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WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

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LOWRY

FARRELL

DENNIS

A Johnny Liddell Novelette

by **FRANK KANE**



*the word
is out*

GET MAN— HUNT

**160 pages
of
MAYHEM
MISCHIEF
MURDER
MALICE**

see back cover

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*At best, a stoolie's life is uncertain.
Much more certain is his death.*



**PLAY
TOUGH**

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY

FRANK KANE

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BARNEY SHIELDS was worried. It showed in the way he stopped at each store window, studied the stream of blacks and whites that ebbed and flowed the length of 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth. When he was satisfied no one was paying him any particular attention, he headed for a second run movie house, bought his ticket, and was swallowed up by the dimness inside.

He didn't see the thin man with the wedge-shaped face who lost interest in the job he was doing on his nails, closed his pocket knife and dropped it in his pocket. The thin man walked over from the curb, bought a ticket, followed Shields into the theatre.

Inside, the man stood for a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, then walked over to the center aisle. Barney Shields had the back row to himself, sat right in front of the thin man.

An usherette in a maroon uniform coat that was sizes too big

detached herself from the shadows against the back wall, came over to whisper to the thin man that there were plenty of seats. The man nodded. She went back to her companion in the shadows.

The thin man looked around, calculated his chances. On the screen, Alan Ladd as Shane was building up to the big fight scene. The half-empty theatre was charged with the anticipation of violence. The little usherette had lost interest in him, was engrossed in her companion. Over near the entrance, a policeman was stealing a smoke, cigarette cupped in his hand. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the thin man.

He leaned against the railing behind the back row, slid his hand inside his coat, tugged the icepick out of its special leather case. He tested the point against the ball of his thumb and was satisfied.

On the screen, excitement was mounting. Shane was standing off five villains, chairs were being broken, bottles smashed.

The thin man reached over the railing, caught the man in the back row in a murderous mugger's grip. Shields gasped, tried to struggle, but couldn't break the hold on his throat. His head was pulled back against the seat. His eyes rolled up to the thin man's face, white and frightened in the half-light.

The thin man aimed for the right eye, jabbed. The blade sank home almost to the handle. Shields' body jerked as the icepick bit into his brain, slumped back. The thin man held the body erect, sank the blade into its chest a dozen times. Shields stopped struggling and went limp.

The fight on the screen had reached its climax; the sound died away suddenly. The thin man straightened up, looked around.

The cop had finished his smoke, dropped the butt to the floor, was crushing it out with his heel. The usherette had her back half turned to him, using her body to shield the frenzied fumbling of her companion's hand in her open coat.

The thin man wiped the icepick blade on the dead man's shirt, then returned it to its leather case under his coat. He walked unhurriedly to the exit and melted into the stream of humanity that was flowing East toward Broadway.

Johnny Liddell leaned on the bar at *Mike's Deadline Cafe* with the ease born of long experience. He lit a cigarette, adding to the grey fog that swirled lazily near the ceiling.

Mike's Deadline, usually packed

during the hours when genius was at work in the advertising agencies in the neighboring skyscrapers, was beginning to thin out at 8 o'clock. Only a handful of commuters who had stopped by at 5 "for just one" before heading for Grand Central were still draped over martinis.

Liddell examined his glass, discovered it was empty, signalled for a refill. The man behind the stick made a production of dropping a couple of ice cubes into a glass, drenching them down with bourbon. He separated a quarter and a half from the pile of silver in front of Liddell on the bar, shuffled off to answer a phone that had started shrilling somewhere.

Liddell took a sip of the bourbon, softened it with a touch from the water pitcher.

"It's for you, Liddell," the bartender called from the end of the bar.

Liddell picked up his glass, walked back to the phone.

It was the redhead in his office. She sounded upset.

"You'd better get right up here, Johnny. Lee Devon of Seaway Indemnity is on his way over." She dropped her voice. "Barney Shields, the head of their investigation bureau, was knocked off tonight."

Liddell whistled softly. "How?"

"I don't know. Devon was down at the morgue. He couldn't talk much, I guess."

Liddell nodded. "I'll be right up, Pinky."

Lee Devon looked as though he had been jammed into the armchair across the desk from Johnny Liddell. He was fat and soft looking, and kept swabbing off his forehead with a balled handkerchief. His eyes were two startlingly blue marbles that were almost lost behind the puffy pouches that buttressed them.

"Pretty rugged, eh?" Liddell sympathized.

The fat man nodded, his jowls swinging in agreement. "Plenty." He jabbed at the damp sides of his cheeks with the handkerchief. "You wouldn't have a drink handy? I could use one."

Liddell opened the bottom drawer of his desk, brought out a bottle and two paper cups. He tilted the bottle over both, held one out to Devon. "What was Barney working on, Devon?"

"The piers. We've been taking a pretty bad lacing on maritime risks lately. Most of it right here on the docks." He took a swallow from his cup, coughed. "Barney's been trying to run it down."

"He keep you up to date on his progress?"

The fat man leaned back in his chair, sighed. "He hadn't made much. When he had something to report, he telephoned in and I'd meet him in the back row of a movie."

"He called in today?"

"His girl did. He'd stumbled on something important, he thought.

Set the date for 7:30." Devon drained his cup, crumpled it between his fingers. "When I got there, he was dead."

Liddell pursed his lips, nodded. "How did he give the reports? In writing or verbally?"

"Verbally. In case they got suspicious and picked him up. He didn't want anything on him to give him away."

"Then you don't know what he had for you tonight?"

The fat man sighed again, shook his head.

"How about his secretary? Would she know?"

"I haven't talked to her yet. I came right here from the morgue." He ran the damp handkerchief across his face again. "We want you to find Barney's killer, Liddell."

Liddell swirled the liquor around the paper cup, stared down at it. "How about the police? That's their job."

"I'd feel better if you worked on it, too. You know how much pull those dock racketeers have. I wouldn't rest if we didn't get the man who did that to him." He licked at his full lips. "You wouldn't, either, if you saw him on that slab, Johnny."

Liddell nodded, tossed off his drink, threw the cup at the waste basket. "Where do I find this secretary of his?"

The fat man fumbled at his pocket, brought out a small memo

book. He wet the tip of his finger, flipped through the pages, found the pencilled note he wanted. "Her name's Lois Turner. She lives at 331 East 38th Street. Apartment 3D." He closed the book, returned it to his pocket. "You'll take the case?"

"I'll take a stab at it," Liddell nodded. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Just one thing. Barney Shields was getting a lot of information from one of the union boys. You've got to keep him covered."

"What's his name?"

The fat man shook his head. "I don't know if—"

"Look, I'm playing with a marked deck as it is. Don't stack the cards as well. Who's the fink?"

"Lulu Monti. He's one of the organizers."

"A meatball, eh?"

The fat man stared. "A what?"

"A meatball. A strong arm man," Liddell growled. "Know where I can find him?"

The fat man shook his head. "Shields kept him well covered. I was the only one that knew Monti was working with us." He looked worried. "You'll keep him covered, Liddell?"

Liddell nodded, chewed on his thumb nail. "I'll keep him covered." He snapped back his sleeve, scowled at his watch. "If I'm going to get started on this thing, it might as well be now."

"Where are you going to start?"

Liddell shrugged. "You mean I've got a choice? Apparently the only lead I've got is his secretary, and chances are she doesn't know too much of what he's been doing."

"That's the trouble," the fat man said. "Barney always was a solo. Will you be reporting to us?" He sighed at the necessity for movement, decided it was inevitable, and pulled himself out of his chair with a lugubrious grunt.

"Not until I have something worthwhile to report," Liddell said.

331 East 38th Street turned out to be an old-fashioned residential hotel set almost in the shadow of the Third Avenue El. It had a faded awning that showed signs of having waged a losing battle with time and strong winds. Nobody had bothered to patch the gaping rips that flapped noisily in the evening breeze.

The prim little lobby inside had the requisite number of tired rubber plants, a few chairs obviously not intended to be sat on, and a general air of decay. The impression was borne out by the shabby registration desk and the old man who presided over it. He blew his nose noisily and favored the detective with a jaundiced look.

"Miss Turner. Lois Turner."

The old man stowed the dingy handkerchief in his hip pocket, looked at the fly-specked face of the alarm clock on his desk. "After

nine, mister. We don't allow men upstairs after nine."

"Police business," Liddell told him.

The old man sniffed. "How many cops have to see her?" he grumbled. "One left no more'n half hour ago."

"Just tell her Johnny Liddell wants to see her," he cut short the complaint.

The old man started to argue, shrugged. He shuffled to a small office set at the end of the desk, stuck his head in. "Call Turner. Tell her she's got more company. Detective name of Liddell." He waited in the doorway for a few moments, then shuffled back. "Says for you to go up. It's 3D." He stared at Liddell sadly. "Management don't like men visitors this hour."

"Good thing I'm not visiting the management, huh?" Liddell followed him to an open-grill elevator at the back of the lobby.

The blonde who opened the door to 3D was tall. Her hair had been clipped short, curled around her head. A blue silk gown managed to cling skin-tight to her curves under the guise of covering them. It was, Liddell noted, a figure worth clinging to, high-breasted, narrow-waisted, long-legged. Her lips were full and moist, her eyes green and slanted.

"What was it about?" The slanting eyes hop-scotched from the broad shoulders to the face approv-

ingly. "I've already told the police all I know."

"I'm not police. I'm a private op. Lee Devon asked me to take over for Barney Shields."

She stood aside. "Come on in." She led the way into a surprisingly well-furnished living room. "Lee didn't lose any time, did he?"

Liddell tossed his hat at a table, walked over to the couch and sat down. "He seemed to think you could give me a hand."

The blonded walked over to the coffee table in front of the couch, leaned over to pick a cigarette from the humidior. It had a devastating effect on the neckline, confirming Liddell's conviction that she wore nothing under the gown. "I'd like to, if I can." She stuck the cigarette between her lips. "Tell me what I can do."

Liddell grinned at her. "I've got a hunch nobody would ever have to tell you what you can do."

"I've never had any complaints," she grinned back. She walked over to the kitchen door. Her body moved tantalizingly against the smooth fabric of the gown. When she returned a moment later with a bottle and glasses, the effect from the front was equally satisfying. She set them down on the coffee table, dropped down alongside Liddell, accepted a light for her cigarette. "But if you're talking about Barney, I don't think I can help much." She took a deep lazy drag on the cigarette.

"You talked to him today?"

The blonde nodded. "He wanted me to ask Devon to meet him in the back row of the movie at 7:30." She took another drag on the cigarette, removed it from between her lips and studied the carmined end with distaste. "When Devon got there, Barney was already dead."

"You don't know what he had to report?"

Lois shook her head.

"It sounded important?"

"Very."

Liddell scowled at the bottle on the coffee table, reached over, poured some liquor in each of the glasses, took one. "Know a guy named Monti?"

The blonde caught her full lower lip between her teeth, chewed it for a moment. "The one they call Lulu? The union goon?"

Liddell nodded. "Shields ever mention him?"

The blonde shook her head. "No more than any of the rest. I guess he was one of the gang Barney was after."

"Guess again. He was stooling for Barney. I've got to get to him."

The green eyes widened. "You sure of that?"

"Reasonably. Know any way we can catch up with him tonight? Shields never mentioned any contacts or places he hung out?" He smelled the liquor in his glass, tasted it. It tasted as good as it smelled.

The blonde took a last drag on her cigarette, crushed it out in an

ashtray. She glanced at the tiny baguette on her wrist. "He might be down at the union hall. Maybe I could reach him there." She looked up at Liddell. "Suppose I can?"

"I want to see him. Tonight."

"Suppose he doesn't want to see you?"

"Tell him who you are. Tell him Barney's dead and he may be next unless he plays ball."

The blonde shook her head uncertainly. "I'll try it. But I'm not too sure it'll work. That big goon doesn't scare easily, from what I've heard." She reached over, picked up her glass, took a deep swallow. "Wish me luck."

She walked across the room, disappeared in the bedroom. Liddell leaned back on the couch, lit a cigarette. After a few moments, the blonde re-appeared in the bedroom door. "Jackpot! He was there."

Liddell pulled himself out of his seat. "How fast can you get dressed?"

The blonde grinned at him. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On how fast you want me to get dressed." She raised her hand to her neck, fumbled with the zipper. With a quick motion, she unzipped the front of the gown. Her full, tip-tilted breasts spilled out. "There's really no hurry. Monti can't get away until midnight. He'll meet us then."

Liddell walked closer to her. He

could smell the faint perfume of her body. He slipped his arm around her waist, covered her mouth with his. Her body melted against his, almost unbearably hot.

After a moment, she put the flat of her hands against his chest, pushed herself free. She slid the gown back off her shoulders, stepped out of it. Her legs were long, softly curved. Shapely calves became rounded thighs above the knee. Her high-set hips converged into a narrow waist and a stomach as flat as an athlete's. She stood in front of him proud, assured of the impact of her loveliness.

Liddell dropped back on the couch, caught her wrist, pulled her down into his lap. She reached up, buried her fingers in his hair, pulled his mouth down to hers. Her lips were soft, eager.

After a moment, he pulled back, breathed hard. "I'm glad there's no hurry, baby."

She smiled at him. "We only have two hours," she told him. She caught his tie, loosened it, unbuttoned his collar. She pulled his face down again.

Several hours later, Johnny Liddell slid the big convertible through the midnight Park Avenue traffic as easily as though it were a baby carriage. Alongside him, the blonde sat quietly, her tight curls ruffled by the breeze. At 93rd Street, he skidded to a screeching stop, drummed impa-

tiently on the wheel, glared at the red light that stared back imper- turbably with one eye.

"Do you think Monti will talk, Johnny?" She asked.

"One way or another."

The light blinked green. The convertible shot forward.

