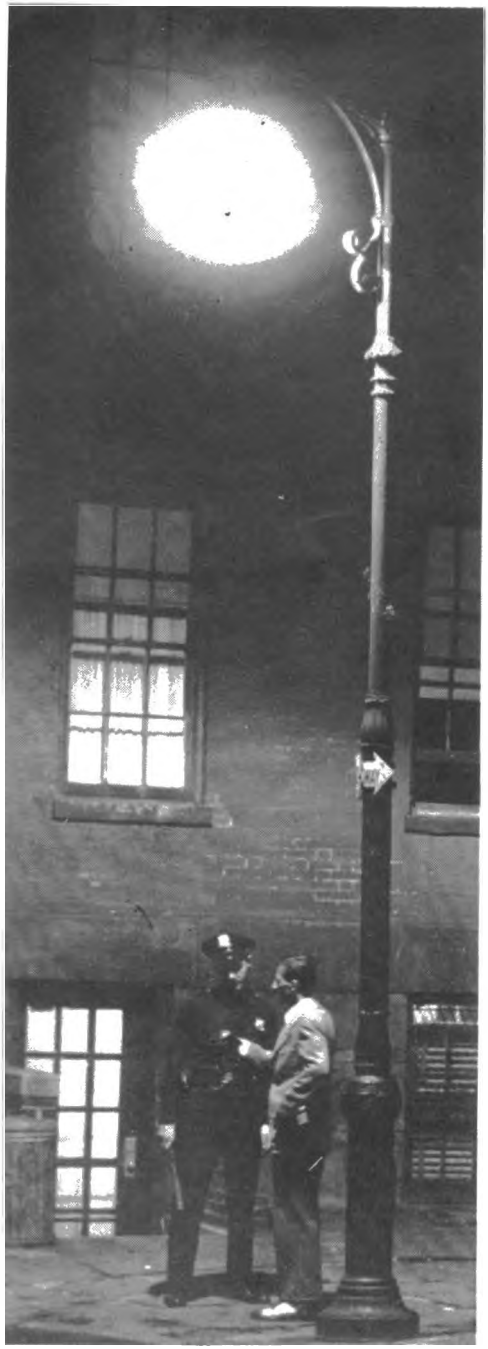
MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

JUNE-JULY, 1966

50 CENTS

HENRY KANE
DON LEE
JONATHAN CRAIG
RUSSELL W. LAKE
FLOYD MAHANNAH
ROBERT ARMPRIEST



the word is out .....

GET MAN— HUNT

160 pages of MAYHEM MISCHIEF MURDER MALICE

see back cover

VOL. 14, NO. 3 **MANHUNT** JUNE-JULY, 1966

CONTENTS

MANHUNT CLASSICS

NOVEL

SHORT STORIES

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*
GERALD ADAMS, *Art Director* JOHN UNDERWOOD, *Editor*
MICHAEL SHAPIRO, *Advertising Director* B. WADSWORTH, *Business Manager*

MANHUNT VOLUME 14, Number 3, June-July, 1966. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions, $3.00 for 6 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $4.00 (in U.S. Funds) for 6 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue New York, N. Y. 10017. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at New York, N. Y., and at additional mailing offices.

LEOPARD MAN

"Do you smell it?" Panic gave her whisper a shrillness. An unmistakeable odor had come into the room, a foul, nauseating jungle odor . . . weighted with dread.

BY

RUSSELL W. LAKE

THE eight-hundred-tonner, *Copper Lady,* groaned in every plank as she wallowed doggedly toward the distant wharf at Stanleyville, engines straining to make headway against the five mile current. David Mackenzie settled against the rail facing the ship's passengers who had gathered to disembark. Perspiration gleamed on his deeply tanned face and darkened the broad tight back of his shirt. A few helmeted whites waited in the background and a larger group of Congolese decked out in western clothes crowded the rail, noisy and gesticulating. Most of these were government employees traveling the river on official business. A still larger number of black men and women dressed more in keeping with the sweltering heat, stood sullenly, their broad ugly faces impassive.

The *Copper Lady* was one of the busy little workhorses of the Congo, running up and down the great river carrying supplies and picking up cargoes of local products. Less expensive though not so comfortable as the tourist steamers, she always carried a full complement of passengers who shared deck space with stacked-up crates of goods, as well as the overflow from the hold of blister copper, manioc, iron ore, or bales of rubber. In season the deck was likely to be further crowded with sacks of palm nuts, cotton, or maize.

Stanleyville, deep in the interior, was the upriver end of the line, only a short way down stream from the two-mile wide shelf of rock which was Stanley Falls.

Mackenzie's brooding eyes slid from one to another of the waiting passengers, pausing longer on one pock-marked, broken nose black man who turned quickly and pushed into the crowd. In the noon brilliance, none of them looked to be either above or below the usual run of natives, yet one was a murderer. In intent, if not in fact.

Mackenzie stood near the gangplank with his luggage beside him —a light bag, a portable typewriter, and a camera, which is all the equipment any news correspondent needs. He had not advertised either his profession or his purpose and was a stranger to everyone on this ship yet the night before as he walked alone on deck in the darkness, a man sprang from behind and slashed a deep gash in his shoulder and attempted to bully him over the rail. Mackenzie's size and strength proved valuable then.

He struck out blindly and the man vanished among stacks of cargo. In fact, Mackenzie never saw him at all but even now he could not forget the sour animal odor of peculiar pungency.

All the way up from Leopoldville, more than a thousand miles, he had moved among the passengers asking innumerable questions about the country like any raw tourist. In the process he had acquire a wealth of useless information but nothing at all about the subject that was the reason for his being here. After nearly two weeks of riding the *Copper Lady* upriver past monotonous green walls of forest a hundred and fifty feet high, he had learned absolutely nothing new about the Aniotos. Even a casual mention of the name was enough to smother conversation in an entire group.

The dark, olive-green river, still swirling from the falls above, was half a mile wide at Stanleyville and dotted with native dugouts, narrow and precarious looking as sharpened saplings. Mackenzie observed the naked dugout crews balancing upright and chanting as they thrust their crafts through the water with long spear-shaped paddles.

A white man whose thin face looked strangely small under a huge sun helmet, moved out from the group and stood at the rail beside him. "We'll be docking soon" the man said pleasantly. "None too soon for me. I never liked the river."

This slight narrow shouldered man had got on the ship downstream at Holtershau yesterday. The natives regarded him with respect, even fear, and stepped out of his way as he passed. He sat next to Mackenzie at dinner last night in the cramped dining room and introduced himself as Albert Horky. He was considerably older than Mackenzie with long bony hands and prominent cheekbones. He moved with extraordinary grace which indicated healthy, smoothly-coordinated muscles in spite of his age. He had been in the Congo twenty-five years, he said, without ever once going outside. His face showed it—cadaverous, and burned the color of saddle leather by the African sun. His milky eyes shone like steel balls from dark recesses. He informed Mackenzie that he was assistant to the district officer at Stanleyville and had gone to Holtershau to investigate a murder.

Now he stood watching the crowd and waiting for the ship to dock. "Staying long in Stanleyville?"

"I hope not," Mackenzie said.

"Don't blame you. This is not tourist country, especially now. Considerable unrest. Wouldn't be surprised if the government pulls out one of these days and leaves the Congolese to fry in their own grease." He glanced up at Mackenzie's square-jawed face. "I hear you had an accident last night."

"It was no accident."

"You didn't report it to me," Horky said, chiding a little. He put his elbows on the rail and became interested in watching an enormous black dock hand struggling to unload a crate from a hand truck on shore. "I did a little looking around anyway, but you don't get very far in a thing like this. It had to be someone on board of course, but not a soul knows anything about it. You're up against a stone wall in dealing with natives. Who's your enemy?"

"I never saw any of them before."

Horky shrugged. "Someone knows you are not simply a tourist as you tried to appear." Mackenzie shot a hard glance at him. "There's no explaining it," Horky smiled. "Call it witchcraft, call it sixth sense, call it whatever you will, news travels with the wind. You never know how they know, but they know."

"There's a logical explanation for it somewhere."

"Strange things happen up here that no one can account for. Most of these black men are still savages although they may wear clothes like your own and shop in the same stores and speak English or French in addition to their native dialect. Some of them may be educated but they're still Congolese, and the jungle is not far behind. This is not true of all the blacks of course, but too many. To our way of thinking it's a mystery how they know but apparently it's no secret why you're here. Someone definitely attacked you. Maybe an Anioto."

Mackenzie's deep set eyes remained impassive. "Why an Anioto?"

"I just said maybe."

With a bedlam of shrieking on shore the ship was made fast and the gangplank creaked into position. Mackenzie and Horky walked together among stacked cargo on the dock and on through a dingy native village of sagging shacks and potbellied native children and listless adults of peculiar ugliness. After two weeks on board ship Mackenzie felt the need to stretch his legs and waved aside a native taxi driver who reached for his bag. Horky walked silently beside him.

Stanleyville was a small town of red-roofed buildings and precipitous streets which stepped up and away from the river. Beyond the native village, they climbed a wide pebbled street lined with mangoes and oil palms interspersed with almonds and monkey-bread trees. Here and there a monstrous baobab thrust its craggy limbs toward the sky like an old man in righteous wrath. Small private homes, curiously alike, with neat lawns brilliant with scarlet tropical flowers, clung to the hill seemingly out of place with the deep jungle so close at hand. Stanleyville was the chief town and capitol of Orientale Province. At the top of the street

ahead was the Government House, a gray, gloomy, Victorian building.

"Stanleyville is too hot to be popular with tourists" Horky said. "Strangers who wander in here usually don't stay long. There's a steamer going downriver tomorrow and the *Copper Lady* will start back for Leopoldville the next day."

"I'm interested in native customs," Mackenzie said. "Fascinating subject."

"I have lived here a lifetime and I don't understand the natives. Within a radius of a hundred miles are some of the most savage, the most hideous humans left in Africa. Every kind of witchcraft is practiced, some you'll find nowhere else. Too much curiosity can be dangerous."

Mackenzie grinned. "You're telling me I'm not wanted here."

Horky shrugged. "I'm a policeman. It is my job to guard the lives and property in my district. You could become a problem."

"I came to look into the Aniotos, as you seem to know already. I'm going to stay long enough for that."

"That's what I was afraid of. You've had first hand evidence that they know and thoroughly disapprove. Next time they won't miss. Forget the whole thing and go back on the steamer tomorrow."

Mackenzie shook his head. They came shortly to the business district which consisted of low buildings housing modern shops. A surprising number of signs along the street advertised an assortment of night clubs. Apparently the people of Stanleyville liked their fun. Mackenzie stopped before the Hotel Moravia where he had his reservation. It was a long building like an American motel with guest houses clustered about.

Horky's milky eyes were moody as he studied Mackenzie's face. He swung away without a word and went up the street as Mackenzie went on into the hotel. A native body in slacks and loud sports shirt carried his bag and typewriter, gliding ahead of him down a walk in the rear to Number 8 Guest House which consisted of one large room, and bath.

The boy, who had changed his name from Dlalla to Constantine while attending the Belgian school, was slight and copper skinned and fine featured. He was more handsome than most of the natives Mackenzie had seen. He had, however, the intent, inscrutable eyes of the native Congolese.

He moved quickly, opening Mackenzie's bag, sliding open the gay print draperies, checking the towels and soap in the bathroom. He stood at the door. "Anything more, sir?"

Mackenzie tipped him. "I didn't expect quite this kind of service," he said pleasantly.

Constantine bowed. "Thank you, sir." He stood with his hand on the doorknob, hesitating.

Mackenzie glanced at him and straightened, becoming conscious of a change, a tenseness, in the boy's attitude. "Yes," Mackenzie said sharply.

"Would—would you care for entertainment, sir?"

"What kind of entertainment?"

The boy lifted one shoulder. "The usual kind."

"No, thanks. But that isn't what you had in mind to say."

Constantine's glittering eyes narrowed and bored into Mackenzie's face. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I am half white," he said. He drew himself up in unconscious pride. "My father was a Belgian trader. Believe me now." He advanced and stood close to Mackenzie. His voice was barely audible. "It is not suggested that the gentleman remain in Stanleyville longer than departure time of the boat tomorrow, but if the gentleman insists on staying it is suggested that he remain in his room with door and windows locked." He glided to the door.

"Wait!" Mackenzie said. "Why?"

Constantine turned his head as he went out and his face held a strange expression, almost mocking.

Slowly Mackenzie removed his shirt and lay it across the bed. He took off his shoes and then his trousers and hung the trousers in the closet. He sat in the chair staring speculatively out the window at the broad river in the distance and the green jungle beyond. He locked the door and went into the bathroom and took a long warm shower.

When he came out his eyes flashed about the room and stopped at the scrap of brown paper propped against the lamp on the end table. It was not unexpected yet it brought a tingling shock to the ends of his fingers. The lettering was square and neat like a careful child's: WARNING! LUCK WAS WITH YOU LAST NIGHT. NEXT TIME, NO. He folded the paper and put it into his pocket and checked the door and windows. They still were locked.

He sat at the table and wrote a short note and addressed the envelope to His Excellency the Governor. He pressed the buzzer which rang in the hotel office and signalled a boy.

Constantine closed the door and leaned his back against it. "Yes, sir?" he said, grinning cheerfully.

"I had a visitor a little while ago." Mackenzie said, watching him. "I'm sorry I missed him. I was in the shower and he didn't wait. Who was he?"

"I saw no one, sir."

Mackenzie continued to study Constantine's ingenuous face. "It was you, then."

"No, sir!"

Mackenzie handed him the note he had written. "Deliver this to the Governor up at the Government House," he said, "and wait for the answer."

After Constantine had bowed himself out, Mackenzie relaxed in the big chair with his feet on the window sill and lighted a cigarette. He let his mind move slowly over the past several days, the voyage on the *Copper Lady,* the attack on deck last night, Horky's warning, and Constantine's, the note on the table. Plainly he had fooled no one. However, espionage was no part of his training or predilection; he was a newsman, and a good one. He had brought a reputation with him to Africa and for the past three years had shuttled back and forth across the northern and central expanse of the continent, wherever the big news was. He had covered the Mau-Mau uprising in Eastern Africa, the Amazons in Dahomey, governmental duplicity in several colonies, the trial of alleged cannibals in Nigeria which turned out to be more of a comedy than a trial. But these were past successes; now it was the Aniotos and so far he had been stumped like a cub reporter.

Within an hour Constantine interrupted his reflections with a cordial message from His Excellency inviting him to come at once.

"Don't go."

Mackenzie looked up from reading the Governor's invitation. Constantine was grinning broadly, in most friendly fashion.

"What?"

"Don't go." Constantine's expression had not changed. He might have been discussing the latest gossip around town.

"Why not?"

"Don't interfere. It's marked."

"What's marked? Marked for what!"

He became conscious of a pungent odor, a foul animal odor which, though faint, was particularly penetrating. It was the same sour odor which had been present after the attack on board the *Copper Lady.* He moved quickly to the open window and leaned out. Some internal warning mechanism caused him to jerk his head back into the room and swing about. Constantine stopped halfway across the room toward him. His smile had weakened and become uncertain.

"Marked for what?" Mackenzie repeated.

"I'm sorry, sir. You misunderstood me. I said that if you will mark the menu on the dresser, sir, and put it outside your door, I will see that your dinner is brought to your room tonight." His face was blank as he bowed low and went out.

It was then that Mackenzie noticed on the back of the Governor's note a crudely drawn leopard's paw with fangs extended.

From its eminence, the Government House overlooked most of the city. Mackenzie entered the imposing but stolid-looking building and found himself in a large entry which had a tile floor, a single ta-

ble, and a vaulted ceiling. An emaciated black man rose from the table and came toward him. His piercing eyes moved over Mackenzie's face and down his body to his feet and back to his face where they held, searching. Mackenzie thought he might have imagined there was malevolence in the man's unabashed inspection. "Monsieur Mackenzie?" he said at last. "This way, please."

Mackenzie followed him down a wide corridor lined with portraits of royalty past and present, and was ushered into a vast room crowded with heavy furniture and Victorian bric-a-brac. Behind the ornately carved desk sat the Governor, His Excellency Alphonse Robelet. Crossed flags on the wall behind him made the only spot of color.

The Governor stood up and came around the desk with his hand outstretched. He looked out of place here. He reminded Mackenzie of an irrepressible little druggist named Pete back home in Ohio. His Excellency was short and rotund, with pink cheeks and wide brown eyes and heavy white hair waving back from a broad forehead. He had a gold tooth in front.

"Welcome, Mr. Mackenzie," he said in English with only a slight accent. "I received your letter from Dakar and I'm happy that you arrived safely. I was getting concerned about you."

"I came up by freighter hoping to pick up some information along the way but as it turned out I learned nothing."

"Most unpleasant trip. Slow and noisy and the engines shake your teeth out. The plane's much better." Robelet chuckled. "You news fellows. Always working, always looking for a story."

He returned to his high backed chair and offered Mackenzie a cigar from an ornate box, then leaned back and steepled his chubby fingers. "Now what is of special interest to you in our steaming city of Stanleyville?"

"Aniotos."

Robelet's face settled. "Aniotos. The Society of Leopard Men." He sighed. "Damn 'em."

"When the story came through about the murder of a Mrs. Abernathy under peculiar circumstances, a New York news magazine cabled me to check it out. The story mentioned the Aniotos."

"Yes, a horrible thing. Abernathy is a good friend of mine, an American buyer of palm oil who comes up to Stanleyville once a year. On this last trip two months ago, he brought his wife along although he should have known better. I must say she was somewhat—ah—flighty. Nobody knows why she did such a stupid thing as to rent a car one afternoon and drive off into the bush and get herself killed. Caused me all kinds of trouble. A week ago I received an

order from Brussels to stamp out the Aniotos. Just like that." He groaned. "That's what comes of having a home office on the other side of the world. They have no idea of conditions out here. They seem to think I can go out and round up all the Leopard Men and line them against the wall and execute them. I have no idea who the Leopard Men are. The identity of the Aniotos is probably the best kept secret in Africa, or anywhere else for that matter."

"How do you know Mrs. Abernathy was murdered by Leopard Men?"

"There never is a question when a Leopard Man kills. He invariably leaves characteristic signs, such as claw marks and footprints. Her throat was slashed, a breast torn off, and her heart removed. Both probably were eaten by the Leopard Man later."

"Do they have any connection with the Mau-Mau?"

"None whatever. The Mau-Mau are dedicated to the extinction of the white man. The Aniotos have no such purpose."

"What is their purpose?"

Robelet spread his hands. "They apparently have none, except to kill and kill. They prey more on their own people than on whites. Sometimes they kill for revenge, sometimes as punishment, sometimes even for profit. It appears that some Leopard Men are simply hired assassins of witchdoctors to secure parts of a human body for use in potions and ceremonies. In such cases, the death of the victim is incidental and not the purpose. No one knows who they are, how they communicate with one another, or where they are. It is pretty clear that the Wamba section of Belgian Congo is the center of their operations but you find them all over Africa—in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Angola, Kenya, and other areas." A worried frown creased Robelet's pale forehead. "I'm getting all the publicity because the murder happened to be committed here. This is especially unfortunate at this time when there is great pressure both here and at home for Belgium to pull out of the Congo. God help the blacks if we do. They'll destroy themselves.

"Stamp them out, Brussels says. What do they think I have been trying to do the past five years? Any black you see could be an Anioto—anyone you pass on the street, a bellboy at your hotel, a native from the bush, one of my clerks, even my own houseboy. The Aniotos can murder their own people and nobody gets very excited but let them kill one white woman, a visitor, and the world takes it up. There's hell to pay. I have just made a big shakeup in my police department to satisfy the home office."

"It's hard to understand," Mackenzie said, "the kind of man who could be an Anioto."

"Only a native can understand the Leopard Men, and I'm no native. I've been out here five years and, thank God, I'm about due to be replaced, temporarily, while I take a year in Brussels to recuperate. I may never come back. My government may have withdrawn by then. During my term we have caught and executed nine Aniotos and I never understood one of them. They were all kinds, from educated blacks in government service to the lowest savage in the bush." He straightened. "One of my police officers is going this afternoon to a village a little way upcountry to investigate another Leopard Man killing. All of a sudden we're getting a rash of them. Would you like to go along?"

"Yes, and thanks."

"I'll have my boy take you over to the district office and meanwhile I'll let them know you're coming. Your story might only add to my embarassment but nevertheless I want to cooperate as best I can. You must come to dinner tonight with my daughter and me. You should be back in plenty of time. Now I'll ring for Nkona." He pressed a button and Mackenzie heard the sound of a distant bell.

The door behind Mackenzie opened and Robelet's face lighted up. "Here's my daughter," he said. He stood up and Mackenzie rose with him.

"I'm sorry, Dad," the girl said. "I didn't know you were busy."

"Come in," Robelet said. "I want you to meet Mr. Mackenzie from Dakar. My daughter, Avis. Mr. Mackenzie is an American, a representative of a New York news service, in Stanleyville on assignment. I've invited him for dinner."

The girl came forward, smiling, and held out her hand. She returned his handclasp with frank pressure. She was taller than her father, and slim. Her white Parisian dress went well with her black hair and golden skin and luminous eyes, "Do come," she said.

Mackenzie inclined his head, feeling that this was one part of the Stanleyville excursion that he was going to thoroughly enjoy.

The boy arrived then and stood inside the door waiting. The district headquarters was half a block from the Government House and when Mackenzie entered Horky waved from a desk in the corner.

"I was just about to take off for the bush when Robelet phoned," Horky said. "You're welcome to come along of course." He grabbed his helmet and led the way to a rickety car at the curb. "We can ride most of the way but will have to hike a couple of miles when the road leaves off."

Near the edge of town Horky pulled into a service station which consisted of an ancient gasoline pump, a ramshackle building which served as a garage, and a small mud shack which was the owner's living quarters. A young

black woman leaned beside the door of the mud building.

A white man crawled out from under a truck in the garage and wiped his hands on his pants. He was an evil-looking fellow with little eyes, a crooked nose, and snaggle teeth. The girl wore only a dirty pagne which was a single strip of cloth three yards long wound about her hips and falling to the ground. Her dark skin glistened like rich mahogany in the sun. She stretched her arms languidly above her head and assumed a pose. She stroked her protuberant breasts and watched Mackenzie insolently. Mackenzie chuckled. Regardless of race, environment, or education, all women know the language of the eyes.

The white mechanic veered toward her and shoved her roughly inside the shack. There was a sharp, slapping sound and a scream. The woman rushed out, howling, blood running from a cut lip, and fled down the road. The white man came toward them brushing off his hands. "Gas, Mr. Horky?"

With the tank refilled, they drove out of town and turned into a narrow, bumpy road that led northward into the bush. "Do you have many mixed marriages?" Mackenzie asked thoughtfully.

"None. But a lot of whites take native girls home to bed and the girls welcome it, actively seek it. The black girls seem oversexed. In the native villages it usually is the woman who is the aggressor." Horky glowered at the road. "But that dirty bitch at the service station is going too far. Lichti had a right to beat her up. She ought to get more than a beating."

They passed small farms, each with its mud hut and barn that appeared about to collapse. Evidently the principle crops were manioc and bananas, with some maize and scraggly cotton. The skies opened up again and rain came down in bucketfuls, pounding fiercely against the windshield and bouncing a foot high in the road. The lush jungle crowded close on both sides, the dark green punctuated by the brilliant hues of moon flowers, zinnias, and hibiscus. Coral creepers grew rank along the roadside.

Mackenzie stared into the gloomy forest that towered like a menacing giant over the puny car. "What makes a Leopard Man?"

"Who knows? It's a disease. When you're dealing with a Leopard Man you're not dealing with a man at all but with a leopard. The natives believe it implicitly. They have great faith. If you say you're a leopard, and look like a leopard, and act like a leopard, then so far as they are concerned you are a leopard. The Aniotos get to the point where they even believe it themselves, I understand. It is a psychological regression into some deep animal instinct that takes over and transforms them into a leopard

with all the animal's savagery and strength and cunning. The Leopard Men can't help what they do, any more than other men can help drinking, or taking narcotics."

"What about those who kill for profit by obtaining parts of bodies for witchdoctors?"

"There are those, too," Horky said. "But I'm speaking of the true Anioto, the Leopard Man who puts on his leopard skin and his claws and is no longer a man but a leopard. It may be a release, or a means of expressing some deep urge that he can't satisfy in civilized living, or even under primitive tribal rule."

"Are there any white Aniotos?"

"Well," Horky said, "we've never caught one but I wouldn't say it was impossible. Some of the whites have lived so long in the jungle that they have become like natives. In fact, they are natives."

A few miles farther they came to the end of the road. The rain had slowed to a soaking drizzle. They followed a narrow, dripping, bush-crowded trail that was slimy underfoot. Even with jacket collars turned up, water trickled down their necks and ran off their chins. "Damn this country," Horky growled. "A man who's crazy enough to live in this muck deserves all he gets."

Half an hour they slogged through the mud past groves of oil palms which held huge clusters of mahogany-colored, pear-shaped fruit as large as big cherries. They came suddenly upon the village, a wide cleared space crowded with long, one-room buildings with sharp roofs constructed of bamboo ribs. The walls had been daubed with clay to bake in the African sun. The roofs were thatched with banana leaves. Naked childred and men and women wearing only loin cloths padded listlessly about, paying no attention to the visitors.

"These are Wagenias," Horky explained, "Damn, dirty tribe."

They were very black, under medium height, and most of them excessively ugly.

Horky corralled the sullen head man and after considerable palaver in native dialect was led to a building which contained the body of the victim. Half a dozen ancient, shrunken women sat outside swaying slowly and chanting an eerie dirge. The horribly mutilated body of a young woman lay inside on a mat of banana leaves. It was sickening. Mackenzie came out quickly and waited for Horky to finish his inspection.

"How do you know it was a Leopard Man and not an animal that did that?" Mackenzie said.

"As I said before, a Leopard Man is an animal. It was a Leopard Man all right. The throat was slashed and only the breast and certain organs were taken."

"It looked like claw marks."

"The Aniotos wear iron bracelets to which are attached four curved

knives that lay in the palms of their hands. They leave marks very much like a leopard's claws."

"Why would anyone kill a young girl like that?"

"Maybe as punishment for violatting a *tabu,* maybe she refused to live with some man, maybe—" Horky shrugged. "Who knows?"

Horky moved about the village questioning everyone. They shrank away as he approached and kept their eyes downcast. They were sullen and uncommunicative. One young woman, naked except for a narrow strip of bright cloth like a G-string, watched Mackenzie boldly, moving slowly with an exaggerated swaying of her hips and stroking her hands across her breasts and down her sides in obvious invitation. One man, bigger than the others, came briefly into view and shoved the woman roughly into a mud hut. Mackenzie recognized him as the broken-nosed one on board ship, now stripped down to a loin cloth.

"Let's go," Horky said at last. "All natives are convinced that a person may normally die only of old age, starvation, smallpox, or be killed in battle. Any other death is witchcraft, and they won't go against witchcraft. I'd get as much information talking to a banana tree."

"I saw a man here," Mackenzie said. "A big man, pock-marked face, nose out of shape. He was on board the *Copper Lady.*"

"Gawelli?" Horky chuckled. "He's just a big simple child, too timid to kill a warthog. He couldn't be an Anioto."

They got back to their car and started the return trip. They rode in silence. Horky kept his eyes straight ahead and his hands tight on the wheel to keep the car in the slick road. Mackenzie watched the jungle go by in moody contemplation of the information he had gained, finding none of it pleasant or even understandable.

"Now you've seen an Anioto killing," Horky said. "I've told you all I know about them and I probably know as much as anyone. But you'll never write the story."

"Why not?"

"The Aniotos won't permit it. I warned you not to get too inquisitive. They don't want publicity, or anyone prying into their Society. Frankly, I believe they'd like to see the Belgians withdraw from the Congo and in their own way are making it uncomfortable for us. They have two good reasons for getting rid of you and I'd say that the head man, whoever he is, of the local Aniotos might consider it worth his while to take personal charge. My advice to you is get out fast."

"I'll lock my door and keep my gun handy," Mackenzie said.

Horky made a violent gesture. "What's a locked door to a Leopard Man? What's a gun? What's a life? To be accepted into the Society of

Leopard Men, the first thing an initiate must do is kill a favorite relative or a close friend. Second, a committee selects a certain victim in a village and sets the night. The initiate must get into the village, find the victim, commit the murder, and get out without being discovered. The Aniotos are all over the place with their spears watching for him. If they see him they try to kill him and usually do. If he succeeds in getting out alive, he becomes a Leopard Man. What's a locked door to a man who can do that?"

"A locked door plus a gun is damned good insurance," Mackenzie said grimly.

Horky grunted. "I warned you."

They drove back into town and stopped before the Moravia. Mackenzie got out and stood beside the car. "Thanks for the ride. And for the warning. You're a dedicated cop."

"Tell that to the Governor. I'm being replaced on account of the recent flareup of Anioto killings. He needs new blood in the department, he says."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm working on it," Horky said, and drove off.

At seven o'clock Mackenzie arrived at the Robelet home and a houseboy showed him into an Old World parlor. It was long and narrow, similar in effect to Robelet's office but ornately furnished as living quarters. Robelet entered immediately and greeted him warmly. "Sit down and be comfortable, my boy," he said. "Let's have a short one while we wait for Avis. You know how women are about getting dressed."

Robelet sat opposite him in a brocaded chair. He launched into a humous account of a trip down the Congo the year before. Robelet seemed most friendly and genuinely pleased to have Mackenzie as his guest although with characteristic cynicism Mackenzie reflected that some of his host's show of friendliness could stem from a desire to be treated kindly in any article Mackenzie might write.

They rose as Avis came into the room. She wore a pale blue tight fitting dress that revealed the shapely outline of her slim body. Her hair was combed more formally than this afternoon and she had on a little more makeup. The effect was striking. Mackenzie looked at her in unabashed appreciation.

She inclined her head in acknowledgement and smiled. "We're happy to have you, Mr. Mackenzie."

Shortly the boy announced dinner and they went into the enormous dining room with its long table and fine linen and rich tableware. They sat at one end of the table. Avis and Mackenzie were across from each other and Robelet at the head. The dinner began with good vintage wine served in fine glass. "I hope you like my choice of wine, Mr. Mackenzie," Robelet said pouring the glass full.

"Better than I'm used to. You live well," Mackenzie said, thinking of the filthy, tumbledown shacks of the natives on the riverfront and on the fringes of the town.

"One must preserve the graces," Robelet said, a trifle pompously. "The white man's greatest crime is to let himself go native."

"Besides," Avis smiled, "Dad likes good food, good wine, good clothes—and he hates the sunshine."

Throughout the dinner Robelet kept up a bright conversation, mostly a monologue. Mackenzie was glad to let him talk; he found it more interesting to watch the candlelight flickering on the smooth, composed face of the girl opposite him. Sometimes she met his eyes steadily for a moment and as the dinner progressed, the color in her cheeks heightened and her eyes became even more luminous.

After dinner they went back into the parlor and the boy brought their coffee in a silver service. Avis sat beside Mackenzie on the sofa and served the coffee while Robelet brought cigars.

Robelet took a seat opposite and plunged into a story about one of his superiors in the service who had come out from the home office the year before and found it impossible to adjust to life in the Congo. Mackenzie could feel the closeness of the girl beside him. Now and then she brushed against him as she moved. The faint, exciting odor or perfume drifted in the air.

Nkona hurried in from the outside hall and a look of annoyance came into Robelet's face at the interruption. The boy handed him a scrawled message. Robelet read it and his face became livid. He wrote a brief answer and handed it back. "Hurry!" he commanded.

"There's been a murder." Robelet's voice trembled with excitement. "Lichti's woman. Lichti runs a small garage out at the end of Brug Street. She was—mutilated. It was the work of Aniotos. The bounders have the effrontery to come right into the city!" He jumped up. "I'm sorry to leave you for a while but I'm going to investigate this personally."

"We stopped there for gasolene this afternoon," Mackenzie said.

"I'll appreciate it if you'll remain with Avis while I'm gone," Robelet said rapidly. "I'll tell the district officer to send up a man to stand by. He'll be here in fifteen minutes. I myself will be back in an hour or two." He hurried out of the room.

"A horrible thing," Avis shuddered. Her voice sounded hollow. "I had a strange feeling all day that something awful was going to happen."

With Robelet gone, the big room seemed especially vast and empty, menacing. They sat in strained silence. "Dakar seems a world away from here," Mackenzie offered.

"I've never been to Dakar but I was thinking how different this is from Brussels. I am not very fami-

liar even with Stanleyville. I have spent only a part of the summers here, the rest of the time I have lived at home in Brussels. Until last year I was in school. When Dad was given this post he insisted that I stay in Europe except for short visits. He has such a dread that I will go native and start running around barefoot and wearing—"

"Pagnes?"

She colored. "This old building is so spooky. I think—"

The lights went out. A scream started in Avis's throat and she covered her mouth with her hand. The only illumination was a dim glow near the window from a quarter moon hanging low in the sky. She laughed a little, tremulously. "Something has happened to the electric system." She stood up. "I'll have a boy bring some candles."

"Stay here!" Mackenzie said sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it is better if you don't move around in the darkness." He led her to the open space in the middle of the room. He could feel her trembling.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I don't know." The silence was filled with barely discernible sounds, vague hints of creakings and rustlings. In artless simplicity her hand found his in the darkness.

Her hand tightened. "Do you smell it?" Panic gave her whisper a shrillness, and he put his arm about her shoulders. An unmistakable odor had come into the room, a foul, nauseating jungle odor. It was not strong but it filled his nostrils and drifted about him weighted with dread.

"What is it?" she whispered again. "What is that horrible smell?" She clung to him. "I know it's silly to be so afraid."

"It is not silly," he said, tightening his arm. "That's the odor of an animal, close by."

The vagaries of the dim light seemed to reveal shadowy forms and glittering eyes behind every chair. He knew with unexplainable certainty that a Leopard Man was in the room.

"Is there a gun in the house—close?" he whispered.

"In the gun case in Dad's den—but it's locked and Dad has the key!"

Mackenzie heard a deep growl. It came from behind the sofa where he and Avis had been sitting. He could not have imagined the sound, it was like the muted snarl of an animal at bay. At least now he had it placed. The pungent odor was suffocating.

"Try to get a gun," he said swiftly. "Break open the gun case if you can—but get out of this room! Hurry!"

He moved with her to the door and squeezed her arm reassuringly as she slipped down the hall. He held his open pocket knife in his hand and advanced cautiously toward the unobstructed area in the

middle of the room. It would have been useless to attempt to hide or to escape down the hall.

Like a flitting shadow the creature came on in the darkness soundlessly, with eyes gleaming like a cat's and with claws outstretched. It glided on its hind legs, crouching. Suddenly it rose in a tremendous leap and catapulted through the air from what seemed an incredible distance. Before Mackenzie could step aside the thing was upon him, bearing him to the floor, snarling and clawing. Desperately he slashed with his knife but knew the short blade was not penetrating the loose skin of the writhing form. The creature slashed through his jacket and into his flesh with razor claws. With a sense of horror, Mackenzie knew that those claws could rip his throat out. Mackenzie drew up his legs and slammed his feet against the figure on top of him, and rolled away and bounded to his feet.

The thing was snarling hideously. It rushed again with forepaws sweeping in vicious arcs aimed at his face and throat. Mackenzie jabbed with his knife and beat his fist against the beast's head. A pocket knife and a bare fist were puny weapons with which to fight a savage creature armed with needle claws and protected by a thick skin of fur, particularly when that creature, practiced in the art of killing, was malevolently bent on murder. There could be only one reasonable outcome to such an unequal combat. Grimly Mackenzie dodged and ducked and slipped aside, and struck with knife and fist and feet, while his breath grew tight in his throat and pain stabbed at his chest. Soon his coat hung in shreds and the deep gashes in his body burned like fire.

A gun would have evened up the fight. Mackenzie thought of the automatic resting in the bureau drawer in his hotel room. Horky had warned him of danger not three hours ago—but you don't shove a gat in your pocket when you go calling on the Governor and his daughter. So you die horribly under the claws of a Leopard Man. And Avis would be next—

The roar of a heavy caliber gun sent shock waves slamming against his eardrums, and the acrid odor of gunpowder swept over him. The shot had come from the hall doorway. Realization flashed into his mind that Avis had found a gun after all, and then the hideous snarl of the creature as it streaked past him toward the girl brought its own instantaneous reaction. He leaped upon it as it went by and fell full upon the lithe figure. He wrapped his legs about the steel-muscled form beneath him and struggled to get his forearm under the beast's chin, striking again and again with the pocketknife.

They rolled violently on the floor while the Leopard Man plunged about, snarling frenziedly, and Mackenzie hung on with grim de-

termination and the hand holding the knife rose and fell, rose and fell.

Mackenzie did not know how long it was but at last the Leopard Man's strength seemed to withdraw reluctantly from his body and finally the creature lay quite still except for spasmodic twitching. Mackenzie pushed himself away.

"Now you can get a candle," he panted.

"I missed, didn't I?" Avis came to him, trembling violently, and he put his arms about her and awkwardly patted her shoulder. "I couldn't even hit it at five yards," she said, her voice muffled against his chest. "But I'm glad we're both alive."

She went out into the corridor and shortly came back with a lighted taper. Her face was ashen. "I found Nkona. He's dead."

Mackenzie knelt beside the loose-skinned form on the floor. He jerked off the ugly mask and pulled back the leopard's scalp from the man's head. Horky's eyes dragged open. Instinctively his lips drew back in a snarl. Slowly his face changed, loosened and settled, and his eyes lost their glitter. "I warned you," he whispered. Then his eyes became set and staring and his body went limp, like a dying leopard's.

