," he said finally, "it's a rough thing to get promoted. You gotta make decisions and, come right down to it, you're as smart as the guys below you and no more."

He would probably never again make such a remark in the presence of two subordinates. Garfein looked embarrassed. Crisp shrugged.

Ramsey paused. "There's a way out of it, one way."

Garfein, who was sweating, said, "Tell us what it is, Captain."

"It means that we'd all be taking a hell of a chance," Ramsey said. "But I want to remind you two again, that we can't afford to let it get in the papers that a hero cop, with five citations for bravery, killed his wife with a nightstick

because he got so used to being a hard guy on the beat."

"Sure, Captain, we know," Crisp said, and flushed when Ramsey looked sourly at him.

Ramsey said a little more sharply, "Garfein, get a sheet of paper and bring it here. Then go into the next room. Close the windows and turn down the blinds, then mess up the room, kick the furniture, knock things upside down, throw things on the floor."

Garfein, after a pause, nodded slowly. His eyes looked hurt.

Seeing it, Ramsey said with surprising gentleness, "Give me a better suggestion, Fred, and I'll take it." Garfein looked away. Ramsey nodded firmly. "Hop to it. And when you get finished with the living room, go into the bedroom and do the same thing. You've got gloves with you?"

"Sure thing, Captain."

He stumbled off, first to bring back a clean sheet of lined white paper and a ball point pen, all of which he set down on the small table.

Ramsey looked up at Penner. "Sit down there and write out your resignation."

"My resignation?" Penner's hands trembled out of tiredness. He tried to force his mind to think, but nothing happened.

"Listen to me, boy." Ramsey kept his temper. "You are the luckiest son-of-a-gun cop I ever heard of. I'm not going to have a lot of good

men loused up when this hits the papers. Instead, I'm going to take your resignation. Garfein will make the house look like burglars came in and while they were at it, they killed your wife. You'll say you came home from a hard day's work and found her dead. *Kapeesh?*"

"Sure, sure."

"Get busy and start writing. You're resigning out of grief. You can't carry on. Put tomorrow's date on it."

Penner sat down on the hard-backed chair and adjusted the paper so that the top-left was inclined to his left. He wrote slowly. Once he looked up to see young Crisp's eyes on him, then on Ramsey.

"Captain, this is all wrong! We can't let ourselves do this."

Penner wrote listlessly. His eyes were half-shut and he paused at the end of every word.

From the next room, Garfein began his job of destruction. The sounds rose in tempo. With each rise, Penner sighed.

"I don't get this." Crisp's jaw was set almost mutinously. Penner saw his fingers stiffen on the gun, and looked away. He wasn't tempted to move or to call out.

Ramsey, who saw everything, had seen this, too. "You're liable to shoot somebody with that brand-new gun of yours, Crisp. How about handing it over to me if you can't do what you're told?"

Crisp walked across the room

and handed over the gun with butt foremost. Ramsey sniffed down at it and dropped it into a suit pocket, then swivelled around to Penner.

"Finished?"

Garfein had proceeded to the living room and the wrecking sounds were more faint.

"When we get back downtown," Ramsey told Crisp, "you'll get hold of the desk man who took the message that Penner phoned in. Have him see me. And take Penner's nightstick with you. Wrap it up in newspapers and get rid of it." He put up a hand to his throat and turned to Penner. "I'm thirsty. Get me some water."

"Of course, Captain. Sure." Penner rose and walked tiredly toward the kitchen. Crisp started out to call something, but smothered it. There was a shot and pain seared Penner's back. He turned slowly, and sank to the floor.

Ramsey stood over him, looking down. "Sorry, fella." He raised the gun and fired twice more. Penner was still.

From the living room, Garfein ran in with his usual heavy steps. "Burglars shot a hero cop in the back and beat his wife to death," Ramsey said. He shrugged. "When Penner thought he had a chance to get out with a whole skin, he didn't want it. He wanted things to be finished for him. I tried to arrange it so he wouldn't know when the bullet was coming."