Liddell concentrated on his driving, pushed the car as fast as the traffic would permit. Slowly, the character of the neighborhood changed. Huge, flashy apartment houses gave way to less pretentious apartments, then to tenements. There were fewer chauffeur-driven cars, more jalopies and trucks.

"116th Street, eh?" Liddell glanced at the street signs whizzing by. "Only a few more blocks now."

A minute later, he swung the car in a skidding turn off Park Avenue toward Fifth, screeched it to a stop at the curb halfway down the block. He studied the house numbers, compared them to a pencilled notation and pointed to one across the street.

"That's the number." He pushed open the car door, stepped out. "You wait here. I think he may talk, if there's just the two of us."

He crossed the street, climbed the three stone steps that led to the vestibule, stood there for a moment looking around. An odor compounded of equal parts of Spanish cooking, unwashed bodies and inadequate sanitary facilities assailed his nostrils. He walked through to

the inner hall, started up the badly lighted stairs to the second floor.

He struck a match, found a small card alongside the door to the front apartment with the name "Monti" scribbled on it in pencil. He blew out the match, put his ear to the door. There was no sound from the other side. He knocked softly, reached inside his jacket, loosened the .45 in its holster. There was no response from inside the room.

He reached out, rapped his knuckles against the door again. This time when he got no answer, he tried the knob. It turned easily in his hand. He pushed it open, waited. There was a rush of stale air spiced with a smoky, unpleasant smell. Nothing else.

The room itself was in complete darkness. He tugged the .45 from its hammock, transferred it to his left hand. Slowly he walked in, right hand groping along the wall for a switch. He strained his eyes against the wall of darkness, listened for any sound that might betray the presence of another. The only sound in the room was that of his own heavy breathing.

Suddenly, his fingers hit the switch. He snapped it, spilled sudden yellow brilliance into the hallway. At the same moment, he dropped to his knee, brought the .45 into firing position.

A man stood in the doorway to the kitchen, his arms above his head, his thick fingers curled like claws. A gag clenched between his

bared teeth cut ridges in the side of his face, his eyes were blank and staring. Two thin wires attached each of his thumbs to opposite corners of the door frame. A dozen or more cigarette burns and the number of small, ugly-looking ice-pick wounds on his bare chest were evidence that his death had been neither quick nor merciful.

Johnny Liddell walked over to where the dead man hung, put his hand against the side of his arm. It was still warm.

He squeezed past into the kitchen, checked the other rooms, satisfied himself that the killer had left. He walked back to the dead man, was staring at the number of wounds when a voice rang out.

"Hold it, Buffalo Bill."

Liddell froze.

"Drop the artillery and turn around real slow."

Liddell let the .45 hit the floor with a thud, turned around. Two uniformed policemen stood in the doorway. The younger cop held a riot gun in his hand, its muzzle pointed at Liddell's belt buckle. The older covered him with a .38 special.

"Kick the iron over this way," the older cop ordered. When Liddell complied, he looked past him at the body. "Been having yourself a ball, eh?"

"I just got here," Liddell said.

"Be our guest. Stay awhile. I got a hunch Homicide's going to want to have a long talk with you."

"Act your age. This buy's been stabbed. They're not making .45's with pointed ends this season."

The older cop bent over, picked up the .45, hefted it in his palm. "What's this for? You wear it just to make your coat hang straight?"

"It's licensed. I'm a private cop on an investigation for Seaway Indemnity. I've got papers in here that say so." He motioned at his breast pocket.

The two cops exchanged glances; the older walked over to Liddell, stuck his hand into his breast pocket, pulled out his wallet. He riffled through Liddell's credentials, copied down a few notations in the worn leather notebook he carried in his hip pocket. "I guess he's okay, Vince," he told his younger partner. He handed the wallet back to Liddell, scratched the back of his neck. "Know who he is?"

Liddell shook his head. "I was supposed to meet a guy here. A guy named Monti. Lulu Monti. I never saw him, so I don't know if this is the guy."

"Looks like it." The older cop walked over to the body, pointed a thick forefinger at a tattoo on the inside of the arm. "The initials are L. M." He stared at Liddell curiously. "You didn't know the guy but you had to see him in the middle of the night. What about?"

"A squeal. He was supposed to finger the guys who were looting cargoes Seaway insured. The com-

pany was getting hit too hard and too often."

"A stoolie, huh?" The cop grinned. "Not a pleasant way to grow old gracefully." There was a screeching of brakes in the street below. The cop walked to the window, looked down. "Here's Homicide. It's their baby now."

The man who led the Homicide detail didn't fit the usual pattern of Homicide detectives. He looked more like a fugitive from a Varsity football squad, with his broad shoulders and bristly, crew-cut hair. As he walked in, he was chewing on the stem of a bulldog briar. He nodded to the two uniformed men, flicked a brief glance at Liddell.

"You call in?" he asked.

Liddell shook his head.

"He's a private cop, Lieutenant. Came here to keep a date with the dead guy. He was here when we got here," the older cop volunteered.

The homicide man walked over to the body, studied the wounds with a practiced eye. Then he nodded to the specialists with him to take over. He walked over to the two prowl car men, muttered a few words, studied the notes the cop had made in his leather notebook. After a moment, he handed the book back, walked over to Liddell.

"Your name's Liddell?"

The private detective nodded.

"I'm Roddy. Lieutenant in

Homicide." He rattled the juice in the stem of the briar. "I've heard the inspector speak of you." He took the pipe from between his teeth, knocked out a dottle of tobacco. "Want to tell me what this is all about?"

Liddell dug into his pocket, came up with a cigarette. "I'm doing a job for Seaway Indemnity. Trying to bust up a pilfering mob that's costing the company important money."

Roddy pulled a pouch from his pocket, dipped the bowl of the pipe into it, started packing it with the tip of his index finger. He nodded for Liddell to continue.

"I was supposed to see this character tonight around midnight. He was stooling for us." He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, lit it. "This is the way I found him."

"Barney Shields used to work for Seaway." Roddy's colorless eyes rolled from Liddell to the icepick wounds on the dead man. "He got his with an icepick too." The eyes returned to Liddell's face. "Any connection?"

"Monti was Shields' stool. I was trying to pick up the threads." He waited until the homicide man had initialled the DOA form for the medical examiner's man. "He was practically my only lead."

Roddy scratched an old-fashioned wooden match with his thumb nail, held it to his pipe. "Too bad you didn't tell us about

Monti earlier. He mightn't be there now."

Liddell shrugged. "You'll have to take that up with Seaway. I just came on the job." He blew a stream of smoke through his nostrils. "Need me for anything else, lieutenant?"

The homicide man considered it, shook his head. "Not right now. Drop by the office in the morning. The inspector might want to have a little talk with you."

Liddell nodded. "Okay if I take my gun along with me?"

The older of the two prowl car cops looked to the lieutenant, drew a nod, handed the gun over.

"Don't forget, Liddell," Roddy told him. "We'll expect to be seeing you in the morning."

Johnny Liddell swerved the convertible to the curb outside Lois Turner's apartment hotel, turned off the motor, swung around in his seat, stared up the avenue.

"What's the matter, Liddell? You've been looking over your shoulder all the way downtown."

"Force of habit, I guess." He reached across her, pushed open the door. "Head for the lobby fast and keep going."

"Why?" The blonde looked back, saw the black sedan as it swung around the corner a block away. "You think someone is—"

"Maybe I'm buck shy, baby," Liddell growled, "but I think that heap's been following us. Do like

I say." He pushed the girl out, started to follow her to the lobby.

The black sedan put on a burst of speed, pulled up abreast of the entrance. There was a dull glint of metal in the car's back window; then it started to belch flame. Liddell had his .45 in his hand, squeezing the trigger as he started to fall away.

Heavy calibre bullets gouged trenches in the concrete near his head. He brought the .45 up, sat the back window on its front sight. Suddenly a heavy slug hit him in the chest, slamming him back against the ground. The heavy boom of the gun in the car's back seat could still be heard above the roar of the motor as the car pulled away from the curb, gathered speed.

Liddell lay on his back, was dimly aware of a crowd gathering, of the numbness in his chest, of the re-assuring coldness of the butt of the .45 against the heat of his palm. He tried to get up, fell back weakly.

From somewhere an authoritative voice impressed itself on his consciousness. "Let me through. If that man's hurt, I can help. I'm a doctor."

Liddell had a blurred impression of a wedge-shaped face bending over him, white teeth bared in a fixed grin. He caught the movement as the man's hand dipped under his jacket, came out with the icepick.

Liddell laboriously raised the .45, squeezed the trigger. The dark face dissolved in a flood of red; the icepick clattered to the ground.

Somewhere a woman screamed shrilly as the icepick artist's body fell across Liddell. A dark cloud moved in, squeezed consciousness from the detective's mind. He closed his eyes, was swirled into the middle of the blackness.

When Johnny Liddell opened his eyes, a white-faced Lois Turner was bending over him. He tried to move, had the sensation of being nailed to the sidewalk.

"Don't move, Johnny," the blonde whispered. "An ambulance is on its way."

He looked past her to where two policemen stood scribbling in their report books. One held Liddell's .45 wrapped in a handkerchief.

"He's alive," someone in the crowd murmured morbidly. They crowded closer for a better look.

One of the cops strolled over, pushed the crowd back. "Give 'im air," he ordered. He bent over Liddell. "How you feel, Bud?"

Liddell attempted to nod his head, regretted the impulse. The black cloud threatened to move in on him again. He closed his eyes, fought it off.

"Can't you leave him alone until the ambulance gets here?" he heard Lois say. "I told you everything you have to know. They tried to kill him from a car and

then they sent a man with an ice-pick to finish the job. You have enough witnesses. Ask them. Any of them. They all saw it."

"Look, lady," the cop explained patiently. "No matter how many people saw it, a couple of guys turn my beat into a shooting gallery, I got to have some answers when my boss starts asking questions. Now —"

He broke off as the ambulance skidded to a stop at the curb, disgorged a white-coated interne. He shouldered his way through the crowd, walked over to the cop. "Save any for me?"

The cop pointed to Liddell with a pencil. "He's all yours, doc."

The interne nodded, knelt at Liddell's side. He tore open Liddell's bloody shirt, swabbed the chest dry with gauze, grunted. He looked up at the cop. "What's supposed to have happened to this guy, Mac?"

The cop shrugged. "Stopped a couple. Some guys in a car—"

"Not this guy." The interne flipped back Liddell's jacket, examined the heavy leather holster. "Take a look at this. This took the slug, deflected it." He scratched at his head. "But where the hell did all the blood come from?"

"You ought to see the other guy," the cop grunted. He leaned over, stared at Liddell. "He ain't punctured at all?"

The interne shook his head. "His chest'll be sore where that slug

kicked him, but the worst he's got's maybe a cracked rib. Where's the other guy?"

The cop led the way to another form covered with newspapers. The interne leaned over, took a look, drew the breath in through his teeth. "What'd he try to do? Swallow a cannon?" He dropped the newspapers back over the dead man's face. "We're not dirtying up our nice clean ambulance with that. I'll give you a DOA on him and you can have the meat wagon pick him up." He pulled the printed form from his pocket, scribbled on it, handed it back to the policeman.

"You're sure he's all right, doctor?" Lois wanted to know.

The interne nodded. "Might pay to have some X-rays taken." He leaned over Liddell. "How's about coming in with us and getting checked over?"

Liddell shook his head. "I'll be all right, doc."

"I'll take him up to my place. I live right here," Lois volunteered.

The interne shrugged. "You're the boss, mister." He ran his eyes appreciatively over the contours revealed by the blonde's tight dress. "But," he said, grinning, "I wouldn't try anything strenuous for a while, if I were you."

Johnny Liddell opened his eyes slowly and looked around. The blinds in the room had been drawn, making it dim and cool. He

tried to sit up, groaned at the sharp pain that shot through his chest, slumped back on the couch.

"Take it easy, Johnny." The blonde got up from an armchair across the room, walked over to the couch, sat on the edge of it. "How you feeling?"

"I'll live." He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, pulled himself up. "How long've I been sleeping?"

Lois consulted her watch. "A couple of hours. It's a little before four." She reached across him, snapped on a light. "That better?"

Liddell grinned crookedly. "All I need now is a transfusion."

"Bourbon?"

"Bourbon."

She got up, headed for the kitchen. She had changed from the tight-fitting blue dress to the gown she had been wearing when he first came to the apartment. When she returned with the glasses and ice, the light of the lamp revealed a fine network of lines under her eyes, a tired droop at the corners of the mouth.

She set the glasses down, tried a grin that almost made it. "I sure didn't think I'd be having a drink with you tonight when I saw you sprawled out on the sidewalk."

Liddell watched her put the ice in the glasses, fill them half way with bourbon. "Disappointed?"

She stopped pouring, looked up at him through her lashes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The detective struggled up on

one elbow. "You can't bat 1,000 all the time, baby. You're doing all right with two out of three."

The blonde set the glass down, straightened up. "I still don't know what you're talking about. Maybe you should have let them take you to the hospital. You're delirious."

"That's the trouble with killing. You've got to keep it up." He reached over, snagged a cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth where it waggled when he talked. "Was what they paid you worth it, baby?" He didn't take his eyes off her suddenly white face. "Or did you start thinking that maybe they can't stop until they get rid of everybody that can put the finger on them—including you?"

She backed away from the couch, her make-up garish blobs against the pallor of her skin.

Liddell touched a match to his cigarette, tried to take a deep drag, grunted with pain. "The police will start putting two and two together, too, baby. You've made a lot of mistakes." He leaned back, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. "See if I'm right. Barney Shields turned up some important evidence. He managed to get it into your hands to turn over to Devon. Instead, you sold it out to the mob he was investigating, didn't you?"

The blonde backed up until the table at the far side of the room caught her in the back. She reached down, pulled open a drawer, took out a snub-nosed .38. "Go on."