MANHUNT'S

Book Bargains

1. FANNY HILL. (Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure). By John Cleland. Now available for the first time after 214 years of banning and suppression. This is the classic tale of Fanny Hill, young girl who turned prostitute and whose charms and abilities made her the quest of London's male, and female, gentry. **$5.00**

2. 1601. By Mark Twain. One of the most suppressed yet most eagerly sought-after masterpieces of American literature. Issued anonymously in 1880, its circulation up to now has been relegated to the realm of "forbidden books." Unexpurgated, handsome collector's limited edition in a decorative slip case. **$4.95**

3. DISGUISED HYPNOTISM. By J. Whiting. Fact filled easy to follow manual—you'll learn the amazing techniques for inducing the hypnotic trance without the subjects awareness. **$2.00**

4. THE NECESSITY OF ATHEISM. By Percy Bysshe Shelley. An important and profound little known work by the great English poet. Charged with indignation and damnation, the tract created a great amount of trouble for the author. **$1.00**

5. APHRODISIACS. By Alan Hull Walton. The first full-scale history of "love potions" through the ages, from ancient times to the present day. Includes a large section on aphrodisiacs in cooking, a fascinating evaluation of the effects of more than 100 foods and beverages. Large, handsome volume profusely illustrated. **$7.95**

6. THIS I BELIEVE. This is the famous anthology containing the basic beliefs of 100 great thinkers of the world. Represented are Stevenson, Franklin, Baruch, Confucius, Sandburg, Socrates, etc. A must for every library. **$1.00**

7. TROPIC OF CAPRICORN. By Henry Miller. Exactly as published in the long suppressed Olympia Press edition of Paris. Called a creation of genius by some a piece of pornography by others, it is undoubtedly one of the most outspoken and astonishingly frank books dealing with sexual reallsm. A handsomely bound edition. **$1.00**

8. SEX LIFE IN THE SOUTH SEAS. By B. Schloff. A scholarly study by the noted authority on the South Seas. Chapters included are: Sex Life of Savage Children, Savage Prostitution, Incest and Rape, Love Dances and Erotic Songs, Savage Sex Technique in Marriage. Illustrated with photos and prints. 441 pages. **$4.95**

9. THE GANGRENE. Currently banned in France. This is the true, first-hand detailed account by seven Algerian intellectuals of the most horrible tortures ever inflicted on man. Copies of this book were confiscated by the French police who raided the printing plant and smashed the plates. Not for people with weak stomachs. **$3.00**

10. LOST BOOKS OF THE BIBLE: The Books of the Apocrypha. This should be next to your Bible. Authorized version of the divinely inspired books that the scholars took out of the Bible. The rest of the chapters of Book of Esther, the first and second book of Esoras, Book of Tobit, Wisdom of Jesus, etc. **$4.95**

11. OUR METHOD OF GENTLE MASSAGE. By G. Rama and B. Light. Put out in a limited edition, this cardboard covered pamphlet was published for $15.00. Limited to 777 copies. **$1.00**

12. BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PROHIBITED BOOKS: A bibliography with critical notes of erotic, pornographic and curious books. By "Pisanus Fraxi." Three volumes, 1,746 pages. Privately printed in Paris (in the English language) this rare book sold for $500—when you could get it. Edition limited to 500 sets sold by subscription to mature adults only.
The entire three volume set: **$45.00**

13. PORNOGRAPHY & THE LAW. By Drs. E. & P. Kronhausen. Scholarly, remarkably candid look at erotica novels, erotic autobiography, and hard core pornography. Here for the first time you can read actual selections from such secret "pornographic" classics as "Autobiography of a Flea," "The Lascivious Hypocrite," "Lustful Stories," etc. Complete bibliography at the end of the book. Handsome collector's limited edition in slip case. 418 pages. **$4.95**

14. POETRY GRAB BAG. Eight original first editions of aspiring poets. Some will no doubt become famous when these works are no longer available. Pub. at $21.00. **$1.00**

15. MODERN SEX TECHNIQUES (Illustrated). Frank discussions of sexual practices, presenting for the first time detailed instructions for achieving mutual satisfaction. Plain-talk, straightforward information on basic sex techniques and positions. Controversial and startling. **$3.95**

16. TEN LESSONS IN SEX TECHNIQUE. A frank and important book on sexual pleasure in marriage. Positions, techniques and correct applications, etc. Includes an account of normal and abnormal sexual acts for every married person. **$2.00**

17. CURRIER & IVES (FOUR SEASONS). Four prints. Faithful full color reproductions of the rare lithographs that sell for hundreds of dollars. Interesting peaceful country scenes. 7" x 10", perfect for framing. All four: Pub. at $10.00. **$1.00**

18. SEXUAL RELATIONS OF MANKIND. By P. Mantegaza. This banned and suppressed classic of sexual science now available to serious adults. Hundreds of topics including Sexual Initiation, Erotic Positions, Brutal Methods of Defloration, Self-Defloration, Lesbian Contests, etc. **$5.00**

19. FEMALE FORM. Two photo-filled 6" x 9" magazines featuring a parade of female nudes, posed the way you like them. Many photographs. Both books. **$1.00**

20. SEX WITHOUT GUILT. By Albert Ellis. Our sex code is such that countless men and women must fight a lonely battle against guilt for doing those sexual things which are neither harmful to themselves nor to others . . . One purpose of this book is to help you understand sex guilt so that you may throw off its shackles. **$4.95**

21. SPORT GRAB BAG. 5 books. Boxing, hunting, fishing, skiing etc. Pub. at $12.00. All 5 for **$1.00**

22. ADVENTURES IN SMALL BUSINESS. 119 success stories of ideas products and inventions developed into profit-making businesses. **$1.00**

23. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A PIMP. Fast moving, true story of life in a hotel as seen through the eyes of this self-confessed procurer. Stiff wrappers. **$2.00**

24. ON THE CAUSE OF HOMOSEXUALITY. By Hamilton and Legman. Unusual, sometimes sympathetic approach to lesbianism and homosexuality. Cases include lesbianism, incest and the sex life of monkeys as personally observed. Illustrated. **$2.00**

25. SEX MYTHOLOGY. Includes an account of the Masculine Cross. Scarce, scholarly study of ancient sex worship. The Phallus, Sexual Vocabulary of the Bible explained for the first time, religious prostitution, phallic and sun worship, etc. Privately Printed. **$3.00**

26. THE PLAGUE OF LUST. By Dr. Julius Rosenbaum. Indispensable addition to the library of history and medicine. A history of strange sexual practices. The author quotes Greek, Latin and early Christian authors, revealing ancient erotic practices, strange sexual rites and unnatural loves, such as: Cult of Venus, Lingam and Phallic Worship, Cunnilingus, Sodomy, Brothels, and Courtesans, the Fellator, and Unique Sexual Practices. 635 pages. **$7.50**

27. THE KAMA SUTRA. Banned from the United States for 75 years. The most intimate sex secrets of the Orient are revealed in this frank book of detailed "under-the-counter" dealers who had copies smuggled in from Europe. **$5.00**

28. SUNTAN NUDIST BOOKS. Two large size pictorial books vividly illustrated with unposed and candid photography of men and women in nudist camps. Two books. **$1.00**

Mail this coupon to:

MANHUNT, Dept. 66, 545 Fifth Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

Please send me the books circled below:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

Enclosed please find $_____

IMPORTANT: Add 50¢ per order for all orders less than $5. No CODs. New York residents add 3% city sales tax.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____ ZONE_____

SIN OF OMISSION

IT WAS while she was putting a point on an eyebrow pencil with a naked razor blade that the blade slipped, and there she was with a nasty gash in the palm of her left hand, blood pouring into the wash-basin of the hotel bathroom, a train to be caught to London, from there a plane to Paris, and from there another plane on to Athens . . .

"Damn!" said Claire Paterson. The only encouraging features of the incident were that at least it was her left hand, that blood had not dripped onto her clothes, that she was already dressed and packed and was not pushed for time. Blood, meanwhile, continued to pour out. The cut was deep and aching. She shuddered. After a while she wrapped the hand in a handkerchief and rang for the boy to take her suitcase downstairs.

At the reception desk she asked the manager: "I've just cut my hand very badly. I'm rather a hypochondriac, I'm afraid. Could you tell me if there's a doctor near here who could dress it for me quickly before I catch my train?" As he tut-tutted in sympathy and pursed

BY

PAT

AIREY

Thou shall not bear false witness . . .
but the doctor was such an attractive man.

his lips in reflection, she added: "I'm more or less travelling non-stop from here to Athens, so I'd like to get the thing disinfected before I start out."

"Of course . . . this is Sunday morning. It may be a little difficult. I don't know what his surgery hours are, but there is a doctor not far from here, as a matter of fact. A G.P." He got out the phone book to look up the exact address. "Would you like me to ring him for you first?"

"Well, no. He might turn me down as he probably takes Sunday morning off. I think my wisest move is just to appear on his doorstep and wave my poor sore paw at him."

The manager heartily agreed that the doctor would find this irresistible, but he didn't say so to Claire in so many words. She was a very beautiful woman, tall, graceful and elegantly dressed. She had been a famous fashion model, and now was directrice of Thuillier's, in Paris, one of the great fashion houses.

The doctor's residence was on the way to the station, so she had her luggage sent on and set out on foot with Mimi, her three-year-old white Pomeranian bitch. She still had plenty of time for her train. Instead of the cosy villa and rose garden that she had for no reason at all been expecting, the doctor's house turned out to be one in a long terrace that had once been the height of bourgeois opulence but now looked rather seedy. It had three storeys and a basement, however, and looked old-fashionedly roomy inside, with lots of staircases, and a pantry. No doubt the doctor could afford servants to run it for him. Doctors were all pretty rich in these days of the National Health service, weren't they?

She rang the doorbell and nothing happened for a long time. She studied the brass plate. No surgery on Sunday. "He must be at church," she thought, and was about to give one last ring when the door slowly opened.

The man who opened it was no taller than Claire. He was about thirty-five, stockily built, with a dark complexion and dark hair. His most striking feature was his intensely black, burning eyes. Despite the passionate eyes there was a stillness about him, as if he were consciously masking some tumult within. Although their eyes locked, Claire was sure that his whole attention was not concentrated on her for some long seconds.

"Yes?" he said at last.

"Dr. Reynolds?"

"Yes."

She explained about her hand. He stood aside and said: "Of course. Come in."

Mimi the Pomeranian was through the door in a flash, excited, tail waving, dragging Claire along with her.

Claire shortened the leash. "I'm terribly sorry. I hope you don't

mind the dog as well. I'm on my way to the station, actually. I couldn't leave her anywhere."

"That's all right." The doctor seemed to be back on earth again. He smiled slightly and stooped to pat Mimi. His right hand was bandaged.

"You've cut your hand too!" exclaimed Claire. The doctor looked at his hand as if noticing for the first time that it was bandaged.

"Yes. A coincidence!" He had a slight foreign accent. He smiled again, and Claire felt a flutter of nervousness strike through her. Trying to ignore this and avoid analysing the reasons for it, she chatted with great poise, apologising for disturbing him out of visiting hours, as he led her to the surgery.

"That's of no importance, I assure you."

She sat down in the surgery while he assembled bandages and disinfectants. She reflected on the silence in the house, the air of desertion she felt in the hallway. No wife? No servants? No children? The carpets had been up on the hall stairs, and there were more pieces of carpet, not stair runners, as they were of varying widths, rolled up and pushed against the skirting boards along one wall of the entrance hall. Mimi was running round the room as she always did in other people's houses, sniffing excitedly all the new odours perceptible only to a dog's acute sense.

As the doctor cleaned and bandaged her hand, expertly and quickly despite his own injury, she pinned down something else that had vaguely troubled her since she'd set eyes on him. His clothes. They were of good quality, just right—the dark blue suit, white shirt and discreet silk tie, but he looked as if he'd slept in them. Maybe he'd been out all night on a case. Looking closely at him as he put the finishing tucks in the bandage, she saw shadows of exhaustion round his eyes.

"There, that will be fine," he said. "I don't think you'll have any complications. It's a deep cut but clean. Unfortunately, it will leave a mark."

"Doctor, it's so terribly kind—and I do feel so terribly guilty. Your free day!"

He shook his head, sighed, sat on the edge of his desk, and offered her a cigarette which she accepted. He took one and lit both from a gold pocket lighter.

"But I'm only touching down in Paris long enough to park the dog, and then go straight on to Athens," she continued.

"You must live in Paris if you're taking your dog there?"

"Yes. I've been working there for several years. Now I've got a good, steady job and have decided to stay. You know Paris?"

"I spent part of my school days there. Then my parents decided to move to England when I was about eighteen."

"You're French? I notice you have a slight accent."

"No, we were Italian. My father's name was Renato, and he changed it to Reynolds."

They smoked in silence for a few moments, then the doctor laughed.

"I was expecting confidence for confidence but it didn't come," he said. "You must realise I'm consumed with curiosity as to why you have come all the way from your obviously glamorous Parisian circles to this provincial backwater. Only, of course, I'm too much of a gentleman to ask."

His charm let him get away with it. Claire, in fact, would have been prepared to sit chatting with him for as long as he liked.

"I had boarded my dog out in kennels here while I was deciding whether I liked my work in Paris well enough to stay there. Now that I am settling there, I shot over this week-end to collect her."

As if she knew she had been mentioned, Mimi ran over to Claire, wagging her tail, then stood on hind legs to be petted by the doctor. She seemed to have taken a fancy to him, which was unusual. She was nearly always aloof, and sometimes downright unfriendly, to strangers. Then she ran off round the room, sniffing and panting, on another tour of inspection.

"Only you have to park her in Paris and go straight off to Athens," the doctor said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Another of those questions you're too discreet to ask?" Claire laughed. "I work for a fashion house and I'm shepherding a flock of model girls down there to show our new collection."

There was a silence. The doctor's dark eyes were on her, and Claire again felt a thrill of nerves. This time she faced up to the reason for it. The doctor was dangerously attractive. Claire's career had taught her not only how to wear clothes, but how to handle men, and it was a rare bird who could make her feel even slightly flustered. But this doctor . . . His eyes now had that burning intensity she'd noticed when he had first opened the door, only now his attention was fully concentrated on her. She wondered if he had hypnotic eyes, some people did. As she was considering this, she suddenly realised the room and the house were silent, too silent. Something was missing . . .

She jumped up. "I must go. I'll miss my train."

He rose and took her hand in his left. "Bon voyage, excuse my left hand. Je vous donne la main du coeur." She noticed he wore a wedding ring, European-style, on his left hand. So there was a wife.

He bowed slightly, and gave her another of his strangely intent looks, which after a few moments shifted its focus to something beyond and behind her. He caught his breath. "Your dog . . ."

"Oh!" Claire turned. Of course,

that was why the silence seemed so unnatural—no panting and puffing from the little white dog. She had nosed open the surgery door and was now out in the hall, scrabbling and clawing at the rolled up carpets. When Claire ran to pick up the trailing lead, the dog had to be dragged away. She whined, and the whites of her eyes showed in her desperate efforts to get back and sniff at those carpets. Claire dragged her to the front door, embarrassed. The doctor waved away her renewed apologies, her requests to be told how much she owed him.

"I never charge for work done out of hours," was all she could get out of him, and they parted in a welter of excuses, thanks, mutual smiles and hand wavings. Claire knew he did not close the front door for a good long moment after she had gone.

Rattling towards London on the train, she decided the doctor himself and the whole experience had been unusual in some way, but she couldn't pinpoint exactly why. She thought it was a pity she'd never see him again. She would have liked to get to know him better.

One afternoon four months later, in Paris, one of the salesgirls at Thuillier's fashion house came to Claire. "There's a gentleman asking to see you." She handed Claire a a visiting card. It announced Detective-Superintendent Ring, of Scotland Yard. "Good heavens! Are you sure he wants to see *me*?" Claire asked, feeling the flutter of alarm that assails all guiltless citizens when informed that a policeman is asking to see them. She went out of her office to the main salon, wondering how one should address a detective-superintendent. All the detective stories she'd read had just a plain inspector in them.

He was standing there, looking craggy and tough among the gilt chairs and silk panelled walls. Perfect type casting, Claire thought.

"I'm Claire Paterson," she smiled at him.

She was ridiculously relieved when he smiled back in a straightforward friendly way. "Delighted to meet you, Miss Paterson," he said. "I would very much like to talk to you for a few minutes, in private."

Claire considered. "Well, my office is as private as anywhere." He walked after her across the heavily scented salon. "This place is always pretty much of a madhouse, you know."

She shoo-ed her secretary and a seamstress out of the room, and swept some lengths of satin and printed chiffon off a very small chair so that the Superintendent could sit down. She offered him a drink and a cigarette, which he refused.

"Are you really from Scotland Yard?" she said.

"Yes, I really am. Perhaps you'd better look at my credentials."

He handed over an identity card with his photograph pasted on it. Claire studied it, then gave it back.

"Well, it's true then! Now, please begin! I am absolutely dying of curiosity."

He pulled out a notebook. "Miss Paterson, on Saturday, the third of April, this year, you stayed overnight at the Royal Hotel in P. . . ?"

"Yes, it must have been about then."

"On the Sunday morning you cut your hand and went to have it dressed by a Dr. Reynolds, in Park Street, not far from the hotel."

Claire's eyes widened. "Yes."

The Superintendent started to ask another question, hesitated, then said: "Miss Paterson, you don't read the papers? You don't know why I'm asking you these questions?"

"No, I don't, but I do hope you're going to tell me. I just glance at the paper in the morning, I don't always see the London papers, and often, when I travel in connection with my job, I just don't get time to read the papers at all. Does that answer your question?"

He nodded. "Would you mind telling me what happened when you saw the doctor that morning?"

The whole of the visit to the doctor came back to Claire as clearly as if it were being shown on a newsreel. Immediately she felt alarmed, not for herself but for the doctor. Hiding wariness, she said: "Well, he just bandaged my hand and then I went and caught my train."

"There was no record of your visit. Did you pay him cash, or did he send you a bill?"

"He wouldn't accept payment. He was very sweet about it, really, especially as I had disturbed him out of visiting hours."

"I see. Now, was there anything unusual about the doctor that you can remember?" He paused. "Or was everything perfectly normal?"

"I should say everything was perfectly normal. Don't you think you should tell me what this is all about?"

"In a moment. The thing is I don't want to put ideas into your head or words into your mouth. You have no idea what a refreshing experience it is to interview a witness who is utterly without any preconceived notions, who is not concealing anything or inventing anything."

"A witness? What's happened? Has the doctor been murdered, or something?"

The Superintendent gave a thin smile. "I'll tell you when you just think back once more over the whole of your encounter with the doctor that morning, over the minutest details, and try to think if there isn't something, some little thing that you could mention that was out of the ordinary. Even if it seems trivial."

Claire was silent for several minutes, while she carefully selected two items from her wealthy fund of that morning, which she thought

would satisfy the Superintendent. "He was an awfully long time answering the door. I was just about to leave when he finally did appear. And he'd cut his hand."

"You saw the doctor about nine o'clock?"

Claire frowned. "I think so. My train was at nine-thirty or thereabouts."

"Would it interest you to know that a tradesman called at the house at ten-thirty the same morning, that the doctor was a very long time in answering the door to him, that the tradesman didn't see the doctor's right hand, but that the doctor denies that he'd cut his hand at that time, but insists he did it much later, at luncheon?"

Claire's mouth fell open. She now knew that the Superintendent was going to tell her something she didn't want to hear. "Dr. Reynolds is on trial at the Old Bailey at this very moment for the murder of his wife. She disappeared on the night of Saturday, April the third. Her dismembered body, or parts of it, were discovered in a ravine about thirty miles from P . . . the following week. The Crown case is that the doctor murdered her and dismembered the body in his house on the Saturday night, and that that is how he cut his hand."

Claire put a hand to her throat. "Then while I was there, the body was . . ."

"We don't know. We don't know when or how he disposed of it. We can't really prove that he murdered his wife at all, but he must have done it. She went out in their car on the Saturday afternoon. She hadn't come back by the time the daily help left at six-thirty. The doctor was there, waiting supper for her. The next day the car was back in the garage but his wife had disappeared. The doctor was committed for trial, and actually *is* on trial, but to be honest most of the evidence against him is circumstantial. The proprietor of the Royal Hotel at P . . . was discussing the case with one of the local police and he suddenly thought of you, that he'd recommended Dr. Reynolds to you that Sunday morning. He checked his register for the date, and it turned out to be that very Sunday. We traced your Paris address through the kennels where you boarded your dog."

Claire nodded. Her throat was dry and she felt rather sick.

"The doctor never mentioned me?"

"Of course not. Why should he? Now, if we introduce your testimony, that will prove that he was lying about the time that he cut his hand, and show that he was lying because he had something to hide."

"When you say 'introduce my testimony', that's a euphemism for 'when I give evidence at the Old Bailey'?"

The Superintendent smiled and nodded. "Only the matter of a few minutes. You can fly over tonight

and be back in Paris tomorrow in time for lunch."

Claire shivered. She felt as if she'd just been knocked down by a car.

"It's really that important? My evidence, I mean? You're not counting on it to . . ."

Seeing that she was upset, he said reassuringly: "No, of course not. We have plenty of evidence, but as I said when a lot of the evidence is circumstantial, every tiny link in the chain is important."

In London that night, Claire bought the evening papers and started to read the accounts (one paper had two full pages) of the evidence at the doctor's trial that day. There was something about the doctor having had a bonfire in the yard, apparently burning a lot of blood-stained rags. He didn't seem to have been very clever about that. There were a few lines about "a surprise witness" whose evidence defence counsel had reluctantly agreed to allow to be heard the following morning. There was also a picture of Mrs. Reynolds, the doctor's wife. Claire studied it with great curiosity, and could imagine herself in other circumstances, laughing and saying lightly, "Well, if that's the way she dressed I'm not surprised that her husband would want to murder her." But when she came to medical evidence, detailed descriptions of how doctors had reconstructed the body of the doctor's wife, she fled into the streets and spent the evening in a cinema.

At the Old Bailey next morning, Superintendent Ring was waiting for her in the hall. "Cheer up, Miss Paterson," he said when he saw her. "All they want you to say is that you saw the doctor at nine o'clock and his hand was already bandaged. Won't take a minute. Then you can go back to Paris and forget the whole matter."

"I don't know that I'll ever be able to do that," said Claire. "Superintendent Ring, I've read a bit of the case in the papers. It seems to me that nothing could be more sordid and gruesome. Yet the doctor seemed so charming, and . . .nice. Really nice. Why did he do it? *How* could he do it?"

"It seems he had an Othello complex. Insanely jealous of his wife, apparently for no good reason, but the poor woman could never convince him of that. I don't suppose he even meant to kill her, but they no doubt quarrelled when she got home on the Saturday night and he must have flown into a violent rage. Then when she was dead . . . he had to get rid of the body."

"Yes, but his own *wife*," murmured Claire.

The Superintendent said kindly: "Well, I don't suppose doctors have the same feelings about these things as we do. I suppose they regard us all more or less as walking laboratory specimens. You know, I think these forensic medicine chaps our side employed really enjoyed the job

of putting the remains together and . . ." He gave up the light touch at the look on her face. He shook his head and said seriously:

"Miss Paterson, if you'd had as much experience in police work as I have, you'd give up asking the why and the how of human behaviour. I've long ago stopped trying to understand or analyse, much less rationalise, what goes on in the human heart."

Claire nodded slowly. How right the Superintendent was. Could he have any idea of what was going on in her own mind at that very moment? She took out her compact and checked her make-up. A flawlessly beautiful face stared back at her from the tiny mirror. She snapped the compact shut. No use trying to understand, analyse, or rationalise me either, she said silently to the Superintendent, who had never once thought to ask her if her dog had been with her when she called on Dr. Reynolds.

It was actually happening. She was in the witness box, had taken the oath, and was trying to adjust to a million simultaneous impressions — of the stained oak, the red-robed judge, the jury, the solicitors' table in the well of the court, the public gallery, the dock. At the same time she was trying to hang on to her nerves, to stop her voice and her hands from trembling as a hundred faces gazed at her curiously.

What she was most conscious of was the proximity of the dock and the presence of the doctor. Somehow, although it was her strongest desire at that moment, she couldn't bring herself to look at him. It was the result of a religious upbringing, she'd decided in the past, that was responsible for one of her characteristics: she sometimes denied herself the thing she wanted most.

She wondered if he would look nervous, overwrought, fighting for his life; or calm, detached, not caring any more? How would he feel at seeing her suddenly appearing in court to drive another nail in his coffin?

A wigged and robed figure now advanced towards her. Her nervousness abated as she noted that this man—not leading counsel for the prosecution, as she learned later, but one of his assistants—was young, good-looking, and addressed her in a cheerful tone of voice.

"Miss Paterson, you stayed overnight on April the third at the Royal Hotel in P . . .?"

"Yes."

"About nine o'clock on the Sunday morning, just before you left the hotel to catch a London train, you accidentally cut your hand?"

"Yes."

"Ane on your way to the station you called in at Dr. Reynolds' house to see if he could dress the hand for you?"

"Yes."

"Would you tell us what hap-

pened when you got to the doctor's house?"

"Well, I rang the doorbell and the doctor himself answered and I asked him if he could possibly dress the cut. He said he could."

Counsel rustled a bunch of papers he held in his hand.

"Did the doctor answer the door promptly?"

"No, he took a long time. I thought at first there was no one home."

Claire went on to describe her visit, as she had done a dozen times already for Superintendent Ring. She spoke slowly and picked her words. She knew the dangers of nervousness—saying too much, and having some trivial detail seized upon as if it were of earth-shaking importance, and mainly, of just appearing too stupid to stick to the point and be brief.

Even now counsel was pursuing the question of the doctor's bandaged hand. How did he expect her to elaborate on this? He had a bandage on his hand, there was nothing more to say. However: Which hand was it? Did he give any explanation of how he had cut it? she was asked.

There was a subdued stir in court when she mentioned the bandaged hand. She supposed this piece of news was a surprise. She wondered how the doctor was taking it. Then, as counsel asked her to confirm that she'd caught her train at nine-thirty-seven, she thought that now it was over. But it wasn't. The pleasant-faced barrister turned the blood in her veins to ice water by saying casually:

"Now, Miss Paterson, as far as we know you were the only person admitted to the house on that Sunday morning. Since then you have been abroad, and knew nothing about this case until yesterday, and your evidence is brought in at a late moment, after the instruction was completed. Now cast your mind back to that morning, and tell us if you noticed anything outside of the doctor's bandaged hand, anything in the doctor's house that Sunday morning that might have a bearing on this case?"

Claire managed to say faintly: "I really don't know . . ." as if she were turning the question over in her mind. At that moment she raised her eyes and looked at the doctor. He was looking straight at her, with those large black eyes, just as intently as he had at their first meeting. He seemed to give her the faintest shadow of a smile, although she was never sure about this, but what she was sure of was that he knew exactly what was in her mind and exactly what she would do. Now, in court, as they waited for her reply, she re-lived those moments with the doctor's eyes on hers as he gave her his hand, then his gaze sliding past her into the hall, the sharp intake of breath as he saw what the little dog was up to. Now she knew why the dog was scratching at those rolled up carpets

so frantically, she could only marvel at the doctor's self-possession at that moment.

"What about the carpets? Were the stair carpets up then?" counsel persisted. This wasn't a leading question. Claire remembered reading something about the doctor having tried to wash bloodstains out of the stair carpets. And there were other bits of carpet burnt, some pieces missing.

"Yes, I think the carpets were up on the stairs," she said uncertainly: "I think I remember seeing some carpets rolled up against the wall. But I'm not really clear about it. It's some time ago, and I wasn't paying any particular attention."

She shot a brief glance at the doctor. If they'd asked me point blank, her look said, but only the doctor could have interpreted it. There was a pause. Then she was told to step down after defending counsel had indicated that he did not wish to cross-examine her. She walked out without another look at the doctor.

The counsel who had questioned Claire sat down at his place with a flourish of robes.

"Taking a bit of a risk with that last question, weren't you?" a colleague murmured to him. "A last-minute witness like that . . . suppose she'd suddenly remembered she'd seen Mrs. Reynolds doing the dusting, or something similar? Where would we be then?"

"Nonsense. There was no risk. We know the doctor is guilty as hell. But it's not every day we get a Paris model in the witness box, and I just couldn't bear to let her go."

One hot day the following August, months after Dr. Reynolds had been found guilty and hanged, one of the salesgirls at Thuillier's minced into Claire's little office and gave her a card.

"This gentleman is asking for you," she said.

Claire got a shock when she looked at the card and saw it was Superintendent Ring's. She said cooly, however: "Thanks, Solange. I'll go and see him."

There he was again in the perfumed salon, still looking craggy and out of place, although this time instead of dark City clothes, he wore a sports jacket and grey flannel trousers.

French style, Claire held out her hand, and he took it. "What a surprise to see you again, Superintendent."

"I'm flattered that you remember me, Miss Paterson," he said, smiling in his straightforward fashion "I hope I'm not disturbing you." He added: "This is not an official visit, I assure you."

"Just a friendly one? How charming of you! Do come and sit down."

She heaved a silent sigh of relief as she led him into her office. When they were both seated, he explained:

"You see, I'm spending a couple of

days in Paris with my wife and my wife's sister. It's my annual leave, and we're on our way down to a little place in the Ardèche that we're very fond of. Three thousand feet up on a green mountain. Very cool in August." He looked around the room at the bolts of woollen materials, and a fur coat thrown over a table in one corner.

Claire laughed. "In the rag trade we are always months ahead of the seasons. At present we're up to our ears in next winter's clothes."

He said:

"That was what I came to see you about. My wife was wondering if you are already showing your—collection, I think it's called, and if so, whether it would be possible for her and her sister to come and see it. Just to look," he added hastily, then laughed. "I think Thuillier's prices are beyond the salary of a mere superintendent at Scotland Yard."

"Of course Mrs. Ring can come. And your sister-in-law." From her desk drawer she took a printed invitation, wrote a few words on it, and handed it to him. "The collection is shown at three o'clock. Be sure to tell Mrs. Ring to ask for me afterwards. I'd love to meet her. And of course if there's any number that interests her in the collection, we'd be only too pleased to make a reduction."

He pocketed the card and laughed again. "That's very kind of you, but even with a reduction, I'm afraid . . . Anyway, I should warn you my wife's the very devil with a paper pattern and a sewing machine. She'll probably steal some of your ideas."

He refused the offer of a cool drink, and said: "I must be going. The wife's waiting for me at the Café de la Paix. It's been delightful seeing you again, Miss Paterson."

But he just stayed in his chair and didn't get up. Claire hadn't moved either. She and the Superintendent eyed one another for a few moments, then she looked at her polished fingernails and said:

"It's quite ridiculous, Superintendent. You have no idea how relieved I was when you told me your visit was purely unofficial. I was terrified something else might have come up about . . . the doctor."

"That is hardly likely, since the man has been buried in quicklime under the flagstones of the prison yard these six months past."

Claire shruddered.

The Superintendent crossed his legs, as if he had settled in for a nice chat. Claire cursed herself for letting herself be unnerved into mentioning the Reynolds case. However, the Superintendent said nothing. He was still looking at her appraisingly. Claire returned his gaze with a fairly appraising one of her own, and after a little reflection she said:

"Superintendent, this is an unofficial visit, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"And the Reynolds case is closed forever?"

"Yes."

Claire thought: Dash it, I'll find out what's on his mind; I don't have to tell him a thing of what's on mine. She said:

"You didn't come just to get an invitation for the collection, did you?"

Instead of being cagey as she expected, he smiled and said:

"Well, as a matter of fact, there *were* just one or two little things that made me rather curious about your testimony. Just a nuance here, a nuance there."

"Tell me one of them."

"Well, when I first came to see you in this very office—remember? —when I told you the doctor was suspected of having murdered his wife on the Saturday night, dismembering the body during the night and then dispensing of it, you immediately put a hand to your throat, and you said: 'Then while I was there, the body was . . .'"

"You have a very good memory."

"It's my job."

"Anyway, what was suspicious about my remark?"

"I should have thought it would have been a more normal reaction for you to have been startled immediately by the idea of the doctor being a murderer, not that at once you should think that the body was in the house while you were there. Thinking it over a long time later, after the trial as a matter of fact, it occurred to me that you must have had some reason for assuming that the body was in the house."

Claire's eyes slid away from the Superintendent's.

While she was wondering whether at last to make an honest woman of herself, her secretary came in with Mimi, the little while Pomeranian, who had just been taken out for a walk. The secretary looked in and said: "She was a *very* good girl," then left. Mimi, full of excitement, bustled in and jumped straight onto Claire's lap. If the dog could have spoken she would have said: "I've been out! I've been out!" Claire caressed her thoughtfully. This sudden apparition of the dog must surely be a sign from heaven? She hesitated no longer.

"Well, Superintendent, I might as well tell you. My dog was with me that morning."

The Superintendent leaned forward.

"I let her off the leash. While I was talking to the doctor she was running round the room. And then she got out of the doctor's surgery and we suddenly saw her in the hall, scratching like a mad thing at some of those rolled up carpets that there was so much talk about at the time. She was really wild with excitement. I had to drag her away."

The Superintendent grunted.

"Mm, I see. The scent of fresh blood."

Claire shuddered again and said: "Please."

To himself, he said: "Mmm. That explains it."

As he said nothing more, she said:

"Now, come along, Superintendent. Don't go strong and silent on me. Aren't you going to ask me why I didn't mention this?"

"Oh, I know why. In the first place the significance of it might not have occurred to you immediately, although I think it did. In the second place, because nobody asked you point blank about the dog. In fact, I don't think the dog was ever mentioned. And thirdly, just because the doctor was so darned attractive. I know that because my wife told me."

Claire said quickly:

"Of course, I didn't know for sure there was blood on the carpets, and I didn't want to get too involved and anyway you told me my evidence wasn't really vital, and . . ." She checked herself, then said slowly:

"Yes, the doctor was very attractive."

The Superintendent smiled. "It may console you to know that the most attractive man I ever met was an Irishman who murdered his fiancée because she got pregnant and he wanted to marry another, richer girl. He was so attractive that dogs used to follow him in the street, and while he was in gaol waiting to be executed he got hundreds of love letters and proposals of marriage from smitten females. And he was a fellow who had done the same as Dr. Reynolds. He cut the girl up, except that he wasn't as expert at it." He wondered whether to tell her precisely how the man had tried, unsuccessfully, to dispose of the head, and then decided perhaps the lesson had already been learned. He said kindly:

"Don't take it to heart, Miss Paterson. Dr. Reynolds wasn't in that category, in my opinion. I think he killed his wife accidentally, probably struck her in the course of a quarrel or something like that. If he hadn't lied to the police and tried to get rid of the body, I'm sure he could have got the charge reduced to manslughter."

Claire sighed, thinking of all the foolish women penning love letters to a brutal murderer in his cell. She was scarcely any better. Suppose she had not been so irresistibly drawn to the doctor the first moment she set eyes on him? And that he had not let her know too that he had been slightly wounded by the arrow of desire? Suppose he had had a squint, thinning hair and bad breath, instead of being the flashing, dashing, magnetic, vaguely mysterious creature he was? Would she then have lied by omission at his trial?

She said:

"I was lucky to get off so lightly."

"You're lucky that *I'm* letting you off so lightly, too, Miss Paterson. Next time—if there is one—don't keep back any tit-bits for yourself. Next time your evidence might be vital."

He rose to his feet, patted Mimi who was now sniffing his shoes, and said:

"Don't worry. It's all over and done with now."

Claire stood up too. "You've forgotten something, Superintendent. You said there were one or *two* things that made you curious about me. What was the other?"

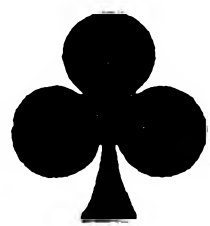
He smiled.

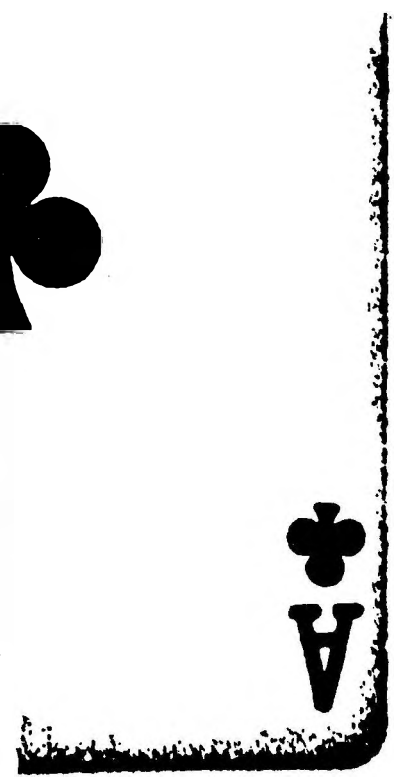
"Well, it was the other thing that really set me thinking. Dr. Reynolds' counsel happens to be a friend of mine. After the case was over and the doctor disposed of, his counsel told me one day in passing, but in strict confidence, of course, that he'd always been curious as to why Dr. Reynolds, as you were finishing your evidence, handed down a slip of paper to him from the dock. On it, he had written: 'With my life at stake, I beg of you, do not cross-examine this very truthful witness.' "

It was an obvious frame-up . . . and Mike Reston was afraid they'd pull it off.

ACE IN THE HOLE

BY DON LEE





MIKE RESTON glanced at the older man, Waldo Schmidt, sitting beside him at counsel table and started to speak but changed his mind. What could he say to a fellow attorney on trial for jury fixing? No need to remind him his career was at stake, or to bluff confidence on the outcome. His client was well qualified to judge for himself; so Reston waited in silence for the trial to begin.

Harry Plumpsett Breedon, the District Attorney, entered the courtroom with a thick folder of papers

tucked under his arm. Breedon always carried a sheaf of papers, convinced that this device demoralized the defence by leading it to believe he had complete information. The flaw was in its constant use. A wag said he used the sheets for toilet paper and the file was dubbed, "Breedon's Brownies, supersized for D.A.s with big A's."

Shortly after taking office, Harry Breedon retitled himself, Harry Plumpsett Breedon, feeling that his mother's maiden name added dignity and a solid sound befitting a future judge.

The district attorney wore his cold, thin smile, the kind a banker reserves for small borrowers or a minister for small change sinners in his congregation. With conscious dignity he walked to the counsel table and said good morning to Mike Reston.

"Hello, Plumpsett," Waldo Schmidt boomed, knowing the district attorney still felt sensitive to his assumption of the middle name. Schmidt's lips curled in a smirk.

Breedon regarded Schmidt with obvious distaste, uncertain whether to acknowledge a greeting from a criminal defendant, though a colleague, or simply to ignore it.

"Hello, Waldo," he said curtly and turned to Reston. "Mike, I have the photostatic copy of a check made out by the defendant. We can stipulate it's his check and save the trouble of calling his banker to prove it."

Waldo Schmidt craned his neck for a better view of the paper. "We aren't going to stipulate anything," he rumbled.

"Are you handling this case or is Mr. Reston?" Breedon snapped.

"Down, boy, down," Schmidt said, "Plumpsett, you're as skitterish as a bitch in heat."

Breedon regarded him sourly. "Waldo, you belong behind bars and I'm going to put you there."

"What do you take me for," Schmidt growled, "one of your relatives?"

Breedon snorted. "Try to be reasonable . . ." he muttered and swiveled away abruptly.

"It's unreasonable?" "Schmidt questioned, pretending to echo Breedon's words. "Of course it's unreasonable. You think I would fix a jury? Climb out of the cesspool, Plumpsett. Show a little faith in your fellowman."

Mike Reston brought his mouth close to Schmidt's ear. "What's the check all about?"

Schmidt heaved his heavy shoulders. "Listen, I don't even know what he has it for. I paid that money to a guy for some work he did for me." He glared at the back of Breedon's head and continued, "I'd like to jam a slop jar over his bubble head."

The State called Mrs. Melda Green, a colored cleaning woman who had served as a juror in the trial of Dante Laterra. This had been Breedon's first big case as

district attorney and the first of a series designed to crush the local underworld.

In each case Waldo Schmidt had appeared as defense counsel and had secured Not Guilty verdicts. Breedon's only success had been the conviction of two grocery store numbers writers—little to show for the time, effort and money spent by his office on the campaign or the rash promises made to newsmen at the beginning; certainly no launching pad for appointment to the judiciary.

Melda Green, a mousey woman dressed in a shabby cloth coat, nervously clutched at a soiled blue purse. She testified that she had been approached by a young man who said Laterra was his cousin, that the police wanted to convict him because of some trouble he had had with the chief. He had told her that the defendant was a poor man and he could see that she knew what it was to be poor. He had felt sorry for her and had given her three hundred dollars to help her out.

"Who was the man who gave you this three hundred dollars?" Reston cross-examined politely.

"He said his name was Jinx."

"Did this man Jinx claim that Mr. Schmidt had sent him?"

"Well, no suh. He just said Mr. Schmidt was the man's attorney."

"Then Jinx could have been acting for himself," Reston summarized for the jury's benefit. "He might have been Mr. Laterra's cousin, or he might have been sent by Mr. Laterra, or he might have been sent by friends of Mr. Laterra. You don't really know."

When court adjourned for lunch, Reston turned to Schmidt. "Something's not right, Waldo. Green's testimony didn't prove a damn thing against you." He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curl. "Who's Jinx?"

"He's a tramp," Schmidt exclaimed. "Listen, I felt sorry for him. The kid was down on his luck. So I let him hang around the office. I let him make himself a couple of bucks running errands and serving papers."

"He worked for you during these trials. Where is he now?"

Waldo shrugged. "He disappeared right after this came up. Maybe he didn't want to get involved or maybe he did try to bribe that dame. I don't know."

"What do you know about him?"

"I didn't ask him questions," Waldo complained. "Who would expect the punk to pull something like this?"

"Waldo," Reston said with a trace of impatience, "Green's testimony doesn't make sense unless it's tied to you. Only this Jinx can do that. He'll have to testify and he'll have to say that he was acting for you when he gave Green the three hundred."

"What can the kid say? That I let him make a couple of bucks?"

"Waldo, I'm on your side," Reston reminded him. "You don't have to convince me."

Waldo Schmidt fell silent. His jowly face, forid from stress, sagged upon his chest. "I feel like I'm standing between a dog and a fire hydrant. You can't tell what he'll do," he said huskily. "The kid's something a toilet would reject. No one seems to know what happened to him."