Ramsey glanced down to the resignation Penner had written, folded it and put into a pocket. "I hope I did the right thing. I sure as hell hope so."

"In a way, I'm sorry for him," Crisp said finally. "I guess he'll get a hero's funeral."

"Deserves it," Ramsey snapped. "He was a good cop."



## *Sweet Surrender*

It happened in Kenosha, Wis. Milton Hall, 23, entered a restaurant, drew a gun and demanded the contents of the cash register. But the waitress, Mrs. Margaret Gresham, 20, was in no hurry. She began talking to Hall about the failure of crime to pay and finally convinced him he should give up his plan. Then she gave him a cup of coffee and borrowed a dime from him to call police. Hall pleaded guilty the following day of attempted armed robbery.

## *Early Bird*

Ardmore, Okla., police arrested a man because of his working hours. He was selling "snuff" from door to door—at three o'clock in the morning.

**T**HE ENVELOPE arrived at his office in the morning mail. It was marked *Personal and Private*, so Miss Madison did not open it. There was no return address, no letter. Just a picture of him and Gloria in the bedroom of her apartment, and they weren't looking for missing cufflinks.

Shock slammed into Norman Bennett when he first ripped open the envelope and drew out the picture. He could not believe it was

# blackmailers don't take chances

*Bennett knew he had to pay the stranger off.  
But Bennett wasn't going to pay off in money...*



**BY**  
**DAVID**  
**C.**  
**COOKE**

possible. No one could have taken such a picture. They'd been alone, he and Gloria. They were always alone in her place. He'd made sure no one ever saw them together.

But then who had taken the picture . . . and how . . . and why hadn't they at least written a note . . . and what happened next?

That last was easy. It was too obvious. And he'd have to pay, no matter how much the blackmailer demanded. If Stella ever got her hands on the picture, she would have plenty of evidence for a countersuit against his incompatibility grounds. And she would milk him dry in alimony. It was just the kind of thing she had been waiting for.

Bennett looked at the picture again, and perspiration oozed from his pores and ran down his cheeks. There was no mistaking the people. Every line in Gloria's ecstasy-contorted features stood out in stark detail, and his face was equally clear. He had moved his head to the side just as the camera clicked, giving almost a profile shot. But even if his face had been hidden, the tattoo on his right shoulder would have been identification enough. It was an exclusive design the artist in Tokyo had worked out for him, and all his friends knew it by sight.

He threw the picture to the top of his desk and jumped up from his chair. He paced back and forth on the thick pile carpeting.

Despite the precautions he and Gloria had taken, someone had seen them together and had followed them, had probably been following them and watching them for a long time. Probably even knew that he went to see her every Tuesday and Friday after leaving the office.

But who could it have been, and how had he got into her place to take the picture, and why hadn't either of them heard him or seen him?

There were no answers to those questions. Not a single damn one. He stopped his pacing, went back to his desk, picked up his private phone. As quietly and calmly as possible, he told Gloria about the picture.

"No!" she cried. "My God!"

"Now don't get upset," Bennett said. "It'll be all right."

"But how can it be all right? Suppose somebody saw the picture—somebody who knows you or me?"

"They won't," he assured her.

"You don't know how many prints have been made from the negative," she argued, her voice tense. "He could have made *hundreds!*"

"Blackmailers don't work like that," he said, trying to soothe her. "He just made a print or two, and put one in the mail to scare me. He wouldn't have shown it to anyone else. Scum like this have to work secretly."

There was silence on the line for a second, then she said quietly, "What happens next?"

"He'll probably phone and tell me his price."

"Will you—pay it?" she asked hesitantly.

"What do you think?"

"I don't want to think, I want to know. Tell me the truth."

"Of course I'll pay. You know what would happen if Stella ever got hold of the picture. She'd be worse than any blackmailer. She might even refuse to give me the divorce."

"No!"

"She's that kind of a woman," Bennett said. "Just so long as she gets what she wants, she doesn't give a damn about anybody else."

"But why would she want to hold you? She doesn't love you, she's never loved you."