Liddell took another drag on the cigarette, rolled his eyes to where the girl stood. "You won't use that. You might be able to set a man up for a kill, but you haven't got the nerve to do your own killing."

"I didn't know they were going to do that to him," she protested. "I—I was scared. I realized he'd know I didn't give the report to Devon. He might even call Devon."

"So you set up a meet in the back row of the movie. Only you told Barney that Devon wanted to meet him at 7. The guy with the pick kept the date. You had Devon show up a half hour later. Who killed Barney, Lois?"

"The man you killed downstairs. I don't even know who he is. Just that his name is Denver." She shook her head. "I didn't know they'd want to kill you, Liddell. I thought they'd be satisfied with Monti."

Liddell managed to prop himself up on his elbow. "I sure pulled a bonehead on that one, baby. But so did you. The minute the mob killed Monti I knew it had to be you that tipped them off. When? When? When you pretended to call Monti?"

The blonde licked at her lips. "I called Denver. He told me to stall you until midnight. I thought it was supposed to scare you off and that's as far as it would go."

"Nice stalling," Liddell grinned humorlessly. "Who were you work-

ing for? Who bought the report?"

"I don't know. The night I got it, I read it. It mentioned Denver. I called him at the union hall and read it to him. He called back and made an offer. No names. Just an exchange of packages. Mine was the report. Theirs was money. Lots of money." She stared at him. "Why shouldn't I? Why should I keep on living in this rat trap, scratching for pennies when I could get all that money? Just for one report! Why not?"

"Because it meant men had to die."

"So what? Shields was on his own. We're all on our own." The hand with the gun started to shake. "You think they'll kill me, don't you? Well, they won't. They'll give me a lot of money for telling them about Monti. They'll give me a lot."

"Maybe more than you figure, baby. Those boys don't leave loose ends laying around. And we're loose ends. Real loose! You'd better—"

"Shut up." The blonde's face was contorted with rage. She crossed the room on the run. The barrel of the gun flashed up, caught Liddell across the side of the head, slammed him back against the couch. A thin trickle of blood ran down the side of his cheek.

Lois stuck the gun in her robe pocket, ran into the bedroom. When she emerged a few moments later, she was fully dressed, carried

a small overnight bag. She ran for the door, hesitated with her hand on the knob as she heard Liddell groaning his way back to consciousness. She slammed the door behind her, ran down the hall to the elevator.

Painfully, Liddell pulled himself to his feet. He stood swaying for a moment, tottered toward the door. He reached it just as the elevator started downward. He called after Lois, his voice echoed hollowly down the hall. Doggedly he started for the stairs. He was on the second floor landing when she left the elevator, ran across the lobby toward the street.

Liddell's convertible stood at the curb where he had left it. The blonde pulled his keys from her pocket, threw her bag in the back, slid behind the wheel. She could hear Liddell yelling to her.

She turned on the ignition, jammed her foot down on the

starter. There was a shattering blast as the windshield seemed to disintegrate in her face. A bright yellow flame shot from the dashboard, the heavy car seemed to lift from the street, then settled back, a shattered pile of twisted, smoking metal and splintered glass.

Liddell ran out onto the sidewalk, followed by a white-faced night clerk. "Send for an ambulance," he tossed over his shoulder. As he reached the car, he shook his head. "Never mind that ambulance."

Windows were going up in buildings on both sides of the street, heads were appearing cautiously. Somewhere a siren moaned.

The night clerk followed him across the sidewalk, stared at the smashed body of the blonde. "What was it? How did it happen?"

Liddell shook his head wearily. "It was just the boys keeping their word. They paid off in full."

*Liddell hasn't even gotten started. He's mad now!
He'll investigate this deplorable situation "in
depth" . . . in the next issue of MANHUNT.*



the gate

BY
WALTER
E.
HANDSAKER

THE discordant clamor of the morning wake-up bell echoed stridently throughout the cell block.

Five hundred men, fifty to a tier, five tiers to a side, two sides to a block, stirred, throwing off sleep, reluctant to face another day.

In his cell on the second tier of the west side of the block, Henry Carruthers, a lifer, known throughout the institution as 'Old Henry', opened his eyes. The thought of another day, on top of all the other endless days, filled him with a bleak distaste.

Then his memory stirred.

This wasn't just another day!

*It was the great day for "Old Henry".
He'd waited forty years for this day.
It was the day the gate opened.*



This was THE DAY! Today he was to be released, paroled! Today he was going home.

Throwing back his blankets, he stretched happily, letting the fullness of the thought wash over him.

Getting out of bed, he dressed.

"Now don't go to hurrying, you old fool," he muttered to himself, "it's a whole hour yet before they unlock the door."

He shaved slowly, with meticulous care. He lingered over his washing and hair combing, and with tender care, brushed and polished his dental plates.

Finished with his morning ablutions, he sat down on the unmade bed. No need to make it up this morning. Tonight he would be sleeping on a real bed, not an old prison cot.

He lit a cigarette. Slowly and conscientiously he smoked it down to the last half inch, then snubbed the butt out in the old jar lid he used for an ashtray.

Restlessly he stood up. Absent mindedly he began to make the bed. Habits of such long standing are hard to break.

The bed made, he carefully swept the floor.

The cell clean, he sat down on the bed again.

"Relax, you damned old fool," he muttered in irritation.

He lit another cigarette.

With a crash the block long bar securing the doors of the cells slid back in its' track.

Old Henry jumped, spilling ashes on the freshly swept floor.

"Damned old fool!" He muttered angrily to himself.

Now that the door was unlocked, he felt a little nervous about going out. Carefully he snubbed out the half smoked cigarette in the jar lid, and emptied the lid in the commode. He carefully swept up the spilled ashes and replaced the broom in its' corner.

He took a long, final look around the cell; the five by ten cubby-hole that had been his home for so many long years.

It was no longer 'his cell'. All the small, personal articles that had gone into making it 'his', were gone. He had packed them yesterday, putting them all into the small zipper bag they had given him for the purpose. The bag was waiting for him now, in the release room.

He pushed open the door of his cell and stepped out onto the tier.

He had expected an empty tier, with all the men gone to the mess hall for their breakfasts. Instead, beside each cell stood its' occupant, waiting.

At first he was puzzled by this, then understanding came. They were waiting for him. They were waiting to say good-by to Old Henry.

"Damned idiots," he muttered, deeply touched. "Now, don't you go and behave like a sap, you senile old fool." His eyes blurred with unshed tears.

Slowly he began to shuffle down the tier. This was 'Old Timers Row', and he knew personally, each and every one of the forty-odd men waiting to shake his hand. Some of them he had known for twenty years and more. He was unable to speak, knowing the words would catch in his throat and release the tears.

From each man he received a bantering rejoinder, a gruff bit of advice. The warm handclasp was all that belied the almost indifferent casualness in their tones.

"So long, Henry, take it easy."

"Bye, Henry, have a beer for me."

"Make sure the broads are still built the same way before you try your luck, Henry. I hear they've changed the styles."

"Just one quick peek at a naked broad, and a sniff of the cork from the whisky bottle, will hold you for the first night, Henry. Anything more, and your heart would give out, sure."

Jests, ribald advice, friendly obscenity, anything to deny the emotions the pressure of their hands communicated to him. With some it was a long anecdote about their days of parole. With others, it was just a simple "Good-by, Henry", or, "God keep you, Henry."

At last he reached the end of their tier. Officer Kratzler, the Block Officer, was waiting there. He and Henry had known each other for a long time. Henry had already been an 'old timer' when Kratzler came

to work as a 'fish bull', fresh from the South Pacific, and the war.

They had grown to maturity, these two; together and over a long span of years. Henry, from a middle aged, uncomforming, and at times, troublesome, convict, to a quiet elderly inmate with mild habits and manners, who was ready for parole.

Kratzler had been a disillusioned, war weary young man, quick to anger, and at times, even brutal. The years had sobered him with their experience. His temper had quieted, and his discipline, while firm, had become impartially fair.

A strong bond of mutual respect had developed between these two men, and now, as they faced each other at the moment of parting, it was not as guard to prisoner, but as friend to friend.

Quietly, with perfect understanding, they shook hands.

"Good-by, Henry, take care of yourself, and drop me a line from time to time. They'll be waiting for you in the release room, so you had best be getting along. Unless you want to eat breakfast?"

Henry smiled. "No, Kratz, I think I'll pass up breakfast this morning. Somehow, I just don't feel very hungry."

Turning to the men who were still jamming the tier behind him, his voice became gruff.

"All right, you guys, you've ran the old man off, so go on and get your breakfast. You're all acting

like a bunch of sissies. It's not my funeral I'm going to, so damnit, smile."

He turned and hurried down the stairs, blowing his nose loudly, and surreptitiously wiping the brimming moisture from his eyes.

Sergeant Cannon was alone in the release room when Henry opened the door. He was seated behind his desk filling out forms and receipts, but when Henry entered he stood up and came around the desk.

"Good morning, Henry. I've waited a long time for this day. There is no one I'd rather be dressing out today, then you."

He opened a side door and motioned Henry through it.

"You go on in and get yourself a shower now. Your release clothes are hanging beside the door there. If you need anything, just holler."

Henry thanked him and began to remove his prison blues, the only type of clothes he'd worn for forty years. He stripped them off and tossed them into a corner.

"I won't be wearing you no more," he muttered, stepping into the shower.

He showered slowly, luxuriating in the almost forgotten pleasure of bathing in privacy, alone, away from the presence of dozens of other men.

He dried himself, taking his time, and then began to don the civilian clothes. After the looseness of the prison blues, they felt constricting.

Staring at the stranger who confronted him in the mirror, he picked up the neck-tie. He placed it around his neck, his forehead crinkled in concentration. Then slowly he took it off again and held it in his hands, looking helplessly at it.

The door opened and Sergeant Cannon entered.

"You about ready, Henry? The Warden, and Captain Vail are waiting to escort you to the gate."

He caught the expression on Henry's face, and the fingers fumbling with the tie. He came and took the tie from Henry and placed it around his neck.

Henry started to pout in humiliation.

"What kind of a damn fool is it that can't even tie a neck-tie," he muttered angrily.

"Don't you let it fret you none, Henry," Sergeant Cannon consoled him. "Over half the guys who come through here have forgotten how to tie a tie. I have to do it for almost every one of them."

With the efficiency of long practice he knotted the tie and firmed it into place, jerking and patting it into obedience.

"I'll just say my good-bys out here, Henry, away from all the brass. I've known you for a long time, and I've seen lots of guys go through here. I'm glad that I'm finally dressing you out, Henry. Now, I want you to remember, if you get problems out there, Henry, I'm always available."

He poked a slip of paper into Henry's breast pocket.

"This here is my address and phone number. Anytime you feel like it, you just ring me up, or if it's after working hours, you just come right on over. Some times when a man is fresh out after doing a long stretch, he feels a need to talk to someone who knows and understands the score.

"Don't you go and get tangled up with any ex-cons, or even any of the fellers you've known in here, cause they'll just get your parole violated. You come and see me instead, you hear?"

Henry mumbled his thanks, deeply touched by Sergeant Cannon's honest friendship and concern. It was contrary to the "Convict Code" to like or trust a "Bull", but he had learned to like, and to trust many of them in his forty years of constant association with them.

In the release room, Warden Benson and Captain Vail were standing beside the desk, waiting for him. Both men looked up with warm smiles as Henry entered, stiff and uncomfortable in the new civilian clothes.

"I've waited a long time to see you in these clothes, Henry. You've earned them."

The Warden was holding out a large manila envelope, yellow and brittle with age.

"Here are the personal things we've been holding for you."

With a hand that trembled slightly, Henry took the envelope and opened it.

He took out a wallet which contained a single, faded snapshot and a drivers license issued to Henry Carruthers, age 23. It was dated 1922.

He laid the wallet on the desk.

In the very bottom of the envelope he found the ring. It was a plain band of gold with an inscription inside: 'H & E Til Death Do Us Part'.

With hands that were shaking, he placed it on the ring finger of his left hand. It had been forty years since he had removed it from there.

He was unable to stop the tears as they brimmed in his eyes and overflowed. He tried to hold them back; to stop them. He placed one hand over his eyes, shielding them from view. He bit down hard on the other hand.

He heard the Warden speaking behind him. His voice was soft and kind. He spoke as one would speak to a small child who has been hurt. His hand rested gently on Henry's shoulder.

"It's all right now, Henry. It's all over. You're going home now, and it's all behind you. Get a hold of yourself now, and we'll escort you to the front gate and send you on your way. Come on now, Henry, get your things and let's go."

"I've got his bag." Captain Vails voice was husky with checked emotion as he stood beside the door

with Henry's new zipper bag in his hand.

Henry fought back the tears. With his new handkerchief he wiped the wet streaks from his face.

"I'm sorry, Warden Benson, Captain Vail, but for a moment it got the better of me."

Gently he twisted the ring on his finger.

"You see, we were only married a few months when they took me away. That was forty years ago, and we haven't seen each other in all this time. She's been waiting for me for forty years, and in just a few minutes now, I'm going to see her again. I'm going to go home and live with her, like a man and wife should live. I love her so much, and it's been so long, I just sort of lost control of myself. I always was an old fool."

He picked up the wallet and took out the snapshot.

"This is her picture. She had it taken as a wedding present for me on the day we were married."

Warden Benson accepted the snapshot. He gazed at the likeness of a beautiful young girl, obviously still in her teens. She wore a wedding gown and was smiling with a warm radiance that even the faded condition of the snapshot could not dim.

He looked at Henry again as he returned it.

"She hasn't written to you, or been to visit you in all this time, Henry," he reminded gently.

Henry smiled at the doubt in his voice.