That afternoon Mrs. John Polski, a handsome Polish woman, took the stand. She had been a juror in the Moriarty trial and the district attorney asked if, during the course of trial, she had been approached by anyone who discussed the case with her.

"It was the second or third day of the trial when Henry Jeneski—Jinx—stopped by. Henry was working for Attorney Schmidt. He said Mr. Moriarty had a lot of enemies and that they were trying to send him to prison for a crime he didn't commit."

"His only reason for visiting you at that time was to influence your vote, isn't that right?"

"Objection!" Reston rapped out. "Prosecution is leading the witness."

"Sustained."

"Did this man ever visit you before at your home? Yes or no?"

"Well, no . . ."

"Has he visited you since?"

"No, he hasn't."

Breedon pursed his lips into a thin smile and regarded the jury.

Mike Reston smiled as he approached to cross-examine. "You considered Jeneski a friend?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Polski nodded vigorously. "I've known Henry since we were children; practically one of the family. The only reason he had never visited my home before was because we have just moved into it."

"I see," Reston said. "Did Henry Jeneski offer you money?"

"No, he did not," Mrs. Polski replied.

"Or promise you'd be taken care of after the trial?"

"No."

"Did he say that Mr. Schmidt had sent him or that he'd lose his job if you didn't vote for an acquittal?"

"No. He just said that he was working for Mr. Schmidt and that Mr. Schmidt was the man's attorney. That's all."

Mike Reston detained his client when court adjourned for the day and they waited until the room cleared. Bright dust particles swirled in the path of the afternoon sun and gave an air of tranquility to the now deserted courtroom.

"Waldo," Reston began, "You know the State has Jeneski, that he's going to testify against you."

"Yeah, I figured the same thing. He'd be afraid to testify against the gang." Schmidt sighed and slumped dejectedly in his chair, his fleshy jowls resting on his chest.

"What was that photostat Breedon flashed this morning?"

"That was a check I gave Jeneski," Schmidt explained, "some of it was salary, most of it was a gift."

Reston nodded. "Breedon will say that check was the bribe money for Melda Green. How are we going to refute it?"

"Listen, that check doesn't prove anything . . . I don't know." Schmidt shrugged. "He paid her three hundred dollars; the check was for four hundred."

The next morning Breedon chatted amiably with Reston and even smiled at Schmidt.

Schmidt scowled at his high spirits, certain they were prompted by Breedon's belief that Jeneski's appearance would come as an unexpected surprise. "Plumpsett," he said, leaning towards the district attorney with easy intimacy, "you look as pleased as a whore attending a sailor's reunion. And smell a little like one too," he added, sniffing the air. "Are you going to put Jeneski on the stand?"

Breedon gaped dumbly at Schmidt for a moment, looking like a child whose sand castle has been stepped upon and is about to cry. He vented a loud snort and spun around in his chair.

Schmidt turned to Reston and winked. "One thing I like about Plumpsett: he's such a good top."

But the scent of victory quickly revived Breedon's spirits. "And now, if the court please," he intoned, "the State will call a special witness to the stand." He paused dramatically to let the import of mystery sink in. "The State at this time . . . calls to the stand . . . Henry Jeneski."

A young man wearing an Ivy League suit entered the court room and walked to the witness chair. He was about twenty-four or twenty-five, his boyish face looked young under a crew cut.

Breedon promptly disposed of the preliminaries. "Did you have occasion during the course of your employment to talk with Mrs. Melda Green?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the Court and the jury what happened on that occasion."

Janeski glanced nervously in the defendant's direction. "Well Mr. Schmidt, Attorney Schmidt, told me this Mrs. Green was on the jury. Ah, she was poor and if I talked to her nice and flashed some bills . . . well, she might see our man wasn't guilty."

"The defendant," Breedon said, pointing an accusing finger in Schmidt's direction, "gave you four hundred dollars to pay to Mrs. Green, is that correct?"

"Well, he said to make it look like a gift."

"But you were paying her to vote not guilty, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir." The witness went on to identify the photostatic copy of the check that Breedon had shown at the beginning of the trial as being a copy of the check he had received.

"I wish to offer this photostat in evidence. If the defendant wishes to stipulate that it is a copy of his check, we can dispense with its proof." Breedon spoke rapidly, knowing the suggestion for stipulation should be made at side bar, out of the jury's hearing.

"May I see the photostat?" Schmidt asked, at the same time placing a restraining hand on his counsel to forestall any objection from being voiced.

"Certainly," Breedon replied, trying to suppress a smile.

Schmidt took the check, appeared to study it and nodded affirmatively. "This is my check. It was Jeneski's pay for that month. I gave him more than his salary to help him . . ."

"If the Court, please," Breedon shouted, flushed and angry, attempting to halt Schmidt's explanation.

". . . get started," Schmidt plowed on in his deep, penetrating voice, ignoring the district attorney's attempt to cut him off. "He was penniless at the time."

"If the Court please!" Breedon shouted. "This is highly improper. If the witness desires to testify, let him take the stand." He glared fiercely at the defendant.

Schmidt's lips pursed into a faint smile.

"You only gave Mrs. Green three hundred dollars?" Breedon asked the witness testily.

"Well, I figured she . . ."

"Speak louder. And talk to the jury."

"I figured she'd go for less than four hundred. I mean she was pretty hard up and we seemed to get along pretty well."

"Did you have a similar occasion to talk to Mrs. Polski?"

"She was on the jury when Mr. Schmidt was defending Moriarty. I told him I was related to her and he asked me if I could get her to plump for a not guilty verdict. I said I'd talk to her. He asked me if she'd go for money but I told him she'd never go for that. So he gave me fifty bucks for myself."

"During your course of employment, did Attorney Schmidt have you contact any other jurors?"

"Yes, when Gianni was being tried I contacted the foreman of the jury." Janeski sucked in his breath and continued. "Mr. Schmidt gave me an envelope to deliver to Mr. Chartiers at his home."

"What did the envelope contain?"

"Money. He tore the edge of the envelope and I could see bills but I don't know how much there was."

Reston studied Janeski as he mentally organized his cross-examination. "What were you doing before you went to work for Attorney Schmidt?" he asked in a bland tone.

"I was looking for a job."

"When did you last have a steady job?" Reston pursued.

"Well, I've had odd jobs." Jeneski stared at the floor. "I move around, so I work at odd jobs."

"You mean you drift from place to place. Pick up a buck any way you can. Ever been convicted of a crime?"

"I was arrested for vagrancy a couple of times," the witness answered sullenly.

"Is that all?" Reston asked, his words dripping doubt.

"I haven't committed no crimes. I work for my money."

"Never committed a crime?" Reston repeated.

"No, sir!" Janeski said defiantly.

"A couple of minutes ago you testified that on three occasions you helped bribe jurors. Isn't that a crime?"

"I wasn't thinking about that."

"You have a convenient memory." Reston fingered the check photostat. "You testified that this check for four hundred dollars was to pay Mrs. Green but you only gave her three hundred. What happened to the other hundred?"

"I kept it," the witness mumbled.

"You stole it! You said Attorney Schmidt suggested money when you went to see Mrs. Polski. Why didn't you take a couple of hundred and just keep it?"

Janeski looked blankly. "I guess I didn't think of it."

"Didn't think of it? Why you had just done it with Mrs. Green. You don't ask us to believe a bright boy like you would pass up a chance for easy money, do you?"

Reston's voice became flinty. "You bribed the jurors all right but not for Attorney Schmidt. You were paid to do it by a racketeer. Now you're afraid of the gang and to save your hide you testify against the only man who gave you a decent break. That's the real story, isn't it?"

Reston called a number of business and professional people as character witnesses but Schmidt vetoed taking the stand himself. "No dice. If I take the stand I open myself to any question Breedon wants to throw. Too much dirt. I thought I could goad Breedon into an outburst. I must be losing my touch."

In his summation, Reston declared that a leading and highly respected member of the bar stood accused of jury fixing; that this accusation rested solely upon the testimony of a drifter, who, by his own admission, lived by his wits and cunning and his ability to appropriate; that this drifter had been bought by the racketeers and now to save himself would convict an innocent man.

He urged, as motive for the charge against the defendant, a blind desire to destroy the man felt responsible for the acquittals and reminded the jury of its duty to protect the rights of all citizens by rejecting attempts to intimidate their attorneys.

In his summation, Harry Plumpsett Breedon reviewed the testimony and direly warned the jury that one corrupt attorney could make shambles of legal procedures and frustrate law enforcement.

"His mother should crawl out

from under the porch and bite him," Schmidt growled when Breedon concluded.

The Court's instructions were brief and the jury retired. Three hours dragged painfully by. Reston nervously paced the floor, lit a cigarette and began to pace again. "Waldo, do you think the jury believed Jeneski?" he asked, grinding out his barely smoked cigarette. He listened to Schmidt without hearing the reply, started to pace the floor again, then returned to counsel table, lit another cigarette and muttered, "That damn check."

Schmidt regarded the younger man's self-doubts with concern. "Listen kid," he rumbled, "you did a terrific job. Don't worry."

Reston gaped dumbly at him. "How can you be so calm. Waldo?"

"Relax, kid," Schmidt said and looked around to make certain they could not be overheard. "Relax. The jury's fixed."

ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD Jubilee took the lead down the twisting backroad with its surface of crushed musselshell, careful where he set his bare feet. His ebony face, round as a pumpkin, glistened with sweat; he carried an extremely long bamboo fishing pole, to the tip of which he had secured a dirty green rag, wadded into a ball and securely tied in place with string. Dick and Rick Wakefield, twin 9-year-old sons of an Airforce Colonel who had recently moved to Merrittsburg, followed just far enough behind Jubilee's wobbling fishpole to keep from being gouged. Right now they were much too dirty to be associated with the immaculate Wakefield household; Dick had on shoes and was minus his shirt; Rick had a torn T-shirt draped from his shoulders, but was barefoot. Peewee, whose folks lived in a muskrat boat on the bayou, brought up the rear, his dark 'Cajon eyes alert, roving. He poked along, watching the swampy ditches, hoping that he might gig a big, fat croaker. Bullfrogs, to Peewee, fell into the same category with fried chicken and chocolate cake. The foursome were heading for an old, abandoned building that had once been the Demaree Pentecostal Church.

"Gotta kill off the hornets first," Jubilee told his compatriots.

"And get stung to death?" Dick's caution was the inherent fear of the city boy embarking on a new, untried adventure.

"Hornets can't fly with burned wings!"

"You'll catch the church afire, maybe."

"Won't, either!"

"What if you do?"

Jubilee's eyes rolled. "We'll run into the swamp."

"And let it burn?"

"It's a rotten ol' church—"

"Wouldn't that be a sin?" Dick's twin, Rick, got into the argument now.

Jubilee shrugged his bare choco-

BY GROVER BRINKMAN

bloody reformation

The ways of the Lord are mysterious . . . but a little dynamite helps.

late shoulders. "Guess so. We might not go to heaven when we die."

"Did the lady preacher at the gospel tent tell you that?"

"No, but it might be so, don't you think?"

"But you don't know for sure, do you?"

"Do you?"

Deadend. Dick Wakefield, the one with the shoes, kicked at the built-up mudhouse of a crawfish.

"You sure we won't get chased out of this church?"

"Sure I'm sure! I'm sanctimoniously sure!"

"Where'd you learn that big word, Jubilee?"

"He heard it at the gospel tent," Peewee explained, slapping at a mosquito.

The backroad, which hadn't seen the imprint of vehicle traffic since the last rain, dipped closer to the bayou now, hugging the lotus-encrusted banks. A breeze set up, stirring the Spanish moss that hung from the branches of the cypresses. A crane, glutted with fish, beat its wings in a frenzy as it rose from a mudflat ahead, much like an overloaded plane nose-heavy in takeoff.

"Dig this creepy place!" Dick said.

"Ain't creepy at all!"

"I say it is. I say it's sanctimoniously creepy—"

"You don't use that word 'less you talk about the Lord."

"I still say it's downright stinking creepy—"

"Where'd you live before you move to Lou's'ana?"

"Kansas."

"Bet Kansas has a lot of places creepier than this—"

"You ever been to Kansas?"

Jubilee evaded the question. "Guess it has real scary swamps, too!"

"You won't find a single swamp in Kansas."

Jubilee swallowed hard, realizing that he was being argued into a corner. He pointed. "Here's the church."

It was a rotten old building, just as he said. It sat on a high pinnacle of land that faced the bayou, white paint scaling from its weatherboarded walls. Part of the belfry had toppled in some hurricane now in the dim past. Weeds, hip-deep, hid the cemetery that surrounded the building.

"Now this is a real sanctimoniously creepy cemetery!" Rick said.

"You quit using that word, you hear?"

"You use it, why can't I?"

The negro boy had no answer to that. They started through the weed tangle, circling the old gravestones, some of them tipped off their base, tramping a path to the door of the church. A covey of marsh quail suddenly flushed from the cemetery weeds, with a startled whir of beating wings. Rick started a hasty retreat. Peewee, still bringing up the rear, broke into a guffaw.

"What you running for, Rick?"

"I didn't know what it was."

"Gee, you're a greenhorn!"

"I am not!"

"Scared of little ol' birds!"

Jubilee was at the door now. He pulled on the latch. The door was unlocked and he forced it open, hinges squealing in rusty protest. He laid down the bamboo pole, edged into the ancient building.

"Come on!" he said, gesturing to the other three.

Inside, the church was a shambles. Unused for years, its benches were broken and overturned; an old organ gathered dust in one corner; cobwebs festooned the light fixtures, and bats zoomed in and out of the belfry through a jagged hole in one side of the framing.

"Gee!" Peewee said, "it's real big!"

Jubilee grinned. He was the explorer; he had told the other three about the old church. But he remembered one thing. The hornets. He looked up now, let his eyes roam the walls—and he saw them, not just a nest or two, but dozens of big, fat cones, with busy little insects flying about each one of the hives.

Jubilee dug into his hip pocket for the bottle of gasoline he had gotten from Ned Shuback's filling station for three pennies. He had seen his uncle kill hornets this way. It didn't look a bit complicated. All you did was dampen the wadded rag with gasoline, then light it and push up the long pole until the flame touched the nest. The hornets would come down like bombs, their wings burned off, to be easily killed.

He was unscrewing the cap on the gas bottle when they heard the noise. It came from the outside, as if someone was pushing through the tall weeds of the cemetery.

"What's that?" Rick asked, wheeled to face the door.

"Someone's coming!" Peewee exclaimed. "Sure as sin!"

"Sure as sin!" Jubilee echoed. They started for the door. But there wasn't time for an exit.

"Hide, quick!" Peewee said, scampered for one of the overturned benches.

Out of sight, they peered over the debris, eyes focused on the door, hardly daring to breathe. The shuffling noise continued. Then they heard footsteps on the stoop—queer, stumbling footsteps.

The door squeaked protestingly. A shadow fell across the threshold. Jubilee saw Rick's hand fly up to his mouth in fright.

A man stumbled through the doorway. He was coatless, dirty. The front of his white shirt was matted with blood.

The shack sat on the edge of the swamp. Like the church it, too, was old, dilapidated, crumbling with age. It had been used as a fishing shanty, and for that purpose the three men inside found it admirable. They had a refrigerator of sorts, stove, table, bunks. But they weren't fishing.

Clay Brennan looked like a football player; a brittle, intelligent face topped by a crewcut. Matt Thruelsen was dark, sinewy, with high-cheekboned features and hair so dense and black it suggested Indian ancestry. Doc Kilker was in the weight class of a jockey; he looked like a teen-ager with his almost beardless face—until you looked at his eyes and the chill in their depths. Brennan was drinking a can of beer—he was far from happy.

"That crazy Adams—a real goony-bird!" Brennan said, slammed his empty beer can into a corner.

"I warned you, Clay!" Doc Kilker said. "I told you he was a mamma's boy. Neurotic as they come!"

"It was that gal preacher in the tent show," Thruelsen observed.

"Yeah!" Clay said bitterly. "Why didn't I get the groceries?"

"Quit worrying!" Kilker said. "My slug caught him between the shoulders. I hit him, I tell you—I hit him hard—"

"It was too dark to be sure. He kept going—"

"Yeah, so he did. Did you ever go deer hunting, Clay? You put a bullet through the heart of a big buck and he keeps running hard, for yards, and then he collapses, dead as a doornail—"

"If your theory is right, we would have found him. We combed the area."

"Too dark! He's bogged down in the muck somewhere. When we find him, you'll see! He'll be stiff."

"That suits me just fine. He'll have the bag with him—"

"Of course he'll have it with him!"

They had chosen a small but prosperous bank in the inland town of Mount Pulaski. They had cased the job for days, working out the probable angles of error, checking, revising plans. There were four of them at that time. Duff Adams had learned his demolition experience in the Army; he was a natural. But there was one flaw. He wasn't too anxious about the job. But it wasn't too hard to win over a guy, once you studied his background, found out that he needed a lot of money to pay some urgent bills. This job would give him a real bundle—for ten minutes' work with some high explosives.

The caper had come off clean; not even a shot was fired. But the car—that sleek greyhound that Clay was so enthused about—developed carburetor trouble so acute they were compelled to leave the highway. Clay knew carburetors, and he took it apart and found the trouble. But that took hours—and by that time the radio told them about the roadblocks. There was nothing left but to hole-up in the isolated fisherman's shack until the heat was off.

"I hit him hard, I tell you!" Doc said again. "He's down in the muck, stiff and cold—"

"It don't figure. How'd he get out of the shack, with the bag, none of us waking up?"

"We had a snack before we hit the bunks, remember? He made the coffee. Could be sleeping pills."

"He came back from that tent meeting all dreamy-eyed—"

"You were with him on that trip to town, Doc. What happened?"

"Nothing. We got the groceries. On the way back we saw this Holiness Tent, went in, just for kicks. We sat there with those hill-billies, all shouting and singing and praising the Lord. This gal was a looker —a real cute chick. One of those evangelists, I guess she was. She kept looking at Duff all the time she was talking. And after it was over she came down the aisle, took his hand. 'You look like you have a problem,' she told him. 'You pray about it, and come back tomorrow night.' Duff was a real goonybird after that."

"Maybe he's back at the tent meeting right now. With the money."

Doc shook his head. "He didn't get out of the muck. I hit him hard, I tell you. I saw him stumble."

"We've got to find him. Doc, get some hash on the table. We'll start out again—"

Jubilee squinted over the broken bench, then turned to whisper to Peewee. "He's bleedin'—real bad. He's just sittin' there, panting for air—"

"He's been shot," Rick whispered. "He's trying to unzip the bag."

"We've got to go for help—"

"Maybe he's got a gun."

"He won't shoot us."

"How do you know?"

"He's hurt, real bad, can't you see? Maybe he's dyin' right now!"

"Gee, I wish my Dad was here!" Rick said.

"He'd know what to do," Dick agreed.

"Maybe we'd better go for the cops. I know Mr. Hankerson, the highway patrol officer—"

Rick's foot brushed against something. There was a grating noise.

The man sitting with his back to the wall jerked up. A gun suddenly appeared in his hand. He faced them, breathing hard, the gun leveled.

"Who's there?" he asked. "Come out—with your hands over your head!"

"Gee!" Jubilee whispered. "I'm scared!"

"So am I!" Rick agreed.

"Come out!" the man said again.

Jubilee stood up, eyes big and frightened. Slowly Peewee rose from his hiding place. Dick and Rick scrambled to their feet. They all stood there, amidst the broken benches, facing the man with the gun.

He was a young man. He had a real nice face. But it was pale-looking. And right now he was breathing fast, and his eyes looked funny, like a dog's when he sees a big stick. Jubilee couldn't keep his gaze from the blood on the man's shirt. It was the reddest blood—

"What are you kids doing here?" the man asked. His voice was almost a whisper.

"We—we come to kill the hornets," Jubilee stuttered, "so we could make a den—"

"Anyone else with you?"

Jubilee shook his head. "Just we'uns." He motioned to Dick, Rick and Peewee.

"Do any—of your parents know you're here?"

"No, sir!"

The man lowered the gun, stuck it back in the belt of his trousers. He leaned back against the wall, as if he was very tired.

"I'm hurt—real bad," he said at last.

"We'll get a doctor!" Rick spoke up. "One lives on our street—"

The man shook his head. The ghost of a smile touched his lips. "It wouldn't do any good, kids." He moved his body a bit, so he could look out of the window.

His hand pointed to the bag. "Move it over here, will you?"

"Yes, sir!" Jubilee said.

"Now open it for me."

Jubilee's fingers trembled as he worked the zipper. Finally the bag was open.

"Empty it," the man bid. "Hand me each item—real careful now—"

"Yes, sir!" Jubilee said. Sweat glistened on his forehead. His hand dug into the bag.

It came out with some sort of tool. He handed it to the man, who laid it down on the floor. The boys crowded closer. Everyone was real quiet. All you could hear was the buzz of the hornets, above them. Jubilee took out another tool—and another. Then he lifted out an object that was wrapped in a roll of cotton.

"Ok—I'll take it," the man said. His eyes looked sicker than ever now. Some fresh blood was on his shirt.

Jubilee lifted out the object and gave it to the man.

"Hurry up!" the man said.

Jubilee handed him the next item. Long, round objects. The man laid the objects near his side. Some more tools came next, a roll of wire, some stuff that looked like putty. Finally Jubilee's hand closed over a bundle of paper. He drew out his hand, and his eyes bulged. He was holding a package of currency. All nice, new, crisp, with a band holding the package together.

"Come on—hurry," the man said. "There's more. Get it—all—"

Finally there were a dozen stacks of the money on the floor.

"Gee!" Jubilee said. "New twenty dollar bills—"

"And fifty dollar bills," Rick said.

"Someone robbed a bank!" Dick blurted, and stopped, choking on his own disastrous words.

But the man didn't get mad. He just smiled. "That's right, son!"

The man looked at the bag, to check that it was empty. Then he motioned to Jubilee. "Put the money back into the bag, zip it up."

Jubilee's hands were shaking so badly he seemed to have a chill.

"Now listen—carefully," the man said. His voice was weaker. "I want you to take the money to the Holiness Tent. Know where that is?"

"I do," Peewee spoke up. "I know the lady preacher—"

"You do?" The smile came back to the man's face again. "You take the bag to her. Tell her it's from—the man who had a problem. You think you won't forget that? Just tell her that, hand her the bag. She'll know what to do—"

"Yes, sir!" Jubilee said, glad they would soon be out of the church. But then another thought crowded into his mind. "But you—you're hurt bad—"

"Don't worry about me," the man said. "But wait—I've another job for you." His fingers dug into a pocket, finally produced a small roll of bills. Jubilee saw that they were all one dollar bills—possibly ten or more. The man handed the money to him. "I want you boys to have it—if you'll run an errand for me?"

"Sure we'll run an errand—"

"There's a fisherman's cottage back in the swamp. Shady Rest, it's called. Know where that is?"

"I know!" Jubilee said. "You follow the bayou—that way—"

"There are three men there. They're—worried about me, I know. You tell them that I'm in the church—"

"You want them to come and help you?"

"Yes. they'll come—and help me—just as soon as they can."

"Sure!" Jubilee agreed. "You need help all right!"

They headed for the door. Jubilee had the bag. Suddenly the man held up his hand.

"Just one more request. Don't come back to the church with the men. Understand that—don't come back to the church! Stay—real far away." He peered out the window. "Don't come any closer than the edge of the cemetery. Will you promise me that? Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"We'll promise," Jubilee said. The other boys nodded their approval.

"Get the bag to the girl in the tent first," the man said. "And hurry, will you?"

The man looked real sick now. He was breathing so funny.

They ran down the slope, through the cemetery. Suddenly Jubilee jerked up, thinking hard. He turned to Peewee.

"He was bleedin' awfully bad—."

Doc finished eating first, walked out to the stoop. He stood there, picking his teeth, gazing up at the swamp, at the weed-grown trail coming in from the bayou. Suddenly he jerked up, eased back inside.

"Four kids coming down the path," he told Clay and Max.

"Kids? You crazy?"

"Little tikes—about eleven or twelve, maybe. Three white boys and a chubby little Negro—"

Clay cursed. "We'll lay low and they'll think the shack is deserted —"

Doc shook his head. "I think they saw me on the porch."

"Nice kettle of fish. Some nosy, talky kids! If we touch 'em we're in trouble, if we let them go, they'll talk their heads off—"

"Just take it easy," Max advised. "Maybe they're just frog-hunting."

The four came up to the stoop, halted. Jubilee cleared his throat.

"There's a man in the old church on the point," Jubilee said, haltingly. "He said he needs help—"

Clay suddenly was alert. "What kind of a man?"

"He—he's young looking. He's hurt, read bad."

"The front of his shirt is all bloody," Rick added.

"You mean he's shot—or something?"

"His eyes look real funny—and he's bleedin' something awful—"

Clay turned to the others, grinned knowingly. "We'll be right with you, fellows!" he said, darted inside.

They went down the path alongside the bayou, Jubilee leading the way. One hand was clamped tightly about the wad of dollar bills the man in the church had given him, to divide among the four. He felt very important. They had delivered the bag to the lady at the Holiness Tent. Now they were getting help for the man in the church. This man needed it very badly, there was no doubt about that. Maybe he was already dead! Jubilee's eyes rolled in fear; he hoped that wasn't so, but you could never tell. His shirt was just too bloody.

When the church came in sight, Jubilee suddenly hung back, and the other three followed his lead.

"We'll stay here—at the edge of the cemetery," Jubilee said.

The man called Clay turned and looked at him, frowning. Then he shrugged.

"Okay," he said. "You stay here—or perhaps you'd better start for home—we'll take care of the man in the church."

He motioned to the other three. They started through the weed tangle.

Jubilee headed back toward the bayou, but curiosity was greater, just then, than his desire to be punctual for supper. He circled, crawled up behind the nearest tombstone, a huge, above-ground crypt big enough for all of them to hide behind. They peered out cautiously. The three men were nearing the church door now.

"Gee!" Peewee said. "They've got guns—"

"Sure as sin!" Jubilee said.

"And the man inside has a gun, too!"

"Gee!"

The men were at the stoop now. They advanced cautiously, then all three of them barged through the door at the same time, guns drawn as they ran forward.

"Just like they do on TV!" Rick said.

A terrific explosion shook the earth.

The boys, watching, saw the building disintegrate, turn into rubble and dust. Debris sailed through the air, and the concussion of the blast flattened them to the ground.

Jubilee was up first, running as fast as his short legs would stretch. Dick, Rick and Peewee were right on his heels, trying to pass him.

Back on the musselshell lane, they saw the building was a fiery inferno now, flames shooting skyward in long, red streaks. But they never stopped running. The shock, the aftermath, the conjectures, would come later. Now they were four frightened boys heading for home, fear knotting the muscles of their legs, constricting their vocal chords.

DEADLY OUTPOST

On the tiny, fog-bound, wind-swept Aleutian island of Chuliak, the enemy was not the Japanese. It was the cold, wet, weary, suffocating boredom. Then came the explosion . . .

BY ROBERT ARMPRIEST

THE Aleutian Island chain extends westerly from Alaska for nearly one thousand miles like a disjointed and forgotten tail. And forgotten these islands were, until 1942 when the Japanese occupied two of them and to the United States suddenly they had some military importance.

Near the middle of the chain lay Chuliak, shaped like a large unwanted appendix, and host first to a Seabee detachment, an Army Engineer company who built the landing strip, then to an Infantry battalion, and later an Air Corps housekeeping detachment.

In 1943 the small Air Force group found themselves alone on the treeless, windswept, foggy island; the earlier military inhabitants having departed for more active duty elsewhere. Their chief duty lay in helping to maintain the island communication network and the low frequency navigation aid. They were served by, and in turn serviced the Air Transport Command and Troop Carrier aircraft on their long journeys down the chain.

The scant duties of the men of Chuliak left them with little to do other than watch the occasional movies that were flown in, worry about wives and girl friends left behind, play poker, and cultivate mustaches (beards were forbidden).

Staff Sergeant Nelson Atkins stood in the doorway of the Pacific hut and stared into the cold grey murk across the rolling tundra that stretched as far as he could see.

Glancing at the wall calendar with the picture of the bosomy pinup, whose left foot pointed daintily toward the leaf which indicated March 1944, he asked himself how many more of those leaves would fall before he got out of this dreary place. Some kind of action would make it bearable, he thought.

He rummaged in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and jammed it beneath the luxuriant mustache. Slamming the door, he strode toward his desk and was reaching for his lighter when the dull boom sounded somewhere out in the fog. There was a second report, muffled but ominous.

Atkins reached the door, flung it open and started toward the Jeep when he saw the two ravens flap sullenly overhead. He stroked his mustache a moment and was struck by a sudden thought. Ravens. They hang out behind the messhall for handouts.

The Jeep's starter groaned agonizingly, the engine fired twice, but refused to run. Jumping to the ground, Atkins began a double-time trot toward the messhall a quarter mile away, and saw the flames licking away the fog.

He had covered half the distance and was rounding a low hummock when he ran into a puffing Walt Hunter.

"I was comin' after ya, Nelly," gasped the stocky sergeant. "Somebody blew the messhall and it looks like we're outa officers. Bein' acting top kick, you're in charge. I guess."

"Good God. Were all of 'em in there?"

"They usually eat at early chow," puffed Hunter.

They rounded a bend in the road and saw the blazing messhall across the small ravine. The frame and tarpaper structure was nearly half destroyed when they reached it, and it was obvious that the hungry flames would soon complete their work.

The odor of burning stove oil and scorched food stores assailed their nostrils.

The enormity of the situation began to reach Atkins as he stood helplessly and watched the fire consume the building and with it his military superiors on Chuliak.

"We're helpless against a fire like this Walt," said Atkins. "I hope the blast knocked off whoever is inside before they burn."

Men were arriving on the run from all directions and forming in small groups, talking and gesturing excitedly, realizing that there was nothing they could do. Some were looking toward Atkins as if expecting some orders that would bring an end to the confusion.

Atkins was seized with a sense of urgency. A semblance of order had to be restored and an assessment of the situation made as quickly as possible. He grabbed the shoulder of the man nearest him and shouted, "Gagliano. Go with Sergeant Hunter."

Turning to Hunter, he said, "Walt, take Lieutenant Harper's Jeep there, and you and Gagliano check every hut from here west and gather up all the men you can find and form up at the Operations hut. I'll check the huts east of here and meet you there. OK?"

"Right, Nelly."

Seeing Coporal Winters, Atkins hollered, "Pete, come with me," and started off at a trot.

The lanky corporal fell in beside him and asked, "Where we goin?" He was long and ungainly looking, with a prominent Adam's apple, and talked through his nose. He was also the highest scoring man on the island with the rifle and carbine and

Atkins knew he could always count on him in a pinch.

"We'll check every hut this side of the messhall and get everybody we can find over to Operations for a nose count."

They found the recreation hut empty. The windup phonograph had finished playing "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," and the needle rested on the record where it had stopped when the mechanism ran down. A half eaten apple lay nearby.

That's the last of the fresh food, thought Atkins. It's canned rations from now on.

The dispensary was deserted, but everything appeared to be in order. Winters slammed the door and they started for the supply hut.

There, they found Private First Class Abe Fein, acting supply sergeant, bending over an Ordnance bin. He raised and turned apprehensively at their sound.

"I'm sure glad to see you Sarge," said Fein. "Looka here. As near as I can make out, at least two grenades are gone. I got here as fast as I could."

"How about carbines or ammo?" asked Atkins quickly.

"Carbines all here, but we all have one anyway. Some carbine ammo's gone. I don't know how much. And somebody's been into the canned rations and GI blankets."

"Are there any rations left?"

"Prob'ly enough to last us a coupla days, if we eat light."

Atkins groaned. "Somebody pulled this stunt and now he's holed up with rations and ammo. We've got a lunatic among us and we've gotta find him fast," he went on. "You boys check the communications hut and join the rest of us at Operations on the double. I'm goin' there now."

The two started toward Communications and Atkins hollered, "Be careful."

Atkins leaned against the door of the supply hut and let his eyes follow the two men loping towards the communications hut fifty yards away. He had to rest a minute and try to organize his mind to attempt to find a solution to the grim situation that had been thrust upon him before it got out of hand. Suddenly and without warning he was an air base commander by attrition. Good God.

He absently drew a cigarette from his pocket and thrust it into his mouth, then threw it on the ground and mashed it into the snow with his heel and broke into a trot toward Operations.

When he passed the still-burning messhall he saw that the roof had fallen in and the fire was beginning to burn itself out. It would still be some time before the ruins could be searched for bodies.

At Base Operations Hunter had the men grouped in a semicircle and was completing a roll call.

Atkins stopped beside him. "How many are missing Walt?"

"We searched every hut, as well as the latrines and shower house, and couldn't find one of the officers. Besides the officers, Higgins, Abe Fein, and Mortimer are missing. Higgins was cooking and Mortimer was on KP."

"Abe was at the supply hut checking rations and ordnance. He'll be along in a minute. Then the only enlisted men missing are Higgins and Mortimer."

Atkins turned and addressed himself to the chattering group, noting the absence of the usual clowning whenever these men were assembled. "At ease," he shouted. Lowering his voice, he continued, "I'll give you what we know. We are apparently out of officers and I'll do my best to get us out of this mess. Abe says we have canned rations for two days. We'll try to get a message out to Headquarters for some help. Stand by here a few minutes and I'll have some assignments."

The wiry little Gagliano left the group and wandered over to Atkins. "Sarge, there's somethin' you oughta know, if you don't already."

"Go ahead Lou."

"Well. Mortimer is missing. You know what an eight ball he is. He's always tryin' to get attention and sayin' stupid stuff. He said a coupla days ago he thought the next time he got on KP he'd blow up the messhall when all the officers were in there at early chow like they usually are. Nobody paid any attention to him and we all forgot it."

"Thanks Lou. I hadn't heard it yet but I suppose everybody else has by now."

The two men facing each other across the desk in Operations were as dissimilar in appearance as they were in temperament and disposition. Hunter, seated at the desk, was short and stockily built, with blond hair and snapping blue eyes. He had a habit of occasionally hitching a shoulder up as if to get rid of an imaginary fly. He was intense, sometimes quick to anger, and fiercely proud of his status as a career soldier.

Atkins was tall and lean, green eyed, deliberate in his actions, and sometimes spoke apologetically when he had to give a disagreeable order. His appearance resembled that of a school teacher, which he had been before his National Guard unit was mustered into active duty three years earlier.

Hunter picked up a pencil and began to write as Atkins, seated on a corner of the desk, said, "Send this to Squadron Headquarters, Walt. 'Messhall explosion and fire today. Following unaccounted for: Harper, First Lt, CO; Briggs, First Lt, Medical Officer; Ingersoll, Second Lt, Communications; Wilson, Second Lt, Crypto; Higgins, Cpl; Mortimer, Pvt. Status of Navigation Aids unknown. Two days rations. Possible sabotage.' Sign it Atkins, Acting First Sergeant, and abbreviate as much as you can."

"This should bring in a C-47 full of brass and, I hope some rations," said Hunter, moving the pencil furiously.

"One thing more Walt," said Atkins fingering his mustache. You're the career man with ten years service and I came in with the Guard and wound up here over you because I had a grade on you when my outfit was inducted. I know how you must feel and I don't blame you. And it doesn't help to be stuck on a fogbound air base with nothing to do but grow mustaches, play poker and hang pinups on the wall. It's no wonder we've had nuts and Section Eights in these islands."

Hunter got up, folded the message and tucked it in his shirt pocket. "Don't worry Nelly. I volunteered for everything and still couldn't get outa here. Not your fault." He paused, then went on, "It ain't nice to speak poorly of the dead, but I thought the CO was a horses' butt and I think he knew it."

"The night the cooks threw a raisin jack party in the messhall he looked the other way, in spite of the noise that musta kept him awake all night," cut in Atkins.

"Prob'ly had a jug stashed away that he conned off of a Troop Carrier pilot," said Hunter sourly, then added, "Oh well. No skin offa us now."

Atkins studied the inscrutable face and tried to read what was there, but it told him nothing. A curious thought began to form in his mind, but was dispelled when the door burst open and the lanky Winters spilled into the hut, followed by a red-faced Abe Fein.

"Sarjint," panted the corporal, pausing for breath. "We've bin tryin' to git into the communications hut to check the equipment but it's locked up tight. The windows are covered on the inside and we can't see in. There's nobody around but stove oil fumes are comin' from the chimney pipe. We tried to git the door open but it wouldn't budge. It's spooky." His Adam's apple bobbed furiously in its agitation.

"Thanks Pete," Atkins told Winters. Turning to Hunter, he said, "Walt, this changes things. Pick three men, take your carbines and check the communications hut. We've got a nut loose and it looks like Mortimer. Let me know how you make out as soon as possible. I should be here but I don't know for sure." To Winters and Fein he said, "You fellas stay with me. Let's go." He snatched up his pistol from the desk and buckled it as he strode toward the door.

Outside Operations the men were milling around in a disorganized group, talking in low voices, smoking and waiting, Army fashion, for someone to give them something to do. One voice rose above the rest, trying to monopolize the attention of all. It was the tall burly Bruce Miller who handled refueling of the aircraft that landed here enroute down the chain.

Miller had watery eyes, a red bulbous nose and a ragged handlebar mustache that gave him the appearance of a benign walrus. It was said that on this liquorless island, he had been known to drink 100 octane gasoline when he was unable to find any more after shave lotion.

Miller was saying, "I say we hunt him down and form a firing squad, bein's there's no trees on the island for a hangin'."

"Shut up Bruce," bellowed Hunter.

The chattering subsided and Miller fixed the two sergeants with a baleful glare. Atkins adjusted his pistol belt and turned to Hunter. "Pick your men Walt, and take my Jeep if it'll start. If you can get in the communications hut, send the message. Be careful, and no shooting unless absolutely necessary."

"Right," said Hunter. He moved among the group and began selecting his men.

Atkins turned to Winters and said, "Pete, you're the sharpshooter of the outfit. Take Gagliano and Chernofsky, collect your carbines and take the first shift patrolling the landing strip. One hole blown in the middle of that and we're sunk. Use the CO's Jeep. I don't know when you'll be relieved."

"Will do Sarge."

Atkins addressed himself to the group and called out, "Wally, take one man and stand guard at your dispensary, and don't let anything happen to it." Corporal Wallace Parks, medical technician, tapped a man on the shoulder and they moved off silently.

Atkins shouted, "One thing more." When he had the attention of the men he continued, "It looks like crazy Mortimer might be our man, but we don't know for sure. If you find him or anyone acting fishy, bring him here. No shooting unless it's necessary to protect lives or property. Two men go with Abe to help him guard the supply hut and the rest go to your huts and keep a look out. We'll use the phones if necessary. Move out."

Abe Fein called out two names and the group broke apart, the men drifting away and their muttering fading as they got out of range.

"Abe," said Atkins, "don't let anything happen to the rations or ordnance."

"I won't. It would help a lot if we knew who we're guarding against. Ya know?"

To the quizzical look, Atkins replied, "That's what bothers us all Abe. There's not supposed to be anyone on the island but us." More to himself, he added, "Or is there?"

Nelson Atkins found himself alone for the first time since he had heard the blasts that fired the mess-hall. Fetching a pair of binoculars from Operations he climbed the knoll behind the hut from where he could see the landing strip and most of the huts that comprised the base.

He swept the glasses the length of the steel mesh carpet of the landing strip to the south, then across the dozen Pacific huts, dispersed in random fashion, and through a break in the fog, settled on the mast of the Very High Frequency transmitter on the mountain top to the north. As he studied the site Atkins was suddenly assailed by a new and disturbing thought. All they have to do is disable that and we would have no possible communication. It could be our salvation if I can get it first.

Atkins scrambled down the knoll, noting how the daylight was already beginning to fade. In the hut he cased the glasses and slung them on his neck. He picked up his carbine and loaded it and stuffed a handful of carbine ammunition in his hip pocket. At the door he took his heavy field jacket from a peg and left the hut.

Hunter had taken his Jeep and Winters was using the CO's Jeep. That left the cantankerous command car which was used by the alcoholic Miller, since he was the base mechanic and the only person who could make it run.