"I've told you before. Because she loves my money. It's as simple as that. She hates my insides, but she loves my money. That's the reason I'll have to pay the blackmailer's price, no matter how much it is."

A short time later he hung up and looked at the envelope again. It was cheap, the dime-store variety, impossible to trace. And his name and address were in block lettering. Everything had the professional touch. It was obvious that he was dealing with someone who knew what he was doing.

Now there was nothing to do except wait for the phone call. And

he had the feeling that it would not come too soon. The black-mailer would want to build up suspense and stretch his nerves thin. But he swore he would not let it get him. He knew what he was going to do, so there was no reason to worry, no reason to make things worse than they already were.

But suppose he wasn't in his office when the call came? The black-mailer might think he was refusing to play ball, and that could be rough. If he wasn't in the market, Stella would be. But definitely. She would give anything or promise anything to get her filthy hands on that picture. He could almost see the way she would gloat in satisfaction. God, but she'd love it!

Despite the promise he'd made to himself, fear shot into Norman Bennett so strongly his mouth was full of its coppery taste. He pressed the button on his intercom set.

"Yes, Mr. Bennett?"

"Miss Madison," he said shortly, "I'll take all calls that come for me today. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." But it was obvious that she did not understand.

"And don't bother asking for names. Just put them through."

"Yes, Mr. Bennett."

He took the picture from the envelope again, and this time his fingers were trembling. How could anybody be so depraved to take such a picture? How low could a person sink? But more important, how had it been taken? That was

the damnable part. How the hell had it been taken?

He couldn't tell which time it had been. He and Gloria made love almost every time they were together. But the lights were never on. If there was any light at all, it was just a dim glow from the hallway. Still, the picture was clear and sharp, as if it had been made in broad daylight or under bright floods.

That meant the photographer had used infrared. Which also meant he'd even known that Gloria insisted on having the lights off. And it followed that if he knew that much, he must have seen them making love before—not once, but several times!

The phone rang.

"Hello," Bennett said quickly, snatching it up. "Who is it?"

Tom Ewing, a business acquaintance. Bennett tried to keep his voice normal, rational, tried to disguise his tenseness. Ewing asked if he was all right and he said he was fine, except for a slight headache. Nothing to worry about, just something he had eaten that didn't agree with him. It would pass. A couple of aspirin would do the trick.

He hung up, and the intercom buzzed.

"Yes, Miss Madison, what is it?" he growled in exasperation.

"Mrs. Bennett to see you, sir."

Stella? What the hell did she want? They hadn't lived together,

hadn't even seen each other except in his lawyer's office, ever since he'd found out that she married him strictly for his bank account.

"Tell her I'm not interested," he said. Then, quickly, "No, send her in. I'll see her for a few minutes."

Stella always looked like something out of the fashion magazines: prim and precise, perfectly coiffed, a walking mannequin as cold and chiseled as a marble statue. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever met or even seen. That was something he couldn't take from her. But she was cold, impenetrable, immovable. A complete bitch.

She came through the door in a little number whipped up by Ceil Chapman, a beautiful but frigidly impersonal smile on her lips.

"Hello, Norman. I hope you don't mind my coming up without an appointment."

"If it matters," he said, "I do. What do you want?"

She sat down in the club chair opposite his desk, crossed her legs, smoothed the dress over her lovely knees. "You don't have to be so abrupt. Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"I'm surprised, but not overjoyed. What do you want?" he asked again.

"I thought we might talk for a few minutes."

"About what? We've said everything that needs saying."

"Have we?" She opened her

handbag and took out a package of cigarettes. An imported brand, of course. Stella did not believe in having anything common. Her smile stretched a bit wider and she touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip. "Suppose I told you we've got a lot to talk about, a lot more than you could possibly realize."

Bennett said nothing, but his mind worked feverishly. Was it possible that Stella had mailed him the picture and was working up to it gradually? That was just the kind of thing she would do, it was just the kind of conniving trick she would pull.