"Yes sir, I know, and for the first few years it bothered me. But then I figured it out. You see, she knows how much I love her, and she felt that seeing her and hearing from her would remind me of all the things I was missing by being in here. She just didn't want me to do hard time. But I know she's waiting for me."

A note of desperation crept into Henry's voice.

"She wouldn't let me down. She'll be at the gate, you wait and see if she isn't."

The Warden frowned and turned toward the door.

"Well, all right, Henry. We'll see what happens. If you're ready, we'll leave now."

Slowly the three men filed out, closing the door behind them.

At the gate the three men stopped and faced each other in awkward silence.

"Henry, don't you think perhaps it would be better if we—", the warden stopped, unable to find the words. He hesitated, searching for some way to say what he felt should be said, then changed his mind.

"Good-by Henry, and good luck." He shook hands quickly, as if afraid he would change his mind, and then turned away.

Captain Vail handed Henry the zipper bag. "Bye, Henry. Take care of yourself." His handshake was

formal and brisk, then he waved to the tower to open the gate.

The huge iron gate opened a few feet. In the opening Henry turned and gave them a brief wave, then was gone.

The two prison officials walked slowly back to the main compound.

"Do you really think it was the best thing to do, Warden?"

"I don't know. I just don't know," the Warden rubbed his hand tiredly over his face. "After forty years it seemed like he deserved a chance. It just didn't seem fair to not let him go."

Henry took a deep breath of the 'free, outside the prison' air.

He looked around.

Where was Edith?

Fifty feet away a woman was standing, watching him intently.

This must be Edith. At that distance and in the dim, almost morning light, her features were indistinct.

Hopefully, Henry walked toward her. She stood, waiting for his approach. Her hair was white and she was wearing glasses. He could see them sparkle in the dim light.

When he was only a few feet away, she smiled at him.

"Hello, Henry."

He studied her features, seeking some trace of the remembered Edith in the age blurred lines of her face and in her voice.

"Don't you remember me, Henry? Don't you recognize me after

all these years?" She watched his face for a sign of recognition, and not seeing any, continued softly.

"I'm Beatrice. Your sister, Beatrice. I was nineteen when you left."

Henry stared at her. Beatrice? Yes, it was Beatrice, his wonderful, vivacious kid sister, Beatrice. Beneath the facade of age he could just detect the ghost of the quick vitality and lovely aliveness that had been the Beatrice of forty years ago.

"Bea," he whispered.

With a glad cry she flung herself into his arms, tears of happiness streaking the powder on her cheeks.

"Henry! Oh, Henry, it's so good to see you after all these years. Why wouldn't you answer my letters, or let me come and see you?"

Mutely Henry shook his head, unable to answer her question. He hadn't even thought of Beatrice for the past forty years. He hadn't thought of anyone but Edith, and the fact that she was waiting for him.

For a moment they stood there, two very elderly people, holding each other very tightly, fighting to break through the barriers of forty years separation.

Henry was the first to break the embrace. His face mirrored his bewilderment as he drew back.

"Where's Edith," he asked. "Why isn't she here with you? Why isn't she here to meet me?"

Beatrice gasped! She placed her

hands on his shoulders and stared into his face. Her eyes were deep pools of pain. "Ohh, Henry," she moaned, tears again spilling from her eyes.

Henry's eyes were blank with puzzlement.

Beatrice pulled at his arm. "Let's not talk about it now, Henry. Let me take you home first, and then we'll talk about it after you're settled."

A taxi was waiting several yards away and she was leading him towards it. Just before they reached it he stopped and pulled his arm free.

"Wait! There's something wrong. Edith should be here, but she isn't. Why isn't she?"

Beatrice took hold of his arm again, gently, but firmly.

"Please, Henry, let's not argue about it. We'll talk about it later. I'll—."

—not argue about it—talk about it later—! That's what Edith had said. When did she say it? Why did she say it?

Now he was beginning to remember something. Something he felt he shouldn't remember. Something he didn't want to remember.

But his mind went right on remembering.

There had been an argument he had argued with Edith about something—what was it—what had they argued about—a dress? Yes, that was it—they had argued about a dress—a new dress.

In a nightmarish torrent the

memories spilled over him, engulfing, drowning him in their swirling flood.

She had spent the grocery money on the dress—all the money they had for the week—he had demanded she return the dress—she had refused—losing his temper, he had torn the dress off her she had hit him—in the mouth—hard!

In a wild rage he had picked up the knife from the kitchen table—the slashing—ripping—rending—terrible knife!

Edith. His lovely, lovely Edith.

Edith — screeching — crawling — whimpering bloody — crumpled up bundle of rags — Edith!

Edith, who cried to him—pleaded with him—implored him with her outstretched, slashed, and bloody hands, begging him to stop, as he slashed and hacked her beautiful face and lovely body to quivering ribbons.

With a scream of horror he pushed Beatrice from him, tearing her hands from his arm, striking out at her in maddened terror, wanting only to escape the searing memories that were tearing at his mind.

Blindly he turned and ran, heedless of her pleas to him.

"Henry! Henry, come back. Please come back. Oh, please, Henry, please, please, please."

Reaching the gate he began to pound on it with his fists, his sobs raising to howls of anguish.

Helplessly, hopelessly, he sagged

against the gate, whimpering for it to open, the clubbing of his fists leaving bloody smears on it.

The gate. The big iron gate that had been his refuge for forty years. The gate that had stood between

him and the world, between him and memory, between him and reality.

The gate between him and insane sanity!

Slowly the gate began to open.



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the dead sell

BY
GEORGE BEALL

It was chic to shop at "Vonda's". It was also practical. Vonda catered to her customer's EVERY whim.

THE society column this Sunday was very interesting to Pauline. Mrs. Van Haugen had returned from three months abroad where she had gone with her sister the widow of Dr. D. W. Wainright, after the untimely death of Mr. Van Haugen the past winter. Pauline made a check after the notice. The sisters would be in by next week at the latest. She'd have to see that she was well stocked in their sizes. The summer social season would soon be in full swing and they would be needing complete wardrobes.

The next item Pauline checked was the announcement of the engagement of Angela Myers, step-



daughter of Count R— and daughter of the Countess R—, the former Mrs. Harry Myers. The wedding would be in late August at the lovely summer home of the bride's mother in Martha's Vineyard. This item she double checked. There would be the official engagement party, showers, teas, parties and then the lavish wedding itself and Angela's trousseau. "Well, well," Pauline thought. Mother and daughter would be quite busy the next few months. Probably couldn't expect too much from the Countess, she had spent a small fortune just eighteen months ago when she and the Count were married and then went on their world cruise. However she was quite certain of getting Angela's business, but just to be positive she'd give Molly (Countess R—) a ring and suggest she bring Angie in and see the lovely new imports, ideal for a garden wedding. It wouldn't hurt to call Mrs. Caldwell either, the prospective groom's mother, she had been a customer of "Vonda's" for several years and with both women working on Angela she was practically a cinch. If she could get Angela it would be a very profitable move. The young debs hadn't given her much business. They preferred the more casual atmosphere of "Connie's" or the "Lyndon Shop" to "Vonda's" more refined elegance. However Angela was this seasons most popular Deb and what she did the others imitated. Getting Angela was a must.

Pauline quickly glanced at the rest of the society page, decided there wasn't much more of interest to her and put it aside. Enough business for today.

Sunday belonged to her and Mac. Sunday she was not Vonda, sleek and sophisticated and the owner of one of New York's most exclusive womens salons. Today she was plain Pauline Bascom, sloppy, uncorseted and relaxed. She took a cigarette and walked to the huge window overlooking the lake. Mac had really been inspired when he found this place. It was only one hours drive from New York and yet completely secluded. They couldn't come up very often during the week but they hardly ever missed Saturday night and Sunday. Poor Mac, he was still sleeping, no wonder, he had really out-done himself last night. Pauline shivered as she remembered last night. Christ, what a man, he was a damned bull. Never think he was forty-eight and she was forty-five. He had it all over the young punks. Never once in the twenty years she and Mac had known each other had it been dull or routine. Recalling last night's more lustful moments she quickly poured a cup of coffee. She'd have to quit this or she would be back in bed with him and he liked to wake up without any interference. She walked to the huge mirror, dropped her robe and slowly caressed herself, thinking, "This is how I feel to Mac, not bad."

She cupped both breasts and watched as the soft nipples became hard and pointed the way they did for him. Her body was still damn good. It gave her and Mac enough sensuous pleasure Saturday night and Sunday to last all week, so long as, during the week, she kept her mind strictly on business.

Thinking again of her business, Pauline put her robe on and settled down on the couch again with the paper. She was proud of the way her modest little dress shop of twenty years ago had grown. It had started out as a tiny hole in the wall with one small window on Fifth Avenue. It had nothing but a good location. Today she owned the whole building and also shops in San Francisco and Palm Beach. She had done it all herself by damn hard and sometimes unpleasant work. It had been slow getting established and building a clientele the first five years, but once the word got around the business had snowballed.

Pauline remembered how she had had to leave the well known finishing school in her second year without a god-damned thing but a stinking insurance policy of \$10,000. She had thought her father rich, they had certainly lived like it. It was a lousy break, both parents being killed before she had been properly presented and then not having the foresight to provide a damn thing for her. After everything was settled all she had left

was the \$10,000 and some very expensive tastes. There wasn't even a rich husband in view. Pauline had been wild in school and would no doubt have been expelled even if she hadn't had to leave because of finances. Her exploits weren't exactly common knowledge, but there were rumors that the college boys might as well stay clear. She liked her men a little older and more experienced. So there had been a ski instructor, a bar-tender at the club, a small nightclub owner in the town near the college, and various other one night or one week-end lovers, but not a husband in the whole lot. Just her damn stupid luck. She had met Mac when her parents were killed. She really flipped over him. He didn't have a nickle either but he did have a rich wife lined up. He had to be careful, the society blonde he was after was jealous but really loaded, and he needed her. Pauline was jealous too but also practical. Without the blondes money Mac was gone. And what Mac gave her she had to have. To hell with the blonde, he had enough for both of them.

It was while Mac was wooing, marrying and honeymooning his "bank account" that Pauline started her shop. Her friends from school, the lucky ones who still had fat allowances, respectable futures ahead of them with their rich, dull, college boys who would become their rich, dull, respectable husbands, were to be her customers. These sweet little

girls would "do anything to help poor Pauline", they promised her, but to each other they agreed that it really was a tough break. Of course Pauline really wasn't quite one of their set, her family wasn't known at all, and how she ever got into such a select school they couldn't imagine. Still she had been in their group and if buying a dress once in awhile would help, it certainly didn't hurt them. After all Pauline was quite reasonable and pleasant, she didn't try to hang on with the crowd as a house-guest or try and wrangle invitations from their brothers. There was also something quite different and exciting about Pauline. She had this silly little shop but she also had a large studio apartment in the village where, when they came to New York, she was always delighted to have them stay. Pauline's apartment soon became a must when in New York shopping or down for a show. At first the girls would come two or three together, but Pauline never invited them back as a group. She would casually mention to them separately, in the dressing room, that next time they were down alone and had extra time, why not drop around? Pauline never promised them any excitement and yet she seemed to get the idea across that if they were alone perhaps something exciting would happen. She knew so many fascinatingly different men and women and her apartment was always open, with

the men and girls just wandering in and out. You never knew who you might meet, actors, actresses, models, painters, perhaps even some of those handsome Italian looking men were real gangsters. "Not that we would dream of going anyplace with them, still it's exciting, and if no one sees us—"

It wasn't long until these sweet, rich little debs were each spending quite a few afternoons and evenings at Pauline's. They would come to the shop, usually in the morning, make a few substantial purchases, casually mention they had a few hours to kill before show time etc. and, "Would Pauline mind if they rested at her place?" Pauline never minded and the apartment was waiting, also the artist, mobster, actor or actress that each girl was interested in was always waiting too.

Pauline chuckled to herself, "What a joke it had been and how Mac had laughed". Those pure innocent virgins, the daughters of the very cream of society, using Pauline as their pimp but in such a refined and genteel manner. Nothing ever said, just hinted. These "sweet things" would just pay \$35.00 for a \$5.00 sweater, \$100.00 for a \$25.00 dress, in "dear Pauline's quaint little shop", without a murmur, get the key from Pauline and scurry out, impatient for their dirty little kicks. It wasn't long until Pauline's business was thriving. Pauline merely had to mention to the girls that it would be nice if they could bring

some of their other friends as customers. She was able to get quite a nice line of merchandise and all new customers started out paying just \$50.00 for a \$50.00 dress. The one's interested in more than shopping were soon also quietly paying much more for their dresses and also bringing in more customers. Pauline soon had four secluded apartments, her friends, the actors, actresses, bookies and artists had very lucrative side-lines and "Pauline's Little Dress Shop" had become "Vonda's".

Pauline didn't stay at any of her apartments but had fixed up rooms above the Salon. Here she spent the week nights and never interfered with the "friends" using her apartments. Saturday nights and Sundays were reserved for Mac whenever he was able to get away. This wasn't often the first three years of his marriage. They had to steal time whenever they could. That's why she stayed at the shop. He could always reach her and she could slip upstairs and let him in anytime. Her clerks were quite discreet (and very well paid) and would suggest to any inquisitive customers that, "Madam Vonda is resting, perhaps you would like to wait at her apartment and she will call you."

Pauline now had nearly enough money for most of her expensive tastes but not nearly enough for Mac to leave his wife and all her lovely money and not enough if she were to quit the business. She and

Mad never discussed any arrangement other than the one they had. Things weren't so bad the way they were and both believed a respectable marriage would take all the excitement from their affair and eventually end it. The only flaw in the situation as it now stood was Mac's wife. Ellen had become very very social and Mac was a very handsome escort. She had paid for him and she expected him to be around when she wanted him. The solution to this problem was obvious to Pauline. Ellen was persuaded by one of "Vonda's" original customers that she really should try Vonda's, "so original and chic my dear and quite the rage."