As he approached the hut shared by Bruce Miller and three other men Atkins was greeted by sounds of a scuffling, grunts and curses from the partially opened door. Suddenly a red-faced Miller burst through the door propelled by two determined looking men, each with an arm lock on the alcoholic.

"Hold it," shouted Atkins.

The men stopped and the taller one, Quigley, said, "We finally got a bellyful of his lynch talk. When we ignored him he went over to my bunk and sneaked a bottle of after shave I just got and swigged half of it down before we could reach him."

"We were gonna dunk him in the muskeg bog behind the hut," said the other man, a newcomer to the base named Olson.

Atkins eyed the trio critically for a moment, then said, "Go ahead. Soak his head quick then leave him to me. I need him."

The two pushed the subdued Miller behind the hut and threw him face down with a splash.

Atkins laid his carbine in the command car that stood near the door and started toward the rear of the hut in time to meet Miller staggering toward him, dripping water and gasping for breath, his stringy unkempt hair and mustache plastered down so that he resembled a wet spaniel.

Taking a tight grip on the man's fatigue jacket, Atkins pushed him back hard against the hut wall, bending him against the curve of the structure and spoke directly into his face, "Listen to me Bruce. Sober up and straighten up from now on or you'll find yourself in the brig when we get out of this."

"OK," muttered Miller.

"Go in and change your clothes. Grab a field jacket and start the car. And shag ass, on the double."

Releasing Miller, Atkins turned to the other two. "Olson, you're as wet as he is. Change and get a carbine and come with us. We've got a job to do. Quigley, stay here and watch things. You may be needed later. Shag it now. It'll be dark soon.

"Ya, I'll be ready in a minute, but how come you wanna take that loudmouth slob? Either of us can handle the command car."

"So I can keep my eye on him. I don't relish his company any more than you do but we can't have him stirring up more trouble."

Bruce Miller drove in a sulky silence, eyes glued to the single lane rutted road, handling the car expertly as they bumped along in the fading daylight. "Damn Engineers had pack mules in mind when they built this road," he muttered to no one in particular.

Beside him, Atkins rode silently, gripping his own and Miller's carbines. Olson, hunched in the rear seat, was thrown abruptly back when Miller downshifted and let out the clutch with a jerk as the car began the ascent up the steep mountain. He swore in Swedish and asked, "Is this trip necessary?"

"I see you still have a sense of humor," said Atkins. "It's necessary though. We don't want the VHF site sabotaged. Fighters go over here all the time and we can use it to get a message out."

They were climbing steadily now and the snow was growing deeper. Although it was still early afternoon, the light was growing dim and the swirling fog drifted and closed about the command car like an unwelcome soggy blanket.

"Jeep tracks in the snow. Wonder if somebody's ahead of us," growled Miller. "Wisht I had a good snort."

"You haven't, so forget it," said Atkins testily. "Hunter and his men come up here every day to check the transmitter. Let's hope the tracks were made this morning."

They rounded a bend to the left and the grade grew suddenly steeper with a turnout at the bend.

"Stop here Bruce," said Atkins. "It's only a quarter mile now. We'll leave—"

Three reports sounded from somewhere ahead and Atkins felt his face showered by small fragments of glass. Miller pointed dumbly at the star-shaped holes in the windshield and sat like a huge frozen gnome. Atkins felt a hand pull at the shoulder of his jacket and heard Olson groan softly, "I'm hit."

He turned quickly and said, "Lie down on the floor Ole, if you can and we'll check you." Grabbing Miller's jacket, he shook the stupified driver roughly, calling, "Back the car the hell outa here. Back around the bend and stop behind that knoll. He can't see us there. Hurry."

Miller came to life with a jerk, jammed the gears into reverse and backed the car around the curve and behind the knoll.

Atkins and Miller dismounted hurriedly and Atkins said, "Bruce, take your carbine and creep around the knoll and watch for the bastard. I'll see about Ole."

The driver grumbled and disappeared into the murk. It was dark enough now that they would make a poor target and Atkins noted with relief that there was no further sound from the attacker.

He gingerly helped Olson onto the back seat and asked, "Where is it Ole? Is it bad?"

"Down the low on the right side. Just a crease I think."

The wound appeared to be a flesh wound and hadn't bled much. Atkins broke open the first aid kit that luckily happened to be in the car and silently handed Olson a sulpha tablet and set about applying a bandage as best he could.

"Gulp that pill and grit your teeth 'til I get this taped on. It went clear through and it looks like you're lucky Ole."

Olson lay quietly against the car seat and said nothing. Little beads of perspiration had broken out on his forehead and taut lips tried gamely to pull themselves into a smile, then gave up.

Atkins got up slowly and turned in the direction in which Miller had disappeared. "Wonder where that sot is," he said softly, more to himself than to Olson.

The grey fingers of mist drifted around like ghosts, reaching for the men and the car and cloaking them in their grasp, then drifting away to allow a view of the snow-covered slope of the mountain, now nearly lost in darkness.

God, thought Atkins. Stuck on this mountain in the dark, with a pea soup fog and a wounded man and an unreliable sot needing a drink and a killer somewhere in the murk waiting his chance.

He reached his decision just as he sensed, rather than saw, a mass of something approaching silently from out of the gloom. He dropped behind the car and brought the carbine into working position—and recognized Bruce Miller as he shuffled toward the car.

"Can't see or hear nobody out there," he muttered.

"Bruce, can you turn the car around here?", asked Atkins quickly.

"Yup."

"Allright. Take Ole down to the dispensary and tell Parks to do what he can. He'll know. Then find Hunter or whoever you can find in a hurry and tell them what happened and to come up."

"OK."

Atkins knelt behind the low hummock, gripping the carbine and listening to the command car whine down the mountain road. If the bushwhacker thinks we all left to get reinforcements he may make a move. He checked his weapons again, then bending low, silently skirted the hummock to the left and

moved uphill toward the VHF shack a quarter mile ahead. The swirling mists became his friend now, hiding his movements.

Squatting now behind another hummock, protected by the fog, he knew the shack was only about seventy-five yeards away. The fickle fog drifted away, exposing his position, but allowing him a glimpse of the dim outline of the small structure.

"Hold it right there," barked the voice from somewhere behind him. "Stand up careful. Drop the carbine and turn around easy."

Atkins felt his heart leap into his throat. His pulse hammered and he fought to control the shock that left him sick as he carefully raised and let the carbine drop into the snow. He knew the voice.

He turned slowly and looked at the unwavering muzzle of the carbine pointed at his belly, then raised his eyes to the face of an unsmiling Walt Hunter.

"It's me Walt. But you knew that."

"So you're the one who blasted the brass so you could take command of this flea-bitten place. Didn't know you had it in you Nelly." Hunter spat out "Nelly" as if it had a bad taste.

"You know better than that Walt.

"Nuts. I only know that I caught you sneakin' up to sabotage the VHF transmitter. Now, unfasten the pistol belt under your jacket and let it drop. Do it easy."

Atkins let the belt fall. His mind raced and some nagging thought kept dragging it back to the shack. There's something about the shack that I should remember.

As if reading his mind, Hunter ground out, "I came up to inspect the transmitter and had a little bad luck. I just got inside the shack when I heard your car comin' up the hill and accidentally crossed up some wires and blew every fuse in it. It's off the air."

Atkins asked, "What did you do with Mortimer?"

"Had to shoot him. We went to the communications hut and found it locked like the boys said. So I kicked the door in and he was there all right. He shot at us and I shot in self defense. But before he died he told us you were the brains behind this and put him on KP and told him how to do it."

He's telling me how he did it, thought Atkins. While he talks I'll stall until the fog dirfts over us again. Then he knew what it was that had been nagging him about the shack and he felt a glimmer of hope. Crusty old Sergeant Ernie Harms, the former communications sergeant, had kept an old M1917 service revolver in some cabinet drawer in the transmitter shack. It was always loaded and he knew Harms had left it there when he was transferred six months ago, and his duties being taken over by Hunter. If Hunter hadn't removed the weapon it should still be there. If.

"Back up Nelly School Teacher.

I'm going to pick up your guns and we're going in my Jeep back down to the base. I don't expect to get you there because you'll try to get away and I'll have to give you Mortimer's medicine."

"What about the men who came with me?," asked Atkins, stalling.

"I'll cross that bridge later. Back away from the guns."

Atkins moved back and Hunter knelt to pick up the weapons, the muzzle of his carbine unwavering.

Atkins quickly weighed his chances. Make a run and take a chance on finding the revolver before he gets there—or surely die on this mountain. He has to kill me now. In his kneeling position, Hunter was in poor shooting posture. Atkins dropped quickly and scooped up a double handful of snow and threw it with all the force of a desperate man, then took off in a zigzag course into the drifting mist. He heard Hunter spitting snow, cursing mightily, and a shot crashed into the fog. He reached the shack in seconds and found it shrouded in the mark. He opened the door, slipped inside and shot the bolt.

Outside, a barrage of shots crashed, some of the slugs spending themselves against the heavy wooden walls of the shack.

Atkins yanked furiously at the drawers of the first cabinet. They held a variety of technician's tools, wire solder, papers and a rolled-up picture of Betty Grable in pinup attire. He snatched at the drawers of the second cabinet and its drawers yielded electronic parts and supplies but no weapons.

Hunter had reached the shack and was shooting at the door bolt, his bullets thudding sickeningly into the wood.

There's one cabinet left. Godammit. It's got to be there. That lock can't last.

He yanked open the two lower drawers and dumped them on the floor but there was no gun. The top drawer was stuck, or locked. He kicked it savagely with his heavy boot but it refused to give. He tipped the cabinet over with a crash, springing the lock, and the drawer popped out upside down.

The shooting had stopped and he heard the door being pulled open behind him. On the floor lay the .45 Colt service revolver. He scooped it up and whirled to face the door as Hunter raised his carbine. With a wave of horror Atkins heard his revolver click harmlessly. He squeezed again and the big gun bucked in his hand and he watched fascinated as Hunter fell backwards and sprawled in the snow as knocked there by a giant hand.

Atkins knelt over the prostrate form, took the wrist and felt for a pulse. It was weak and a look at the man's face told him there was little he could do.

"I took that one in the breadbasket." The stricken sergeant spoke weakly and haltingly. "Nothin' per-

sonal Nelly. Guess I hated—the new system. Ninety-day wonders—crap—stuck here." The voice was weakening. "Crazy Mortimer gave me—" The eyes were open but life had left the stocky body.

Nelson Atkins left the shack and wandered out into the snow, fighting down a growing nausea. He reached for a cigarette but they had fallen from his pocket somewhere. He suddenly became conscious of the low-pitched even moan of the fighter circling overhead. How long it had been there he did not know. When he looked up he saw stars appearing through large breaks in the fog.

The fighter ceased circling and droned westward, the sound soon fading out.

"Hope that boy's alert," Atkins heard himself aloud.

The fog was lifting and dissipating in all directions now and Atkins was seized by the first sense of hope since the explosion of hours ago.

He ran behind the shack and almost bumped into the Jeep Hunter had been using. The steel mast stood like a finger pointing out the clearing sky.

Climbing about ten feet up the mast's ladder, he was able to see the glowing rectangle of the smoldering messhall wreckage below and the scattered lights of the huts.

The sound of a laboring vehicle caught his attention and he dismounted from the mast, jumped into the Jeep, got the engine started and bounced hurriedly down the road toward the oncoming headlights.

The two Jeeps met about a half mile below the shack and Atkins recognized the long frame of Winters hunched over the wheel of the other vehicle. Gagliano sat silently beside him.

"You all right Sarge?", asked the corporal nasally. "We got help comin'. That fighter plane saw the fire and couldn't contact us on VHF, so he called us on the low frequency range. We was in the communications hut by that time and told him to send some help."

"Good. It's all over boys. The fog broke at the right time too," said Atkins wearily. He felt drained of all energy and emotion, but strangely relaxed. "Follow me back up the hill. We have a chore to do. I'll tell you about it up there and then we'll go down."

There was a certain cell in the Eighteenth Precinct that was soundproof. It was reserved for noisy prisoners and it was called, "the quiet room."

TOUGH CHIPPIE

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY
JONATHAN CRAIG

Detective Sergeant Carl Streeter's home on Ashland Avenue was modest. So were the dark suits he always wore, and the four-year-old Plymouth he drove. But in various lock boxes around the city he had accumulated nearly fifty thousand dollars.

He was thinking about the money now as he watched his daughter Jeannie clear away the dinner dishes. He never tired of watching her. She had just turned sixteen, and lately she had begun to develop the infinitely feminine mannerisms he had once found so irresistible in her mother.

The thought of his wife soured the moment, and he frowned. It had been wonderful, having Barbara away for a few weeks. But she'd be back from the seashore next Monday, and then the nagging and bickering and general unpleasantness would start up again. It didn't seem possible, he reminded himself for probably the ten thousandth time, that anyone who had once been almost as slim and lovely as Jeannie could have grown into two hundred pounds of shapeless, complaining blubber.

"More coffee, Dad?" Jeannie asked.

He pushed his chair back from the table and got up. "No," he said. "I guess I'd better get going if I want to get down to the precinct by seven."

"Seven? But I thought your shift didn't start till eight."

"It doesn't. There are a couple things I want to take care of down there, though."

"When will you be home?"

"Depends. Not until three or four, anyhow. We're a little shorthanded."

"You put in too many hours, Dad."

"Maybe," he said. He grinned at her and walked out to the front hall to get his hat. Just another few months, he thought. Six months at the outside, and I'll have enough to put Jeannie in a damned good college, ditch Barbara and her lard, and tell the Chief to go to hell.

Sally Creighton was waiting for him in the Inferno Bar. She pushed a folded piece of paper across the table as he sat down facing her.

"How's the Eighteenth Precinct's one and only policewoman?" Streeter asked.

Sally looked at him narrowly. "Never mind the amenities. Here's the list we got off that girl last night."

He put the list into his pocket without looking at it. "Did you check them?"

"Don't I always? Only two of them might be good for any money. I marked them. One's a dentist, and the other guy runs a bar and grill over on Summit." She lifted her beer and sipped at it, studying him over the rim of the glass. "There've been a few changes made, Carl." Her bony, angular face was set in hard lines.

"Like what?"

"From now on I'm getting fifty per cent."

"We've been over that before."

"And this is the last time. Fifty per cent, Carl. Starting as of now."

He laughed shortly. "I do the dirty work, and take the chances—and you come in for half, eh?"

"Either that, or I cut out." She put a quarter next to her glass and stood up. "Think it over, Sergeant. You aren't the only bruiser around the Eighteenth that can shake a guy down. Start making with the fifty per cent, or I'll find another partner." She moved toward the door with a long, almost mannish stride.

Streeter spread his fingers flat against the table top, fighting back the anger that he knew would get him nowhere. For almost a full minute he stared at the broken, scarred knuckles of his hands. By God, he thought, if it's the last thing I ever do I'll knock about ten of that woman's yellow teeth down into her belly.

Hell, he'd taught her the racket in the first place. He'd shown her how to scare hell out of those under-age chippies until they thought they were going to spend the rest of their

lives in jail if they didn't play ball. Why, he'd even had to educate Sally in the ways of keeping those girls away from the juvenile authorities until she'd had a chance to drain them.

He closed his right fist and clenched it until the knuckles stood up like serrated knobs of solid white bone. Damn that Sally, anyhow; she was getting too greedy. Fifty per cent!

He got up slowly and moved toward the door.

Twenty minutes later, after he had checked in at the precinct and been assigned a cruiser, he pulled up in a No Parking zone and took out the list Sally had given him. His anger had subsided a little now. Actually, he realized, no cop had ever been in a better spot. His first real break with the Department had been when they had organized the Morals Squad and assigned him to it as a roving detective. The second break had occurred when Sally Creighton was transferred to the Eighteenth. He hadn't talked to her more than ten minutes that first day before he'd realized that he had found the right person to work into his ideas.

In three years, working alone every night as he did, he had loaded his safe deposit boxes with almost fifty thousand dollars.

He lit a cigarette and glanced at the list. Of the two names Sally had marked, the man who owned the bar and grill was the best bet. The other, the dentist, lived on the far side of town; and besides, Streeter had found it was always best to brace a man at his place of business. There was a tremendous psychological factor working on his side when he did that, and especially if the guy happened to be a professional man. He memorized the address of the bar and grill and eased the cruiser away from the curb.

It was too late for the short-order dinner crowd and too early for the beer drinkers, and Streeter had the long bar entirely to himself.

The bartender came up, a thin, blond man in his middle thirties.

Streeter ordered beer, and when the blond man brought it to him he said, "I'm looking for Johnny Cabe."

The bartender smiled. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

"Quite a bit, maybe," Streeter said. "It all depends."

Some of the bartender's smile went away. "I don't follow you."

"You will," Streeter said. He took out his wallet and showed the other man his gold badge.

"What's the trouble?" Cabe asked.

"Well, now," Streeter said, "there really doesn't have to *be* any." He took a swallow of beer and leaned a little closer to Cabe. "You had quite a time for yourself last night."

Cabe's eyes grew thoughtful. "Last night? You kidding? All I did was have a few beers over at Ed Riley's place, and—"

"Yeah," Streeter said. "And then you picked up somebody."

"What if I did?"

"Then you took her over to your room."

"So what? They don't put guys in jail for—"

"The hell they don't," Streeter said. "Raping a girl can put you away damned near forever, boy."

"Rape? You're crazy! Hell, she wanted to go. She suggested it."

"Next you're going to tell me she charged you for it."

"Sure, she did. Twenty bucks."

"That's a damn shame," Streeter said. "Because it's still rape, and you're in one hell of a jam."

Cabe moved his lips as if to speak, but there was no sound.

"That girl you took home with you was only fifteen years old," Streeter said. "She—"

"Fifteen! She told me she was nineteen! She *looked* nineteen!"

"You should have looked twice. She's fifteen. That makes it statutory rape, and it doesn't make one damn bit of difference what you thought, or whether she was willing, or if she charged you for it, or anything else." He smiled. "It's statutory rape, brother, and that means you've had it."

Cabe moistened his lips. "I can't believe it."

"Get your hat," Streeter said.

"You're arresting me?"

"I didn't come in here just for the beer. Hurry it up."

"God," Cabe said. "Officer, I—"

"Kind of hard to get used to the idea, isn't it?" Streeter asked softly.

Cabe's forehead glistened with sweat. "Listen, officer, I got a wife. Best kid on earth, see. I don't know what came over me last night. I just got tight, I guess, and . . . God, I —"

Streeter shook his head slowly. "Good thing you haven't got any children," he said.

"But I have! Two of them. Seven and nine. And my wife, she's—she's going to have another baby pretty soon. That's why—I mean that's how come I was kind of anxious for a woman last night. I—" He broke off, biting at his lower lip.

"Tough," Streeter said. "Real tough. But it's that kind of world, friend. I've got a kid myself, so I know how it is. But—" he shrugged —"there isn't a hell of a lot I can do about it." He shook his head sadly. "When little guys—guys like you and me—get in a jam, it's just plain tough. But guys with dough . . . well, sometimes they can buy their way out."

Cabe looked at him a long moment. "How much dough?"

"Quite a bit," Streeter said. "More than you've got, Johnny. Better get your hat."

"Let's cut out this crap," Cabe said. "I asked you how much dough?"

"We got to think of your wife and kids," Streeter said. "So we'll have to go easy. Let's say a grand."

"I ain't got it."

"You can get it. A little at a time, maybe, but you can get it." He took another swallow of beer. "How much you got in the cash register?"

"About three hundred. I got to pay the help tonight, or there wouldn't be that much."

"Too bad about the help," Streeter said. "Let's have the three hundred. In a couple weeks I'll be back. By that time you'll have the other seven hundred, eh, Johnny-boy?"

Cabe went to the cash register, took out the money, and came back. "Here," he said. Then, softly beneath his breath he added: "You bastard!"

Streeter put the money in his pocket and stood up. "Thanks, Johnny," he said. "Thanks a lot. You reckon I ought to give you a receipt? A little reminder to get up that other seven hundred bucks?"

"I'll remember," Cabe said.

"I'm afraid you might not," Streeter said, smiling. "So here's your receipt." He leaned across the bar and slammed his fist flush against the blond man's mouth.

Johnny Cabe crashed into the back-bar, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth.

"Thanks again, Johnny," Streeter said. "You serve a good glass of beer." He turned and went outside to the cruiser.

He spent the next four hours making routine check-ups and trying to think of improvements in the system he had worked out with Sally Creighton. The system had been working nicely, but it was a long way from foolproof. Most of the cops on the force were honest, and for them Streeter had nothing but contempt. But there were a few like himself, and those were the ones who worried him. He'd had reason lately to suspect that a couple of them were getting on to him. If they did, then his racket was over. They could politic around until they got him busted off the Morals Squad. Then they'd take over themselves. And, he reflected, they wouldn't even have to go that far. They could simply cut themselves in on a good thing.

And that Sally . . . He'd have to start splitting down the middle with her, he knew. Maybe she was even worth it. One thing was sure, she'd learned how to terrify young girls better than anyone else he could have teamed up with. He'd seen her work on just one girl, but it had been enough to convince him. Sally had wrapped her arm around a fourteen-year-old girl's throat in such a way that the girl was helpless. Then, with a hand towel soaked with water, she had beaten the girl across the stomach until she was almost dead. When the girl had recovered slightly, she had been only too willing to tell Sally every man she'd picked up during the last six months.

That particular list of names, Streeter recalled, had been worth a little over ten thousand in shakedown money.

He came to a drug store and braked the cruiser at the curb.

In the phone booth, he dialed Sally's number, humming tunelessly to himself. He felt much better now, with Johnny Cabe's three hundred dollars in his pocket.

When Sally answered, he said, "Streeter. Anything doing?"

"I got one in here now," Sally said. "A real tough baby. I picked her up at Andy's trying to promote a drunk at the bar."

"She talking?" he asked.

"Not a damn word. I got her back in the Quiet room."

"What's her name?"

"Don't know. All she had in her bag was a lipstick and a few bucks." She paused. "Like I said, she's tough. She won't even give us the time of day."

"Listen," Streeter said. "Things are slow tonight. See if you can get her talking. Maybe I can collect a bill here and there."

"That's an idea."

"You haven't lost your technique, have you?"

"No."

"All right. So turn it on. Give her that towel across the belly. That ought to make her talkative."

For the first time he could remember, he heard Sally laugh.

"You know," she said, "I'm just in the mood for something like that. Maybe I will."

"Sure," Streeter said. "The sooner you get me some names, the sooner I get us some dough."

"Don't forget, Carl—it's fifty per cent now."

"Sure."

He hung up and went back out to the cruiser.

After another slow hour of routine checks, he decided to see how Sally was making out with the tough pick-up. He stopped at a diner and called her.

"God," she said, as soon as he had identified himself, "we're really in it now Carl." Her voice was ragged, and there was panic in it.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I went too far. I was doing what you said, and—"

"For God's sake, Sally! What's happened."

"I—I think I broke her neck . . ."

"You think! Don't you know?"

There was a pause. "Yes. I broke her neck, Carl. I didn't mean to, but she was fighting, and all at once I heard something snap and . . ."

The thin film of perspiration along his back and shoulders was suddenly like a sheathe of ice.

"When, Sally? When did it happen?"

"J-just now. Just a minute ago."

"You sure she's dead?"

"Dead or dying. There was a pulse a few seconds ago, but—"

"But her neck! You're positive it's broken? That it just isn't dislocated, or something?"

"It's broken. This is it, Carl. For both of us. God . . ."

"Listen, damn it!" he said. "Was she wearing stockings?"

"Yes. What—"

"Take one of them off her and hang her up with it."

She seemed to have trouble breathing. "But I—I can't do that. I—"

"You've got to! Do you hear? It's the only way out. Tie one end of the stocking around her neck. Then put a chair beneath that steam pipe that runs across the ceiling. Haul her up on the chair with you and tie the other end around the pipe. Leave her hanging and kick the chair away, just like she'd done it herself."

He waited, breathing heavily.

"All right," Sally said. "I'll try."

"You'd better. And hurry. Get her up there and then leave the room for a few minutes. When you go back to see your prisoner, she's hanged herself. See? They'll give you hell for leaving her alone with stockings on, but that's all they can do. She panicked and hanged herself; that's all."

"But, Carl, I—"

"No buts! Get busy!"

He opened up the siren and kept it open all the way back to the Eighteenth. He ran up the station steps, through the corridors. He was breathing quickly. When he arrived at the second floor he was soaked with perspiration.

He forced himself to walk leisurely through the large room that housed the detective headquarters, back toward the short corridor that led to the Quiet Room. The Quiet Room was a small, soundproof detention cell where they sometimes put the screamers and howlers until they calmed down enough for questioning. It had been designed to provide some degree of quiet for the men out in the headquarters room, and not as a torture chamber.

But it had served Streeter and Sally Creighton well and often.

Streeter paused at the door to the corridor and drew a paper cup of water from the cooler. Where in hell was Sally? he wondered. She should be out here by now, killing time before she went back to discover that her prisoner had hanged herself.

He glanced about him. There were only two other detectives in the room, and both were busy with paper work. A man in a T-shirt and blue jeans sat dozing in a chair, one wrist handcuffed to a chair arm.

Then he heard footsteps behind him, and Sally's voice said, "Thank God you're here."

He turned to look at her. Her face was gray and her forehead was sheened with sweat.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

"To the john. I don't know . . . something about this made me sick in the stomach."

"Yeah. Well, let's go down there and get it over with."

He led the way down the corridor to the Quiet Room and threw the heavy bolt. The goddamned little chippie, he thought. So she'd

thought she was tough . . . Well, she'd asked for it, hadn't she? She'd asked for it, and she'd damn well got it.

He jerked the door open and looked up at the girl hanging from the steam pipe. Her body was moving, very slowly, a few inches to the right and then back again.

He stared at her while the floor seemed to tilt beneath his feet and something raw and sickening filled his stomach.

He took a faltering step forward, and then another, his eyes straining and misted. It was difficult for him to see clearly. Absently, he brushed at his eyes with his sleeve. The hanging figure before him sprang into sudden terrifying focus.

The girl's body was as slim and graceful looking in death as it had been a few hours ago when he had watched her clearing away the dinner dishes. But not the face, not the horribly swollen face.

"Jeannie," he whispered. "Jeannie, Jeannie . . ."

A WIDOW'S WORD

He pointed at Blake. "Feed this, if you must, but get him out of here before I get back."

BY
GEORGE B. SCANLAN

BLAKE CANSLOW stepped down from the big, two-storied bus and headed directly across the street to Barney's. The familiar, sour smell of the darkened tavern brought a lip-bending hint of a smile to his gaunt face. His caved-in eyes darted quick looks from side to side and the muscle on the right edge of his jaw fluttered in irregular spasms.

He sat on one of the crack-topped wooden stools and bent forward to reach a book of matches beside an overflowing ash tray. The recognized feel of the bar's heavy, rolled edge against his chest took away some of the breath-shortening tension. He was alone with the barkeep and Blake had his cigarette

lighted by the time the grossly fat man had pulled himself from a cushioned, shelf-like seat at the far end of the bar and moved ponderously toward him.

"Barney around?" Blake asked.

"Barney's in his grave," the fat man said, his lips barely moving as though even that effort was too much. "Five, six years now."

Blake felt slapped. The first friend he had asked for was dead. He recalled Barney's kindness when there had been no necessity for him to be kind. He ordered a whiskey instead of the beer he had planned on allowing himself before starting the mile walk to his brother's house.

He was on his third when a man walked in and slapped a white cowboy hat down on the bar three stools away from Blake.

"Gimme a beer, Billie," a loud, deep voice demanded.

Blake's frightened glance verified that it was Jones. The barkeep was back on his shelf. He reached into a cooler beside him and slid a bottle on its side down the bar where it was stopped by a big, hair-covered fist. Blake remembered those fists and what they could do. A metal opener followed the bottle. Blake kept his eyes on his own drink and heard the tiny, explosive pop of the bottle cap, followed by the sound—the sickening sound—of the Deputy's frog-like gulps. Then he heard the bar stool creak from Jones' pivoting weight, and his insides twisted under the deliberate inspection.

"You just passin through, man?" The question was rapped at Blake in drill-sergeant accents of authority.

"No," Blake said, without looking up. "I'm visiting for a bit."

He felt the hard stare taking in his frayed collar, the sport coat purchased when he had weighed thirty pounds more, and the unkempt, unbarbered hair showing beneath his battered khaki hat.

"Visitin?" The Deputy's voice sounded doubting. "Where at you visitin?"

"Out at Matt Canslow's."

Jones' snort was as sharp as the pop of the bottle cap had been. "Matt Canslow!" he echoed; his tone made the name a curse. "I ever tell you, Billy, how that Canslow slob fired me off a good job at his mill years back to make a place for his drunken little . . . Hey!"

The Deputy was at Blake's side, and twisted him around with an iron-fingered grip on his shoulder. "You're him, by God!" he said triumphantly. "You're Canslow's drunken little brother." Jones stepped back with a harsh, vicious laugh. "Never thought you'd have the guts to come back here, bum. When did you get out of the can?"

Blake caught his breath. "You . . . How did you know?"

Jones laughed again. "When a con goes into Stateville, they send a notice to all the towns where he's got a record. You didn't know that did you, bum?"

"No," Blake answered, stunned by the informatiion. "No, I didn't. Does . . . does anyone else know?"

"Everybody, bum! You can bet your life I made sure everyone knew Matt Canslow's drunken little brother was servin' time."

Blake got up and walked from the tavern with Jones' jeering laughter following him. The sound of it pursued him for the mile to his brother's house.

There was an all-white convertible at the curb in front of the Canslow's big, Georgian-style house. The red-haired, broad-shouldered young man at the wheel nodded to Blake and smiled. Blake didn't recognize the man, but was grateful for this first sign of friendship in his home town. So he smiled back and felt a little better as he walked up the bricked path.

Matt Canslow opened the door and Blake watched his brother's heavy-jowled, pale face change expression from its usual scowl to surprised recognition.

"What the hell do you want?" the man barked.

The question confused Blake. "The letter," he said. "The letter you sent . . . That is, your wife—"

"I wrote him to come, Matt," a soft voice said from behind his brother's short, heavy-set figure.

Blake saw Lillian then. She was no longer young; undyed streaks of grey defined the shape of her carefully arranged black hair. She was full-hipped and heavy-breasted. Still lovely, though—her beauty matured by the years, not faded. He had always thought her too much, too fine for his brother.

"Why would you do that?" Matt Canslow asked her. "After all the trouble he's caused us?"

Blake noticed that his brother's voice was still different when he talked to Lillian. There was warmth and affection in the tone, but only in the negative sense that it wasn't brittle and clipped with his wife as it was with everyone else.

"Because he's your brother," Lillian said, coming forward. She took Blake's hand and drew him gently through the doorway. Her smile shielded Blake from his brother's glare.

"You never lose your fondness for lost dogs, do you, dear?" Matt asked. Blake suddenly saw that his brother had become an old man as Matt added, in a flat resigned voice, "Vic Quinn, your other stray is waiting for me outside. Like I told you, he and I have to go into the mill for a few things." He pointed to Blake and said, "Feed this, if you must, but get him out of here before I get back."

The slammed door left Blake facing his sister-in-law, alone in the front hall of her home.

"Thanks for trying to help, Lillian," he said awkwardly. He looked away from her concerned gaze. "I should have known Matt wouldn't agree. I'll go now."

Moving quickly, she kissed his cheek, and Blake could feel the full feminine body against his own. "You're so thin, Blake. Now stop this foolish talk of going. You're my husband's brother and you're welcome here. Matt is still hurt about the . . . about the way you left and about—"

"My being in prison," he finished for her.

"Yes, but he'll come around. You're going to stay here until you're back on your feet again. The first thing is to get some weight back on you. Let's see what Mrs. Anderson left in the kitchen.

Blake knew it wouldn't work. He knew he should get out of his brother's house, his brother's town, his brother's life, but Lillian's warmth and anxious attention were overwhelmingly comforting; so much so that, after his first filling meal in days, he was laughing with her at the antics of a TV comedian when Matt came home.

At the slam of the front door their blended laughter died. Blake realized suddenly that the thick-cushioned gold chair he was sitting in was probably Matt's, and he stood up quickly to face his brother.

"I told you to be out of here by the time I got back!" Matt Canslow snapped, as he rushed forward to throw an awkward punch. It wasn't a hard blow, but a club ring on his finger raked Blake's cheek. Blake staggered backward and fell into the gold chair.

Lillian ran to him with a cry. "He's bleeding! You've hurt his eye."

"It's nothing, Lillian. I'm sorry for the trouble," Blake apologized even before he put a hand to his face and examined the trace of blood on it.

"He's not hurt," Matt said defensively.

His wife looked up at him from where she knelt beside Blake's chair. "I don't like you when you act like this, Matt," she said in a determined tone. "Now, please call Dr. Mornall."

"Call that gossipy old maid? For that little scratch? He'd have some kind of distorted story all over town if he saw Blake like this." Matt's bluster died out.

"You call him," Lillian said. "And I'll tell you something else you're going to do. You're going to give Blake half the money your mother left."

"Money? You know my mother didn't leave any money, Lillian."

"She left a few hundred dollars, and half of it is Blake's. It might not mean much to you, but he needs it to get a start." She rose to her feet. "And, if you won't call the Doctor, I will."

While they listened to her making the phone call in the hall, Blake was aware of Matt's eyes on him.

"You really hurt?" Matt asked at last.

"No. I'll leave right away, Matt. I shouldn't have come."

"No," Matt said heavily. "She's right, I guess. You're my brother. God help me. You can stay awhile."

Without another word, he left the room.

Dr. Mornall was a small man with a nakedly bald head and tiny, blinking eyes behind oversized rimless glasses.

"Hit by his own brother, eh?" he said, carefully applying a small bandage. Blake found it annoying to be ignored and spoken of in the third person. "Did he hit back?"

"He didn't even have a chance to get his hands up, the way Matt lunged at him," Lillian said. "It was just—" She stopped for a second, then said, "Now don't you go spreading any stories around this town, Tom Mornall. Matt is a good man. He just loses his temper at times."

"Do you think I'd divulge anything about a patient in my charge, Mrs. Canslow?" Dr. Mornall sounded outraged.

"You know you're the world's worst gossip," Lillian said coolly.

Dr. Mornall's lips tightened. He finished the bandaging, slammed his things into his bag, and slammed the front door behind himself without the formality of a goodnight.

"Oh, my," Lillian said in a worried tone. "I've really done it now. He'll outdo the town crier."

Blake had thought her remarks to the Doctor were indiscreet, but he said nothing. She came to his chair and took his arm, helping him to rise.

"I'm all right, Lillian," he said, embarrassed but liking the attention. "You don't need to help me."

"I want to help you," she insisted. "Lean on me and we'll get you upstairs to the guest room. I'm more ashamed than I can say about what happened, especially since I wrote you to come."

Despite Blake's protestations, she did everything but tuck him into bed. For the first time in years, he went to sleep with the feeling that the following day might not be as bad as the last one had been. In the morning, he awakened to the same unfamiliar sense of hope. There was a light knock on his door, and Lillian entered with a tray.

"Oh, really, now," he exclaimed. "You don't have to—"

"Hush," she said firmly. "Sit up so I can place this on your knees." Balancing the tray with one hand, she arranged the pillows behind his back. "And, after you've eaten, I want you to stay in bed and rest."

"What about Matt, Lillian?" he asked before taking his first bite.

"Don't you worry about my crabby old husband," she smiled. "He and I had a long talk last night. I think he'll have something nice to say to you at dinner tonight." She left the room humming.

They had lunch together in his room, despite his insistence that he be allowed to get up. Lillian had

confiscated his clothes. Afterward, she told him she had to go out shopping. He was asleep when she returned, and was awakened by the weight of new clothing she playfully dropped on him.

"I thought you should start fresh in the way of clothes, too," she said, refusing to heed his protests. "Get ready for dinner now. Matt will be home shortly."

It was easily the most pleasant dinner that Blake could recall for a long time. The only bad moment had been when Lillian suggested Matt mix cocktails for them all.

"I don't know if that's wise," Matt said, looking at Blake.

"Now you stop that, Matt," Lillian flared. "We all know that Blake . . . has a problem, but, with our help, he can overcome it. What better and safer place could he have a drink than here?"

Matt shrugged and went out to the kitchen for ice. After the drink, some of the tension in Blake's nerve ends eased. Matt was hardly effusive in his friendliness, but, obviously, Lillian had convinced him to make an effort.

Matt had to go out right after dinner. "That damn farmer who's been refusing for years to sell me the piece of land next to the mill has finally agreed to discuss terms," he explained. "My lawyer told me that, today, he had convinced the old goat he should sell. So, I'm—"

"See! I told you Vic Quinn would be a big help to you," Lillian interrupted triumphantly.

"Yea, he's worked out fine. I got to admit you had a good idea when you talked me into hiring him."

Watching his brother's smile, Blake again sensed the love the older man had for his wife.

"She had a good idea about you too, Blake," Matt said as he stood up from the table. He gave Blake's shoulder an awkward pat as he passed his chair. "I'm glad you're here, boy."

"Now, wasn't that nice?" Lillian said after Matt left the house. "Let's have a brandy to celebrate."

Blake couldn't answer for a moment. Finally, he trusted his voice enough to say, "I don't think I should."

"Nonsense," she returned briskly. "Matt just made a slip when he mentioned your drinking."

Blake felt the first one, but his declination was only half-hearted when she refilled his glass. Lillian sat opposite him and spoke gaily of people he had known. It was a wonderful evening. It ended in Blake's room with him draped across the bed, fully dressed, trying to teach the giggling Lillian the lyrics to a ballad he had learned in jail. She was putting her hair up in curlers before the mirror on his dresser when the front door bell rang. "I'll be right back," she said, as she left to answer it. "Just relax."

The brandy had him so relaxed that he began to drift to sleep. Lil-

lian's sharp scream jerked him upright and off the bed. He stumbled out of the room and down the steps to the first landing. Deputy Jones was standing inside the opened front door, his big white hat on his head, staring down at Lillian sprawled at his feet.

Blake's fear of the man was forgotten in his anger. "What've you done to her?" he yelled and tried to run down the remaining stairs. He tripped and fell into a limb-thrashing pile at the foot of the stairs. He leaped up and swung at Jones' surprised face. The instant his fist landed, he saw the surprise change to rage, and he realized what he had brought on himself. His eyes couldn't follow the Deputy's swift, hard hands that exploded pain through his body in crushing waves—pain that was familiar, too familiar. People beat drunks; it's a game. Bartenders, jackrollers and policemen do it professionally. The amateur division consists of other drunks and an occasional gang of sadists who do a really complete job. Blake felt the onset of numbness as he slid gratefully into a deep, black pit.

He woke in the familiar terror of an unknown place. A sun-filled window hurt his eyes until he closed them. He re-opened them slowly and saw the vertical bars between himself and the light. The bars disappeared behind a great black shape, and Deputy Jones loomed over him. His open palm slammed down onto Blake's stomach, folding him into a belly-holding N.

"Ya see this?" Jones roared, pointing to his own swollen and blackened eye. "You did that, damn you!"

Blake screamed from the scalp-tearing pain as Jones pulled him off the cot by his hair and threw him face down on the floor.

"I'll have more time to work on you later, when the Sheriff gets finished with you," the Deputy said, as he slammed out of the cell.

The Sheriff! Jones' last words had blown down the wall that Blake's memory had built between itself and the image of Sheriff Byron Fredericks—tall, emaciated, old, the only color on his grey face was a knife scar—a straight pink ditch from his left nostril to where his left ear lobe had been.

In his own strict terms, Sheriff Fredericks was moral and just. Blake's first contact with the man had been as a teen-ager, when he was picked up for a minor crime—a "joy-ride" in someone else's auto. Sheriff had felt the sentence given by the court had been too severe, so he merely ignored the judge and released Blake the next day. But Blake had gone on to sin more, and the Sheriff had not been pleased. Jones, and the Deputies before him, had been the agents used to express this displeasure. It had finally driven Blake from his hometown.