"Suppose I told you that I've had a detective following you," she went on. "Suppose I told you I know you've been seeing another woman. A cheap trollop named Gloria Meade."

"All right," he said quickly, "suppose I have? You and I haven't been together for months, and I couldn't just hibernate. This may come as a shock to you, but I'm human."

Stella lighted her cigarette, inhaled deeply, let a thin trickle of smoke drift from her nostrils. Her face was inscrutable. "Are you in love with her?"

"Yes," he said. "I love her the way I thought I loved you. Only this time, there's no mistake. She loves me too, and she's a fine and decent girl."

"Are you sure of that?"

He looked at her steadily, his eyes cold. "Get to the point, Stella. I'm not in the mood for games."

Her smile suddenly vanished. "You're a fool to think you could keep a thing like that secret." Her voice was like iced satin. "It's going to cost you another twenty-five thousand dollars, or I'll enter a countersuit and name her as co-respondent."

He breathed silently in relief. Stella hadn't had anything to do with the picture. If she had, she wouldn't be talking in what to her were small figures. She would have demanded everything and wouldn't have settled for less.

"All right," he said quietly. "I'll tell my lawyer."

She shook her head slowly, the smile returning, her eyes gleaming in satisfaction. "You won't tell anybody, Norman. I don't want any income tax problems. I want this in cash, with no records anywhere on your books. Understand?"

He nodded in agreement, trying to indicate defeat when he actually felt elation. "All right. In cash."

She mashed out her cigarette in an ashtray and stood up. "You realize you're getting off easy," she said. "I could have made you pay a great deal more."

"I know," he said. "You're a wonderful girl, Stella. Everybody knows how generous and thoughtful you are." He said it straight, but he knew she was shrewd enough to feel the sarcasm.

Bennett did not go out to lunch. He remained in his office, waiting for the phone call. He had lost most of his nervousness now. He was still in a tough spot, but he would be able to work out of it.

At two-fifteen the phone rang. A deep masculine voice said, "Norman Bennett?"

"Yes." There was something in the man's voice, some tonal quality, that told him this was the call he had been expecting.

"You got a photograph in the morning mail. Did you recognize the people in it?"

"I recognized them," Bennett said. "How much for the negative?"

"Fifty thousand," the voice said. "No bills larger than twenties."

"All right," Bennett said without hesitation. "Where, and when?"

"You've got an account at the First National, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll pick you up in front of the bank at three o'clock sharp."

"I might have trouble getting that much money so quickly."

"You'll have more trouble if you don't get it," the man said harshly. Then he hung up.

Bennett waited inside the bank until the hands on the electric wall clock pointed to one minute before three. Then he stepped through the polished brass, and glass doors and walked to the curb, a leather satchel in his hand. A taxi pulled over and the rear door opened.

"Get in," said the man in the cab. He was big, stocky, with a hard face, piercing eyes under heavy brows. After Bennett sat next to him he said, "You got it all?"

Bennett nodded. "I've got it."

The man smiled, showing strong teeth. "That's smart. I didn't think you'd want any trouble." He turned to the driver. "The Atlas Hotel, Mac," he said.

"Why a hotel?" Bennett asked. "Can't we take care of everything right here?"

The man grunted disdainfully. "You think I'm a fool? I don't have the negative with me. And I want to count that stuff you've got in your bag. I don't take chances. Not a single damn chance."

The Atlas Hotel was a rundown third-class joint off Eighth Avenue. The man whisked Bennett past the desk and into the elevator and told the operator the fifth floor. They rode up without speaking and got out when the car stopped. They walked down the hall, and the man opened the door leading to the stairs.

"Where to now?" Bennett asked, puzzled.

"Down one flight."

"The room's not on this floor?"

"That's right. I told you, I don't take chances. And I had somebody else rent the room for me, just in case you try to pull a funny act."

They went down to the fourth floor and out into the hall, the

man still remaining behind Bennett. "It's four-o-three," he said. "The door's unlocked."