Soon Mac had nearly as much free time as he and Pauline craved. Ellen had found escorts who were every bit as handsome and respectable and much more attentive than Mac. She had never been overly enthused about Mac's other abilities anyway, so sweaty and messy.

The years passed quickly and each one more prosperously for "Vonda's." The original group of school friends had nearly all married their college boys who were now corporation lawyers, bankers, doctors etc. They were all quite prolific, with children in boarding schools in the winter season and summer camps in the summer season. All had money, prestige, busy husbands and a lot of spare time. It was usually only about 4 to 5 years

after their big weddings that they were again begging to pay \$500.00 for a \$100.00 "Vonda Original". It was much easier for Vonda now too—she had a well trained staff and she no longer had to personally arrange any of the "little outside activities" her customers were so eager to pay for. The shop in San Francisco, and the one in Palm Springs were also doing a rushing business. The managers there had a few ideas of their own about "merchandising" and Pauline never interfered. The money was coming in in large enough quantities and if her managers were also getting rich, well good for them. As long as the books showed that the only money taken in was for "Vonda Originals" there couldn't be any trouble. Indeed a "Vonda Original" could sometimes seem outlandishly high, but who could say it was illegal? If the husbands of these rich ladies felt that \$2,500.00 was too much to pay for a bit of silk and sequins, or \$500.00 and up for a suit, (extra for accessories) it wasn't a matter for the law to be interested in. It was strictly a family affair and up to the "ladies" to pacify their husbands. The ladies, with a little help, found an infinite variety of pacifiers for their dull unimaginative husbands. A younger generation of eager models, actresses and artists were just as hungry and even more imaginative, and most of the least staid husbands were soon kept occupied and so busy with their

own "little amusements" that what the wife was doing was no longer of much interest.

There was one incident in San Francisco, however, when the husband caused quite a public stink. He not only stopped his wife's charge account at "Vonda's," he also publicly kicked the young "aspiring artist" and protege of his wife out of the little studio she had provided and right through it's "southern exposure". Of course this was strictly a family matter and the law only investigated an unsuccessful attempt by the artist to charge the husband with criminal assault. The law officers did, however, caution the husband about his outbursts of temper and his doctor warned him about his high blood pressure. He was prone to both, and with such a combination it was no surprise to anyone when shortly thereafter, at a dinner party given by his wife, he left (as usual) in a towering rage. His wife had needled him throughout the evening. She had a habit of doing this. But if every wife who nagged her husband was put in jail when the husband was found at the bottom of a cliff after taking a turn at a ridiculous speed, the San Francisco police wouldn't have time for any of their more important criminal activities. It was simply a tragic accident and the bereaved (but very rich) widow, after all arrangements were taken care of left for an extended stay in Hawaii. Since the climate in Hawaii is so different

from San Francisco and the social affairs much more lavish, her wardrobe had to be completely revamped at "Vonda's" to the tune of close to \$15,000. It was all quite proper and a suitable period of mourning was observed, before she married her young "art protege" in a lavish wedding with the new trousseau and wedding gown air-expressed from "Vonda's".

Reading of the events in the New York papers, Pauline was at first quite upset at the new sideline, it was rumored, her manager in San Francisco had taken on. After considering the whole transaction carefully however she decided it was quite a smart maneuver and inevitable. A business must meet the demands of the customers or they will go to the competition. Any successful business man or woman must obey the motto, "the customer is always right, so give the customer what he wants."

The new "fad" was slow in coming to New York. It was several months before the new service instigated in San Francisco had to be installed in the New York salon. The westerners were more adventurous and unconventional than the reserved easterners who were her main patrons. When the first request did come Vonda was prepared and, to the satisfaction of all, the transaction was handled with the dignity and refinement that "Vonda's" was famous for.

Mrs. Harry Myers had also been

grateful of the way the New York police had played down the story. As she told the sympathetic Inspector Ryan: "Really Inspector, It's such a sad thing when a man the age of my poor Harry thinks he can keep up with a group of youngsters . . . over-eating, drinking, and I'd hate to guess what else. Then, imagine, skin diving after partying all night! If he had only listened to me. Poor dear, such an unromantic way to die. Paying for everything for that little gold-digger and her friends and then getting a cramp, drowning, and those ungrateful little beasts not even noticing he didn't rejoin the party for three hours! How cruel and callous young people are today, no feelings at all. What a shame they can't legally be prosecuted for being drunk and careless. Poor Angela and Becky, I'm so glad they won't have to know all the sordid details about their father. He was such a good husband and father until that little tramp turned his head. I can't imagine where he ever met her. I'm so grateful to our loyal friend Count R—, he's up in Westchester now breaking the news to poor Becky. He has been a rock to lean on and it's selfish of me to impose on him but I just feel so helpless."

All of this was told Inspector Ryan between sobs with the Inspector trying in a bumbling way to console the poor woman. "Poor little widow", the Inspector thought to himself, "even with

all her money she needs a man to look after her. She really is helpless."

Mrs. Myers was still feeling helpless eight months later when she decided to marry the loyal Count R—. Vonda was begged to, "Please see to my wardrobe, my dear. Even though I'm sure I'm doing the right thing for the childrens' sake, you know, I just don't have the heart to shop. I know you can be relied upon to get just what I need. Nothing ostentatious for daytime, but dear . . . do you have some of those 'naughty, french nities?' The Count is so much more Continental about some things than we are."

Vonda's staff was used to being given "carte blanche" in such matters and were equal to the task. The Countess's daytime wardrobe was tasteful and elegant. Her nighttime wardrobe at \$250 for each bit of "racy lace" was not tasteful at all. In fact it probably wouldn't have appealed to even the most jaded continental. The \$8,000 bill was paid gratefully and without question.

Pauline and Mac still laughed over what the Count's reaction must have been when he saw what his new bride was wearing in the privacy of their cabin. They were so much sexier than the little creations he picked out for Denise, Becky's French companion he had so thoughtfully hired, and who was taking the same tour as he and the Countess.

Vonda hoped the Count had

enough restraint to control his laughter before his new bride. She had seen that he and Mrs. Myers met, and had let him take it from there. It had been up to the Count to get what he could from Mrs. Myers. He had done quite well apparently. She had supplied the "little tramp" Mr. Myers had lost his head and his life over. But the Count had better watch his step. His new Countess was neither as helpless nor as stupid as she appeared. Pauline hoped they were happy, she wanted no more of that particular business from Mrs. Myers, the new Countess R—. Well she'd soon know, the Countess would be in soon with Angela. If it looked as though she was going to be approached again about the Countess's husband troubles she would refer her to the Palm Beach branch. The only business she was interested in was Angela's. Thinking of Angela and her young friends, she wondered if she should perhaps add a Deb shop. Her original customers all had young daughters coming up. She could see no reason why they too wouldn't be good customers. With the mothers they had been raised by she was surprised the kids hadn't thought up something of the same sort themselves.

Pauline's thoughts were interrupted by Mac turning restlessly and muttering in his sleep. She wished he'd wake up. It was damned boring alone and he would

be quite willing to live things up for her. She switched her thoughts back to the society page with an effort.

The first item she had checked in the paper drew her attention again, about Mrs. Van Haugen and her sister Mrs. Wainright. Both ladies had been customers but Mrs. Van Haugen had gone to the Palm Beach branch for most of her buying. Mrs. Wainright was a good customer but only for clothes, never anything extra. She had never been sure about Dr. Wainright. It probably was just a case of overwork and anxiety that caused him to commit suicide. He had died while they were on vacation in Mexico and if either the westcoast branch or the Florida branch had handled it there had been no reports. That was the way it should be. Each branch manager was on her own. They used their own discretion in such matters. Pauline preferred not to know all the details of every transaction. She really didn't even care to speculate about what was going on. Just getting the word out about a request and then letting others take it from there was as much as she cared to do. Some of the ideas the young employees had were really frightening. They were much more depraved. She would never have thought of the "skin diving caper" for example. She sighed, "Well at least Mr. Van Haugen had died of natural causes. Maybe the actions of his wife, with her taste for young

men, made him give up and not fight to get well when he became ill, but that wasn't any fault of hers."

Pauline arose. This was ridiculous. That man had slept enough, practically the whole damned morning. She dropped her robe and went in to him.

Late in the afternoon, Pauline and Mac had a hurried breakfast. Mac had to be back in New York early to take his wife to dinner and then on to a Concert. He hadn't been bothered with Ellen much the past several years but every once in awhile she demanded his presence at some social function and he always complied. Their marriage really wasn't unpleasant. Ellen made very few demands and was very generous. She appeared to be completely uninterested in his extra-marital activities and it had been months since she had required any more than just a kiss on the cheek from him. Her own affairs were very discreet. She was too reserved and aloof to get very passionately involved. Her passion was either non-existent or else she just hadn't found the way to release it. They had no children. Ellen had never expressed any desire for a family. Pauline and Mac couldn't understand such coldness. Ellen used "Vonda's" extra services, but the young men she dated were strictly escorts and were paid merely to flatter her with their attentions. She had never to their knowledge be-

come involved with any of them romantically.

The Concert that Mac was escorting his wife to this evening was sponsored by a large charity to introduce a young Polish pianist. It promised to be very dull but Ellen had insisted. This young artist was one of Pauline's imports. She, as Vonda, was responsible for bringing many hopeful young people from the poverty of Europe's refugee camps to America. She used her influence to see that they were given the opportunity to make the contacts that would aid them in their careers. Several had already gone on to become well paid entertainers, others had made good marriages (Count R— for example) while a few of the no-talent one's were still existing on whatever Vonda could give them a chance at. It was a smart idea of Pauline's. These young Europeans had been hungry a long time and would do almost anything to get to America and even more for a chance to stay.

Mac had dropped Pauline two blocks from the shop after making their plans for next week. Ellen had mentioned a trip to Bermuda with one of her friends later in the month and they were looking forward to her leaving. Mac drove off thinking of Pauline. She was quite a gal. Too bad she couldn't have been the one with the money rather than Ellen. They would have had a good life. Funny how she never bored him, even after all these

years. Quite a head on those lovely shoulders too, the way she had made such a success of that shop of hers. Of course some of the activities that went on bothered him, yet Pauline herself was not directly involved. He never thought too much about what did go on. Pauline only told him the things she knew would amuse him, and some of the queer pastimes of the pillars of society were quite amusing. Still he wished she would drop that part of the business. The Salon was very well established and there would be plenty without the sidelines. It might even be enough to allow him to leave Ellen. He could get used to a more modest standard of living. Now if he could just get something on Ellen so there would be a nice divorce settlement, large enough to enable him and Pauline to marry, then they could live quite nicely on what the Salon could bring in legitimately. It was just the past year that he had even considered marriage to Pauline. Before he had just considered her a damn good mistress and he'd had no desire to change the arrangement. Lately he'd found himself wanting to be with her, not just as a good bed partner. Pauline really loved him and she made him feel like a man. Pauline worked too hard and it would be nice if they could just go away together and live quietly, with enough money. It was too late for children, but they could have a good life just traveling

and being together. Mac hadn't said anything to Pauline. Perhaps he would next week. If they could just find a way to get Ellen to cut loose with a nice fat settlement. There must be some way. Ellen couldn't be as completely cold and sterile as she appeared.

Mac and Ellen arrived at the Concert just as the young Polish girl came on stage. Ellen looked marvelous, like a cool nordic ice goddess. The little pianist was good but nothing exceptional, and yet Ellen seemed entranced, her eyes never left the stage. The young girl was perhaps twenty, slim and dark with a sultry smoldering look in her large dark eyes. She looked more like a young boy with her slim straight figure and short curly hair.

During the reception after the concert he and Ellen met the young artist. Mac wasn't very impressed. Lovely eyes but no shape, strictly not his type. No top to her at all. He never understood what men saw in these little slips of things. He liked a woman you could get ahold of like Pauline. This girl, Kara, her name was, looked like the rest of Pauline's refugees. She had the same look of burning hunger that all of them had. He couldn't see much hope for this one though, neither talent nor looks.

Mac was bored, he hated these stuffy gatherings. There wasn't even any liquor, just some insipid

punch. Ellen however seemed to be having a fine time for a change. She had monopolized Kara most of the evening. "Whatever had come over Ellen?" Mac thought. The ice goddess seemed to be burning up, her face was flushed and she was actually laughing. Her straight regal figure suddenly seemed to develop soft voluptuous curves. "Well, Well, must be the punch, no, Ellen never drank". Mac started to pay close attention to just what Ellen was doing, but Ellen was doing nothing but talking with Kara. Then as he watched, Kara gently touched Ellen's breast, then slowly ran the tips of her fingers up Ellen's throat and down her arm. That was all, a touch as light as a butterfly but the change in Ellen was electrifying. She looked suddenly wanton. "Christ! Ellen was practically panting with desire. Hm—how interesting, guess little Kara had made her connection. Not bad. Ellen was one of the richest women in America, and what a nice divorce settlement this might lead too. It was too bad Ellen couldn't have looked like that for him. The gal really could have been something. Such a waste, all that passion for another girl". To Mac it was disgusting and a bit humiliating, after all she was his wife. He decided to get Ellen out of there before anyone else noticed what he had. His settlement wouldn't be very large if it became common gossip. Ellen didn't realize how ob-

vious the change in her was. She'd be horrified. This must be as much of a shock to her as it was to him. Poor girl, he wished her luck and hoped the little Kara would be kind to her.

Ellen left without any protest but with their eyes she and Kara agreed to meet again. "Fine", Mac thought, he would give them every opportunity. The way it looked, this budding affair would be consummated very soon.