He lay where he had been thrown on the floor—his pain, his question

of why he was in jail this time, every other thought, smothered by the memory of the Sheriff's face. The face of an angry god.

Then Jones returned; his huge hands grabbed Blake's shoulders, stood him up, and propelled him from the cell down a corridor to an opened door. Blake stumbled into a large room containing an old-fashioned roll-top desk, a table, half a dozen chairs, and three people. Lillian was there, seated next to the redhaired man Blake had seen in the convertible in front of her house when he first arrived.

"Your face!" Lillian cried. "My God, Blake! What have they done to you?"

"I'm going to prefer charges against Jones for this, Sheriff," the redhaired man said. "He's done this sort of thing once too often."

"What's the matter with you, Quinn?" Jones sputtered indignantly. "He got that way resistin' arrest."

Blake only half-heard these words; his attention was pinned by the slit-eyed, steady stare of the cadaverous man seated in the swivel chair at the desk. Sheriff Fredericks' hands were folded prayerfully in his lap. He rocked slowly, as he asked in a deep monotoned voice that stilled the chattering of the other three. "Blake Canslow! You kill your brother?"

Matt was dead. Somehow, Blake wasn't surprised, but he couldn't make his voice answer the question. Lillian answered for him.

"Of course he didn't! Sheriff, this is foolish and cruel to put us through a thing like this, after . . . after what happened." She began groping in her purse for a handkerchief.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Canslow," the sheriff said, his voice courtly and concerned, "but you and your attorney, Mr. Quinn here, have indicated that you feel my deputy made a mistake, and we have to determine if there was, in fact, enough grounds for arresting your brother-in-law. I'll make it as brief as possible."

"There's grounds, all right," Jones said. "That bum killed Canslow. Whole town knows how he got beat up soon as he got in the house out there."

"The whole town also knows how you felt about Matt Canslow, Deputy," Vic Quinn said. "You've always made a big thing of telling everybody how much you hated the man."

"You sayin' I'm a murderer, Quinn?"

"Not yet!" the lawyer answered staring back at the reddening Jones.

"Listen, you lousy, slick-mouthed, son-of—"

"Enough!" the Sheriff's voice cut off Jones. "The Widow is present. Now, let's proceed." He pointed to a chair and nodded to Blake. "Boy, you sit there. Jones, come sit in front of the table." When they were both seated, the Sheriff instructed, "Tell how you came to find the deceased, Deputy."

"A phone call came in," Jones began, still glaring at Vic Quinn. "Fella said there was a body in a car parked off the highway on the edge of town. Wouldn't give his name. Said he didn't want to get involved. When I got out there I found Canslow in the front seat with a bullet hole in—"

"Not necessary!" the Sheriff interrupted, glancing at Lillian. "Now explain why you picked up the accused."

"The evidence I found, not ten feet from the car." Jones' smile was triumphant. "Let's see if this smart lawyer can talk out of that."

Impassively, the Sheriff opened his desk's side drawer, took out an oilskinned bag, tore the stapled end of the bag and dumped its contents on the table. Blake found himself staring at his own badly worn khaki hat.

"What's that?" Vic Quinn asked, leaning forward. He looked from the Sheriff to the smirking Jones to Blake. "Blake, is that yours?"

Blake nodded, continuing to stare at the hat. He had had it on in the bar after getting off the bus, but had he still been wearing it when he reached Matt's house? He couldn't remember. He was suddenly more frightened than he had ever been. He looked up to see Lillian watching him, her face cold, without expression.

"Tell them, Lillian," he said, holding back his panic. "Tell them we were together all evening."

"Is that right, Mrs. Canslow?" the Sheriff asked. "Were you and the accused together all last evening?"

"Well, not *all* evening," she answered, her face now a picture of concerned uncertainty. "Matt left about six, and then Blake and I talked for a time in the dining room, while he had a number of brandies. Around seven-thirty he got a bit boisterous. He started singing some songs that I felt were . . . Well, I thought they were a bit vulgar, so I went up to my bedroom to fix my hair and then read until Matt came home."

"Did you see the accused during the rest of the evening?" the Sheriff asked.

"No. Not until after the Deputy came and . . . and told me about Matt. I fainted, I guess. When I came to the Deputy was hitting Blake. I tried to stop him. I . . . I tried—" Her eyes turned suddenly to Blake. "Oh, Blake!" She drew in her breath sharply with a quick sob. "How could you?"

Blake felt strangled, as though an enormous weight was pressing down on his chest. "How could I what? he managed to gasp. "Tell them, will you?" His vocal cords felt shriveled as his voice faded. "You know I never left the house. You know—"

He stopped as he caught the glance exchanged by Lillian and Vic Quinn while the Sheriff and Jones were concentrating on himself. Understanding hit him like a fist in

the stomach. A frameup: Lillian's letter asking him to come; his hat gone with the rest of his clothes when she bought him the new ones; keeping him occupied and out of sight while Matt was waylaid by Vic Quinn, the lawyer who had set up the fictitious story of the stubborn farmer's change of heart; the final set of nails driven in by Lillian's lying about their evening together.

He lunged out of his chair and charged at the woman who had helped kill his brother, but Jones' huge fist intercepted him. He looked up from the floor to see Vic Quinn lead the sobbing Lillian out of the room. "I can hardly believe he did it," she said.

When the door closed behind the couple, Jones was standing over him, smiling, and lightly touching his swollen eye with the tips of his fingers.

"Okay, Sheriff?" the Deputy asked.

Blake heard the old man sigh before answering, "Yes. Go ahead. A man guilty of fratricide deserves no mercy."

Blake squeezed his eyes shut, praying for the first blow to be hard enough, but knowing that Jones would keep him on the edge of consciousness for a long time.

For ADULTS Only

BOOKS COMPLETE! UNCUT! UNCENSORED!

AN ABZ OF LOVE
by Inge & Sten Hegeler

OVER 100 ILLUSTRATIONS
600 VITAL SEX TOPICS

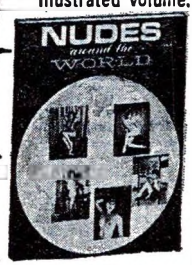
"ABZ is the best Sex Book ever published"— London Sunday Times

This explosive "BOOK OF LOVE" shocked even Europe. It presents a new and remarkable approach to Sex. The authors, both doctors, write in simple everyday language, in a completely frank and uninhibited manner on every aspect of advanced sex techniques that can provide exquisite varieties for the man and the woman.

NOT FOR BEGINNERS

ABZ was written for mature people who have had years of experience but feel that their sexual relationships can be improved and become more rewarding. ABZ shows numerous ways to attain a happier relationship. ABZ is considered by many to be the most important **Book on Sex** in existence today! A must for Doctors, Scholars, Connoisseurs and your private library. A large, magnificent, illustrated volume.

Published at $10. NOW ONLY $8.95



NUDES AROUND THE WORLD

Masterpieces of photography of the Female Beauty. Girls from nearly every country in the world appear inviting comparison and inspection. Asian Beauties, Exotic African Lovelies, the full sultry beauty of France, Spain, Cuba, Norway, Tahiti, England, Italy and many more . . . Luscious girls from every walk of life . . . Secretaries, Strippers, Exotic Dancers, some representing their countries in Miss World and Miss Universe contests. A rare opportunity for discerning connoisseurs. Invites many hours of leisurely browsing.

ONLY $3.50

SPECIAL OFFER!

FREE ORDER BOTH BOOKS FOR ONLY **$9.95**
& RECEIVE ABSOLUTELY FREE "DIARY OF A NYMPH" by NATHAN A. SCHIFF, M.D.
The actual case history of a "Nymphomaniac" taken from her own private diary.

IMMEDIATE DELIVERY IF YOU ORDER NOW! FULL 10 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

NOVEL PRESS, 31 Second Avenue, Dept. 137 New York, N. Y. 10003

Please rush me the following: Check book or books you wish to order.

☐ AN ABZ OF LOVE $8.95
☐ NUDES AROUND THE WORLD $3.50
Add 25¢ Handling Charge for each book.

☐ SPECIAL OFFER 2 BOOKS plus FREE BONUS
ONLY $9.95 Plus 50¢ Postage and Handling

I understand I must be fully satisfied or my money will be refunded.

☐ I Certify that I am over 21 years old, (FOR ADULTS ONLY).

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

★ Write for **OUR FREE CATALOG**

A Collection of hundreds of unusual & exciting books.

You saw it in the papers every few weeks—every few days, it seemed now. Somebody walked into a bank, handed the teller a note. Often he didn't even show a gun, perhaps had none. The threatening note was enough. Sometimes there was a sack to be filled, other times they just grabbed a handful of cash and ran. Bert Wilson had wondered what he would do if it happened to him. He was quite sure he would at least be able to kick the alarm button at the foot of his teller's cage. He thought he would make the person actually show a gun before he handed over any money, but he wasn't sure. You couldn't be too sure how scared you'd be if it happened to you.

The bank had given them all some simple instructions for such an emergency. Keep cool. Do not raise your voice. Act normal. Do

the conspirators

BY
ROBERT STREETER ALDRICH

There's something contagious about a conspiracy . . . everybody wants a piece of the action.

nothing suddenly to excite the robber who may be a disturbed person. Do not argue. Remember the safety of our customers. Quietly press the alarm-button.

It had happened once since Bert had gone to work at the Citizens Prudential. Mrs. Elstrom, who served at the window to his left, had been the unfortunate victim. She had stuffed over nine hundred dollars in the man's sack. They caught him later. It made Mrs. Elstrom very nervous. She couldn't stop talking about it for weeks afterward. She would quit her job, she told Bert, were it not for her children. A widow, she had three, two girls and a boy, all under twelve.

The robbery had led to Bert getting better acquainted with Mrs. Elstrom. He had no great desire to keep company with her. He had only meant to be kind. He asked her to have lunch with him. She accepted—rather eagerly, he thought later. Somehow, from this small gesture, Mrs. Elstrom seemed to acquire the idea that Bert was interested in deepening the friendship. She had bent upon him a barrage of invitations. With numerous memberships in innocent clubs, she was forever after him to come to this or that church supper, bridge party, lecture or musicale. Bert sometimes wiggled out, but often he accepted out of a bachelor's loneliness, or because he felt she might be offended. After all, he worked close beside her everyday.

Rita Elstrom was a small woman. She had to stand on a box behind the teller's window. She was paley pretty, with wide, observant eyes and dark reddish hair in ringlets. She was unfortunately pudgy, with a second chin. In an effort to draw attention to her best features, her eyes and her small, soft mouth, she rather overdid the makeup, which gave her a sort of kewpie-doll look. She wore a good deal of costume jewelry.

Bert was privately more interested in two or three younger girls in the bank, but of these only one was unmarried and she had a steady boyfriend who appeared regularly at closing time.

He could understand and sympathize with Mrs. Elstrom's desire to marry again, a desire which she spoke of quite frankly, even if it weren't easily guessed. He shuddered a bit at the thought that she might have such designs on him. But he was confident that the time would come when he could make it clear his feelings were not of the romantic kind.

One's friends are not always acquired by choice. It happened that Bert had come to be, quite involuntarily, the chosen chum of a man named Gus Hunnicker. Gus drove an ice-cream truck, and the way they became acquainted was that one night Gus's white truck stalled outside the apartment where Bert lived. Gus rang Bert's bell and asked to use the telephone. It was

pouring rain, and as Gus had to wait for a tow truck, Bert gave him a can of beer and listened to his life story.

It was quite an interesting story. At first somewhat annoyed at having his television-watching interrupted, Bert gradually found himself absorbed. Gus was openly frank about being an ex-convict. He was a slender, wiry man. He had peculiar eyes, narrow, rather slanted and close together, and these together with a large red nose, adorned with a prominent wart on one side of the bridge, reminded Bert of one of those dime-store masks kids wear at Halloween. He was certainly homely, but he was warmly gregarious and apparently loved to talk about his past.

He assured Bert he was on the right road now and that a man was a fool to get mixed up in the adventures that had put him behind bars. "Kid stuff," he called them. He seemed resentful, though, of the world's attitudes toward ex-cons and he declared that selling ice cream from a truck was a low estate for a man of his brains.

They had several more beers, and when the ice-cream company's tow truck arrived, Bert told Gus to drop in any time. Actually, he intended only a polite good-night, but Gus was a man for whom a smile was an invitation to dinner. He fell into the habit of dropping in on Bert nearly every evening. Bert didn't mind too much. He thought him interesting. He had never known anyone who had been in prison. Knowing Gus seemed to put him in touch with that other world of darkness and crime, about which he had always been curious.

Gus was a gambler. He admitted cheerfully that his reformation had not included overcoming this human weakness. For awhile, Bert was bored with all his talk of horses and card games. When Gus suggested a visit to the racetrack, Bert said he didn't gamble, and besides the bank frowned on that sort of thing. It wouldn't do to be seen forming up at the wagering windows.

Gus chuckled understandingly. "They might figure you was usin' the bank's coin." Bert agreed that something like that might happen. Gus's brow wrinkled in a moment of deep thought. "Hey, tell you what," he said. "Any time you want to lay a bet, let me do it for you. That way you don't need to go to the track or deal with some lousy bookie, either."

"I don't make enough to throw money away," Bert said.

Gus didn't pursue the point right then. But the next evening he opened his wallet and took out a fat wad of bills, his day's winnings. Bert was impressed. Reluctantly, under the spell of Gus's enthusiasm, he gave him ten dollars to bet for him the next day, choosing a horse at random. He expected to lose, but it would be worth it to silence Gus on the subject.

When Gus showed up the next night, he was grinning. "You lucky sonovagun!" he howled. "Know what you did? You hit a forty-to-one shot! Me, I didn't think that nag stood a chance." And he dumped four hundred dollars on Bert's kitchen table.

Bert was too stunned to believe it. Ten dollars into four hundred, just like that! He felt a peculiar singing in his blood. Of course, he reasoned with himself, it wouldn't happen again in a dozen years. But he couldn't resist sending Gus off with another wager the next day the horses ran. Fifty this time. Gus lost half of it and laid the rest on a ten-to-one horse that came in. Two hundred and fifty!

The excitement was high in Bert now. "Take it easy," Gus cautioned. "You had a couple good days. Beginners luck."

"Yes, of course," Bert said. But he couldn't put down the fever in him. When Gus mentioned a floating crap game he knew about, Bert went along, nervously, worried about who might see him. He lost the money he'd made at the track, and more. There was a roulette wheel in the place and Bert lost there, too.

He didn't blame Gus. He was angry at Lady Luck. He dug into his small account at the bank.

He lost on everything, horses, dice, the wheel.

Worse, reduced to offering IOU's he borrowed heavily from a man named Tony Scalise. And Tony wanted his money. He was not a gentle man.

The two friends sat in Bert's place, drinking and talking.

"Sure is funny when you think of it," Gus said. "Every day you handle more money than I see in a year."

"That's depositor's money." He thought about Mr. Pierson, the bank manager, and what he would say about his gambling.

Gus sprawled on the sofa, reading the evening paper. "Little old grandma walked into a bank in Newark and took four grand," he said. "All she done was shove a note across the counter. Turned out she didn't even have a gun."

"They caught her?"

"Sure, she was easy to spot. Somebody followed her into a dime store." Gus laid down the paper. "Suppose—"

"What?"

Gus leaned toward him, his ugly face eager. "Suppose a guy walked in your bank and stuck you up. Quiet, you know, not raising any commotion."

A queer feeling came over Bert.

"Busy time of day," Gus went on. "Nobody else pays any attention to this guy, he's just another customer. Time you raised a fuss, he'd be gone. They ask you a lot of questions. You describe the guy."

Bert swallowed his drink.

"They'd have to depend on your identification," Gus said.

"Yeah, so what?"

Gus grinned. "Suppose the guy was me." He grabbed Bert's elbow, nearly spilling his glass. "What day you likely to handle the most cash?"

"Last Friday of the month. Big payrolls. But, look here—"

"Okay, it's a Friday. I slip you a note, says 'hand over all your currency or else.' You dump the money in the bag I hand you. It's like any big depositor getting his payroll money. I get out quick, only I don't run or do anything to attract attentiin. Then you hit the button."

"It'd never work."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, your face. Excuse me, Gus, but you got a face nobody can forget. Other people in the bank would see you, customers, maybe another teller. You'd have to wear a mask."

Bert trembled. He could hardly believe he was sitting here talking about such a thing.

"No, no mask," Gus was saying. "That'd start a panic, the last thing we want. No, I leave my mug right out in the open. Let 'em see me. That's the whole point of this operation. They see me but they don't see me, not in particular. Why? 'Cause I'm just another bank customer among a lot of people in line in front of your window. People aren't watching' faces then, they're worrying about their bills and how much dough they got. You let me slip out before you raise a holler.

"But whoever's behind you—"

"What are they lookin' at? The back of my head. When it's over, you describe somebody else, somebody that don't look like me at all. Who's gonna argue with the guy who got held up, the guy who was staring right into the face of the robber? These other people, they'll try and remember, "let's see now, who was just ahead of me?' Maybe they'll remember me, the coat I had on, the color of my hair or my hat. Maybe they'll say, 'Yeah, there was this fellow with a long nose.' But who are the cops gonna listen to? And if somebody describes me, you just say, 'No, it wasn't him, I know him and he's all right.'"

Bert sank in his chair. "I wouldn't be able to do it, to lie like that."

"Sure you can. You ain't going to make up your story right then. You're going to have it ready. You're going to have it rehearsed so it sounds right. So it sounds good but not too good, if you know what I mean—like a guy who's so scared he only remembers a few things, general shape and color, and about how old the guy was, and so on."

"Gus, I couldn't, I wouldn't have the nerve."

"You want to tell Tony Scalise you can't pay up? He'll cut you in pieces!"

They rehearsed well. Gus prepared the note, pasting up letters from newspaper headlines so no handwriting could be traced. I have a gun, it said. Put all currency in this sack. Do not touch the alarm.

They picked a Friday morning at eleven, when business would undoubtedly be quite brisk, but before the heaviest withdrawals.

The description Bert gave of the holdup man would have to be convincing. Their worst fear was that some especially observant customer, someone behind Gus or in line at another window, might remember him and counter Bert's rendition. But as they dwelt on the chance, they decided it was worth taking. Gus would wear a plain gray coat or a raincoat, depending on weather, and a hat with the brim pulled down.

On the chosen morning Bert was extremely nervous. He had hoped Mrs. Elstrom might be assigned to another window, but she was in her place as usual. "Good morning, Bert," she twittered, as he tabulated the money in his cash drawer and turned to greet those waiting at his window.

It was raining. Customers hurried in and out, dripping, folding umbrellas. Mechanically, Bert made out deposits and withdrawal slips, counted money, nodded, said "Thank you." The clock crawled.

Suddenly he looked up and saw Gus.

Just ahead of him, a girl cashed a small check. Then a gas-station man in uniform made a deposit. And Gus, in dark green raincoat, hat pulled low, stepped to the window.

Mrs. Elstrom was nudging Bert's elbow.

"I'm short on fives," she said. "May I?" She reached into his cash drawer. Panicky, Bert caught Gus with his eyes, tried to signal him. Gus frowned, puzzled. Mrs. Elstrom did not look his way at all. She returned quickly to her window.

Gus handed over the canvas bag and the note. "Hurry up!" he whispered. Behind him, four or five people stood in line.

Bert hesitated a second longer, swallowed hard, and began chunking currency into the bag. It seemed to take forever, while the normal noises of bank business went on around him. He pulled the bag shut. Gus grabbed it.

It seemed to Bert that Gus was running, dodging people. He saw him dart through the front doors.

A fat woman was tapping her passbook impatiently. "Next window, madam," Bert whispered, and hit the alarm.

"No, I didn't," the fat woman was saying. "I didn't pay any special attention to him. He had on a dark green raincoat and a brown hat, that's all I remember."

The lieutenant looked at Bert. "You say a Negro?"

"No, I didn't say that. I don't think he was. Sort of dark-complected. He had this hat pulled down. I could just barely see his eyes, but they were brown, I think." Gus's eyes were a pale blue. "He was kind of a good-looking fellow."

"You think around twenty-five?"

"I'd say about that."

"Any distinguishing marks, anything unusual?"

"N-no, I don't recall any."

"Well, I guess we won't need you any more, Mr. Wilson. Thanks. It's been a rough morning for you."

"You poor dear," Mrs. Elstrom said. "You mustn't blame yourself. You did all you could. I think it's wonderful the way you were able to describe him so well."

They gave Bert the rest of the day off. He waited two hours in his rooms, hearing nothing from Gus. Suspicion nagged him. Had Gus played him for a sucker? If so, he thought angrily, all he had to do was lift the telephone . . . but, no, how could he put the finger on Gus when he had described somebody else? His head ached and he gobbled aspirin.

The phone rang. "Come over to my place," Gus said.

Gus had transferred the money to a suitcase. They dumped it on the bed, counted it into two separate piles. It came to a little under fifteen thousand.

"Now you better get out of town," Bert said.

But Gus was against that move. His ice cream job was perfect cover. That was what had delayed him. He'd had to show up at the plant, acting normally. "They like me there," he said. "I got a new route. How'd it go with the cops?"

"I think they bought it all right. But Mrs. Elstrom still worries me. The teller at the window next to me. She was with me when you came up." He explained the casual relationship between them.

Gus advised that he see Mrs. Elstrom and gather her thoughts. Bert remembered an art lecture she wanted him to attend.

"No," Mrs. Elstrom said, when he brought her home from the Art Circle, "I didn't actually see the man you describe. You remember I made some change with you. There was a line at my window and I was in a hurry. Wait!" She put a finger to her tiny nose. "I just thought of something."

The teacup rattled in Bert's hands.

"It's probably nothing, but I recall a man wearing a raincoat. He had quite a big nose, I remember that. And, yes, there was a wart on one side, the left—no, the right side. He wore a hat too, I think."

"Oh, that one," Bert said, smiling. "No, I know him. He's all right. No, it wasn't him. I'd already waited on him."

She patted his arm. "Poor Bert, I expect you're tired. You ought to have a wife to look after you!"

Bert phoned Gus and told him Mrs. Elstrom wasn't going to be any trouble.

"I know just what you need," Mrs. Elstrom told him at lunch.

Three days had passed since the stickup. "A day at the beach! I was out there with the kids Sunday and we had a marvelous time. Let's go this Saturday!"

Bert did not look forward to a day with the Elstrom children, but somehow he felt it was no time to cross her.

"Sounds fine," he said.

She was right about the beach. The sand and sun did wonders for his jangled nerves. For long moments he could almost forget the faces of the police and the bank manager, the flashing news cameras. The kids ran over his legs, squealing happily. Under an umbrella, Mrs. Elstrom, in dark glasses, read a movie magazine.

"Are they annoying you, Bert?"

"Huh uh."

"Come, kids. We'll go get ice cream cones. Come on, Bert."

Plowing through the sand, Bert saw the white ice-cream truck parked at the pier. Of course, he thought of Gus—and then he stopped. Oh, no, it *couldn't* be. Unmistakably, there was Gus handing out cones and popsickles. A chill seized him.

"Coming, Bert?"

"Yes, yes." What was there to worry about?

Gus's face was impassive as Bert paid for the ice-cream.

"That's the same ice-cream man who was here Sunday," Mrs. Elstrom said as they strolled away, the children running ahead with their cones. "I noticed him then, on account of that enormous nose." She raised her voice: "Now, kids, stay in sight! Seems to me we were talking about someone's nose—oh, yes, the man in the raincoat who was there in the bank just before—but you don't want to talk about that now, do you?"

But as they again lay beneath the beach umbrella she resumed the subject: "It wouldn't be the same man, would it? You said you knew the man who was in line, the one in the raincoat."

"Just slightly. I didn't know him well." He felt sick.

"Do you think you might marry some day, Bert?"

She insisted that he stay for supper. Her voice, irritating as a machine that couldn't be shut off, had been in his ear all day. The children had gone to bed. They were in the living room with their coffee.

She sighed. "I would like to marry again, and soon. I suppose you think it's terrible of me to be so frank! But it's a problem, with the children. He would have to be someone good to them, the way you are." Her blush made her doll face like waxen fruit.

"I expect you'll meet someone," he murmured dutifully.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear you say that! Oh, by the way, if you don't mind my bringing it up, I remember where I first saw that ice-cream man with the big nose. He used to

drive his truck through this neighborhood. The children teased him. I recognized him last Sunday." He swung to face her and she glanced away quickly. "When I saw him in the bank, I knew who he was then, too."

He flushed with anger. "Then why did you ask me if he was the same man, if you knew all along?"

"When you're very fond of someone, Bert, you notice everything about them. When I'm busy at my window at the bank, I still notice what you're up to. Out of the corner of my eyes, you know. That's why I know he was the last customer you had before you pushed the alarm. Won't you have one of these little cakes? I made them myself."

Bert's hands clutched at his knees. "Damn it," he said, half under his breath. Why hadn't she phoned the cops? Or told Pierson? What was her game?

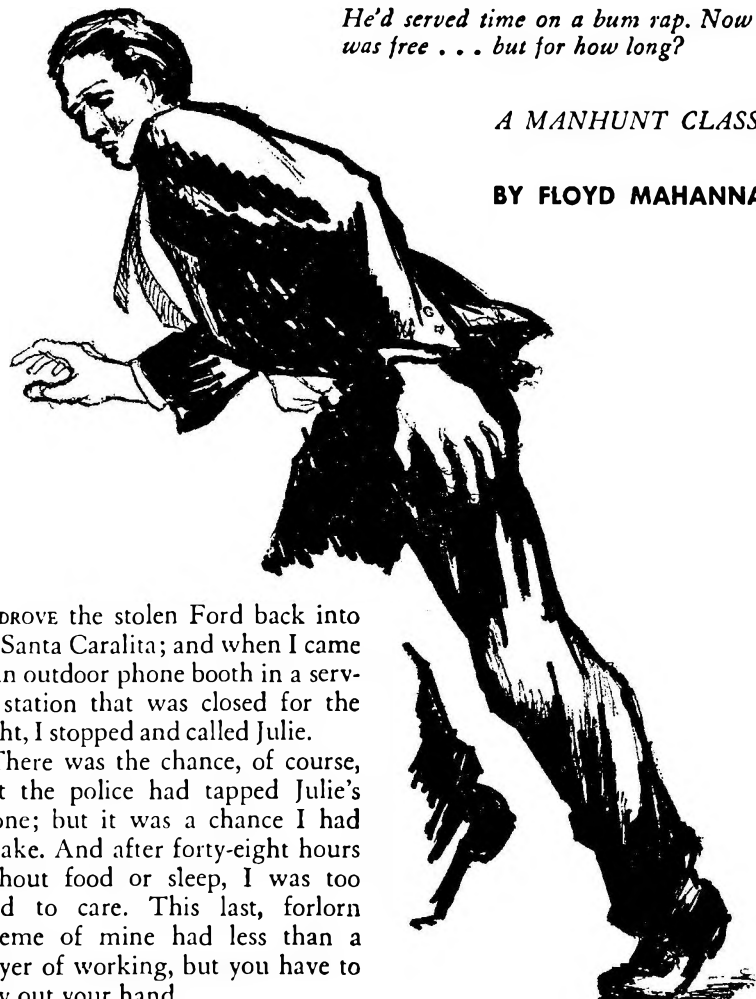
She had placed a pudgy, freckled hand next to his. "A wedding ring will be so nice to wear on that finger again. It needn't be expensive. Just knowing it comes from someone who cares—who won't *stop* caring—that's all that matters to me. You understand, don't you, Bert?"

TWICE A PATSY

He'd served time on a bum rap. Now he was free . . . but for how long?

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY FLOYD MAHANNAH



I DROVE the stolen Ford back into Santa Caralita; and when I came to an outdoor phone booth in a service station that was closed for the night, I stopped and called Julie.

There was the chance, of course, that the police had tapped Julie's phone; but it was a chance I had to take. And after forty-eight hours without food or sleep, I was too tired to care. This last, forlorn scheme of mine had less than a prayer of working, but you have to play out your hand.

"Hello?" It was Julie's voice.

"It's Mel."

I could hear the sharp intake of her breath, then the break in her voice: "Mel—where are you?"

"No matter. Julie, I want you to do something for me."

"Mel, you've got to give yourself up. They're hunting you—with guns—I've been so scared." She sounded close to tears. "Mel, why did you do it?"

"I didn't kill Vince Dobleen. You've got to believe that."

"Then who—"

"I don't know who. There's a chance, a very long chance, that I can find out. If you'll help me."

"I'll do anything for you, Mel."

"I want you to get in your car, drive out Twelfth Street to the park, make the loop around the lake, then go straight back to your apartment. That's all there is to it."

"But how will that help you?"

"No time to explain. Just do exactly what I said. Start in twenty minutes."

"All right." Tears were in her voice now. "Mel—"

"Yes?"

"I love you. Please take care of yourself."

"Sure, kid."

I waited until I heard her hang up, I jiggled the hook like I'd hung up too, then I waited, listening. After a while there was a click, but I don't know enough about wire tapping to tell if it meant anything or not. I hung up.

I sat there a little longer, very tired, not thinking of anything but Julie now. I remembered how the dark hair framed her face—her face with its clear, unmarked quality that made her seem so young. It was a dark-eyed, full lipped, snub-nosed face that was on the edge of being plain, until she smiled. When she smiled, she was beautiful—it was as if somewhere in her a light started to shine, and the warmth and happiness of it came from her to you.

And she loved me. I think that's all that kept me from going crazy those two long years in prison. And it was all that kept me from running away now.

I drove the Ford to within a block of the park, left it beside a big apartment house where it wouldn't attract attention, then I walked the rest of the way to the park. At the entrance was a four-way boulevard stop, and a big overhead light. It was late at night, with very little traffic—none at all right now. I crossed the street and slipped into the shelter of the thick shrubbery and eucalyptus trees.

Fog drifted thinly past on a cold breeze setting in from the ocean. The surf was a faint, faraway boom not as loud as the brittle sound of the breeze in the eucalyptus leaves. The fog condensed on the leaves, and the cold drops fell on the back of my neck.

For the time, there was nothing to do but wait. Wait, and remember back to last Sunday and the picnic

with Julie. It was the third day after my release from prison . . .

"Julie, I can't do it. If I even go near that guy, there's no telling what might happen. If you knew how many times I've dreamed of strangling him with my bare hands —"

"Mel, he's changed."

"Well, I haven't."

"He visited me several times while you were—away. I believe he is sincere. He wants to make it up to you some way. Help you get a new start."

I guess my laugh was bitter.

"Please, Mel." Her face had that earnest, puckered look it gets when she wants something very much. "He has changed a lot. He does a lot of charity work, spends a great deal of his time down at the Rescue Mission—you know, where they work to rehabilitate men who are down—"

"I'm not a charity case, baby."

"I didn't mean that. I'm trying to make you see how Vince Dobleen has changed."

"Listen, that's the guy who sent me to prison. Maybe he has got religion, but I can't forget what he did to me. You can't hate a guy the way I have, and as long as I have, then just—" I shut it off, made myself smile at her. "Heck, we're spoiling the picnic. Forget Vince Dobleen. I'll get a job all right, then you and me will get married and be off on a fresh clean start."

2

Well, maybe you remember me now—Mel Karger. Mel Karger, the guy who brought home all the medals, who shot down all the enemy planes, the guy they gave the parade and the keys of the city to. Mel Karger, the guy Vince Dobleen turned into the prize chump of the century.

Don't ask me how he worked it, because I never knew.

All I know is he was promoting a real estate development, low cost housing, that looked good. I sunk all my cash into it; and somehow I wound up as general manager, where I had no business being at all, because I know next to nothing about that end of it. Selling is my line; and with all that war hero publicity I was getting, I was a natural—I pulled money into the deal that ordinarily wouldn't have touched it with a forty-foot pole.

As a salesman I was hot, but as general manager I somehow always turned out doing what Vince Dobleen advised me to. He showed me how to handle things, what to do, what to sign—brother, how I did sign things.

For a while I was a big shot riding around in a new Cadillac; and the next thing I knew I was in a courtroom watching the prosecution parade all those signatures before a jury and demanding to know what I'd done with the money.

In the end, even my own attorney believed I was guilty.

Dobleen? He came through without a scratch. He came through with all my money, and God knows how much money belonging to the other sheep I'd led to the shearing.

I remembered that last day in court, with me being led away, yelling I'd get him if it was the last thing I ever did. I remembered that, and the cold shiver that ran through me now wasn't just the cold wind and the drops of water falling on the back of my neck.

And now I could hear his voice on the phone two nights ago: "Don't hang up on me, Mel, until you hear what I say. I can't make up all the money you lost on that deal—I haven't got that much myself—but I would like to pay back enough of it to give you another start. Say twenty thousand dollars?"

I was too astonished even to answer him.

"Mel? You still there?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you say? Can you come over to my place tonight and talk it over?"

"I guess so." He'd knocked the wind out of my sails completely. Maybe the guy had gotten religion.

"Fine. Make it nine o'clock sharp?"

"I'll be there."

Vince Dobleen lived in a big, beautifully landscaped, Spanish style place that overlooked the ocean. There were lights behind the curtains when I got there; and, figuring he was home, I paid off the cab driver. I walked up the flagstoned path that curved through the shrubs and trees, and I rang the doorbell.

And nobody answered.

I rang and waited three more times without answer. Evidently he hadn't called from the house, and he wasn't home yet. I waited more than half an hour, and there was no doubt now that something had come up to delay him. I'd call him again tomorrow. I gave the bell one last ring, in case he'd been asleep or something; then for the first time I gave the doorknob a try. It turned and the door opened easily and silently to my push.

I hesitated. Should I go in and wait a while longer?

I leaned inside. "Dobleen? Anybody home?"

There was no sound except the roll of the ocean against the cliff back of the house. I stepped into the entry hall, which was dark except for reflected light from the living room. "Dobleen?" I walked into the living room, and it was empty. The door to the library was closed, and it was barely possible he had fallen asleep in there and not heard the bell.

I opened the door. I looked inside and my heart seemed to stop cold inside my chest. I stared, and I couldn't move, I couldn't even breathe. Then suddenly my stomach seemed to turn a somersault, I turned and I ran. I made it to the front door, then I got sick.

3.

Listen, he'd been lying there on his stomach, a small, slender, silver haired figure in a tweed suit, with both hands under him, his face turned toward me. Only it wasn't a face any more. Somebody had fired God nows how many bullets into it at point-blank range; and—what with the bullet holes, the blood, and the powder burns—it wasn't anything like a face, it was just a red ruin.

For a while I just stood outside, sick, then it began to come to me—the kind of jam this put me in—and I began to get scared.

That was Vince Dobleen, the guy who'd sent me to prison. That was the guy I'd sworn to get. I had reason to kill him, the cab driver would remember bringing me here, I had no alibi for the last half hour. I thought of all that, and for a second I was on the verge of running; then I went back into the house.

There was a gallon can of gasoline near the body on the red tiled floor. Some of it had been sprinkled on the body and around it, and a lot more was on the piled papers and drapes spotted around the base of the panelled wall, as if the killer had been interrupted in the act of setting fire to the house to conceal his crime.

The whole library was a mess—desk drawers open, papers and books littering the floor, the big wall safe open and empty.

Call the cops? I threw that idea away instantly. This murder fitted me like a glove. I forced myself to feel the body, and it was almost as warm as my own. That meant he'd probably been killed only minutes before I'd arrived. That put me on the scene of the crime at the right time with the right motive and a record of having threatened to murder him. The cops wouldn't have to look twice to decide who *had* murdered him.

The killer—where was he? If I'd interrupted him in the act of setting fire to the place, where had he gone? He sure hadn't passed me out front. He could be still in the house.

I checked every room. Sure, I was scared—any door I opened might mean I'd get what Dobleen got, but I opened them all. And they were all empty. In the garage, joined onto the house, there were two cars, a Ford and a Cadillac. But no killer. Then I found the back door open, and I realized my arrival must have driven him out the back.

And by now I knew what I was going to do—the only thing that was left to do. Run.

I had twenty dollars in my pocket and that's all. I had to turn Vince Dobleen's body over to get to his wallet, and I couldn't help noticing how his hands were pressed flat and tight against his stomach—why, I don't know, because he hadn't been shot there.

There was a hundred and eighty dollars in the wallet.

And now I needed a car.

I took the Ford, because it'd attract less attention. I drove it out, closed the garage door, then I got out of there in a hurry.

4.

I drove about a dozen blocks before I spotted the car following me. It looked like a big car, but that's all I could tell with the headlights in my eyes. I made a couple of turns which were duplicated, and I knew for sure I was being tailed. Police? Then why didn't they close in? I thought of trying to outrun them, but suppose it wasn't the police? And that's when I had a sudden hunch.

I stomped on the gas, stretched my lead out to more than a block before the other car started to close up again; then I skidded the Ford into a dark side street, hit the brakes, dove into the first driveway I came to, and cut the lights.

The other car came around the corner moments later, braked sharply as the driver saw the dark, empty street, and came almost to a stop. It was a Cadillac.

I gunned the Ford back into the street, shifted, gave the motor all it'd take; and in seconds I'd crowded in on the Cadillac, jamming on my brakes as fenders crashed and the bigger car was pinned against the curb. I was out and running the instant the Ford stopped; but the other driver was too fast for me. And he didn't try to back up and circle the Ford; he poured on the gas, and that Cadillac's big motor humped it right up over the curb. It skidded across a lawn, just missed a tree, gouged huge holes in a flowerbed without getting stuck, then was back in the street, roaring away.

I'd killed the Ford's engine when I stopped, and now I flooded it. The starter ground for what seemed minutes—lights were popping on all over the neighborhood—then finally it caught, and I roared out of there myself.

The Cadillac had gotten away clean. But I'd gotten a good look at it—it was black, it had white sidewalled tires, and from the back fender rose the kind of antenna they have when there is a mobile telephone in the car—*it was the Cadillac that had been in Vince Dobleen's garage.*

The killer must have been hidden in the gardens back of the house. When I left, he'd jumped into the Cadillac and followed me. Why, I couldn't make the remotest guess. But I'd been so close to trapping him; if I'd only rammed him instead of—no use thinking about that.

I was ten miles out of town on a highway that would take me clear to New York if I stayed on it long enough, before something occurred to me.

This Ford. Vince Dobleen was the kind of guy who always put up a big front, he wanted the best of everything; and so far as I knew, he never drove anything but a Cadillac. I thought about that until finally I pulled into a side road between a couple of apple orchards, and switched on the interior light to look at the registration slip on the steering post.

It was registered to Joseph T. Rogers, 6127 Purfoy Road, Santa Caralita, California.

This wasn't Dobleen's car at all. Then what had it been doing in his garage with the keys in it? Could it be the killer's car? I could feel the excitement coming up in me now. That would explain his following me.

I looked in the glove compartment and there was a flashlight, a pack of cigarettes, and an almost full box of .38 cartridges. I turned and looked in the back seat, and there was a tan pigskin brief case there. I opened it, looked, and my hands started to shake.

Listen, it looked like half the money in the world in there. My hands were shaking so badly I could hardly count it. If the figures written on the bands were correct, I had just under a quarter of a million bucks stacked on the front seat beside me.

"God Almighty!" I breathed.

Brother, I knew why Dobleen had been killed now. And I knew why the killer had trailed me. And I also knew the only reason I was still alive—the killer had given Dobleen the full clip in his face, and the gun had been empty when I walked in.

For a few seconds I felt good. I was off the hook, and Joseph T. Rogers was on. Then a thought chilled me. Suppose the car was stolen. Sure, I could hand over the money, but the cops might say that I'd just tried a clever move to make it look like I hadn't killed Dobleen; and I'd be right back where I started.

I thought about that a long time before I started the car and drove back to Santa Caralita.

5.

6127 Purfoy Road was on the beach, well out of the settled part of town, a lonely place where sand dunes hid all signs of neighbors, and the surf broke thunderously. In the blowing fog I could tell little about the house except that it was shabby and there were no lights in it.

I hesitated—if Rogers was the killer, he might be in there, and this time the gun might be loaded. But there was no car in front of the house. Finally I walked onto the rickety porch and knocked.