Bennett opened the door to 403 and went in. The room was small and dingy. A sagging bed, scarred furniture, a threadbare rug on the floor. The bathroom door was partly open.

The man put the chain on the door, then said, "All right, let's see the color of your money. Dump it on the bed."

Bennett unlatched his satchel and spilled out the neat bundles of green. The man walked to the other side of the bed, picked up each bundle and examined it carefully.

"It's all there," Bennett said. "I kept my part of the bargain, now you keep yours."

The man pulled the spread back from the bed, took an envelope from beneath one of the pillows. He tossed it on the bed.

"I promised the negative. There it is."

Bennett slipped the film from the envelope, looked at it briefly in the light from the window. Satisfied, he struck a match and touched it to the celluloid. It blazed fiercely, and he dropped it in an ashtray. A moment later nothing remained except brittle ashes.

"Now we're both satisfied," the man said, starting to put the bundles of money back into the satchel. But suddenly he stopped. Bennett was pointing a gun at him.

"Not so fast," he said quietly. "I got what I wanted, but you haven't got a damn thing. I came in with that money, and I'm going out with it."

The man's eyes narrowed as he looked at the gun. "You think you'll get away with a rumble like this?" he said.

Bennett smiled. "I don't think, I know."

"Then you're not as smart as I thought. You're not smart at all. I told you I don't take chances. I've still got a few prints from that negative. How'd you like me to show them to your wife?"

Bennett's smile widened. "Don't try to take me for a sucker. I've heard all the dodges. You don't have any other prints."

The man shrugged. "Okay, have it your way." He nonchalantly stuffed the rest of the bundles into the satchel, snapped it shut, picked it up in both hands. "So take your dough. I don't want it. As of now, my price is double."

The man was too cool, too calm, too sure of himself. Bennett began to think that perhaps it hadn't been very smart to bring a gun after all. Perhaps the man wasn't lying. Perhaps he did have—

Suddenly the satchel was flying at him. He saw it coming and ducked aside. But then something happened he hadn't intended. Involuntarily, his finger tightened on the trigger and the gun exploded.

The man stood still for a mo-

ment, a terrible grin of shock and pain on his face. Then, slowly, he fell forward, collapsing across the bed. He was dead before the springs squealed from his weight.

Bennett's mouth dropped open in horror. He had brought the gun merely as a threat, not as a weapon. He would have given the man the money without a word if he'd realized that anything like this was going to happen. But now that it had happened, he had to get out—he had to run.

He shoved the pistol back under his belt and picked up the satchel. Thank God no one had seen him with the man, he thought. He hurried across the room, took the chain off the door, went out.

His mind was racing. He had to get out of the hotel without being seen. He couldn't chance going down in the elevator. The operator might remember that he and the dead man had gone up together. There was a good chance that the operator wouldn't remember his face after just that one time, but Bennett knew he couldn't let him take a second look.

He walked down the stairs. Slowly, taking his time, saving his strength in case he needed it for a mad dash. He opened the lobby door a crack and peered out. The elevator door was closed, the desk clerk was nowhere in sight. He

stepped out and slipped from the lobby to the sidewalk.

Bennett was close to collapse when he arrived at his apartment. But he was positive he had been careful enough to avoid detection. No one would remember seeing him with the dead man, and he had left nothing in the apartment, not even fingerprints, to give the police a clue. He would dispose of his gun in the garbage and reposit the money in a few days. Then life would go on as usual. He was completely in the clear. It was a wonderful feeling.

The phone rang shrilly, startling him. It was Gloria.

"I got the negative and paid him off," he told her. "Everything is fine now."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I told you there wasn't anything to worry about."

"That's where you're wrong, Norman," she said. "There's a lot to worry about. More than before."

He was puzzled. "What the devil are you talking about? I told you I paid him off."

"But you didn't say *how*, darling," she said softly. "But I know. I was in the bathroom. You should see the new pictures I took. Wonderful photography. I'll send you a print in the morning. But they're terribly expensive. I'm afraid there's not going to be any money at all left for poor Stella!"

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