The week passed in a flurry of packing and shopping for Ellen. She and Kara both were outfitted at "Vonda's" with Ellen paying the substantial bill. Mac didn't know just what was going on but Pauline soon informed him that the affair was apparently hot and heavy, according to Kara's reports to her. Kara was to leave ahead of Ellen but they would be together in Bermuda.

After Ellen was on her way, Pauline left word at the shop she would be gone for at least three weeks and would not be available to anyone. The manager was left in complete control and all decisions she might make were alright with Pauline. She and Mac were going to have more than a few stolen hours together for the first time in twenty years. She was as excited as a new bride. The business could take care of itself. She had never really cared about it. It had merely taken the place in her life that Mac should have taken if he could have.

When Mac told her of the opportunity to get enough from Ellen so they could be married she was ready to chuck the whole thing and just be Mac's wife.

Final instructions were sent to the Palm Beach branch to get pictures of Ellen and Kara for evidence. Then Pauline and Mac left New York. Pauline's manager guessed that the reason for the vacation was a man but Pauline and Mac had been very careful and none of the organization had ever dared even try and find out who "Vonda's" lover as.

The pictures were taken of Ellen and Kara, very compromising, thanks to Kara's help. Kara was greedy. Ellen's husband was in her way. Let him have his settlement and divorce. She'd have Ellen all to herself, and all that lovely money.

Ellen's reaction to the pictures was quite different. She was in love and Kara would not be sullied by any threats of exposure, nor would she pay blackmail. Ellen had become a jealous, protective lover and Mac was not going to have his fat settlement and his girl friend too. Mac was going to have a very nice funeral. Ellen made a flying trip to "Vonda's New York Salon", bought more clothes and made arrangements to have Mac found. She gave no instructions about his woman. Let her take her chances.

The bodies of Mac and Pauline were not found in their secluded lodge for two weeks. The whole

affair was quite a sensation for the tabloids. It was apparent they had fought and Mac had killed her, and then himself in remorse.

When Pauline's will was read she had left the whole of her possessions to Mac. There were no relatives to protest, and Ellen was sole owner as Mac's heir.

Kara, Ellen's young refugee friend, was put in charge of the huge enterprise and, with Ellen's backing, shops were being opened in London, Paris, and Tokyo, with plans to go into South America the

following year.

One change in operations was the name. "Vonda's" is now "Kara's". However only the name was changed. The same tradition of service to the customer, whatever the customer wants, is the same. The second change Kara made was obviously needed. The managers were no longer given "carte blanche". Every transaction was first cleared through Kara. A boss who ran an organization as loosely as "Vonda" had done could be displaced too easily.





A ON'S ODE

BY

WILLIAM P. PERRY

Every place has its code, a set of principles, an ethic . . . a prison is no exception.

THE first time I saw him was out in the yard. It wasn't hard to spot him. All that khaki, and him in his shiny blue uniform. It wasn't meant to be shiny, it got that way from too many press jobs. He always seemed to have a smile on his face, which is out of place in any joint. What the hell does anyone, Con or Hack, have to smile about all the time in a dreary, morbid jungle of angry men? But here was this guy, walking among nine-hundred cons with a smile on his face.

"Hey, Charlie! How's that Caddy workin' out, man?"

"Like a champ, Lefty, like a champ!" His face broke into a wider smile, as he stooped down and plucked a large blade of grass, which he put in his mouth. "How did you know I bought a Cadillac?"

"I was out front moppin' the hall one day when you was tellin' the Turnkey! Cadillac is the magic word with me, man! When I hear somebody say the magic word I gotta know more! Anybody that can afford a Cadillac is a man who's hittin' on somethin'?" He put his face up to the Hack, "Now you know they aint a Hack in the world that

gets paid Cadillac wages!" The husky man let his shoulders drop, as though he had lost all his strength, then began a cackling laugh, with head and shoulders bent low.

"You're bum rapping me, Lefty! I'm not hitting on anything! I'm getting to be an old man, and I figure an old man ought to treat himself to something he has always wondered about! Some guys save their dough all their lives, and when they realize their getting old, and they can't take it with them, they start shopping around in their minds for something to buy. Something they didn't dare buy before, because they figured they couldn't afford it! Some guys buy boats with in-board motors, or them expensive snow plows that you ride on like a tractor to clear your walk and drive-way, or a house trailer to use for fishing, or horses—some guys are nuts for horses—me, I'm a Cadillac dreamer, have been for twenty-five years!"

When I walked closer I could see the battle scars on the husky negro's face. Not one, or ten, or twenty fights, could have disfigured his face like that. He must have had closer to a hundred. Scar tissue had overlapped his left eyebrow, like a heavy growth, weighing down his eyelid until it allowed slightly more than a slit for vision. His nose was flat, almost as wide as it was long. His ears were small, bunched-up balls of cauliflower flesh. He was a

massive, six-foot-four inch hulk of a mighty tough looking man. This was my first time in any joint, and I had only been in about two months. I see this mountain of ugliness everyday in the mess hall, but never had I seen him smile or laugh. He looked, like so many of the guys, bitter, I mean real bitter! Not just a momentary thing, but a bitter look that you know the guy's been wearing for a long time. Now here he's laughing, and carrying on, over something that sure didn't show me any humor. Then, as Charlie started his slow walk again, the big fellow starts walking slowly in the same direction for a few feet, rolling a newspaper nervously in his hands. Then he stops and just stares at Charlie's back for a few seconds. He turned around to see another negro had moved in on his choice spot of green grass, of which there was very little.

"Boy!" He looked down at the figure in his spot. "I'm going to start sittin' down, and I hopes my ass hits grass, 'cause if it don't, they's going to be a mighty flat-headed cotton picker sleepin' in your cell tonight!" The frightened man on the ground clawed for safety, as he shot across the grass without rising to his feet. Lefty was back to his old ugly-tempered, bitter self again. But why, for just that moment, did he go out of his way to strike up a conversation with Charlie?

The first good look I got at Char-

lie was the first time my mother came to visit. She had never been in a prison before, and knowing how high-strung she is, it took a lot of guts for her to walk in the front door. This was the first time I'd seen her since the day I was sentenced. I didn't know what to expect. I was nervous, and ashamed, as I walked into the visiting room. Charlie was on duty there, and my mother had not been processed in yet, so I took a seat at a long table. Charlie walked over to me with his ever present smile. He placed his hand on the table as he leaned over me. His face was clear, as were his eyes, which were large and sky-blue. His cheeks were full and rosy, and his eyes seemed to sparkle as he talked. He wore frameless glasses that were too large for the bridge of his nose, so half of the time he was looking over them. He had a full head of neatly groomed, white hair, and his voice was soft, gentle, and friendly.

"This your first visit, Angelo?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well, someone should have told you, when you come for a visit, what to do! You're supposed to hand your pass to whatever Officer is on duty here, and then he tells you where to sit!"

"I'm sorry! I was told, but I guess I forgot!"

"You must be a mind reader!" He smiled broadly, looking directly in my eyes. For some reason I didn't feel nervous as much as I had

when I first walked in. "This is exactly where I was going to tell you to sit!" He slipped the pass gently from my hand, gave me a couple of quick pats on the shoulder, then returned to his elevated chair, which gave him a full view of the room.

When mother came in I was calm and collected, not revealing how very bad I felt—down deep. I steered completely away from the trial, or other morbid conversation. The weather, food, treatment, working hours, and privileges, we covered in detail. I asked about her favorite subject to make her open up. Rajah', the Siamese she had raised from a kitten, and was now nine years old. I didn't hear much about Rajah, as I watched her face and eyes, and realized I had succeeded in making her comfortable. We killed the rest of the hour in small talk about family and friends. It was a pleasant visit, and we kissed goodbye. She left in much higher spirits than when she arrived. I was thankful that I had hid my true feelings for the joint, and I couldn't help but credit Charlie with giving me some help. I don't know to this day what it was, but he did help.

"Thanks!" I smiled as I left the room.

"Angelo!" He called behind me. "You're supposed to pick it up on your way out, too!" He was waving the white pass, smiling broadly again.

"Settle down, boy!" He handed

me the pass, "You got over that first hurdle like a champ!" He winked.

"Thanks again!" As I was walking out I felt as though he had looked inside of me and knew exactly how I felt.

Charlie had been a Hack for twenty some years. There was something different about him, compared to the others, and it took me awhile to figure out some of the difference. I say some, because I never did figure him out completely. Some of the Hacks look so serious it makes a guy think that they are carrying all the worry and cares in the world on their backs. It seems like the longer they work in the joint, the less emotion is in their faces. They walk around you with that cold, blank, look of authority, like they don't even know you're there. But they do know you're there, and they watch, without looking at you, every move you make. Somehow Charlie had escaped the look and manner of the average Hack.

Charlie wasn't "buddy-buddy" with the Cons, but when he looked at you it didn't make you feel as though you had just crawled out from under a rock. You felt human, and he let you know that he thought you were human, too! He was a Hack from his heart out, but he was definitely different. I noticed more and more how many different guys would go out of their way to talk to him. Guys like 'Silent Sam' Palermo. Now there

was a Kook that nobody could get to. He wiped out his whole family one night because his wife was seeing a neighbor too often—in the bedroom. Now to show you how this coconut thinks makes me shudder that I have to be locked up with him. In his mind his wife must die, what she did calls for the death penalty. But he also realizes that after he aces her out he'll have to go to prison for life, which automatically makes orphans of his three kids. He feels sad when he thinks of his lovely children as orphans, so he wipes them all out. This is what the clown's got the nerve to tell the judge twenty years ago. In all that time he has never said that many words to anyone at the same time—except Charlie!

One day I'm out front washing windows on the second floor, when I see this black Station Wagon pull up in front of the prison and park. The driver was a beautiful girl about twenty-five. What I could see of her looked good. I stopped work, gawking out the window like a high school kid, waiting to see the rest of her when she stepped from the car. She looked at the doorway a few times, but made no effort to get out of the car. It looked like she was waiting for someone, so I went back to my windows. A few minutes later I see Charlie crossing the street, in street clothes, heading for the car. He talked to her for about five minutes, then she stepped from the car drying her eyes on Charlie's

handkerchief. He supported her left arm as they walked up the steps and entered the building. I couldn't figure that out at all. When I finished up I walked by the Turnkey to see Charlie's smiling face, behind the double bars in his uniform. His smile broadened as he waved. I smiled, and waved back. As I passed the Visiting Room I saw the girl again. She looked very pleased and happy, as she visited with Wes Mooney, a guy who celled on the same tier as I did.

That night I was out in the yard, trying to get a chance to play horse-shoe. I was considered pretty good a few years back. We played for beer then. Now I play for nothing, when I get a chance to play. By the time my tier gets down to the yard the guys on the first tier have a game in progress with six or eight sets of partners waiting to play the winners. "Dum-Dum" Slater, a bum-check artist, who has, in fifteen years, been in and out of the joint more than the Warden, said that since he can remember there has always been a problem at the Horseshoe Court. If they had more room they could put in another court, but the way it is you have your pick. You wait in line to play or forget it. "Dum-Dum" also said that Charlie was always by the court. He'd be called on occasionally to settle a dispute, as though he were the Official Scorekeeper, but outside of that he was just an observer. Just as I was told that I was

eighth on the list to play, I spotted Wes walking toward the benches.

"Hey, Wes!" He stopped. I trotted up to him. "Tell me something, 'Uglier-than-me', how can a guy like you, with a face like a dirty plate of worms, get a luscious doll like that to visit you?"

"That's my wife!" He smiled proudly.

"Man, you must have black-mailed her into saying 'I DO' in the same room with you!"

"What'ya mean, she should have married a 'Joe Hollywood', like you maybe?"

"Why not? That's better than an Irish Frankenstein!" I laughed.

"Terry is proud of her race, that's why! She's white, and she marries white! Any broad knows that when she marries a 'wop' she's breaking the color line!"

"All kidding aside, Wes—what's her beef? Or am I being to—"

"Beef? She's got no beef! What's with you?" We sat on a bench.

"I saw her as the female star in a 'soap opera' this afternoon, and Charlie wasted his talent as the male lead, because I see you ended up with the girl!"

"So that's who it was—Charlie! Terry told me some old guy talked to her, but she didn't say it was a hack!" He said "hack" as though it were a dirty word.

"She couldn't have known, Wes! Charlie was just coming on, and he was in civies. But what has she got in common with Charlie?"

"Well, she came out here to see, not me, but the Warden! She wanted to ask him to ask me to sign some papers—power of attorney! I've got a couple of lots my old man left me when he kicked off! Terry wants to sell them to get us out of hock. She had her mind made up when she left the city! She was all through with me, she even had an appointment with some divorce 'shyster'! She said she hesitated out front for a few minutes, then this old guy came up to her car! He told her she should at least hear my part of the story before she went off half-cocked. He told her some other things, too, she hinted to me, but she wouldn't open up and tell me what they were!"

"Well, I'll be damned! That Charlie's all right! He's a hell of a swell guy! You'll have to thank him when you get a chance!" Wes looked at me like I just kicked his mother.

"Holy balls, Mike!" He slammed his cigarette to the ground, then moved closer to me on the bench. "You are either the greenest greenhorn that ever walked through the front door, or you're the phoniest bastard I've ever met!"

"What the hell's gotten into you?" I was shocked goofy by his last remark.

"O.K., I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, Mike! As long as you're in here, this is your world, all of this—" His arm moved in a sweeping motion, "—inside these walls!