Nobody answered. I walked around the house and the windows were shut and fastened. I tried the back door, and it gave a little, like it might be held only by a flimsy

bolt. I hesitated again, then I put my shoulder against it, and it opened with a mild complaint of screws pulling out of old wood. I stepped in then something stopped me stock still. The smell of boiling coffee.

And in the same instant a switch clicked, a ceiling light blinded me, then something socked me hard on the back of my head.

I was on my knees, staring stupidly at dirty linoleum; then this shadow moved on it, and I barely had sense enough to roll my head before another blow smashed into my neck muscles, half paralyzing my right shoulder and arm.

You never know where your strength comes from a time like that. I guess it was instinct that made me somersault forward, twisting as I rolled, so that I wound up on my back with my feet between me and whoever was slugging me. The guy, his shape enormous against the ceiling light, was driving in again; but my feet caught him in the chest, driving him back and right up onto the top of the stove, yelling as the scalding coffee slopped on him.

I guess it was the coffee and the hot burner that gave me my chance. For a couple of seconds he wasn't fighting anything but the coffee and the stove; and in that time I grabbed a foot, twisted with all my strength, and he rolled off the stove to land on his face. I dropped my knees into the small of his back, clubbed him at the base of the skull with my fist, and he went limp under me.

I rolled him over.

He was a big man, bigger than me, and he wore slacks and a sweater. He had sandy crew-cut hair and a big jaw; and the scar tissue around his eyes, the bent nose, crumpled ears all said he must have been a boxer at one time. But was he Joseph T. Rogers?

I rolled him back on his face, took the billfold out of his back pocket, and opened it. I looked and almost dropped it. The picture looking back at me from the I.D. card was his, and the card stated that he was Sergeant Chad Vednick, Santa Caralita Police.

Had he been staked out here, waiting for Rogers? No, they wouldn't stake out just one man to catch a murderer. Besides it was hardly possible that Rogers had left any clues that would bring the police so directly to this place. It might be that Rogers was in some other trouble, but I sure wasn't going to wait around to ask this cop.

I was a fool to hang around any longer. The only way to beat the jam I was in was to run and keep on running. With all that money I had a chance, if I could just get some distance between me and Santa Caralita. Vednick was stirring as I walked out.

By the time I was five miles inland, the fog had cleared, and that's all that saved me. I came over a lit-

tle rise, and half a mile ahead I could see all the red lights and stopped cars. I'd waited too long. Now the roadblocks were up.

I cut the lights, took the first side road I came to, followed it through the orchards and vineyards, up into the hills, and to road's end against the mountains where a small stream ran through a thick stand of second-growth redwoods.

This was the end of the road. In every way. I cut the motor and just sat there. There was nothing else to do.

6.

I was there two days and two nights. Once some kids wandered up the stream, shooting at birds with an air rifle; a couple of parties of picnickers showed up, but nobody paid me much attention.

It seemed like all the will to move had run out of me. I just stayed there in the redwoods where the road ended and listened to the radio as the busy police wove the web around me.

The killer had dropped a match in the library as he ran through the house to jump into the Cadillac and follow me, but the fire was spotted in a matter of minutes by a passing motorist, and the fire department got there before the body was badly charred. Dobleen's appointment pad had escaped the fire; and the notation there, "Mel Karger, 9:00 P.M." plus an alert police officer who remembered my trial and threat two years ago, plus a quick check at my apartment, were what had gotten the roadblocks up so fast. The cab driver's identification, and my fingerprints all around sewed the case up tight. I was guilty.

With the body badly charred and and the face ruined, only his fingerprints identified Dobleen. His hands, under the body, had escaped the fire; and there was no question of identification. Dobleen had been arrested a couple of days earlier on a felony drunk driving charge, and booked and fingerprinted. He'd been out on bail.

And that wasn't all the trouble he'd been in. The Treasury Department had an income tax evasion charge pending. And on the second day an elderly widow demanded an accounting of a hundred thousand dollars she'd given him to invest. Seemed like Dobleen's troubles had come all at once, climaxing in his death. Anyway, that accounted for the quarter of a million bucks that Dobleen wasn't trusting to banks.

Julie was picked up for questioning and released. The murder gun had not been found. Joseph T. Rogers' name was never mentioned. The Cadillac had been found—presumably abandoned by me.

Sergeant Chad Vednick's slugging was not mentioned.

So far as I could see, I held only one trump. The money. Now that

they had it settled I was the killer, the real killer might be sitting tight instead of running. Only he knew I had the money; and he might be greedy enough to risk trying to find me before the police did—he had one advantage over the cops: he knew I was driving a gray Ford, license IG80838. His best bet would be to watch Julie, hoping I'd contact her. Then he might make a try for the money. Unless the police were also trailing Julie.

That's how slim my chances were.

And that's what I was doing hiding there among the shrubs, while the wind rattled the eucalyptus leaves above me, and the cold drops fell on me. One thing I had done: I'd buried the brief case at the foot of a tree before I started out. The killer would never get that.

And finally Julie's blue coupe came into sight, made the stop, passed less than fifteen feet from where I was hidden. Her eyes were front, her face showing the strain she'd been under these two days. It was all I could do not to call to her as she passed.

And, when she was half a block away, another car made the stop. It was a black Chevrolet sedan, and the man in it was Sergeant Chad Vednick in plain clothes.

Him again. Out of fifty cops on the force, it had to be him again. And didn't he ever work with a partner? I thought all cops worked in pairs. Then a thought hit me, a thought so crazy I'd have pushed it out of my mind but it wouldn't go.

Chad Vednick alone on Julie's trail. Chad Vednick alone in Rogers' house. Who had arrested Dobleen for drunk driving—Chad Vednick? It was crazy, but just suppose Dobleen, dead drunk or asleep had babbled about all the dough in his house; suppose Vednick had gone there two nights later, forced him to open the safe, then shot him dead; suppose I had lifted the dough right out from under him, he'd gambled on me checking Rogers' house before I ran . . .

It was fantastic, but so was everything else about this mess. And what did I have to lose now?

7.

Ten minutes later, I drove the Ford slowly past Julie's apartment, spotted Vednick's sedan, and drove past it, my face turned away from him. It was dark and foggy, and he wouldn't spot my face; but if he spotted this gray Ford, that would mean something. And what it would mean was enough to send a prickle of excitement through me.

I drove on, watching my rear view mirror, and *there!* He'd grabbed the bait. He was coming after me, coming fast; then his sedan cut in front of me, tires squealing, crowding me to the curb.

"Come out of there, Karger," he barked, gun levelled at me.

I came out, eyes on the gun, set to start yelling for help, to make so big a disturbance I'd get the whole neighborhood out here, and somebody would call the cops before Vednick could get me into a car and take me some place where he could beat the money's location out of me. And not until that instant did I see the flaw in the whole crazy stack of suppositions I'd built up.

Vednick wasn't the killer. If it'd been Vednick in the Cadillac the other night, he wouldn't have run away. He'd have pulled that gun on me, and I'd have done what he said; then when he was close enough, he'd have slugged me with it, dumped me into the Ford, driven out of town, reloaded the gun and given me what he gave Dobleen.

The real killer would have done that too. Unless . . . unless . . . God Almighty, the thing had been staring me in the face for two days, and I'd been to dumb to see it! Sure, Vednick was in on it—without him there'd have been no murder—but he hadn't killed anybody.

I was standing there in the street, fitting the facts together so feverishly that I was only half aware of Vednick's harsh voice: "Do you turn around and stick out those hands, or do I shoot a leg out from under you?"

Almost dazedly I turned and he put the handcuffs on me; then he patted my clothes for weapons. Every single fact fitted. I had the whole works put together without a thing out of place—and no proof for any of it. And no way to get any.

No, there was one way! A longer chance than even the first one had been. I had no business even thinking of it; but maybe I was too tired of running, of being scared, to realize what I was letting myself in for. All I was thinking was that I knew who the killer was, but if I couldn't find him, I could never prove a thing—and there was only one person who could lead me to him.

I didn't yell. I didn't say a word. I got into the car just as Vednick said to. And he drove out of town, the gun held in his left hand in his lap and pointed at me.

"The jackpot, no less," he grunted. "Brother, are you dumb."

Nobody knew it better than I did. Maybe I was being dumb now, but it was the only chance I had. We'd just have to wait and see.

8.

It was out Purfoy Road again, but not to 6127. This house was a quarter of mile farther out, but it was much the same kind of a house. And the dunes crowded around in the same way, the same ocean boomed out there to drown any kind of a call for help a man might make.

"Where is the money?" He'd searched the Ford, and now he turned to me.

"I hid it."

"Where?"

"Go to hell."

His fist smashed me in the mouth, and I stumbled and fell, my ears full of a louder roar than the surf.

"Get into the house. We'll see whether you talk or not."

I stumbled into the house. He wouldn't kill me before I told him what he wanted to know. Meanwhile I'd find out what I wanted to know.

Lights were on inside the house, the front door was unlocked, the front room was empty but a door to another room was just closing; and I knew who was behind that door just as surely as I knew the sun would rise tomorrow.

"Come out of there, Dobleen!" My yell sounded crazy even to me. "Come on out and join the party."

And he came out, a slender, frail little man with silver hair and a sharp, half-handsome face that was twisted in tight smile. Vince Dobleen, the cause of everything that had happened to me.

And now was as good a time to make my break as any—Vednick had his back half toward me, closing the door, Dobleen was all the way across the room. I spun and ran for the open hallway, then about ten feet down it to a door—a swinging door, thank God—and I hit it and it slammed back against the wall, and I was in a kitchen. The back door was closed; and, with my hands handcuffed behind my back I just hit it full tilt, my heel slamming in just beside the knob. If it'd been like the door in the other house, my kick would have torn the lock right out of it, but this wood was better stuff.

My foot felt like it was broken, and the door hadn't budged. I was back to it, fumbling for the knob, when Vednick's fist drove my head back against the doorjamb; then he grabbed me and swung me around and back into the stove so hard I hung there, the room spinning around me.

I hadn't had anything planned, except maybe some crazy idea of running around the house, grabbing the keys out of the Ford, and disappearing in the fog among the dunes, and running for a phone at the next house.

And now, sprawled against the stove, what I did next was just as aimless. It was a big, old-fashioned stove, with an open grill top and no pilot lights; my hands were against the handles, and I just turned on as many of them as I could reach, then I lurched back through the swinging door before he'd have time to notice. Maybe later, if one of them went to investigate the smell of gas, I'd get a chance for another break.

9.

After that things were pretty bad for a while. I don't know how long it took; but when Vednick

finally stopped to breathe, my left eye was swollen shut and I could barely see through the right. I don't know how many teeth were loose in my mouth, or whether my nose was broken or just too swollen and clogged with blood to breathe through. "Where," Vednick demanded, "is that money?"

"Go to hell." I'd lost track of how many times I'd said that.

Vednick stared at me sprawled against the sofa, as he peeled off his blood-soaked gloves and lit a cigarette.

I couldn't smell any gas, but it must be getting thick in that small kitchen. When it got thick enough, anything might set it off—the motor in the electric refrigerator starting up, if it was an old enough model; or the doorbell ringing, if the bell was in the kitchen; the spark of the light switch, if one of them went in there to investigate. A lot of things could set it off, but an "if" went with everyone of them.

But I couldn't take much more of this beating. If I could talk, maybe I could stall him a while. I opened my one eye, and Dobleen was still showing that tight little smile, like he was enjoying this part of it. Later on, when and if I broke and told where the money was, he'd probably enjoy emptying his gun into my face too. Now talk. Stall . . .

"It was those hands tucked so neatly under the guy's body that cooked you," I told him.

"Smart," Dobleen said in his gentle, acid voice. "So smart I got you two years in prison. And framed you for murder."

"And your're smart—facing a prison term for income tax evasion, and probably a longer term for swindling an old lady out of a hundred thousand dollars. No wonder you figured it was time you died. You and your charities, your work at the Rescue Mission—that's where you picked out the guy who was going to do your dying for you, wasn't it?"

"Get on with it, Vednick," Dobleen said, bored.

"In a minute." Vednick drew on his cigarette.

"And you," I told Vednick. "If I'd known what department you worked in, I'd have tumbled a lot sooner. Fingerprints, isn't it?"

Vednick laughed like that was funny, blowing smoke out.

"The drunk driving thing was faked for the sole purpose of getting Dobleen's prints on record—only it wasn't his prints that went into the record; it was the prints of some poor bum that was unlucky enough to look like Dobleen. After that, it wasn't hard. The house in the name of Rogers was because he wanted to buy a getaway car under a phony name, and there had to be an address to send the registration certificate and pink slip to."

"Smart." Dobleen's eyes were bright with hate. "Now tell us where the money is. You will sooner or later, you know."

I knew. There comes a time when death becomes a release, and that time would come for me, as he said, sooner or later. Unless I could stall.

I could smell the gas now, but that was because I was expecting it. Vednick, smoking, probably wouldn't smell it for a few minutes yet; and Dobleen was on the other side of the room.

"The fire," I went on in a queer voice that didn't even sound like mine, "was to burn off the hair, char the skin, but it was important to preserve the fingerprints, so the guy's hands were put under his belly where the fire wouldn't destroy them. But what really cooked you, Dobleen, was me grabbing your getaway car with all the dough. Even so, you didn't lose your head. You lit the fire before you set out to follow me in your Cadillac; and you called the fire department a few minutes later from that mobile phone in the Cadillac. But you didn't dare trying to bluff me with an empty gun after I ran you to the curb later."

My laugh sounded crazy. "The bullets were in the Ford. If you tried to reload the gun, I'd jump you. If you'd tried to knock me out to get time to reload, you wouldn't have had a chance—a dried-up runt like you."

The smile had twisted to a snarl. "Get on the job, Vednick."

"Let me finish," I said. "Let me show you how clever I am. After you got away from me, you phoned Vednick and he hustled down to the Rogers' house on the off chance that I might check there after reading the certificate in the Ford—if I'd gone to the cops with it, he'd have slipped out the back door when they showed up."

The smell of gas was bad now. It's a wonder Vednick didn't smell it. And I knew something for sure now—it wasn't going to go off by any accident. Maybe it was thick enough to explode in the kitchen, but Vednick would smell it and put out that cigarette long before the gas would be set off from in here.

"Hey," Dobleen said suddenly, "I smell gas."

"Yeah, me too." Vednick walked over to the hall door, looked down the hall. "Do you suppose—"

I swear, I hadn't planned a thing until that second. I just saw him standing there, the cigarette still in his mouth, and something clicked in my mind and I was already in motion.

My shoulder drove into his back with every ounce of drive I could put into it. His startled yell was a wild sound in the room as he went plunging ahead of me. I hit the floor and tried to press myself flatter against it; and my last glimpse of him before pressing my face to to the floor, was him crashing through the swinging door, arms windmilling wildly as he tried to regain his balance.

10.

And the cigarette went with him.

It was like the whole universe blew up. There was the blast and the searing lick of flame that seemed to lift me and drive me ahead of it. It seemed a long time later, although it couldn't have been more than a few seconds, that I was pushing my head through splintered wood, some of it burning. The shattered plaster was all around me, and dimly I realized I had been blown back into the living room.

There was something I had to do.

Something that was more important even than getting myself out of this burning wreckage.

Dobleen!

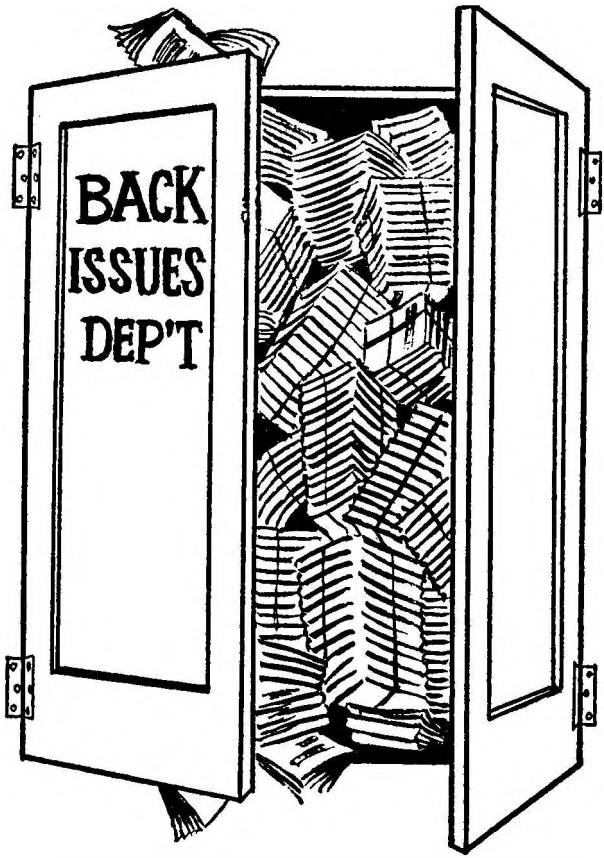
If he was cremated in this blaze, I could never prove—I stumbled to my feet, unable to use my handcuffed hands. "Dobleen! Where are you! *Dobleen!*"

I heard a feeble moan over the crackle of the flames. A figure so covered with plaster dust that you had to look twice to see it was a man, rolled a little, moaned again.

Don't ask me how I did it. I can remember only a little of it, and that only as a dim nightmare. They say I dragged him out of the wreckage and all the way to the ocean, but I don't remember the last part at all.

My memory picks up again with the sharp smell of ammonia in my nose, and a voice saying, "He's coming out of it now."

Then somebody was kissing my cheek, whispering, "It's all right now," and the voice was Julie's and she was crying. Then I opened my eyes and saw the smile coming through the tears, and I knew she was telling me the truth.



If you missed any of the past issues of Manhunt you can still catch up while we clean out our files to make room for the new issues ahead. The issues available are listed on the facing page. Supplies are limited . . . so please hurry.

50¢ apiece . . . or all six consecutive issues for $2.50. Send cash, check or money order. Use the handy coupon

7-64 **HENRY KANE** *weaves a plot of intrigue and action that involves Peter Chambers with the strip dancer, Manaja. Also along to keep you on the edge of your chair: Joe Gores, Ed Lacy, W. Engeler, etc.*

9-64 **FLOYD MAHANNAH'S** *superb mystery, "Kill and Run," is a fast action whodunnit that will keep you guessing right up to the last paragraph. Also on board: Frank Sisk, Michael Zuroy, H. L. Greene, etc.*

11-64 **JAMES HARVEY'S** *novel on the stag film business may be fiction, but once you've read it you'll think you were there. Also Robert Page Jones, Edward Wellen, R. A. Gardner and others.*

1-65 **DAVID GOODIS** *mixes a bitter brew of betrayal and revenge with a dash of brutality and concocts "The Sweet Taste." Adding to the larder with an assortment of goodies are: Ed Lacy, Charles Freylin, Will Cotton, etc.*

3-65 **FRANK KANE'S** *super-tough super-sleuth, Johnny Liddell, takes a beating in this action-packed issue. And Jerry Bailey matches a vengeance-bent American airman against a Communist karate man in "Five Days to Kill."*

5-65 **JOHNNY LIDDELL** *is back in the fray, cleaning up the mess he was in when we left him, above. Johnny may be down . . . but he's never out. Next, squint along the barrel of an assassin's rifle in "Kill or Die" by Charles Freylin.*

MANHUNT (6-66)
545 FIFTH AVE.
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

I am enclosing _____ *Please send me the issues I have circled below.*

7-64 9-64 11-64 1-65 3-65 5-65

My name is: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____

"THE MATRIARCH"

BY
JAMES B. KITTELL

"Look for the face behind the mask," the old woman read . . . and then she heard the stealthy steps outside her door.

THE light from the shaded bed lamp caught and held the flashing pinpoints of the jewels on her grasping hands. She was an old woman, and she felt the strain on her back as she had been sitting unsupported in the bed. Clutching the manila envelope, she flounced back against the pillows and shut her eyes. The window in her room was open just enough to admit the hazy shadows of late evening. If she strained very hard she could still hear the merry sounds floating up from the boardwalk three stories below.

People had such curious notions about living in a resort town, all salt water taffy and macaroons. And it wasn't like that at all. That was one of the purposes of her book, one of the reasons she'd written the story and gone to the trouble of finding an agent to represent her. To set people straight about day-to-day life in a resort town.

Not that the story dealt exclusively with the life of the town. No. Mostly, it was her own life story, and the story of her family, thinly fictionalized, of course. Amelia Spencer Wentworth glared at the bundle of papers she held in her hand. The manuscript had arrived that morning in the mail. And after that agent fellow had as good as promised . . . her glare deepened as she recalled the way she'd been taken in. She remembered the ad:

". . . looking for a publisher? Put first things first. You won't get very far without an agent. My clients are among the top writers in the country. Many of them were virtual unknowns 'til I began to work with them on their stories. . . ."

The ad went on like that for nearly half a page. And the magazine featuring the ad was highly respectable.

And so, Amelia had taken the book-length manuscript out of her vanity table drawer—where it had reposed for nearly three years—and sent it off to the agent.

She was glad, now, glad she hadn't told the children. How they'd smile at her foolishness. Amelia Spencer Wentworth knew her family, and she knew in advance what they'd say.

"How much will this agent fellow cost?" Charles would ask.

"Oh," Amelia heard herself say casually. "A few dollars."

"Exactly how much?" Charles was a lawyer and a persistent boor. "Not enough to make any difference to your inheritance, Charles." There. That would squelch him. And how her granddaughter Marcy would laugh. But Amelia had decided in advance to avoid such scenes. The children were staying with her now for the holidays. It would be best, she thought, to present them all with a fait accompli, when the book was accepted for publication.

And besides, there was Francis to consider. Amelia frowned, thinking of her grand-nephew.

She didn't think she could bear to hear Francis express his opinion. "I-I t-t-t-think it's w-w-w-" What would that irritating boob think? That it was wise? Weirdo? Wayout? "Wonderful." The word was an explosion of sound from the larynx. The cords in the neck stood out like ropes. Saliva dripped down the front of the expensive sports jacket. Amelia hoped years of self-discipline would come to her aid, and her face wouldn't reflect the disgust she felt. "I'm glad you approve, Francis." To forestall his tortured 'thank-you', she turned her gaze on her pretty grand-daughter.

Now there was no need to consult anybody. The manuscript had been rejected. Maybe, Amelia thought, maybe I wrote too smugly about my life. The servants. The leisurely drives in the afternoon and the loving family in constant attendance. The title of the book-length manuscript was 'The Matriarch'. Amelia liked the title. To her it suggested permanancy and stability.

With an almost savage motion she ripped open the envelope. She quickly thrust aside the manuscript itself, and concentrated on the voluminous notes the agent made. He began by criticizing her typing. "There are various technical shortcomings in your story that you must strive to overcome. To begin with, you must make an effort to improve your typing. If ever you hope to sell, your manuscripts must have a professional appearance."

The old woman stole a brief, self-pitying glance at her swollen arthritic fingers.

"As for paragraphing and sentence structure, both can be im-

proved. Keep in mind that most sentences are improved when shortened, and that frequent revision corrects awkwardness. You must vary top-heavy, over-long sentences with short ones to achieve paragraph balance. And every paragraph must stick to a single idea. Just as the short, simple sentence conveys the clearest idea, so the short, simple word conveys your idea most exactly."

The old woman raised a hand to her mouth to stifle a yawn. She was heartily bored. "Unity of sentence structure." What on earth did the fellow mean by that? She riffed through the pages impatiently. Surely all these pages weren't taken up with such mumbo-jumbo. Somewhere he must get down to discussing her story. She felt quite proprietary about the people in the book. And why not? They were members of her own family. She'd hoped the children wouldn't object too much when the book was published. (Although there *were* one or two scenes which didn't show them in too good a light.)

Amelia was about to return her attention to the criticisms when a sound caught her ear. It was sound she recognized. The children were going downstairs. From all over the house doors were being quietly opened and furtively shut. How sweet they could be. They didn't want to disturb her.

How surprised they'd be, if she stuck her head out of her door and laughed. "It's all right, chickens. I'm awake." But no. She wouldn't spoil their consideration for all the world. Her life was made up of such minute considerations, and she was grateful for them.

It hadn't been easy, having such a large brood, and trying to raise them all, alone and single-handed after dear Pappa's death. The younger members of the family, especially, were a source of much concern. They had such queer ideas about things. About money for instance. As if it could be thrown around. Money was a great responsibility, and it had taken her years of continual lecturing to teach them that.

With some reluctance she returned to the criticisms. "What you've done, dear lady, what you've written, is not, properly speaking, a book at all. It's more of a prolonged amiable anecdote. And a highly improbable one at that. Except for a couple of scenes the story has no life. Your characters do not bear any resemblance to anyone, living or dead. I think this must be your first attempt at professional writing. Delineation of character is a subtle, complex task. I urge you to try to know your characters better. Get acquainted with your people. I suggest you write about individuals who are most real to you. Your own family, for instance. . . ."

Amelia began to beat an angry tattoo on the thin coverlet.

"But that's what I've done, you

idiot." She cried. "That's what I've done."

The man was a fraud. A charlatan. There was no doubt about it. When she thought of the money she'd spent she felt almost ill. There ought to be a law against such tricky advertising. Legally, she guessed she didn't have much of a case. The agent only promised to criticize her story and he was certainly doing that. But he hadn't submitted the book to a publisher. Nor had he told her the easy way to become a professional writer. It was all very irritating.

Somebody was coming upstairs. Slowly, making as little noise as possible, one of the children was going back to his room. That was odd. Amelia sat straight. The footsteps stopped as abruptly as they started. As if whoever it was had stopped at the first landing. How curious. Why would anybody stand in the middle of a staircase?

Maybe my hearing's not as good as I thought. Whoever it was had obviously gone about his business, and she hadn't heard him. Amelia brought her attention back to the criticisms. "My advice is to look for the face behind the mask. As written, the characters are not real to you. And if they are not real to you, they will not be real to your audience. The important subsidiary characters are called the children throughout. They lack even names. As drawn by you, the children are merely servants-by-blood. They're like the actors in the Japanese opera. They wear false faces of jade. The hair is crepe. The children especially cry out for some pick-and-shovel work. I beg you not to take the easy way out. Work with your characters. Develope them. . . ."

Amelia sat up straighter. She'd never read such nonsense in her life. Her mouth was tight with disdain. The children not real to her. They were her family. Of course they were real to her. And look for the face behind the mask. What rot. As if she didn't know her own family! Was he deliberately trying to frighten her? For she was frightened. Terribly, terribly, frightened. . . .

The footsteps had started up again. He stood—whoever it was—at the top of the steep staircase. Again he paused. Amelias' breath was coming in gasps. How still the house seemed. It was all the fault of this dreadful, dreadful man. Look for the face behind the mask. She couldn't get the ominous phrase out of her head. It was so foolish to feel . . . threatened. There was no sound from the corridor, and Amelia glanced once more at the papers she held in her hand. She began to read. . . . "I've said there were one or two scenes in the story that are exceptionally well done. I was thinking in particular of the scene in which you have granddaughter and grandmother confront one another. In this chilling sequence, dear lady, your characters do not merely come to life, they spring to life. It is

almost a portrait of hate, horror, heartbreak."

A slow ship's ladder of fear began to uncoil down Amelias' spine. She remembered that dreadful scene with Marcy. And all because the child insisted on being foolish. But it had turned out all right. The old woman reached up and pressed a handkerchief against her damp upper lip. "The conclusion of this scene by the way is a perfect example of blurred characterization. You have the grand-daughter fall in love with a slovenly beatnik type. The old woman disapproves, and pays the punk a visit.

She pays the young thug to end the relationship. The grand-daughter finds out what the old lady has done, and stages a show-down. This is an exquisite scene. The air is stifling with hate. You show good control over your material here. But then you back away from your own story. In a manner of speaking, you renege. One paragraph later, you have the grand-daughter realize her mistake, acknowledge her grandmother's superior wisdom, and marry the man the old lady picks out for her. Some fair-faced lout from Suburbia.

"I'm sure dear lady, you realize this is not merely bad psychology, it is virtually impossible for your readers to accept.

"In theatrical parlance, what you've done with this and other scenes is called 'throwing away'. In other words the momentum from one scene should carry your reader right into the next. But you don't do this. After nearly scaring him to death with one super-charged episode you put your reader to sleep with the next. Don't do this. It only serves to irritate your reader and no writer can afford to antagonize his audience. . . ."

Her face was bathed in a thin film of sweat, and her hand shook as she tamped it away.

"To go back to my analysis of your book. You justify the old woman's incessant meddling by saying she always acted in the family's best interests. She always did what was best for them. Dear Lady. People, particularly young people don't always want what is best for them. Sometimes they want what is bad for them. All the time, in fact.

"I'm sure you've at least heard of reader identification. This is very important.

"Thus your central character, the Matriarch, is all wrong. Who'd want to identify with a bitch. . . ."

"I-I don't think I'll read any more tonight." She spoke the words aloud, as though there were someone in the room with her. But there was nobody there. Just the crouching blackness beyond the foot of her bed. Tears of fright began to splash down her face. She was frightened, but she was angry, too. Angry at that stupid man who dared to write such dreadful things about her. 'Look for the face behind the mask.'

But maybe . . . maybe if she read through to the end, she'd find surcease from this nightmare. "I'm dreadfully tired." But her grip on the typed pages didn't lessen. She felt she must keep reading, must find her way out of this maze of terror and suspicion. With shaking hands she sorted out the pages and began once again to read. In her fear, the print jumped around and she had trouble focusing her vision.

". . . . throughout these pages of criticisms one word will recur again and again. Revise, I will tell you, Revise. Revise. Now in order to revise the above section I might suggest the following: have the granddaughter marry the town clown, but make it clear to your reader, that the self-willed young woman bears a grudge, that she's merely waiting a chance to strike. Of course this is only one way in which the incident might be made more believable. Doubtless you have your own ideas. . . ."

The footsteps started up again. They moved in the direction of her room. Their step was firm, all doubts resolved. They sought her out, these footsteps. Moving with such stealthy purpose, they drew closer and closer. . . .

". . . as conceived and written by you, the characters are an almost perfect sarcasm. To give but one example: you've written a truly moving death-scene for the Matriarchs' husband; but it's only too obvious that the old boy was glad to escape the fevered clutches of the old harridan. . . ."

Her breath came in gasps. Her vision was hardly focusing.

". . . flesh out your characters a little. Give them some description. You might give the granddaughter a full, pouting mouth to suggest obstinacy. As for the grand-nephew, you might give him some physical disability, a limp or a nervous twitch in his cheek. A stammer in an effective way of heightening menace, as well as providing a psychological basis for his hatred of the old woman. . . ."

The sound of the footsteps died away just beyond her door.

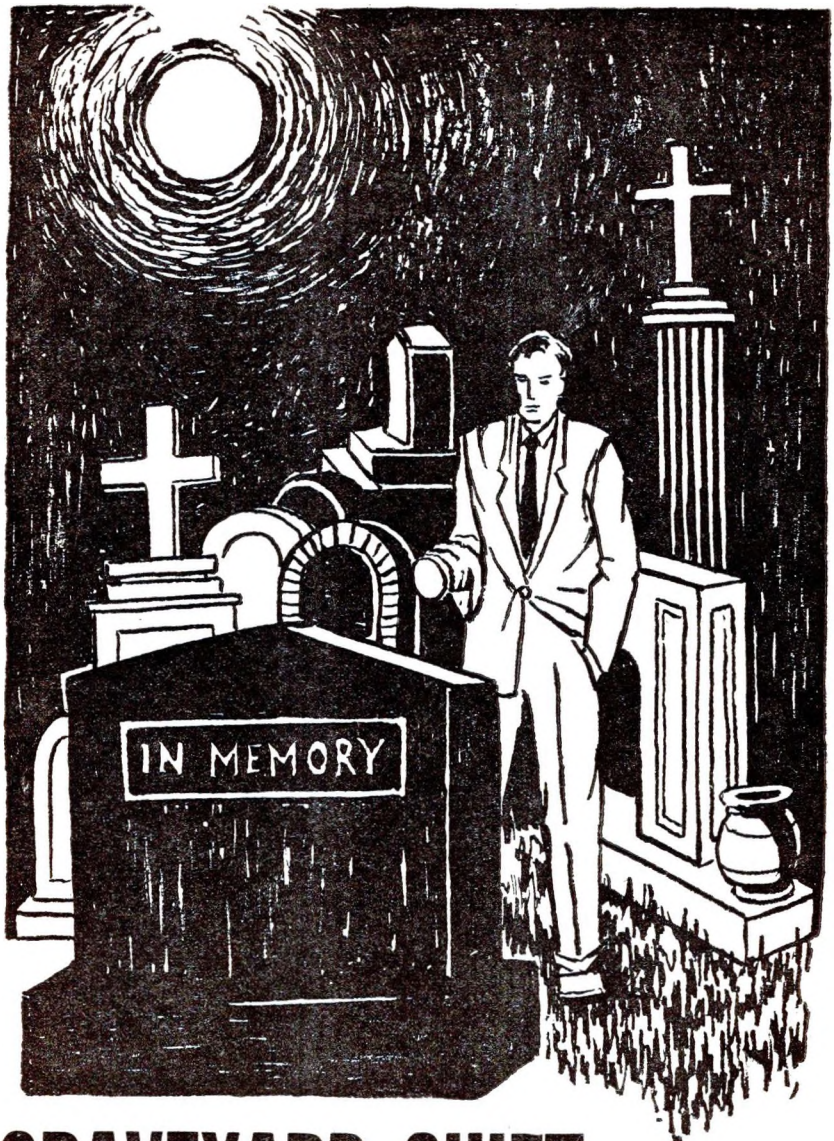
"The single exception to this lack of characterization is the Godson. You draw him in full, brilliant, colors. The shiftless, dipsomanic Godson whom the old lady alternately pets and petrifies. He's easily the most sinister of the lot. . . ."

Even in her craven terror, Amelia felt a bitter amusement. As if Michael could menace anyone. She recalled this afternoon: Michael had sat on the couch, squirming.

"Stop fidgeting." She had said.

He rapped out a short oath, and before Amelia could reprove him, he subsided with the sullen, bewildering remark: "And people wonder why I drink."

As the door to her room swung slowly open, Amelia wondered whose face the opening door would unmask . . . but too soon her heart stopped beating.



GRAVEYARD SHIFT

A
MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY
HENRY KANE

If you just happen to be in the precise place at the precise moment, you just might bump into ecstasy, or catastrophy, depending on your point of view.

WHEN you're alone in a graveyard, you have many thoughts. When you're alone in a graveyard, that is, and you're not dead.

And I was not dead.

I was, in fact—if one can be said to be—*too* much alive. Nervous. Jumpy. Prickles ridged along the back of my neck like the risen hackles of a fighting cock. Nerve-ends jagged, and every fibre taut. And why not, at one o'clock in the morning of a silent fog-wisped night, alone in a stone-infested graveyard out at the eerie edge of Long Island?

And what was I doing there?

Have a laugh.

I was there on business.

I had a flashlight in my left hand, and a brown-paper package in my right, and I was glued, like a peeping-Tom at an inviting aperture, to a flavorsome tombstone, enticingly inscribed, in curlicues yet: *J. J. J. Tompkins, Rest In Peace.*

Tompkins, I hoped, was resting more peacefully than I.

I shrugged, scratched, grimaced and clicked the flashlight again. It was five after one. I had been there, at Mr. Tompkins' tombstone—as directed—since twelve-thirty. I stiffened, stretched and returned to the whirligig of random thinking, but my unconscious mind must have sought succor, because it presented a picture of Trina Greco.

Ah, that Trina Greco. Tall, dark, lithe and graceful, she had the longest, shapeliest legs in New York, and they were legs that stood up against the staunchest of competition—Trina was a ballet dancer. This very afternoon—before I had returned to the office, and before the call from Mrs. Florence Fleetwood Reed—I had attended a rehearsal with Trina. Legs, legs, legs . . . legs and leotards . . . but my Trina won hands down (or is it legs down?). Afterward, we had sat about sipping peaceful afternoon cocktails in

a peaceful afternoon tavern, and she had looked off wistfully—Trina, the unusual: with a brain to match the legs—and she had said, apropos of nothing:

"A fragment of time in connection with a fragment of space . . . creates the precise moment."

"Wow," I had said. "In the middle of the afternoon. Just like that."

"It's from the Greek philosophers."

"Trina, my Greek."

"I *am* of Greek extraction. You know that, Pete."

"Sure. Sure." I had pondered it. "Fragment of time . . . fragment of space . . . precise moment."

"And that precise moment . . . can be ecstatic or catastrophic."

"Wow. Again with the words. Slow down, my lady love. I'm only a detective taking off part of an afternoon."

"Even here . . ." Her dark eyes crinkled in a grin. "You and I . . . this might be . . . a precise moment."

My grin had answered hers. "No, ma'am, and that's for sure. I can think of a better time and a more appropriate space for *our* precise moment. But I do believe I know what you mean, big words or little words."

"Do you, Peter?"

"Sure. Something like this, let's say. Deciding game of the World Series. Last half of the ninth, home team at bat, one run behind. Bases full, two out. Third baseman moves a little to his left for some reason, just as the batter hits a screaming line drive. Third baseman lifts his glove, practically to protect himself . . . and he's made a sensational catch. At the right fragment of time he was in the right fragment of space . . . and for him, it was the precise moment. Ecstatic for his team, catastrophic for the other."

"Very good, Peter. Very good, indeed."

The way she had said it, the way her dark eyes had narrowed down, the promise in the soft-sweet smile—right here in the fog-tipped graveyard, a pleasant little shiver ran through me. Everything else was forgotten—even Johnny Hays, small-time hood with big-ideas, good-looking lad with a smooth blue jaw—Johnny Hays, who had come up to me just after I had put Trina into her cab—Johnny Hays, talking through stiff lips:

"You just beg for trouble, don't you, Mr. Chambers?"

"Like how, little man?"

"Like making with the pitch for this Trina Greco."

"That have any effect on you, little man?"

"It figures to have an effect on you, big man."

"Like how?"

"Like Nick Darrow."

"Darrow, huh?"

"Friendly warning, big man. When Nick don't like, Nick cuts you down to size. Then you're a little man, very little, and very dead.

So smarten up. There's a million dames. Skip this one."

I forgot about Johnny Hays, thinking of the expression on Trina's face, of her dark eyes, of that secret little smile, and, as I clicked the flashlight, the pleasant little shiver went through me again —but then the shiver remained and all the pleasantness went out of it.

A voice said, "Put that light out."

I put the light out. I was back in the graveyard working at my trade. I stood still and I said nothing. I saw nobody.

The quiet voice said, "You Peter Chambers?"

"I ain't J. J. J. Tompkins."

"Never mind the jokes. Turn around, and stay turned around."

"Yes, sir." I turned and stayed turned.

"Now reach your arm back and hand me that package."

"You're a little premature, pal."

"What?"

"You're supposed to give me the word, pal. This is a real eccentric bit, but my client is a real eccentric lady, and she's rich enough to afford her eccentricities. You're supposed to say a name. So, say it."

"Abner Reed."

"That's the jackpot answer. Reach, and grab your prize."

There were soft footsteps, then somebody reached, and somebody grabbed.

"Very good," somebody said. "Now stay the way you are. Stay like that for the next five minutes."

But I didn't "stay the way you are" for the next five minutes. Fast count, I'd say there were two reasons for that. First, five minutes in a graveyard, in the middle of the night, after your business is finished, is like, say five *years* on the French Riviera. And second, I'm blessed, or is it cursed, with a large lump of curiosity. I turned, and I didn't turn a second too soon, because I ran right smack up against Trina's "precise moment." Somewhere through the faint fog there was enough light to put a glint on metal—and I dropped—as five shots poured over me, and then . . . nothing.

Running feet . . . and nothing.

I got up, but I didn't even try going after him. The guy was gone. Go search for a needle in a haystack. *You* go—but at least you've got a chance. The needle is inanimate, and it *is* in the haystack. But searching for a gunman in a graveyard . . . no, sir. I'll take the needle-in-the-haystack deal.