There is no other world! You have two kinds of people in here, 'Cons' and 'Hacks'! There both on One-Way streets, going in opposite directions! You are either a Con or a Hack! Whichever you are decides what street you live on! They don't walk on our street, and we don't walk on theirs. A Hack can't be for a Con, if it's found out that he is—bingo!—You don't see him anymore! If a Con is for a Hack, there's action there, too! Ninety-nine percent of the Cons will never see you again either! Oh, you'd be around, but nobody will see you—if you know what I mean! Cons and Hacks can think what they like about each other, but never out loud! It can be worse for a Con than a Hack! The Hack can only lose his job! If the Con don't catch a 'sticker' in his ribs, he wishes he had later, because he loses contact with the only world he's got! There's a lot of lonely guys in here that bought and are paying for all the loneliness they've got coming! So watch yourself, Mike! I like you, and I want to *see* you around here until you hit the bricks!" He was speaking low, and most sincere, when we were both shocked from our thoughts.

"There's a rumble at the Horse-shoe Court!" Somebody yelled. Wes and I ran to the gathering crowd. We were too late to see anything. When the crowd dispersed some, we saw Lefty standing against the wall, two Hacks, one of them Char-

lie, shaking him down—policeman style! Another negro was lying on his back, unconscious, with a jagged laceration just below his ear. Lefty was clean. None of the Hacks saw what happened, but Lefty was mad and shouting when the Hacks got to the action spot, so it was assumed that Lefty was the winner of the fight. The injured man went to the hospital for three days, and Lefty went to court. He got sixty days in the hole. The guy that came out of the hospital wouldn't open up, so he went to the hole, too! I found out later that Lefty was mad because some guy cut his friend, and before he could get to the knifer, the Hacks got to him. Who wrote up the charge against Lefty? Charlie!—Now what's a guy supposed to think? Is Charlie a 'Big-Brother', or a 'Big-Bastard'?

A couple of months later I went to my cell at the usual time in the afternoon and, as I usually did, laid down to read the afternoon paper. It was then that I received one of the greatest shocks of my life. On the second page, big as life, was a picture of Charlie. He had been killed in an auto accident on Sunday, coming back from visiting his wife's grave at a cemetery in the next town. It also contained a story how he had inherited nearly a quarter of a million dollars ten years before, in addition to stocks and bonds in a local Tire Manufacturing Company which was worth another one-hundred thousand dol-

lars. It went on to tell how prominent he was with working for the Boys Clubs of the State. A close friend of his was quoted as saying that after Charlie's wife died he felt worthless, and became very despondent. Then he took stock of himself and decided he could, regardless of his age, be a service to the community. He had made many large donations of time and money to the 'Boys Clubs', and their summer camps. The boys of the State were planning to have one day set aside, one day for tribute, for one who had become known as "Uncle Charlie".

I laid there staring at the ceiling. It somehow didn't seem real, but it was there, in big black print. I didn't care what Wes Mooney or anybody else thought, I felt bad about Charlie—even if he was a hack. I thought that maybe after I'd been in the joint longer I'd be able to hate like the rest of them, but right then I thought Charlie was a damn good man, and I felt bad. I wondered why he kept working, especially in a prison, when he didn't have to? He was a wealthy man!

During the recreational period that evening I was still a little numb with the shock, as I instinctively walked toward the Horseshoe Court. The sun was hot, and there were pockets of whirl-winds playing here and there across the dusty-brown earth, sweeping up dust and small particles of paper, like inverted corkscrews, coming out of the

earth, rising a few feet, then slowly falling back again. I stopped short, as I became shocked once again. I looked back at the doors to see if perhaps I had come out with the wrong tier, but the lines had all come out. I looked back to the court—my eyes had not been playing tricks—the Horseshoe Court was empty!

The same familiar faces from every other yard session were present, but they were all in various leisure positions around the court. I overheard parts of different conversations as I walked slowly down the line of idle cons, nonchalantly sitting or lying down, or leaning against the building.

"If Milwaukee don't win the pennant, I'll eat your shoes, laces and all!"

"So I says to this broad: 'Baby, I don't care how many guys you crawl in the 'kip' with while I'm on vacation, but don't let me know about it! What I don't know won't hurt me!'"

"They'll never let a ball team out of this joint for two minutes, let alone two weeks—you're nuts!"

"Why do they have to steam cook everything? After awhile everything tastes the same! I heard a blind guy on the fourth tier put milk and sugar on fried potatoes and ate it for oatmeal and didn't know the difference!"

It was then that I noticed an unfamiliar face. It must have been one of the new men. He walked in the

court, picked up a horseshoe and struck it against the stake. The low rumble of conversation immediately disappeared, it became as quiet as a church. The confused stranger looked around at the noticeable lack of activity.

"Hey!" He shouted. "What the hell's going on? Any of you dead-heads got a couple packs you don't mind losing, 'Ole Dad here will show you chumps the finer points of this farmer-game!" The only sound of reply was a whirlwind of dust and fine paper particles, buzzing in the center of the court. It rose about eight feet then settled back.

The stranger was very much annoyed, when not one of the many men present would answer him. The silence was broken by one set of heavy stepping feet. The small rocks and gravel crunched under the pressure. Suddenly there was a duet of crunching sound, as a second set of feet joined the first, progressing toward the stranger in the center of the court.

"Boy, let me tell you something! I just got out of the hole!" The stranger looked up into Lefty's squinting eyes. "It's real quiet down there, and a hell of a lot darker than here! Now this bright sun, and all this loud talkin' out here give me the big headache! It was startin' to go away when you pounded on that stake with that there horseshoe—that hurt me, boy! Now I aint goin' to tell you what to do, but I am goin' to tell you what I'm goin' to do if

you pick up one more of them horseshoes—I'm goin' to try real hard to make you eat the other two!" The stranger looked at the "mountain", then to Wes Mooney. He shook his head, then was about to throw the horseshoe, but thought better of it, and gently placed it on the ground with the others. He silently, but quickly, walked away.

I took a seat next to Wes and Lefty, as the low rumble of conversation on a hundred different topics was renewed. The whirlwind came from the earth once again, slowly gliding up and down the deserted court, as black storm clouds quickly covered the sun, cooling the surrounding atmosphere. I took a slight chill, as the first clap of thunder brought a cascade of heavy rain, hitting the hot, parched earth like rifle shots. Wes butted a tailor made, putting it protectively in his shirt pocket. Lefty turned up his shirt collar, then pulled his con-cap down to his ears, over his near-bald head.

It was quite apparent that it was raining much too hard to last for any extended period of time, therefore, men in other parts of the yard, not associated with the horseshoe enthusiasts, bolted for areas offering cover from the temporary deluge. Not one of the frequenters of the court moved so much as a foot from their original position before the storm.

All of the familiar faces to the court, except one, became involved in shams of a convict society, each becoming aware of the others over-enthusiasm for mediocre topics of conversation. They suffered very little from the cold, spring rain, for the rain was, as it had been from the start, a secondary cause for their discomfort and frustration.

My family did a lot of moving when I was a kid, we lived on many an Avenue. But none of them impressed me more with memories of regret, or sadness, than just recently —on the street where I live.



WHEN I walked into the office of The West Los Angeles Rampart at 9:15 that Tuesday morning, the first thing I saw was a frantic Fletcher Lash. He was rapidly waving his finger at me, having probably started the moment he'd seen me approaching through the front plate glass windows.

I reached his desk in proper double quick time, feeling a faint red signal at the base of my brain. "Ever hear of Quentin Shell?" He barked, throwing the full weight of a hard stare at me.

"The writer?" I responded. "The guy that knocks out the Shenanigans show?"

"Did the show, Tony," Lash answered brusquely, "did the show."

"That's past tense."

His eyes curdled. "Thank you. As of last night, our Mr. Shell has changed his occupa-

SHENANIGANS

tion to murder suspect." "Murder?" I whistled and sat down.

Lash became sufficiently satisfied that I was interested in his bombshell and dropped his tempo a notch. "Billy Joe Essex," he explained, checking his cuticles.

Then I did jump. "Essex!" I exclaimed. The story was all over *The Morning Times*. Billy Joe Essex was a Hollywood producer with a past back to the silents and the more silence about his past, the better. As a promoter, he was the middle stone across the creek between P. T. Barnum and Bobby Baker. I had planned to go over the story at coffee.

"The same. Now I'll give you a hint of what's in the wind, Tony. Shell is presently asleep in my guest room."

"That's fine," I nodded absently. "In your guest

BY
ROD BARKER

"Sho pro cooled . . . cops seek hot hack!"

room!" My red signal began flashing furiously. The wind Lash referred to could only mean one thing: We were off and running again on Lash's other self.

Mr. Fletcher Lash is my boss and the publisher of *The Rampart*, a lively little every Thursday weekly covering Brentwood and Pacific Palisades. Among other things, Lash is also the author of nearly fifty mystery novels of which more than twenty were made into movies. He's a graduate of the old pulp magazine field, a former screen writer and a Brentwood Sherlock Holmes.

Two years ago, Fletcher Lash satisfied an old urge and went into the newspaper business. What was then a quiet weekly became *The Rampart*. Weddings and junior league gossip were replaced with real news of the tub thumping variety. After his first law suit, Lash knew he was on the right track.

His first three editors came and went quicker than a finger snap. Thunder clap would be more like it. Then I drifted along, knowing something about the newspaper business but nothing of what I was getting myself into. Lash not only wanted an editor and combination man, he wanted a Dr. Watson. I'm still with him and not because of pay.

"Essex was found in Shell's apartment," Lash machine gunned. "He had been shot and because of his being found in the apartment,

the police are looking for our Mr. Shell."

"Sounds reasonable. Why doesn't our Mr. Shell explain to them that the whole thing is a mistake?"

Lash looked down his nose. "Along with Essex, the police also found the murder weapon—Shell's gun. If you read the latest report, you'll learn his fingerprints were on it."

I didn't have to ask. "And, you think Shell is innocent."

"If my inner computer has anything to do with it, yes."

"And, it's our problem to prove it."

"Tony Ward, sometimes you amaze me."

Tony Ward, aged thirty-two, five foot, ten inches tall and weighing 170 pounds, journeyman reporter and ad man, sometimes you amazed me, too. Sometimes you dumbfounded me. How you could be sitting there at that man's desk awaiting instructions on the correct manner of being a sleuth was one for the mental books. I took a deep breath. "Give me something to go on."

Lash smiled evilly and threw his foot on the desk. There was a hole in his shoe which was typical. "Here's your rundown. One, Essex was found dead in Shell's apartment. Two, Shell's gun was found near the body complete with his fingerprints. Three, Quentin Shell wrote the *Shenanigan* show. Four,

Shenanigans was in the top ten TV ratings. Five, Shenanigans had been cancelled—”

“Cancelled?”

Lash continued his rapid pace. “Six, the show replacing it belonged to Essex.”

“Motive?”

Lash shrugged.

“Seven,” I said, “you have no leads.”

“I’ll leave such things to you.”

I liked Shenanigans. It was about a big laughing Irish family and all the heartaches they went through. “Naturally,” I answered, standing. “Where was Shell when it happened?”

“Unfortunately, on a binge.”

“A binge!” I yelled. “Then he can’t say for certain where he was?”

“No,” Lash admitted, “though right now that’s immaterial. All we have to do is locate the real killer.”

“That’s all?”

“I know it’s a mountain.”

Lash’s sister, Rachel, was coming in the office as I left. She gave me an irritated look.

I left the office and walked absently to my Ford, sitting behind the wheel for a long moment. Then I pointed carelessly toward Wilshire, drove three blocks and cut back to Sunset. When I came to Doheny, I turned north, went around a variety of circle drives and soon came out on a spot that overlooked the majesty of Los Angeles.

The day was as fresh as a new

potato chip and the city below possessed all the tones and definitions of a fine lithograph. For one scant moment, I forgot about Fletcher Lash and Quentin Shell as I picked out the different landmarks I knew. It was like gazing at a beautiful rock, knowing what lay underneath. Suddenly, I thought about Danny O’Toole.

Danny was a journalistic jack of trades like myself. Currently, he was working on *The Hollywood Form*, a new trade magazine. We’d met a year or so previously at a studio party, hit it off and since then had seen each other around town.

I turned back to Sunset, stopped at the drug store on the corner and phoned O’Toole. “How about an early lunch?” I asked.

“You buying?” He asked typically.

“If I have to.”

“You have to. Make it Musso & Franks in a half hour, give or take a half hour.”

He was sitting in a wide booth and when he saw me, he grinned and went through a string of bad jokes until the waiter came. I ordered drinks and fished out a cigarette. O’Toole was in his center thirties, was getting bald though sported a crew cut to cover it and enjoyed all the pallor that went with life on a bar stool.

“I’m digging into the Shenanigan show,” I volunteered.

O’Toole squinted. “For Lash?”

Lash did have his reputation. "For the paper—we are a newspaper, too, you know."

"If you have to be classified. All right, so you want information as if I'd know anything."

"Why was it chopped?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "The word broke a week or so ago that the show was going off. You can imagine my reaction, old buddy. I had just written a glorified release on Ginger Cole."

I had a quick mental picture of the beautiful red head that was the girl lead in Shenanigans.

"What gives, O'Toole? I asked myself. How can this be? But when I heard old Billy Joe Essex was moving his show in the time slot, I said to myself it figured." Through the dark gray of environment, something that had been Daniel O'Toole groped forward. He paused and dropped his voice to a much lower and more modulated pitch. "Essex, Tony, was a case of the true serpent. If you won't settle for that, try vampire. He fed off human blood. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do if there was something in it for Billy Joe. He was also a very talented individual, that's the hell of it."

"Hold on," I interrupted his soliloquy, "I know Essex was Mr. Big, but how about sponsors, agencies, the network and so on? Shenanigans was a very successful show and even Essex couldn't barge in at the drop of an idea."

O'Toole's answer was to signal to the waiter for a refill. He looked at me like a teacher looking at a child. "Farber owned the time period. What more do you want?"

"Farber?" Essentially, Farber was a talent house. Beyond that, they owned a piece of more than one studio, had most of the name stars under contract and also produced a few shows of their own, Shenanigans being one. Acting as producer, Farber bought certain time periods outright from the networks which they either brokered or used for their own shows.