Anyway, I brushed at my clothes, and I got out of there, and I was damn glad to *get* out of there. My car was parked about a quarter of a mile down, and when I slammed the door behind me and pushed down the buttons, I permitted myself the luxury of a couple of real deep-down shudders, and then I turned over the motor and went away from there, fast. When the clustered lights of civilization finally rose up before me, I visited

the most civilized place I could think of—a bar—where I had three quick constituents of resuscitation and a slow chaser. Then I went back to the car and my progress to Manhattan was less precipitate and more thoughtful.

2.

Names ran through my mind like tape running through a clinking cash register. Trina Greco, Johnny Hays, Nick Darrow, Florence Fleetwood Reed. I gave the first three a quickthink, so I'd have time to concentrate on the last, and then, perhaps, hash them all up together. I was relaxed now, and moving without hurry. I was heading for the Reed mansion at Gramercy Park, and it figured for about an hour.

Trina Greco. A dish for a king, and I make no pretense at royalty. I had seen her once, about six months back, dancing at the Copa (and had admired her from afar), but I'd met her at a party about two weeks ago (admiring her from very near), and had commenced a small but concentrated campaign. She had quit the night-club job (which was bread and butter) and was rehearsing now with a ballet company, for which she had been trained most of her life. I knew very little about her, but was eagerly trying to learn much more.

Johnny Hays. A good-looking kid who had been inoculated by slick-type movie heavies in his early youth. A no-brains young man who would wind up, one day, neatly dressed, but grotesquely sprawled in a gutter with a generous portion of his intestines splattered beside him. Meanwhile, he was a killer-diller with the ladies, and drew his pay within one of the varied echelons which went to make up the intricate empire of Nick Darrow.

Nick Darrow, very much more important. Brains, cunning and the conscience of a crawling lobster. Neat, young enough, and at the height of his ambition. Politically well-connected, reasonably cautious, and one of the top ten narcotics outlets in the United States. Owner of the *Club Trippa,* on Madison Avenue.

Florence Fleetwood Reed, completely removed from any of the others. Until late this past afternoon, unknown to me, except through legend. Cafe society, real society, and snob-rich to the tune of a hundred million dollars inherited from a five-and-dime pappy who had passed away leaving little Florence as his sole and avaricious beneficiary. Reputed to be inordinately shrewd in business, stuffly stingy, and wierdly eccentric. Young, beautiful, headstrong, imperious, commanding. Married once, a long time ago, to a movie actor, divorced, and recently, about six months ago, remarried.

Late in the afternoon, I'd had a call at the office . . . from Florence Fleetwood Reed. I'd been sum-

moned to her home, and I had answered the summons. I had met her alone, at her Gramercy Park home, a firm-hipped blonde with a lot of control and hard grey eyes within an almost imperceptible network of crepe-like wrinkles. I had been informed that I had been selected as a final cog in a peculiar business transaction. I was told that I was not to ask questions, was to return at eleven o'clock, was to pick up a package, was to go to a cemetery on Long Island, find a tombstone marked *J. J. J. Tompkins,* wait until somebody came there who asked for me by name, and then mentioned the name Abner Reed. I was then to turn the package over to him, and return to Gramercy Park and collect my fee. Said fee, one thousand dollars. Time of appointment at said J. J. J. Tompkins' resting place, twelve-thirty, and wait if the caller is late.

In case you haven't heard, I'm a private detective, which is synonymous with anything confidential, including cockeyed-type messenger boy (if the fee is large enough). In my business, if the client is right, you ask no questions, you give not whit nor wisdom (unless requested); you take it, leave it and forget about it unless an acute or wildly unforeseeable incident occurs.

Gunplay in a graveyard, when your client is the esteemed Florence Fleetwood Reed, is both acute and wildly unforeseeable.

Was the gunplay, then, connected with our client, or was it mixed up with Trina, Hays and Darrow? True enough, it was a vastly populated cemetery, but just as truly you were the only one present upon whom bullets could have even the slightest effect, so, as you turned into the driveway of the Reed home, you were grimly determined to breach the canons of your profession and fling questions until a couple of answers bounced back.

3.

A sleepy-eyed maid ushered me into the downstairs living room and vanished. Uncomfortably, I waited alone, and then a door opened and Florence Fleetwood Reed strode in. And, striding behind her, in measured steps, like a couple of pallbearers—a tall silver-haired man and a tall silver-haired woman.

"All right, Mr. Chambers?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reed."

"You made your delivery?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reed."

She had blue eyes and blonde hair and a patrician nose with easily quivering nostrils. She was in her young thirties, thin-lipped and severe, but plenty good-looking, with a firm full figure, ramrod-straight, but a little bulgy in spots if you're inclined to be critical. She flung a hand over a shoulder and introduced me to the pallbearers. "My uncle and my aunt. Mr. Harry Fleetwood and Mrs. Ethel Fleetwood."

The man smiled and said, "Uncle Harry."

The lady smiled and said, "Aunt Ethel."

I smiled and said, "How do you do?"

The guy was about sixty, hawk-nosed and yellow-toothed, with a deep gruff voice slightly British in accent. The lady had a round smooth face and a porcelain smile and more flirtatious sparkle to her eyes than double the girls half the age.

Mrs. Reed snapped her fingers at Uncle Harry and Uncle Harry drew an envelope from his jacket pocket.

"Uh, excuse me," Mrs. Reed said. "That was a one-sided introduction. This is Mr. Chambers, Peter Chambers, and that envelope, Uncle Harry, is for him."

Uncle Harry came to me, bowed somewhat, and handed it to me.

Mrs. Reed said, "As per agreement. One thousand dollars."

I took it and I said, "Thank you, ma'am," and then I said, "For what?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What's this all about, Mrs. Reed?"

"I *beg* your pardon?"

"Look, lady, after I completed your cockeyed business transaction, somebody took a couple of pot-shots at me. Could be part of your business, or could be some business of my own. Before I go to the cops with it . . . I'm asking."

"Cops?" Uncle Harry brought bushy eyebrows down over the hawk-nose.

"No," Mrs. Reed said. "No." The nostrils quivered and for the first time the eyes betrayed agitation.

Right then I knew I was in on a deal and some of the flop-sweat shook off me. High society or low-society, thousand-dollar fee or more, mansion on Gramercy Park and a lad reputed to be worth a hundred million bucks . . . suddenly I shook it all off and I was treading on familiar ground. Because something around here stank. Out loud.

"The bullets," I said. "*Were* they part of your business?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Then what's all the objection to my going to the cops?"

"Well, because . . ." She turned and looked at her uncle and aunt.

Aunt Ethel continued to smile pleasantly, but Uncle Harry pursed his lips, coughed, grunted, hoisted the eyebrows, then said, "I think you ought to tell him, Florence. Since he was selected for so delicate a mission, he *must* be a man of character."

"Tell me what?"

Aunt Ethel said, "Why you shouldn't, young man, at this particular time, take your troubles to the police."

"My troubles," I said, "seem to be your troubles." I looked at Mrs. Reed. "Then the bullets were your business, weren't they?"

"No. I'm certain they weren't.

There wouldn't be any purpose . . ."

"Look. What the hell is . . . ? Pardon me."

"Time," Aunt Ethel said, "for a drink. Brandy for me. What will it be, please? I'm serving."

Nothing for Florence Fleetwood Reed and nothing for Peter Chambers but Aunt Ethel and Uncle Harry buried their noses unto the bouquet of over-sized snifter-glasses into which Aunt Ethel had poured as though she were a bartender who hated the boss.

Florence Reed said, "Have you any idea, Mr. Chambers, what was in that package?"

"Goulash," I said. "For ghosts."

Very funny. Mrs. Reed looked blank, not even contemptuous. Uncle Harry gazed at me sadly over his brandy. But Aunt Ethel winked slyly and smiled. There was plenty of life in that old dame, too much life for Uncle Harry, no question about that.

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Mrs. Reed said.

It went by me the first time. Mildly I said, "Pardon?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"What?"

"Three quarters of a million." Uncle Harry wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "In thousand dollar bills."

I came back to Mrs. Reed. I said, "Look. You've got a reputation for being, well . . . two things . . . stingy and eccentric. Stingy, that's none of my business. Eccentric, that fits in with this. You're also supposed to have a lot of good practical horse-sense. So, business transactions in the middle of the night, even in a graveyard, nobody's put it past you, nobody'd think twice about it, you're supposed to have pulled a couple of real wing-dings in your time, but—"

"That wasn't exactly a business transaction, Mr. Chambers?"

"What then—"

"It was a delivery of ransom money."

"What? What the hell is going on around here? You mean to tell me that I'm involved in some kind of cockeyed kidnapping?"

Aunt Ethel didn't stop smiling. "That's what she means to tell you, young man."

"Not exactly involved," Mrs. Reed said. "You were an instrument of delivery. An instrument, period."

"Instrument, huh? The police know about this?"

"No, they don't."

"Don't, huh?" Sarcasm blurred my voice. "Expect to inform them?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

I headed for the brandy bottle. I poured and I drank brandy like it was a chaser for bourbon. Then I smacked down the glass, turned, said, "Look. What happened here? Let's have it, huh? Let's stop with

this casual deal. Let's have the story."

Florence Reed went to a divan, sat wearily, lowered her head and touched fingers to her temples. "Last night. It seems a year ago. Last night, he went out, my husband, he went out for a newspaper."

"What time?"

"About ten o'clock. He . . . didn't return. It's happened before. He'd step into a tavern, become involved in a discussion, or just drink in the company of others. Anyway, I went up to bed, fell asleep, and when I awoke, suddenly . . . it was two o'clock, two in the morning. He wasn't back yet and I became . . . apprehensive. Just then, the downstairs bell rang. I thought it was he . . . that he had left his keys. I slipped into a dressing gown quickly, I hoped the servants hadn't awakened . . . and I opened the door myself. It was Uncle Harry."

"I think," Uncle Harry said, "I ought to take over at this point."

I said, "Okay with me."

"Well, sir, I live nearby, on lower Fifth Avenue. At about one-thirty last night, I received a phone call. It was from Abner . . . my niece's husband, Abner Reed. His voice sounded somewhat muffled, and for a moment, if you'll forgive me, I had an idea that he was inebriated. But that idea was quickly dispelled. He informed me that he was talking to me with a gun pointed at his head. He told me that he'd been slugged, rendered unconscious, and kidnapped. Naturally, I was frightfully perturbed."

"Naturally."

"He said that he didn't know where he was, that he was blindfolded, that this phone call had been made for him, and then he was put on, and that he was merely repeating what he'd been told to say."

"And what was that?"

"That I was to come here and inform Florence, and that there would be another call, here, in the morning. And, that if the police were notified, he'd be killed. Then there was a click, and the wire was dead."

"Then?"

"I came here—I told my wife to follow in half an hour, which she did—and the three of us sat up until morning. At eight o'clock in the morning, the second call came."

"Abner again?"

Mrs. Reed said, "Yes."

"You sure it was he?"

"No question. He sounded tired an . . . and beaten . . . physically beaten . . . but it was he. Anyway, to make a long story short, the arrangements were made, and . . . you must have quite a reputation, Mr. Chambers . . . because your name was given to him to give to me as . . . I believe the word is intermediary. You know the rest."

"That all?"

She stood up. She tried to control it, but I saw she was trembling. Uncle Harry put his glass away and went near her, holding her lightly at

the elbow. She sighed, said, "It was promised that he'd be returned to us during this night."

I shook my head and softly I said, "Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"I . . . I'm regarded as, well, a rather frugal person." Tears brimmed over and spoiled her face, but it didn't break up, there was no grimace, the face remained haughty and expressionless. "But . . . this is different. I love my husband. We've only been married six months . . ."

Uncle Harry said, "I think you ought to go upstairs now."

I said, "But you *are* going to notify the cops about this, aren't you?"

"Yes." She leaned heavily on Uncle Harry. "Tomorrow morning. Whether he's returned to me or not. I've got to give it a chance . . . and then I'll go to the police, either way." She shivered once, violently. "I was warned . . . we were being watched . . . that even the phones were tapped . . . that if we went to the police . . . they'd . . . kill him."

"I understand, Mrs. Reed. I'll keep my nose clean. It's your affair, entirely. Now, easy does it, ma'am."

Uncle Harry led her toward the door. He said, "Ethel, you'll show Mr. Chambers out," and then they were gone.

Aunt Ethel came to me, still smiling and smelling of brandy. Aunt Ethel's silver hair was deceptive. Aunt Ethel was no youngster but she wasn't senile. Aunt Ethel was a beautiful woman, mature but not aged. Aunt Ethel wore a blue dress which matched her eyes. Aunt Ethel's blue dress was cut deep in front and a good deal of firm cream-skinned bosom was exposed. She took me out to the small dim vestibule. Aunt Ethel wasn't smiling now and her lips were full and red and glistening. Aunt Ethel said, "I'm drunk."

"So?"

"So . . . this."

She slid her arms under my arms and hooked her hands over my shoulders. She drew me close and opened her mouth on mine. Oh, Aunt Ethel. She smelled of brandy but she smelled too of a vague and attractive perfume. She moved her mouth away and I made one last small attempt at trying to keep the track clear. I said, "You people could have gone to the cops. There are ways. Who advised her?"

At my ear she said, "Nobody advises Florence. She supports us, just as she supports her husband, not too liberal with any of us, so . . . nobody advises Florence . . . except Florence. You're sweet." The hands on my shoulders tightened and her warm body was close. "I'm drunk, but I've wanted to do this from the moment I came into that room. Drunk. Anyway, it's an excuse."

Then her mouth came back.

4.

It was late, but I tried the *Club*

Trippa anyway. There was a bar in front and a cocktail lounge in the rear. It was done in maroon and silver and had a glow that was warmer than a bachelor-girl on vacation. The bar was crowded three deep and the inside room was jumping. The bartender winked and waved and said, "Hi."

"Nick around? Or Johnny Hays?"

"Don't know myself, Mr. Chambers. Try upstairs."

Upstairs, up a maroon-carpeted flight of stairs, was the floor show, the band, the dance floor, and the heavy spenders. Upstairs, too, were a couple of choice back rooms, one of which was Nick Darrow's office, if a studio fitted out like a sultan's reception room can be termed "office." The merry-makers were engaged in watching a stripper called Bonnie Laurie so I strolled along the periphery of dimness and opened the office door without knocking.

Nick Darrow wasn't there.

But Johnny Hays was.

He unfurled off a couch, black-eyed and contemptuous, and lounged toward me.

"Still looking for trouble, my dear shamus?"

"Where's Nickie?"

"None of your business. Any message?"

"Yes."

"I'll take it."

I gave it to him. High, hard and handsome with a lot of shoulder behind it. It splattered blood from his mouth and sat him down with his toes pointed at the ceiling. I didn't wait for him to get up. I went downstairs and had a Scotch highball and my palms were wet with expectancy. But nothing happened. Johnny Hays didn't show, nor did Nickie Darrow. Johnny was still sitting there, or he didn't want to come down, or he'd gone down the back exit and was out front waiting. I paid and went out. Nobody was there. I walked along a couple of quiet streets but nobody sprang at me. So I gave it up and went back to the lights. I had ham and eggs in a cafeteria, with coffee, ketchup, and well-buttered English muffins. Then I went home.

I showered, dried down, slipped into a pair of shorts. I bought myself a Scotch and chased it with more Scotch and I was ready to wrap this day up and put it to bed. I thought about Florence Reed and felt a little sorry for her, as sorry as you can feel for a dame with a hundred million bucks, and then I thought about Aunt Ethel and I got a belt out of that. So . . . my door-buzzer buzzed.

In the middle of the night, the door-buzzer buzzes.

Each to his own. Poets sleep in the daytime. Tramps work at night. Charwomen come home at dawn. Editors read in bed. Actors awake at the crack of noon. Atom experts ponder through the night. Doctors are always on call. And a private

richard . . . there is no reason why business should not be buzzing the door-buzzer in the dead of night. Private richard. He has about as much privacy as a parakeet in a kindergarten.

I opened the door to darkness. Somebody'd switched off the corridor lights. When lights are out that should be on, you drop, you learn that early when you're in my business. But I didn't drop in time. Blazes of light punctuated the blackness, and when I dropped, it wasn't because I wanted to drop, it was because I was knocked down by the force of the bullets. I heard the pound of feet in the corridor, but right then I wasn't interested. I felt blood on my naked body, and I heard the labor of my breathing. My one interest was reaching the phone. I tried to get up, but I couldn't make it. So I crawled, and I lifted the receiver, and dialed o, and heard my whisper: "Operator . . . hospital . . . hospital . . . emergency . . ."

5.

I was under sedatives for a day, while they probed for bullets, and then I was sitting up in the hospital bed, ready to go, but they told me five days, five days before they'd let me out of there, and then I got a caller, amiable but worried-looking, Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, good cop and good friend.

"Hi, Detective," he said. "I hear you're coming around real good."

"Hi, Lieutenant. What brings you?"

"Well, when a friend is sick . . ."

"What else brings you?"

"That Abner Reed shindig. I hear tell you were an innocent bystander . . . in a cemetery. You well enough to chat?"

"I'm well enough to get the hell out of here. Did they return that bird?"

"Yah." He sighed and sat down. Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, squat, thick, ruddy and black-haired, stump of an unlit cigar in his mouth. "And none the worse for his experience. Got hit in the throat a couple of times, a little damage to the windpipe. Had to do the questions and answers by writing, but it's a condition that figures to clear up quick enough."

"Has it broken in the newspapers?"

"Nope. Not a word. We're trying to work it through before it gets any publicity. Now, let's hear your story."

I gave him the story without frill or furbelow. When I was finished he said, "Any ideas?"

"About what?"

"About what makes you a shooting-gallery target?"

"Yeah, I've got a couple of ideas, but I'd rather not talk about them."

"Why not?"

"Because they're personal, and I'd like to give them some personal

attention, as soon as they let me out of here."

"Okay, Peter Pan, if that's the way you want it." The cigar rolled around in his mouth and stopped. "What about the snatch? Want to discuss that?"

"Love to."

"Any ideas on that?"

"Not a one. You, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing."

"That's a good basis for discussion. Okay, what have you got on it?"

"Nothing more than you have. The guy showed up at his house about seven o'clock yesterday morning, period. Tired, a little banged up, and his throat on the blink. Had a doctor in, who couldn't find anything really wrong. Cold compresses and rest, that's the treatment."

"Get his story?"

"Got it the best possible way. Complete statement in writing, then questions and answers in writing. Sum total . . . nothing."

"Well, let's hear, anyway."

"Went out of his house for a paper. Got jumped in the dark and figured it for a mugging. But then he was slugged, and when he came to, he was in a car, bound and gagged and under a blanket. Also blindfolded. There was a stop, where he was put on the phone to that Uncle Harry; then he was riding again. Then there was another stop, where they roughed him up a little; then the call in the morning to the wife for the ransom dough, where you were suggested as go-between, and he transmitted that suggestion to the wife. You know what happened in between. Then, yesterday morning, about six o'clock, he had another car ride. He was dropped out near the bridge on First Avenue and a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, and the car roared off. He wandered around a little dazed until he got a cab, and went home. That's his story, sum and total."

"License plate of the car?"

"Couldn't get it. It was still dark, and they had their lights out. Nice, huh? A lot to work on."

"Yeah."

Silence. Of the heavy type. The kind of silence you can only get in a hospital room. Then he said, "Can I smoke?"

"Sure you can smoke."

He lit up. "Well . . . ?"

"What about the background of the guy himself? Abner Reed. What kind of a guy?"

"Nice enough young fella. Tall, rangy, young, good-looking. Used to be a dancing instructor. That's how he met the lady with the bucks. She came for lessons and she fell for the teacher."

"How they get along?"

"Swell, from what they tell me."

"How long married?"

"Going on seven months."

"She been liberal with him?"

"Liberal as can be expected. Rich, but plenty tightwad, that one."

"What about his background?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, he's only married six-seven months. If it was hard guys he was playing around with before that, they'd know just what a set-up he was for a snatch. Maybe he even blabbed *after* he was married."

"Maybe. We've checked the background, of course. Usual thing for a good-looking kid alone in New York. Ran around a lot. Handsome kid, picked the best-lookers in gals. Nothing special in hard guy friends."

"Nice selection of zeroes we're coming up with, aren't we, Lieutenant? What about that aunt and uncle?"

"Harry Fleetwood was the brother of Florence's father, pappy with all the bucks. Pappy supported him and Aunt Ethel. When Pappy died, he left his all to lady Florence. Florence continued the support, but was somewhat more firm on the purse-strings. You met that Aunt Ethel, huh?"

"Yes."

"Something, eh?"

"Quite."

"Twenty years younger than Uncle Harry, and Harry's fifty-nine."

"She looks older."

"It's the white hair, which she *dyes* that color. Now that's a switch, isn't it? I've heard them go from grey to blonde, but that one's a natural blonde who goes to grey. Quite a dame, Aunt Ethel. Used to be married to a British peer. Gave that up because she thought Harry had the kind of dough the Fleetwood name conjured up. Wound up being a ward of Pappy's. Nice."

I lay back and I said, "Yeah." Then I said, "I'm in it, Louie."

"So?"

"Mind if I stay in it?"

"Real polite. As if I could keep you out." He stood up. "But, at least you remember what too many private eyes forget."

Sweetly I said, "And what's that, Lieutenant?"

"That it's not a solo performance. That we work together."

"Sho nuf, Lieutenant."

"Real spry, for a guy that recently harbored bullets."

"Spry enough to ask a favor."

"Shoot."

"There's a girl by name Trina Greco—"

"Isn't there always?"

"Lives on Christopher Street."

"So?"

"Would you get in touch with her—don't scare her—just get in touch. Tell her where I am, and that I'd like a visitor. Okay?"

"Okay, pal. You'll get your visitor."

I got her the next afternoon, Trina Greco, tall in a green suit shaped to her figure, black hair a shining Italian whirl on her head, black eyes enormous and a little frightened.

"Easy does it," I told her. "A little virus. I'll be out in a few days."

"Reluctant hero."

"There she goes again, my Greek philosopher."

"It's not virus. It's bullets. I inquired, and I was told. Something I can do, Peter?"

"Lots of things you can do, Trina. But for now, just sit down, cross those lovely legs, and prattle. Make with the small talk."

She told me about the ballet rehearsals, she told me about how much she liked me, she told me about the fact that she was in the process of moving to a new apartment and how excited she was about that. I lay back and I looked at her and you could tell that I was sick, because it was soothing. Once I asked her to kiss me, which she did, lightly, and next thing I knew, I was asleep. When I woke up, she was gone.

6.

Anger and well-being seem to run hand in hand, and as your health improves, so your anger mounts. By the time I was out of the hospital, I was as tense as a piano-wire and fit to bust wide open. First visit was to the Reed mansion where the maid informed me that Mr. and Mrs. Reed weren't home, they were downtown, passports, something like that. I asked her for Uncle Harry's address and she gave it to me.

Uncle Harry lived in an apartment house on Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street and Uncle Harry was wearing a monocle this trip: purple lounging pajamas, purple slippers, purple dressing gown, and a monocle. His greeting was cool. I asked about developments and he said there were none. Then he said, "Anything else?" And he said it curtly.

"How's Mrs. Reed?"

"She's fine."

"How's she taking the loss of all that dough?"

"She hopes it will be recovered. If it isn't—" he shrugged— "then she writes it down as a loss and it's over. She has had losses before."

"And how's Aunt Ethel?"

"Very well. Now . . . is there anything else?"

"Don't you like me, Uncle Harry?"

"I neither like you nor dislike you, Mr. Chambers. You are, I trust, a fine young man. But your calling on me is, in essence, an intrusion. We are not friends, and we have nothing in common. You were hired for a purpose, and you served your purpose. Now . . . is there anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"Then good afternoon, Mr. Chambers."

I went back to the office and sat on my hands. I was wearing a gun now, and turning to look behind me wherever I went. I sat on my hands and waited for a call, but no call came. It burnt me, but there was nothing I could do about it. I'd put

in a couple of phone calls to Nickie Darrow but Nickie-boy didn't seem to think I was important enough to call back. I got off my hands and attended to routine but routine was duller than a one-horse race, so I kissed it off. Finally, at six o'clock, I was back at the Reed place on Gramercy Park and this time the maid showed me in. The living room was dimly lit by a couple of lamps and first thing Florence Reed did was raise a finger to her lips; then she pointed. I followed the point to a long lean lad snoozing softly on a couch.

"Abner?" I whispered.

She said, "Yes."

She crooked the finger and I followed her into a smaller room. "He's napping," she said.

"How is he?"

"Very well."

"How's his throat?"

"Coming along fine. Now, is it anything special, Mr. Chambers? Maid tells me you were here earlier in the afternoon."

"No. Nothing special."

Her thin lips grew thinner. "Uncle tells me that you called on him too. I don't quite understand, Mr. Chambers. Is it something about your fee?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

In a sense, she had me there. I said. "I was just wondering if I could be of any help . . ."

"Help? Oh. Perhaps you don't know. We've been to the police, just as I told you that night. He was returned to us in the morning, and within an hour we were in touch with the police. They say they're working on it, and we're doing our utmost to co-operate. There's just no help needed."

Once more she had me. I said, "I thought perhaps I could be of some assistance."

"None whatever, Mr. Chambers. The matter is in the hands of the proper authorities. I do wish to thank you for not going to the police with your private troubles that night, and if you feel there should be some added recompense for that . . ."

"No, ma'am. No added recompense."

Then I was out of there and I knew I wasn't coming back. And I knew if I did come back I'd be thrown the hell out of there. And I knew that even that would be right because I had no business coming back there. So I had dinner in a quiet restaurant and I longed for Trina Greco but I wouldn't call her because I was a target for somebody and there was no sense pulling her in as innocent bystander. I called Nickie Darrow again but he wasn't in. I asked for Johnny Hays but he wasn't in either. A good deal of hate was being dammed up inside of me and it had no outlet. I went down to Parker and chewed the fat. He didn't have a thing on the Reed snatch, and it was growing stale. It's a big city and there

are a lot of crimes and they overlap and Parker was a busy man. So, since it was nighttime, I got on my broom and made for the *Club Trippa.*

I was hardly past the door when I realized I was *persona non grata.* The word was in. The bartender's glare was colder than frigidity in an igloo, and almost at once a bouncer with heft bellied up to me.

Softly he said, "Out."

Petie-boy was innocent-eyed. "But why, sweetie?"

"Because them's orders. And don't call me sweetie."

"You're big, but I got a hunch I can take you."

"Try."

"I would if it made sense, but after I get past you, there'd be too many others."

"Smart. But you wouldn't get past me."

"That's one man's opinion. Can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Who gave the orders?"

"Johnny Hays."

"That little prig?"

"Yeah, that little prig."

"Nickie know about these orders?"

"Look, pal, I only work here. Johnny's one of my bosses. I don't ask my boss no questions. You going out nice and quiet? It's better for business if you go out nice and quiet. But just between you and me, I wish you wouldn't, because I'd love to shove a fist through you. You're one of them dressed-up wise guys that thinks he's a muscle. Get a little fresh, pal. I would love it."

It didn't make sense, but it's the same old story. Business is business, and in my business, you've got to keep them respecting you or you lose face. I lifted my knee, and his face hung out, and he caught a tennis-racket right, and then a straight left to the point of the chin. It was neat and it was quick and before the commotion even started I was out in the night.

And thereafter I was out many nights, night after night, milking the underworld, trying to coax a tip on the Reed snatch, but it was locked up tight, and nothing wanted to happen. I kept making calls to Nickie Darrow but no call came back to me. I didn't see Trina, I didn't see Johnny, I didn't see Nickie, I didn't see Florence, I didn't see Abner, I didn't see Aunt Ethel, and I didn't see Uncle Harry. I saw Parker, and between the two of us we had accumulated a great big bunch of nothing. The holster I was wearing was growing heavy, and the flesh beneath it was growing red, yet . . . nothing. And then, late one sunny afternoon, I was sitting in the office thinking about my next move, when the next move was made for me. The phone rang and the husky female voice said, "Mr. Chambers?"

"This is Chambers."

"Good." She spoke quickly. "My

name is Sandra Mantell. I live at Fifty-two West Forty-ninth, Apartment Two, downstairs."

"Yes, Miss Mantell?"

"I want to talk to you. Personally."

"I'm a little busy, Miss Mantell." It wasn't true, but you always say that to a new client. It helps with the fee.

"It's important, Mr. Chambers." The voice dropped a note. "It's about a kidnapping."

Crinkles commenced on my scalp. "Pardon?" I said.

"The kidnapping of Abner Reed."

I sat bolt upright. "What? What's that?"

"Listen, please. I . . . I'm involved in it. It was my idea, really. I dreamed it up. I was supposed to get a third. One third." The voice got harsh now. "But . . . I'm not getting it. So . . . I want to talk. Understand? I want to talk."

"Yes," I prompted. "Yes, Miss Mantell."

"Look. I want you to make a deal for me. If I spill . . . I want to be able to cop a plea. If I give them the evidence, worst I want is a suspended sentence."

Now I tried the crafty approach. "Why me, Miss Mantell?"

"Because I know you're mixed up in it. Because I want you to feel out the cops for me. You tell them I'll spill if they guarantee me a plea. I'm ready to talk, Mr. Chambers. No body is going to cross me and get away with it . . . *oh!* . . ."

The raps over the wire were gunshots.

Could have been backfire, could have been explosions, could have been firecrackers—but they weren't—none of that—not with the quick cry from her, and then the sigh, and then the thud of the receiver to the floor. The connection was open but I broke it. I hung up and I ran. Fifty-two West Forty-ninth was near enough to my office and I ran most of the way . . . and then I was there . . . in the presence of death . . . Apartment Two . . . a blonde on the floor with blood on her face . . . and standing above her . . . a sobbing brunette . . . and that one I knew.

Her name was Trina Greco.

"What the hell?" I said. "What's going on here?"

Sobs.

"Trina!"

"Yes?"

"You didn't kill her?"

"No."

I closed the door and I prowled. The receiver was still off the hook, a discordant insistent buzz pouring through it. The blonde was in a sheer housecoat, a tall blonde with a fine figure, shot through the head. A revolver lay near her. I came back to Trina and shook her. I said, "Did you kill her?"

"No."

"Did you call the cops?"

"No."

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here."

"Look. Talk it up. Talk it up fast. We've got to report this. Now come on. Let's have it."

She was trying to pull herself together, but she wasn't too successful. "Let me tell you," she gasped. "Let me tell you what . . ."

But then the sobs came again.

I said, "I'll ask questions, and you try to answer them. And get hold of yourself, will you please?"

"Yes. Yes."

"You say you live here. Is this the new apartment you moved to?"

"Yes."

"And this girl. She Sandra Mantell?"

"Yes."

"She live here too?"

"Yes. My room-mate."

"You know her well?"

"I met her a couple of months ago. I was introduced to her."

"By whom?"

"A man. Johnny Hays."

"Johnny Hays, huh? That guy mean anything to you?"

"Nothing. An acquaintance. I went out with him a few times."

"And this Sandra Mantell. Was she a friend of his too?"

"No. She was a friend of a friend of his. Nick Darrow."

"How well do you know this Nick Darrow?"

"I don't know him at all."

"You mean you just met a girl, and you became room-mates?"

"No. She lived in Jersey. She was a dancer, working in Union City."

"Doing what?"

"A burlesque turn. But she was a trained ballet dancer. We were short a girl for our show, and I brought her in, and she qualified. We became better acquainted, and she suggested taking this apartment."

"How'd you get along?"

"I didn't like her. She was tough, hard, unpleasant. I told her I was going to move out after the first month, for which my rent was paid."

"How'd she take that?"

"She said she didn't care. She said if things worked out for her, she'd be living in a penthouse, and very soon."

"Yet she attended rehearsals as a ballet dancer?"

"Attended them faithfully. She wanted that, terribly. I think she was trying to prove something to herself. She made much more money in burlesque. She did a specialty."

I went away from her and looked over the apartment. It was clean, neat and nicely furnished. When I came back, I said, "Okay. I think you're in shape now. I want to know what happened here, and I want it coherent."

She wiped her palms with a handkerchief and laid it away. She said, "We'd both been at rehearsal. She said she had a date, and a very important one, a business date."

"Did she say where?"

"At a restaurant. She didn't tell me which restaurant. She said she was going to talk business. She

said she was going to give somebody a last chance to make her rich. That's what she said."

"Where'd you go?"

"I went to a movie."

"Then?"

"I came home. As I entered the hallway, I heard the shots. Our door opened and a man came running out. We collided, and that's when the gun dropped to the floor."

"What gun?"

"The gun right there." She pointed at it, on the floor.

"Wait a minute," I said. "If you and the guy collided in the hall, what's the gun doing here?"

"Well, when I looked in here, and I saw her, like that, I went to her, saw she was dead. Then I went back into the hall for the gun. I remembered about not touching things . . . fingerprints. I kicked it . . . with my foot . . . kicked it along until I worked it into the apartment."

"Good enough. Now, what did the guy look like?"

"I don't know."

"Honey, you just told me you collided with him, out there in the hallway. You must have seen what he looked like."

"No. Remember I was coming in from a sunny street into a dim hallway. And he was running. And we collided. And then he ran out. I just have no idea what he looked like."

"Okay," I said. "That's it. Now we go call cops."

"Can't we call from here?"

"I don't want to touch that receiver. You're supposed to leave things as close to what they were as is possible. Sometimes it helps. Come on."

On the way to a phone booth, I asked her for a favor. I asked her to tell her story exactly as she told it to me, but to leave out one thing. Nickie Darrow. Not to mention him. That's all. Nothing else. Just omit Nickie Darrow.

"Why?" she said.

"It's a personal thing, my little Greek philosopher. I've been trying to get through to him, and this gives me a wedge. Don't worry. You won't be breaking any law, and if there's any trouble, I'll take full responsibility."

She was hesitant but she was cooperative. "All right, if you say so, Peter."

"I say so."

I called down to Headquarters and then we went back to the apartment and pretty soon there were cops, lots of cops, tons of cops, and they were in the charge of Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, and Parker was in a gruff mood. "Never fails, does it? How come whenever there's a corpse . . . there's you?"

"It's mixed up with the other thing, Lieutenant?"

"What other thing?"

"The Abner Reed snatch."

"You kiddin'?"

You straighten him out on current events, from the phone call in

your office from Sandra Mantell to right now (omitting friend Darrow) and now his mood is ameliorated and he's on your side again. "Go home, Pete. Go home and stay home."

"Why?"

"Because you're a good kid."

"That's why you want me to go home?"

"Listen. For once will you listen? There's nothing you can do here, and there may be a lot I can do. But I'll come up and see you, Pete, as soon as I can get loose from all of this. You've played ball with me—I'll play ball with you. I'll come up and see you and we'll kick it around some more. Okay?"

"About Trina Greco, Lieutenant."

"Yes?"

"She's a friend of mine."

"So?"

"Treat her nice."

"Okay. She's a friend of yours. I'll treat her nice. Now, will you please go home?"

7.

So you go home. You're a good little boy and you've listened to Papa. You sit around like an old lady with lumbago . . . but you sit. You do some home cooking, and some home eating, and some home drinking . . . but you sit. You get sick and tired of sitting . . . but you sit. Day melts into night, and night is getting wearisome, and you're still sitting. Finally, at twelve-thirty in the morning, Parker shows up, perspired and tired-looking.

"Hi," he said. "How you doing?"

"Been sitting. Been sitting real good. How *you* doing?"

"Pretty bad."

I went to the liquor cabinet. "A bit of the potables, Lieutenant?"

"Thanks. I can use a drink."

He used a couple.

I said, "Let's get down to cases, Lieutenant."

"That's my boy. Always in there pitching."

"Cases, Lieutenant."

"Well, sir, that gun on the floor was the murder gun. And we were able to garner a gorgeous set of fingerprints off it. Only prints on it, as a matter of fact. Gun's an old one. Couldn't do any tracing from the serial number. Dead end on that phase."

"How much luck do you want, pal? Gorgeous fingerprints, you said."

"There's a catch."

"As my Greek philosopher would say—isn't there always?"

"Who's your Greek philosopher?"

"Skip it. Where's the catch?"

"Gorgeous set of prints, but they match nothing we've got on file. And don't match anything out of Washington either. Where's that leave us?"

"Way out in left field on a rainy day, and there is no ball game."

"Very aptly put, me lad. I'll have another drink."

I served him another drink. I said, "You check her friends?"

"I've got forty men working on this. We've checked everybody that's ever had the remotest connection with her. No prints fit the prints on that gun."

"You couldn't know *everybody* . . . that had the *remotest* connection."

"We're only human, pal. We've run down every single possible lead, and we're no place. We've got fingerprints, but they match nothing. Stinks pretty good, eh, pal?"

My conscience reared up on its hind legs and pawed at me. Nickie Darrow was a careful guy and he rarely left traces of his friendships. Casually I said, "You guys got Nickie Darrow's prints on file?"

"Nickie Darrow? He got any connection with this?"

"I'm not saying he has, Lieutenant. Let's say I got a personal hate for the guy, and I'm trying to implicate him. All I'm asking—have you got his prints on file?"

"You bet we have."

"Then routine would have put him on the spot if the prints on the gun were his."

"Definitely."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Don't glare at me like that. You get anything special on that Sandra Mantell?"

"Nothing, except she was a looker with a real upholstered torso. Knew a lot of the best people, and a lot of the worst. A burlesque dancer, and a top-notcher. Used to live in New York, then moved to Jersey when she got work permanent in Union City. Played in New York though, and played plenty. There's a lot we don't know about her, that's for sure, and there's a lot of people that knew her that we don't know a thing about." He stood up and sighed. "But we keep plugging. We're cops and we keep plugging. We're not brilliant private eyes that sneak around, and fast-talk all the girls, and slug a few people, and come up with all the right answers. We're only cops, and we plug, and a good deal of the time we solve our cases. Without fanfare, and without getting paid by publishers and TV sponsors to tell our stories. Good night, sonny. I'm tired. I'm going to sleep. You ought to do the same."

8.

You close the door behind him and you hit the horn. You dial the *Club Trippa,* and you ask for Nick Darrow, and they ask who's calling, and you tell them, and you get the same old answer: not in. This time you leave a message. You say that Sandra Mantell has been murdered, and that you've been investigating it, and that you left out the name of Nickie Darrow when you made your report to the police. You say you'll be home the rest of the night

and you give them your phone number. Then you hang up and make yourself some frozen blintzes out of the freezer, with sugar and sour cream, a dish you learned from one of Lindy's chefs, and you're in the midst of enjoying it, when the phone tinkles, and guess who . . . ?

Nickie Darrow's voice, over the phone, was smoother than my sour cream. "How are you, Pete? Where you been keeping yourself? My club too lowdown for a high-hat guy like yourself?"

"Been busy, Nickie. Haven't had time for night clubs. Haven't even had time to call you on the phone, a nice old friend like you."

"You really ought to call sometime."

"Yeah, I really ought."

"Why don't you drop in tonight, Pete? You free tonight?"

"Matter of fact, I am. It's a good night for slumming. Thanks for the invitation, Nickie."

"Come up to the office, Pete. Say . . . two o'clock, eh? Love to see you. How's two o'clock? I'll clear the decks for you, pal."

"Two o'clock. That's fine."

"See you, pal."

I showered and dressed and looked at the gun and holster and decided to leave them behind. You could get killed like that, but Nickie wasn't one to molest people, not when he's invited them. The people might leave word as to where they were going and then Nickie would be involved, and Nickie was averse to being involved. In anything. Nickie had said two o'clock, so you were there at one-thirty, just for the hell of it.

The word was in again. In reverse.

The bartender winked and waved and said, "Long time no see."

The bouncer with the belly said, "How are you, Mr. Chambers?"

I patted the belly and I said, "What the hell. Business is business. No hard feelings?"

"Not me, Mr. Chambers. I work for a living. I dish it out, and I take it. I got no complaints. How's for a handshake?"

"Why not, pal?"

We shook and he squeezed my hand and then he said softly, "Tell you this, pal, off the record. When I got business, I bring it to you. And so do my friends. You're a quick one, and I like a quick one. And you don't take no guff, and I like a guy don't take no guff."

"Thanks, sweetie."

He grinned a grin that was more gum than teeth. "Don't mention it, sweetie."

I went upstairs. Bonnie Laurie was on again and the customers' eyes were riveted. I repeated my dimness-and-periphery bit, and I opened the door to Nickie Darrow's office. I was early. Nickie Darrow wasn't there. But the room wasn't empty. Aunt Ethel came toward me, swaying slightly. Ethel Fleetwood, in a tight black off-the-

shoulder gown that emphasized every curve and protuberance of her hour-glass figure, and let me state, once and for all, Aunt Ethel had what it takes, and more. Haul off that Bonnie Laurie, haul her off that floor, and substitute Aunt Ethel, and the customers' eyes would remain just as riveted. Aunt Ethel leaned on me, and I enjoyed every inch of her. She said, "You too? I might have known."

"Living it up, Aunt Ethel?"

"That Nick Darrow. He's a terrible man. No compassion, no soul, nothing. Want to kiss me now, honey? You're the cutest."

"Take a rain-check, Auntie-love."

"I'm in the mood." She wasn't drunk, but her eyes had more glare than a windshield on a desert.

Then the door opened and Nick Darrow came in. Quietly he said, "What the hell is going on here?"

Nick Darrow always spoke quietly. He was, as always, perfectly dressed. He was tall and lean and broad-shouldered. His hair was black, faintly tinged with grey at the temples. He had blue eyes rimmed within long black lashes. He was always serene, always composed, but always, a muscle in his jaw kept jumping. He said, "Mrs. Fleetwood, I've told you time and again—stay out of here."

"I'm with a party, dearie, outside."

"Then stay with your party."

"Nickie dear, all I want is a small favor."

"No favors from me, Mrs. Fleetwood. Now . . . out. Or I'll have you thrown out."

I clucked my tongue at him. "Is that the way to talk to a lady, Nickie dear?"

"Look, Petie dear. You keep your nose out of my affairs." He went to her and took her arm. "Out. You're a gorgeous dame, but out. Go join your party."

"Will you help me, Nickie?"

"You mean you can't find your way?"

"That's not what I mean, Nickie."

His voice roughened. "Out, Mrs. Fleetwood." He opened the door, gently shoved her through, closed the door, and locked it. Then he turned to me. "You know what she wants?"

"I've got my figure."

"Horse. Nose-candy. Heroin."

"Well, for Horse, she's come to the horse's mouth."

"Very funny, and very stupid. I run a night club here, period. Sit down, eyeball. We got talking to do."

I sat.

He sat.

He said, "Where's it tickling you, pal?"

"That kind of tickling, Nickie, I almost *died* laughing."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He sounded convincing. I said, "You on my back, Nickie?"

"Like how?"

"Somebody's been blowing spit-

balls at me, Nickie. Any idea who?"

"No. Period."

"Know a girl by name Trina Greco?"

"I've heard the name."

"Got any interest?"

"I've never even seen her."

"Has Johnny Hays ever seen her?"

"Yes. He's seen her."

"It's beginning to add up, Nickie."

"*What's* beginning to add up?"

"Listen. Your Johnny buttonholed me a time back, while I was out with this Greco, and he told me to lay off that, and he told it to me —as a message from you."

Darrow stood up and walked. "That ain't the first time, the little punk. When he wants to scare a guy off . . . on his personal business . . . he uses my name. This on the level?"

"You ever know me not to be?"

"Okay. Thanks. That little punk is scratched from here on in. I'll put him to work in a tank town. Don't worry no more about Johnny Hays."

"I never was worried about Johnny Hays. I was worried about you. That boy wouldn't do any serious shooting unless you knew about it, would he, Nickie?"

"No."

"Then who the hell's on my back, and why?"

He walked some more, then he turned to me and smiled. "You got your headaches, kid, and I got mine. Let's get to Sandra Mantell. I hear you covered up for me, and I checked that, and you did. Thanks."

"You mixed up in a snatch, Nickie?"

"No."

"Abner Reed?"

"He get heisted?"

"Yes."

"I know him. Been a customer here. Married money-bags. She's been a customer here. So's her aunt and uncle."

"Big heist, Nickie. This is off the record."

"How much?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand. Big ones."

The corners of his mouth turned down and his head nodded. "Big enough. I should have heard something. I didn't. Was it paid?"

"All of it."

"You sure?"

"I paid it."

Now his glance held admiration. "You're a hip guy. You're always in on the big action. You have a piece?"

"I had nothing. But your Sandra thought she did."

"What are you talking about?"

I told him. I told him a good deal of it. I stressed her phone call, and I brought it up to date.

He was very serious when he said, "Look, kid, for guys like me, the snatch racket is out. There are easier ways to turn a buck. Plus I had nothing to do with that Sandra

Mantell killing. On that, I'm on your side. You covered for me, and I appreciate it, but it was a cover I didn't want. After your call, I went down to Headquarters. Guy by the name of Parker is in charge, but he'd gone home. I talked to a Captain Weaver. I offered full co-operation. That's that, and you can check it. On that Johnny Hays bit, I'll take care of that. Now . . . is there anything else you want?"

"No, sir, Nickie, don't want a thing."

"Fine. Now go on outside and enjoy yourself. It's on the house."

"Thanks, Nickie. For tonight, I'll pass."

9.

I went home and I went to sleep. I had my usual nightmares, but they didn't waken me. I sleep through most of the day. I heard the phone ring in my dreams, many times, but I let it ring. I stayed with my nightmares. When I awoke at four in the afternoon, I was cradled in perspiration. I bathed and I had breakfast and I read a book. A mystery. I hate them. But I stayed in. I didn't want to go to the office. I wanted a clean day. One clean day. I didn't want to mix in filth, and thievery, and murder. I wanted to be a small boy, and I wanted to believe that all men are good and all women are pure. I have those moments—even as you—and I wanted to live in my preposterous illusions for one solitary day. But the phone rang and I couldn't resist it and I was glad because it was Trina.

"How are you?" she said.

"Just dandy."

"What's the matter?"

"Why? Why should anything be the matter?"

"You sound . . . somehow . . . like a little boy."

"That's bad?"

"I like it."

"I'm thrilled. To the marrow."

"Now you don't sound like a little boy any more."

"Look. Let's get off that pitch. You're my Greek philosopher, and I love you, but—"

"Wanna go to a show tonight?"

"With you?"

"Yes."

"I'd love it."

"My coach gave me a couple of tickets to *Dead Of Night.*"

"A mystery?"

"Yes. I'm crazy about them. Aren't you?"

"Just love 'em to extinction. But they frighten me. Hold my hand?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"And no Greek philosophy?"

"I'll just hold your hand."

"You talked yourself into an escort, plus dinner. Do I call for you, or do you call for me?"

"I moved out, Peter. I couldn't stand it there. I'm at a hotel. It's barren, dreadful."

"Okay. You call for me. We'll have cocktails here, dinner out, your play, and after that . . . you're the boss."

"What time?"

"Suppose you be here at seven."

"Let me think." There was a pause. "I've one hour of rehearsal, and then . . . okay, fine. I'll see you at seven."

But she saw me at six. She came to me breathless and excited, and I had to restrain myself from kissing her. She had a little black book in her hand. She said, "I think . . . I think this might be important."

"What is it?"

"A little black book."

"Well, thanks. I wouldn't have known that. Unless I was blind. Yours?"

"No."

"Whose?"

"Sandra Mantell's."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was in my bag, in my locker, at rehearsal hall. It was a bag I don't use much. She must have put it into my bag, at our apartment, by mistake. And I took it to rehearsal hall. And I hadn't looked into it . . . until today."

"Gimme," I said.

But all my anticipatory tremors went for nothing. There wasn't a name in that book that meant a thing to me. I said, "You stay here, honey. Make yourself a couple of drinks, and get real high for Peter."

"Where you going?"

"Downtown to friend Parker. This little book doesn't mean a thing to me, but it might to him. Enjoy. I'll be back in time for dinner."

I took a cab downtown to Headquarters, and the elevator took me up to Parker's floor, and I was excited, so I barged in without knocking, but Parker had company. Company was a tall guy, with a bruiser's shoulders, a dancer's figure, and an angel's face—Abner Reed. I started backing out, when Parker called:

"Come in, come in, Peter."

When Parker's busy and he's that congenial, watch yourself, but it turns out, this time, he means it.

"You know Abner Reed, don't you, Pete?"

"Yes. Saw him once, when he was asleep. How do you do?"

Reed nodded.

"This is Peter Chambers," Parker said.

Reed said, "How do?"

Parker said, "Mr. Reed is going to Europe. He and Mrs. Reed. Going away for a year's stay. Making a ship tonight, at eight o'clock. Dropped in for a last goodbye. What brings *you*, Pete?"

I showed him. "Wouldn't be legit without a little black book."

"Black book?"

"It belonged to Sandra Mantell."

"Mantell?"

"Yes. Seems she slipped it into her room-mate's bag, by mistake. Room-mate took bag to rehearsal hall, and didn't look into it until

today. Today, she did. There are names in it, which don't mean a thing to me, but they might to you. So grab a look, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant grabbed.

I turned to Reed. "You've heard about Miss Mantell?"

"Yes."

"Mixed up with your kidnapping."

"Yes, so the Lieutenant told me."

Suddenly I couldn't hear too well. I said, "Pardon?"

"Yes," he said. "So the Lieutenant told me."

I tightened my face at him. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"What's the matter with you?"

"Little hard of hearing."

"I said, 'So the Lieutenant told me.'"

I'd heard about as much as I wanted to hear. I jumped him. I didn't wait. He was big, and I wanted the first punch, and I got the first punch, but he took it standing up, and then he let loose a few of his own. From the corner of my eye, I saw Parker jump up, and I heard him roar: "Here. Stop it. Break it up. What the hell is going on here?"

By then we were mixing it like a couple of wild preliminary pugs. I slipped by a couple of lefts, but he punched too hard on one of them, and he was wide open, and I was in perfect position, and I came up with one off the floor, with all of my weight behind it, and it caught him clean on the button. His feet left the floor going up, and his head caught a corner of Parker's desk coming down, and he went into a deep freeze, and he was going to stay frozen until someone warmed him up.

"Man, you're nuts," Parker roared. "This time, you've really gone and done it."

"Precise moment," I said.

"That's assault and battery, and this guy's important. You've popped your cork this trip, fella."

"Precise moment," I said.

Parker bent to him. "Here. Help me get him up. You've flipped your wig, pal."

"Stay away from him, Louie."

Parker peered up at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Precise moment," I said.

"What the hell is this mumble you've gone into?"

"Greek philosophy. I'll come to it. In due time."

"What'll you come to first?"

"A couple of answers to a lot of questions that you and I have been throwing about, Lieutenant."

He straightened up. "Like which?"

"Like . . . why I was shot *at* in that graveyard . . . and shot *up* in my apartment. Like . . . why Sandra Mantell was killed. Like . . . why she called me in the first place. Like . . . why that gun had fingerprints . . ."

"Okay. Okay. One at a time." Parker had lost interest in the stiffened Abner Reed.

"Let's take the last one first, Lieutenant. Fingerprints on a gun. A guy dropping it when he collides with a dame. Does that sound like a professional?"

"No."

"If it rules out a professional . . . what does it rule in?"

"An amateur."

"Very good, Lieutenant?"

"So . . . ?"

"Let's do it right side up now. Here's a guy, Abner Reed—married himself a large hunk of dough—but he can't reach too much of it . . . because she's . . . frugal, that's the word . . . frugal."

"So . . . ?"

"So . . . on the suggestion of a friend of his—Miss Sandra Mantell—and you'll find, I'm sure, with a good deal of digging—that those two had a close *sub rosa* association—"

"Never mind what I'll find out. Let's get this over with first."

"On her suggestion—for a hunk of the proceeds—they figured out a beauty. *The guy would kidnap himself.* Remember Uncle Harry? The first call? Whom did he talk to? Abner Reed, nobody else. Remember the wife, Florence Reed? Whom did she talk to the next morning? Abner Reed."

It was beginning to come to Parker. "Yeah," he said, "Yeah . . ."

"He knew his wife. He knew how much in love she was. He knew she'd pay, and play ball. *Which she did.*"

"Which explains the shooting at the cemetery too."

"Of course. He played it alone. And I had heard his voice. I was a loose remnant. So he brought a gun with him. Knock me off, and it's all clear. He missed, so he tried again, at my apartment, and that time, he almost made it."

"Yeah," Parker said. "And then, when he had this appointment with Sandra, and he wouldn't pay . . ."

"She called me, and she knew *whom* to call, because she was in it from the beginning, and they had picked me. She called me . . ."

"But he'd followed her home, and when he heard what she was up to, he finished her off. Cleared the last loose remnant."

I shook it off. "Precise moment," I said.

"What the devil is this 'precise moment' pitch you're on?"

"A fragment of time in connection with a fragment of space . . . creates the precise moment."

Parker scratched a stubby finger against his crew-cut. "How's that?"

"I came here with the little black book. It undoubtedly contains nothing more than the names of her boyfriends, but that doesn't matter now. I came at that fragment of time that Abner Reed was here, occupying this fragment of space."

"Meaning?"

"If both wouldn't have coincided, perfectly, this guy'd be off for a year in Europe, and by then, that voice would no longer be fresh in

my memory, and your Abner Reed snatch would have gone down in the books as another unsolved crime. Ecstatic and catastrophic."

"Wha' . . . ? What's that last?"

"From my Greek philosopher. Ecstatic for us, catastrophic for him. Bye, now. I've got a date."

"That good, huh? Who's the date?"

"The Greek philosopher."

His forehead creased into many wrinkles. "Greek philosopher? Not you. You're a guy for dames."

"Bye, Lieutenant."

As I went for the door, and he bent to the stricken Abner Reed, I could hear him mumble: "Oh, that Peter Chambers, go figure that guy, unpredictable Peter . . ."

MISSILE MISSING

Truitt was a bit skeptical of plant security. So, he said: "Fred, could you steal a five-hundred-pound rocket out of this plant?"

BY S. K. SNEDEGAR

Inspector Truitt shook his shaggy head ruefully as he gathered papers together and stuffed them into his worn and battered old briefcase. He hated these missile plant security problems, and a half smile very nearly erased his glowering annoyance as he admitted to himself that he was probably only angry because his assistant was on vacation, unavailable for this particularly putrid investigative exercise.

Truitt snapped the strap over the case, locked it, and went out to retrieve his car from the parking lot. He shook his head only twice more as he drove to the Vulcan Rocket Works, but they were long shakes. He stipulated a certain over-simplification, but he'd told his assistant, "These rocket people think that security is simply keeping unauthorized personnel out of their plants. Oh, they blow the whistle when one of their authorized people *looks* furtive, but it usually turns out that Freddy Furtive is either a petty thief or is having an affair with some unauthorized secretary.

"They hire security guards, most of which have trouble spelling their own names; they appoint a security chief who is usually an ex-personnel man and wouldn't recognize a secret if it bit him; they lock their files; they burn their waste paper; and they'll hire anybody who has a birth certificate, social security card, and a high school diploma. They run spot checks to make sure that no one carries anything out of their plants, they monitor telephone conversations, and they'll let anyone who wants to, go ahead and mail a sealed envelope right out of their own mail rooms.

"If information leaks out of one of those places, the only way—well, ninety-nine per cent of the time, anyhow—the only way we can hope to find the culprit is to cross check their personnel roster with *our* files of known and suspected communists."

Truitt put on his bland face as he parked and strode purposefully toward the entry to the Vulcan offices. A low gate, guarded by a pretty receptionist, barred his way through the ornate lobby. He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Greenwald," he explained.

"Yes, sir," she presented him with a visitor log. "Do you have a clearance with us, sir?"

He signed his name, noted U. S. citizenship, and noted his affiliation as "U. S. Government." He admitted that he hadn't a clearance on file, and then completed his entries on the log by stating the purpose of his visit as "discussions."

The girl asked, "May I see your identification, Mr. Truitt?"

"Mr. Greenwald knows me," he answered, working hard to conceal his annoyance.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Truitt, but my procedure manual says that I have to see your identification before I can badge you."

Truitt smiled at the girl and expostulated, "Isn't Mr. Greenwald the Plant Manager?" and upon her affirmation, "Can he not approve a slight departure from the manual?" and without awaiting the reply, "I suggest then that you call him and see if he won't verify my identity. Okay?"

While the girl made the suggested call, Truitt mentally censured himself for not remembering the "badging" abomination and providing himself with a fake identity card. He didn't want the news of his presence spread all over the plant, but the rumor of a mystery guest would very likely fly farther and faster. He made a quick decision and acted on it.

As soon as she put down the phone he took out his identity card and whispered conspiratorially, "Listen. I don't want *anyone* but you and Mr. Greenwald to know who I am. It means a great deal to our national security," he lied, "so I know you'll keep it quiet. If the fact that I'm here should happen to leak out..." He left the sentence hanging there, and was satisfied that the gleam of comprehension he perceived in her eyes meant that she'd figured out that any leak would be traced right to her door.

"You can trust me, sir," she breathed.

Inspector Truitt writhed inwardly, but he believed her. Then John Greenwald, a husky, bald, and bespectacled individual bounded up to Truitt, right hand extended.

"Mr. Truitt. I'm Greenwald. Would you give Mr. Truitt a badge, Sally? Will you come with me, Mr. Truitt?" Handshake, badge, trip to

office, seat, and offer of a cigar seemed to be accomplished in the very twinkling of a small eye with this dynamo of human activity. "Now, may *I* see this identification card, Mr. Truitt?"

As Greenwald took the proffered card, Truitt confided, "I showed it to the girl, finally. I urged her to keep very quiet about my visit; careless of me not to have provided myself with some innocuous ID card." He couldn't resist a small jab at Greenwald, however. "Amazing though, as security conscious as you are, that you didn't call back to our office to verify my original call."

Greenwald was crestfallen, and Truitt had to wait while the call went out to his secretary, asking her to call back and verify his existance. Truitt eased the tension with a smile and said, "Well, now that we've corrected each other's mistakes, shall we get down to business?" He opened his briefcase and extended a sheaf of papers across the desk to Greenwald.

"These papers," Truit explained, "are apparently some sort of rocket test report issued by your organization. They are classified "Confidential," and they were found in one of the hiding places—T.V. calls them 'drops'—enemy agents use for transferring material. The fact is, that we let some of the stuff pass through these mail boxes so we can get a line on the couriers, but in this case we hadn't sufficient time to determine the importance of the information, so we had to pick up the stuff and close the post office. What can you tell me about this report?"

"This is serious," said Greenwald gravely. "This document is what we call a flash firing report. As you probably already know, we don't fly any rockets from here—we static test them in captive firings, measuring their thrust on a sensitive gage that is part of a thrust stand. For every static test we prepare a comprehensive final test report which includes the complete analysis of all available data. The long report will sometimes require weeks of preparation, and so, for the customer—the government—and some of our own people we prepare this type of 'flash' report which details the essential data gathered during the test. This report is completed the day after a rocket firing, and the information it contains may enable design engineers to make any changes they deem necessary."

"The heading, 'LT-14'," Truitt interjected, "What does that mean?"

"The 'LT' stands for 'Long Tom'," the plant manager answered. "We have a contract for the Long Tom Retro Rocket, and this is a report of the fourteenth firing in the research and development series."

"Forgive my ignorance, Mr. Greenwald, but what is the Long Tom? I don't think I've heard of it."

"I don't know all the particulars, myself," Greenwald admitted, "but

from what I have been told—and perhaps some of what I have surmised—the Long Tom, after Thomas Paine, is the vehicle used in something they are calling 'Operation Commonsense.' Since RFE and RFA are being successfully jammed in a great number of the satellite countries, someone got the idea of dropping leaflets containing news, history, philosophy, and religious material from the free world.

"The airplane wouldn't do, for obvious reasons, and since we missile men have been accused of offering no more to the progress of mankind than a sort of awesome deterrent to backsliding—guarantors of the status quo, as it were— . . . well, I guess a lot of people were happy to get a chance to do something constructive with an ICBM.

"Anyway," Greenwald went on, ". . . and incidentally, a good deal of this is my own supposition, they settled on a basic Titan booster, presumably to be fired from this country—both to get the required velocity to evade being shot down over the target country's border, and to be able to drop off the booster stages while still over the ocean.

"On reaching the target area, the missile will slow from reentry, and then our retro rocket will slow it still more. The payload packages, I think there are four of them, are to be pressure launched from the central payload launcher likely to four quadrants. The retro rocket casing, the payload launcher, and the payload packages, are all consumable. Once the leaflets are jettisoned from the individual packages, the packages are ignited. The only thing that will reach the ground will be the printed matter and a few ashes."

Truitt digested this information for a moment, and then queried, "Is there some way that the enemy could design a preventive, that is if he had the information contained in this report?"

"That, I don't know, Mr. Truitt. I must apologize for my ignorance, but we have some seventeen programs going on in this plant, and though I have to know a little bit about all of them, I confess I don't know a great deal about any of them. I think that I can call several people in here with us, and between them they will be able to answer most of your questions."

Truitt ignored the question for a moment to say, "How many copies of this flash report were made?"

Greenwald raised his hands in exasperation, "I can't answer that either. I've seen the report, of course. I have a copy of it in my files. A copy goes to the Air Force Program Manager and another goes to the program office in the civilian agency. Everything that leaves this plant for a government agency must go out over my signature, so I've personally seen three copies of the report. I'm sure that one of the people that I have suggested we

talk with will know, or will be able to find out for you very quickly."

The office door burst open, and a tall, gangly, loose-jointed man poured through. He was breathing deeply, as if from strenuous exercise as he said, "May I see you for a minute, John?"

Greenwald replied, "I was just talking about you, Jim. Mr. Truitt, this is Jim Spotztokken, our Ballistics Manager."

Spotztokken interrupted with, "How d'yu do? John, I'd like to see you privately. I think you know that I wouldn't interrupt you if it weren't important."

"Regarding what, Jim," Greenwald probed.

"Long Tom Retro," came the terse answer.

"Go ahead, Jim," Greenwald nodded, "I'll vouch for Mr. Truitt." The Ballistic Manager looked at Truitt, and then back to Greenwald.

"John," the gangly man persisted, "I don't think you realize the importance of this."

After looking inquiry and receiving an affirmative nod from Truitt, Greenwald said, "Jim, Truitt is investigating the Long Tom Retro."

"I'm sorry," Spotztokken sighed. "I didn't realize that you already knew."

"Knew what?" asked Greenwald.

"Why, that one of the Long Tom Retros was missing."

"Missing!" Greenwald's voice rose. "How can you be sure? Have you checked—"

Truitt rose, and quieting Greenwald with a gesture, took over the investigation. He was fairly certain that Greenwald would spend half an hour just making sure that Spotztokken wasn't mistaken. Men who insisted that all correspondence, no matter how trivial, must be seen and signed by themselves . . . men like that must perforce cover a lot of unnecessary ground.

"Mr. Spotztokken," said Truitt calmly, "are you saying that the rocket is gone, or just that it can't be found?"

"Gone," came the simple answer.

"You're satisfied that it is not on the premises—that it must have been taken elsewhere?" Truitt queried.

"Just that it's not on the premises," answered the lean ballistician.

Greenwald had to get into the act. He said, "Jim, have you looked everywhere?"

Spotztokken answered matter-of-factly, "John, I haven't looked anywhere at all. Fred Swartz," he looked at Truitt coolly and explained, "my chief test conductor, assigned a man to test fire this particular LTR tomorrow night. The production records showed that the afternoon shift in rocket assembly loaded the motor—that means assembled the complete rocket, nozzle, igniter, instrumentation,

and so forth—they did all this last night before they went off shift. The man Swartz assigned went down to try to get QC quality control—to hurry up the final inspection so he could get the rocket into temperature conditioning, and there was no rocket to inspect. The midnight shift foreman in rocket assembly doesn't remember seeing it in the building after he came on.

"Swartz said that he couldn't believe it either, so he searched the plant, and Swartz knows this plant better than all of our other seventy-five hundred employees put together. If he says it isn't here, it isn't here. Besides, when he told me about it, he put five twenty dollar bills down on my desk and told me to cover it if I thought that rocket was on this plant. Fred's never bet over a dollar in his life unless he had a lock cinch sure thing."

"Anything else?" prompted Truitt.

"Well, I did a little more checking before I came running over here, and it seems that the shift changeover takes place in the lunchroom outside the plant gates. They can't smoke in the plant itself, so the offgoing and oncoming shifts get together in the lunchroom and smoke while the outgoing people tell what they've done, where they've left off, and what's left to do. The four to twelve shift left the building about quarter to, and the new shift didn't get there until about quarter after. The building was probably empty for most of that half-hour."

"Have you talked to any of the people at the gate?" This, from Greenwald.

"How big is the rocket?" Truitt asked.

Spotztokken considered briefly, and then answered both questions simultaneously. "The gate guard wouldn't have seen it, or he'd have said something. The thing only weighs five hundred pounds or so, and it could fit on the floor of the back seat of any of the station wagons where the guard wouldn't notice it unless he was searching. The other problem is that we had a big test firing last night—we fired our first prototype of the Achilles Rocket—and literally hundreds of trips were made through that gate by everybody from John, here, on down to my lowliest test technician. We didn't finish up until two-thirty."

"Isn't there a log kept at the gate?" Truitt persisted.

Greenwald answered that one with, "No. There are no vehicles except Company cars allowed on the plant during the afternoon and midnight shifts. The guards check all passengers for valid identification cards and ask them where they are going, but that's all."

"How about the vehicles? Any way to find out who had which ones and when?"

In answer, Greenwald pushed a buttom and lifted his telephone

from its cradle. "Mary," he barked into the instrument, "get Donlevy in here immediately. In fact, get Dr. Ackerly and Fred Swartz, too."

Within the minute, three men showed up in Greenwald's office. Donlevy—"Call me 'Axe'"—was the security chief, a large-boned, blustering, red-faced man. Dr. Ackerly, the Design Superintendent, was a distinguished graying individual with rimless bifocals that wanted to slip down the bridge of his rather pinched proboscis. Fred Swartz, the Chief Test Conductor, was a smiling All-American giant of some thirty years.

The men took chairs as Greenwald spoke, "As you may know by now, a Long Tom Retro has been stolen, or at least is missing. There are other ramifications." Truitt warned him off with a shake of his head. "Mr. Truitt, I'm certain, will want to take charge of the investigation. You are to give him your fullest cooperation. Mr. Truitt?"

Truitt rose. "First, I'd like a private telephone so I can get the wheels turning outside the plant." Truitt figured that the adversaries were probably smart enough that they wouldn't try to transport the stolen rocket until the furor died down, but if not, there was always an outside chance that it might slip through the net that he'd set up. If any of these people were remotely connected with the theft, he hoped to encourage them to lie low and keep the missing missile where he might find it.

"We'll have roughly two thousand law enforcement people covering every conceivable means of transportation out of this area within twenty minutes.

"Then," he continued, "I want to get together with Mr. Donlevy and organize our investigation in and around the plant. If you will, Mr. Greenwald, while I call, please inform these gentlemen of the circumstances thus far." He gathered the pilfered flash report from the desk, and placing it in his briefcase, shook his head again to warn against bringing it into the discussion. "If you gentlemen will consider the matter carefully and report to us any thoughts, theories, or significant facts, it will be appreciated."

His brief but urgent call completed, Truitt drew Axe Donlevy, the security chief, out of Greenwald's office, through the lobby, and outside into a large, grassy area in front of the office. He asked, "Any way we can tell who had company vehicles last night?"

"Well," the florid chief answered, "The company has nine wagons like those." He pointed to several station wagons parked in a nearby lot. "As you can see, they are equipped with a flash arrestor on the exhaust pipe—keeps any glowing carbon particles from getting loose in the air. Those nine, plus two security watch pick-ups, and of

course, the plant manager's sedan, are the only vehicles that can come through the gate after working hours. During the day, commercial vehicles can come in to make deliveries, pick ups, and so forth.

"As to who has them," he continued, "three of the wagons belong to the test conductors; the keys hang on a board outside of Spotztokken's office. They're supposed to sign them out on a clipboard log, but after hours they usually don't. The other wagons, during working hours, belong to the design people, the test people, the QC manager, safety, and too, I have one of them. We all leave our keys with the guard who takes over the reception desk when the girl leaves for the day. The guard checks them out during the night, and keeps a log of who took them, and what time they went out and returned. That log is filed by my office and should be there now."

"Good," commended Truitt. "If I might suggest a course of action, I think you should round up all the company vehicles into one isolated spot, and put a guard on them. I'll have some technicians out here shortly to go over them for evidence of their being used to transport the rocket. Then, I suggest you get that log, determine who checked out vehicles last night, and get a statement from all of them—where they went, what they did, why they were here, what did they see, and by whom were they seen.

"While you're doing that, I shall probably want to talk a little with Mr. Swartz—perhaps I'll take a trip out to the assembly building, maybe it might be a good idea if you'd have the area cleared and post a guard there too." Truitt thought a minute. "Oh, and you'd better arrange with the gate for me to take my car on the plant. Give me some sort of carte blanche to go anywhere and see anything. Okay?"

The security chief agreed and went off to take care of his tasks, and Truitt hopped back to Greenwald's office to pick up the Chief Test Conductor, Fred Swartz. The group was breaking up when he arrived there, asked if anyone had any ideas, and got a negative.

In the car, and on the way to the rocket assembly building, Truitt asked Swartz, "Were you here last night, Fred?"

"Yeah," he grinned a reply, "Damn near everybody was. We fired the first Achilles last night."

"Did you have a vehicle?"

"Yeah. I had the test conductor's old Plymouth. It sat in the parking lot though until just before one o'clock when we all went down to look the test set-up over. I picked up the keys about nine, and then kept them in my pocket while a bunch of us played poker in Spotztokken's office."

"You got the keys from the board outside the office?"

Swartz regarded Truitt interestedly. "That's right," he replied.

"Were there any other keys on the board when you got yours?"

Swartz squinted reflectively. "No," he finally answered, "there weren't. I think Ernie—that's Ernie Miller, the test conductor on the Achilles test—Ernie had the new Chevvy, I know, and I think Bill Baker, the instrumentation test supervisor, had the old Chev.

"Who was in the poker game?"

"Let's see . . . Spotztokken, Ackerly, Weyland—he's the Superintendent of the Text Complex—, and the Production Head, Dick Lester."

"You played from nine 'til almost one? Did anyone leave the game for a while around midnight?" Truitt asked.

"Well, Ackerly was in and out all evening. The others might have gone out for coffee, or to go to the head, but I wouldn't remember what time it was."

Truitt changed tacks with, "Fred, could *you* steal a five hundred pound rocket out of this plant?"

Swartz thought a minute before answering, "I wouldn't, but I guess I could have stolen this one. They're put on a special dolly for the final QC inspection. Makes it easy for the inspector to get the assembly off the dolly and onto the scales for weighing. Your question about the wagons leads me to believe that I could use the dolly to get the thing out of the building, and that the transfer from dolly to wagon should be fairly simple. Getting it out of the wagon might be a little touchy for one man, but once out, you can roll them on the forward thrust mount without hurting them at all—sort of like jockeying a fifty-five gallon oil drum. In fact, now that I remember it, I've carried some empty rocket casings —from the Long Tom Retro—out into town for some precision machine work. Oh, here's rocket assembly."

Truitt smiled ruefully, "No need to go in. You've told me what I wanted to know." Truitt opened his briefcase, and then silently extended the apprehended flash report toward Fred Swartz.

"Hmm," Swartz observed. "Where did you get this?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," answered Truitt.

"I don't know;" Swartz exclaimed, "there are only five copies made of these LT flash reports. Two go to the customer, one to Greenwald, one to Spotztokken—he buck-tags it and sends it around to various people on the distribution, and the other is in the test conductor's file—LT-14 was Ernie Miller's test, the same fellow who ran the Achilles test last night. The master comes to me, and it goes in my file."

"Is there any way that an extra copy could have been made?" asked Truitt.

"Not easily," averred Swartz. "You see, the reproducing process

is set up to put the 'Confidential' at the top and bottom of each page—it's a special machine setting necessitated by the fact that the stamped 'Confidential' on the master doesn't reproduce on the copies. When the machine is set for five copies, it makes those copies and then writes the number of copies it made back on the master. I suppose it is possible to beat the system, but I can't think of how right now."

"Fred, was there anything special about LT-14?"

"Very much so," Swartz answered. "This firing incorporated all of the most recent design changes. Because it was hoped that this would be the final design—the one we'd go with for the rest of the program—we prepared a special flash report that included details of almost the entire design. Thus, when the customer looked at the report, he could tell at a glance what design modifications were used and what configuration changes had been made. I might add that the test was highly successful; I think this is very likely going to be the final design configuration."

"Has anyone borrowed the master from you?"

"No. At least, not with my knowledge. And anyway, this is how the copies come out on our machine. If someone borrowed the master without my knowing it and ran copies from it, there would be a '5' somewhere on the page. Once on the master, the copy number will reproduce also. I'd say that this must be one of the original five."

"Miller was the test conductor?" asked Truitt.

"Hey, slow down, Mr. T. I and my test conductors could build one of these rockets in our basements if you'd supply the parts. What do you say we go see Ernie and find out what he knows about this?"

"That was to be my next suggestion," admitted Truitt, starting the car.

Back in the administrative and engineering offices, Swartz led Truitt through a maze of corridors and then down a long hall. At the end of the hall was a door that apparently led outside, and just in front of that door, looking sideways into a hidden office had collected a crowd of people.

"That's Ernie's office," observed Swartz. "I wonder what's going on?"

Ernie Miller was dead. When the facts were sorted out Truitt knew that most of the people billeted on the hall had gone to lunch. Miller was dead. The corpse had an ugly, deep gash on its skull just behind the ear. The door at the end of the hall was supposed to be locked from the outside, but the more enterprising engineers in the area had rebelled against making the tortuous journey through the main reception lobby, and had gimmicked the lock. Further investigation had shown that Miller's copy of the

LT-14 flash report was indeed missing, likely it was the one in Truitt's own briefcase, but that remained to be seen.

Now, back in Greenwald's spacious office, Truitt, along with Greenwald, Dr. Ackerly, Spotztokken, Donlevy, and Swartz, heard the homicide detective announce that Miller had died of suffocation, probably having first been knocked out by a severe blow behind the ear. Greenwald was practically apoplectic, in fact all those in attendance save Truitt and the homicide man seemed to be lost in a hovering world of their own.

"Sir," one of the technicians Truitt had ordered poked his head through the door.

"Find anything, Don?" Truitt asked.

"No, sir," the technician replied. "If the rocket was transported in one of those vehicles, it would have to have been wrapped in a tarp of some kind, and most likely put on the seat. There are no indentations in any of the carpeting to show that any kind of heavy load was there for any length of time. Sorry, sir."

"What about the security force's pick-ups?"

"I forgot to tell you," Donlevy broke in, "that both pick-ups have been in a garage in town for the past two days."

"Will there be anything else, sir?" the technician inquired.

"Hang on here a minute, will you Don?" replied Truitt. "I think I know where to find the rocket, or at least where it's been.

"Mr. Greenwald," Truitt turned to the plant manager, "do you still have your copy of this LT-14 report?"

"I'm sure I must," Greenwald answered. He called his secretary, and she came in with the report. "Here it is," he said and handed it over to Truitt.

"Now, Mr. Spotztokken and Mr. Swartz. Will you gentlemen be kind enough to locate your copies of this report?"

Swartz went off to pick up the master and returned shortly. Spotztokken took a little longer, but returned bearing a well-handled copy of the document bearing a buck tag, or distribution tag, on the front. "Took a little while," he confessed. "I had to go down the distribution list to locate it.

Truitt examined the copies in front of him, and then carefully scrutinized the master, noting a number "5" in each corner. Satisfied at last, he looked at the expectant faces around the room.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I may be completely wrong. That has happened before. If it happens this time, I'll apologize to whomever necessary, but I'd like you to follow me while I advance this theory.

"At first I considered the possibility that the rocket had been fired and burned into nothingness, a feature that this particular rocket seems to have. I was rather sur-

prised that none of you mentioned this possibility to me, but—"

"I guess it was because all of us knew," interrupted Spotztokken, "that if it had been fired—even without a nozzle—that it would have lit up the sky for miles around and waked up the world with a racket like a howling banshee."

"Possibly so," Truitt admitted, "but not if it was burned at the same time the Achilles was being tested last night. No matter, though, I don't think it was burned, I think it was stolen. And I think that the theft was a spur-of-the-moment action by someone here. Lieutenant," Truitt nodded at the homicide detective, "I doubt if your murderer will ever go to trial, because I think that the Federal Government will take adequate care of that individual's future. You see, originally some papers were stolen—very important papers. Some of our people intercepted the papers, and so they never got to the enemy. The thief, and the murderer, learned from his cohorts that we had picked up the papers; that he had to get them something else.

"I think that he was here for the Achilles firing, just happened on an untended building that contained a fully assembled rocket, and so he stole it. If it was, actually, a sort of happenstance like that, then I seriously doubt that he has been able to make arrangements to get rid of the loot. Mr. Donlevy, now you didn't take the plant manager's car to the compound with the rest of the vehicles, did you?

"Don, if you will get Mr. Greenwald's keys, I think that you'll find the missing rocket—or evidence of it—in the trunk of his car. It's the Chevvy with the flame arrestor on the exhaust."

"This is preposterous," Greenwald exploded.

"Perhaps, Mr. Greenwald," said Truitt gently, "but perhaps not. You see, you've already explained that you haven't the time to learn a great deal about any single rocket. Something Mr. Swartz said got me to thinking. Fred, and any of his test conductors, could build one of these rockets blindfolded. Obviously, Dr. Ackerly, as Design Superintendent, must approve all the designs, so he must be familiar with all of them. Spotztokken, for the same reason, wouldn't need the report *or* the rocket. Donlevy, in his capacity as security chief, has access to every file on your plant, of course, but I'd think him more likely to raid Dr. Ackerly's files—or yours—than those of a mere test conductor.

"I think you borrowed Miller's copy of the report, probably on some pretext such as an Air Force visit or what-have-you, sent it off to your comrades, and intended to claim that you'd mailed Miller's copy back to him when he asked about it. He couldn't have argued much, because you're the plant manager."

Greenwald slumped in his chair. "My God," he said, "I think I left my keys in the car last night. The damned thing could actually be in the trunk. Even if it is, you have no proof that I put it there."

"Oh, you may think," Truitt observed almost casually, "that you've taken care of the proof by eliminating Miller, but if the rocket is there, something else will turn up."

The technician burst into the room. "The rocket is there, Inspector!" he planted. "And, sir, there is a bag of golf clubs in that trunk, too. The eight iron seems to be missing."

"Lieutenant," said Truitt to the interested homicide detective, "what do you want to bet that there is an eight iron around here somewhere that someone has tried to wash all the blood and hair off of? And what do you want to bet that some of the lint and dust that's found in Miller's mouth and throat won't match the lint and dust in Mr. Greenwald's sports jacket."

Truitt looked around the room. "The irony of it," he remarked, "seems to be that if anyone else had stolen the Long Tom Retro, then he'd have gotten clean away with it."

6 ISSUES (1 YEAR) FOR $3

12 ISSUES FOR ONLY $5

(you save $1)

MANHUNT IS NOW LARGER THAN EVER WITH AN ADDITIONAL 32 PAGES PER ISSUE

Simply fill out and drop the handy post card below in the mail tonight. Receive each bi-monthly issue of Manhunt delivered by your mailman right to your doorstep. You don't have to make out a check now, we'll bill you later. You don't even have to worry about a stamp, we pay the postage.

SUBSCRIBE NOW—Enjoy the convenience—The saving—Your favorite mystery magazine that is now bigger than ever.

This offer is good only in the United States of America

(For foreign subscriptions: 6 issues $4.00; 12 issues $6.00. Payment must accompany order.)

MANHUNT (6/66)
545 FIFTH AVE.
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

Please send Manhunt regularly for { 12 issues @ $5 ☐ / 6 issues @ $3 ☐ } *(check which)*

I understand I need send no money now and that you will bill me later for the amount I have indicated above.

My name is: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____