I left O'Toole at the door of Musso & Franks and walked two blocks west on Hollywood Boulevard to a hotel where I phoned The Rampart. Rachel answered and sharpened something about my devotion to duty and where was the copy for Herman's Carpeting and what about the material for the Johnson story running Thursday. I waited her out until learning Lash was at home, then hung up.

Lash's phone rang seven times before he answered. I skipped all preliminaries and went right into my lunch with O'Toole and the introduction of Farber.

I heard the sound of his breathing. "Call me back in fifteen minutes."

I called him back in twenty and spent ten minutes after that writing down the names and addresses of the production company. Lash had

phoned Bob De Santos, the Shenigans producer.

"Check these people out," he said, "then we'll talk about Farber." He gave me his customary good luck and clicked off.

I looked at the list and Ginger Cole's name jumped out like a firecracker. The second name was David Prince, her boyfriend on the show. The rest were all featured character actors and members of the crew. I decided to start first with Ginger. Why not? Put a little fun in your life and try prancing.

I dialed her number. When there was an answer, I swiftly pulled down the hook.

Ginger Cole lived on a back street a few blocks from the Warner Brothers Studio in Burbank. It was an old Spanish stucco with a low slung tile roof. With all the greenery, it was very much the hide-away. A blond in sausage tight red capris answered the door. She was holding a highball. "Magazines?" She chirped brightly.

I shook my head. "Newspaper."

She lifted her drink and downed what was left of it. "Well, we don't want any," she giggled and slammed the door.

I located the bell under some creeping ivy and pressed insistently. There was the sound of hushed girlish voices. Then the blond threw open the door. A red head I recognized as Ginger Cole stood behind her.

"He claims he's selling newspapers," the blond said.

"Did you tell him we only read *The Wall Street Journal*?" Ginger asked wobbily.

"Of course not, honey. I didn't want him to think we were uppity."

"Good show," Ginger clowned.

"Sorry ladies," I broke in. "I'm only a poor working reporter."

Ginger stiffened immediately, and retreated back into the house leaving the blond and me. The blond gushed, "A journalist? Well, mister, come right in."

I followed her down a short entry while she prattled something about her latest achievement in show business. "I showcased in Glendale," she said. "Lousy play but I got the mentions."

Ginger Cole was sitting in the middle of one of two identical couches that faced one another in front of a fireplace. She was staring ahead and when I came into the room, she gave me a vague glance and quickly hid behind her drink.

The next quarter of an hour was spent in useless give and take with me in the middle. The blond had taken the opposite couch and I stood by the fireplace. Obviously, it was no time for questions about Billy Joe Essex. I made my excuses.

As I returned to my Ford, I heard the sound of their high pitched laughter. It bothered me. So did Ginger Cole.

The remainder of the day and

night was invested in the investigation of the remainder of the Shenanigan production company, cast and crew, of which there were too many.

I didn't finish, but I called Lash, anyway. He said to hurry over.

The fragrance of his loaded garden swept gently over me as I drove into his driveway. The moon was as high as a studio head and shone like a bright new contract. I stepped quickly up his brick steps and rang once.

Lash answered immediately. He opened the door and padded back to his main library with me at his heels.

Quentin Shell was lounging in my favorite huge red leather chair. His legs were stuck straight out like match sticks and he looked cramped with his hands in his pockets. He wore a white on white dress shirt with the collar turned under and a monogram over the pocket.

"This is Tony Ward, my assistant," Lash muttered politely.

Shell could have given the figures for the rainy season in Bolivia. "Fletch has been talking about you," he said listlessly.

I gave him the once-over and spoke directly to Lash, reviewing my adventures for the past twelve hours. When I finished, I went back to Ginger. "That gal was really tying one on. Beside her, everybody's Uncle Charlie would be strictly bush league."

Shell sat erect. "Of course she's

been drinking," he blurted. "The poor girl has been hit hard—our show was a big thing to her."

"What's your connection with Miss Cole?" Lash asked Shell pointedly. "Outside the show, that is."

"Connection?" Shell raged. "We were going together—I love her! And, I believe she loves me. She must! Ginger is that rare woman and of the rare, of the few, she is even more singular. She's sensitive, attentive, impossible, a woman of great talent—in short, a mystery!"

"Oh, me," I sighed.

From Lash: "Tony!"

"Shut up, damn you! Shell exploded. He bolted forward in his best dramatic pose, giving every impression of the literary genius. I wondered how he managed to put up with television. He gripped the arms of my favorite chair, completely spent, and fell back into its red leather comfort. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Lash nodded toward the hall. I received his message and waited outside the door. Through it, I heard Lash conversing with Shell. Then Lash stepped out and glanced at his watch. "Go home," he said in his gruff simplicity. "There's plenty to do tomorrow."

Wednesday was proof day; stick around the shop and in general see to it that the paper got out. As a rule, it was a day Lash stayed home and I stayed with Rachel. This was a different kind of Wednesday. I ar-

rived at the office before Rachel and called Lash.

"Be down in twenty minutes," he said.

It was closer to an hour before he drove up in his long forest green Cadillac. In the meantime, sister Rachel had arrived and was busy giving me the business over the business that was pressing. I saw Lash through the windows and went out to greet him.

"I'll be glad when this stupid thing is over," he grumbled, sliding out from behind the wheel. "How much longer I can keep Shell in and the police out is in the laps of the gods."

"He's difficult?"

"Very. He's got that red head on the brain and won't let go."

We stood by the open front door of The Rampart while Rachel stared holes through us. I prodded Lash. "Farber today?"

He let the traffic pass. "If Billy Joe was using muscle, it could only mean the top brass."

"The water's deep."

"It's deep," he acknowledged. "And rough." He hesitated a moment, then turned for the office. "Get what you can," he said curtly. And, it seemed, not with much hope.

Farber, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for the singer from Keokuk, was located on Sunset in the center of the Strip. I tried Lash's name with the receptionist and

asked to see David Gold. Gold was production chief and head of Farber.

"Do you have an appointment?" The brunette asked coldly.

"I'm sorry—"

"Mr. Gold only—"

"I know, only by appointment. Let me put it this way. I'd like to see Mr. Gold about Billy Joe Essex."

She didn't bat an eye. "He's dead."

"Now we're getting someplace."

The switchboard buzzed and I waited while she went about her business. When she was through, she looked up at me and heaved a big tired sigh. "In any event," she droned, "Mr. Gold hasn't come down for the day. If you'd care to leave your name—"

"Do you have his home phone?" I pursued, ,

"That's classified."

I left the brunette in the middle of a negative sentence and went outside, looking for the nearest phone. Six dimes later, I remembered a little guy that dropped in at The Rampart periodically peddling anything from scripts to encyclopedias. I found him in the book and called. "Fenwick, here," he answered with an accent as English as suede. I told him I was calling for Lash and as easy as that had Gold's address. Such as it was with the fringe people of Hollywood.

I had phoned from a hamburger

stand a block from Farber. As I was returning to my Ford, I saw the white Jaguar parked behind me. Some girl with her hair covered by a blue kerchief was motioning to me through the windshield. It was Ginger Cole.

"Just happened to see you," she explained. "And, glad of it, too. That was sure some scene I put on for you yesterday."

"Forget it."

"No, serious. Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I'll buy," I smiled at her.

"Whichever," she laughed warmly. "As long as we get some. Hop in."

We drove down Sunset to La Brea where she left turned into the parking lot of a corner restaurant. I followed her inside to a circular booth by the floor to ceiling windows. Ginger whisked off her kerchief, allowing her Mediterranean sunset red hair to laze about her shoulders. Very nice effect.

"Are you really a reporter?" She asked, giving me the full treatment. "I mean the real thing—not these gossip columnists?"

"You can say I'm a legitimate member of the profession," I countered.

"Then I can talk to you. I don't have to worry that you'll twist my words around like the rest of them do. No, don't answer—I trust you and that's enough for me. Trust is something you feel, you have faith in. Trust isn't something one buys

like pickles across the counter. It's something—" She stopped, groping for the right word.

"You feel," I inserted.

"Right!" Oh, I'm so glad I can talk to you. Glad, because it's so stinking difficult to find anyone that one can literally confide in and glad because of my terrible behavior yesterday."

"Once again, forget it."

"I won't forget it!" She flared. "I want you to understand that I'm not at all like that. It's just that I had received some bad news last week, and, well, one thing led to another."

"Such as Shenanigans being cancelled?"

Ginger's forest pool green eyes opened wide. "You know? Oh, but of course you would—then you understand."

"I'm trying. You're not from the coast, are you?" It was a guaranteed conversation beginner.

"No, Chicago. Why?"

"Call it journalistic curiosity."

Ginger smiled radiantly. "You're funny." Like most woman, she enjoyed questions about herself.

"When did you decide to become an actress?"

"Decided? I never decided, I always knew."

"Such dedication," I chided.

"I'm not dedicated! Oh, please pardon me—I hate that word. Every phoney in the business uses it. I'm speaking of something that is, that exists, that is me!" She was

aroused. "I'm not dedicating myself to an art—I am the art. How can we dedicate ourselves to something so abstract? If the abstract exists, then it has to take form and that form is a human being—me."

I went along with her for the ride. "How'd you get started?"

"You mean my first job? This'll kill you—you're talking about my first paid professional appearance, aren't you? Off the record, I was a dancer in Cicero."

"Cicero? They don't dance in Cicero, they strip!"

"You didn't expect me to hang around the little theatres all my life." She stopped and focused the full power of neon energy on me. "Anyway, thanks for listening. I just wanted to explain."

"Do you think Billy Joe's death might change things for the show?" I sprang.

Ginger studied her long tapered fingers. "Who can say?"

My encounter with Ginger had cost me nearly an hour and I was nervously aware of the time as I glanced at the passing traffic through my side rear view mirror. I didn't want to miss the Farber chief.

David Gold lived high up off Sunset in Bel Air. I drove up winding streets that had more curves than a gay nineties blond until I came to the end of a dead end caused by a deep wooded ravine.

There was an ancient iron speared

fence surrounding the grounds. The gate was open and I walked up a long circular drive to the house. It was a colonial with all the trimmings including four standing columns stretched impressively across the front. A tall, dusky butler answered the door.

He looked me over as if I were a rag peddler and when I stated my name and purpose, emphasizing Lash, he merely sniffed. "Wait here," he said from his mountain top.

I waited some ten minutes then barged in through the half open door. Voices sounded distantly from behind sliding doors on my left. I pulled them apart. The butler was standing at attention near the door and the voices I had heard were those of David Gold and Mike Mann, whom I recognized from photos. Mann was head of Eastern, Inc., the holding company of Farber.

As one who had marched in on royalty, I was the instant center of attention. The butler took a threatening step, awaiting some direction from Gold.

None came. "This is the man at the door?" Gold asked smoothly.

His servant answered in the positive, still straining to throw me out. I gulped and held my ground. "Quentin Shell didn't kil' Essex!" I exclaimed. It was right out of the late late show.

Gold and Mann exchanged humorous glances. "Very interesting,"

Gold soothed. "I assume you're referring to the late producer and the writer accused of his murder. Yes, I've read about it. A classic case, wouldn't you say so, Mike?"

Mann grunted.

"What brings you here?" Gold thrust.

It all came out in one breath. "Shell wrote Shenanigans which was near the top in the ratings. Suddenly, his show was cancelled and replaced with one produced by Essex. Cancelling a top rated show is almost unheard of which suggests pressure—blackmail. Who would Essex blackmail? Those in control —"

Gold studied me thoughtfully as he carefully stuffed a cigarette into a long ivory holder. I stood ready for any move. "My dear boy," he said contemptuously, "I hope for your sake you do have some talent. So far, you've exhibited the most primitive form of thought processes. If you weren't so stupidly sincere, I could very easily become violently offended. Investigate, and you will learn that Mr. Mann and myself were only distantly involved with Essex. Investigate further, and you will discover that while Shenanigans was well received, indications were that it was floundering. The truth is, Essex came up with a much better show.

"Shenanigans was a hell of a good show!" I argued.

"Which had run its course. We wanted to move Shenanigans to a

different time period but the sponsor wasn't interested; neither was the network. And, if any further proof is necessary, that same sponsor had signed for Essex's production."

I looked at Mike Mann. He was dead panned. I returned to David Gold who was smiling like a cat before a very small mouse.

A balloon couldn't have popped any quicker. I excused myself weakly and left swiftly under my own steam, what was left of it, into the bright late morning sunshine. The great grandstand play was the great fizzle.

A time out was needed and since it was nearly noon, I turned east at Sunset to the Cock 'n Bull. The bar was crowded with actors and industry people so I took a small table by the wall where I dawdled through two beers, using the first to ease away David Gold and the second to review the case up to that moment. That didn't take long.

I finished an excellent sandwich before returning to the wars, then left and sped west toward The Rampart. I went fast enough to create a gap between a cluster of drivers and myself, thus, when I stopped for the signal at Beverly Glen, there was no one around for the moment—except the new blue Pontiac that had drawn alongside me. I glanced at its gleaming finish and at the signal and back again. The second time around was when I saw the poor

man's version of King Kong reaching for my door handle.

I was a hair too late in setting the lock. Kong pulled me from behind the wheel like a sack of meal while another man took my place. I kicked, slugged and swore. Then came the revolution.

The sound of the breakers came through to me with the fury of a toy soldier's tin trumpet. They came from over the horizon, sweeping in and out as gently as a mother's caress. Then closer. Then from the distant end of a long black tunnel. In and out. In and out.

I was conscious of the cold wet sand a long time before I moved. When I did move, I turned over face up. The effort sent my head spinning again and I lay for a long while listening to the surf. The moon smiled down at me and I watched the passing clouds like a schoolboy.

I knew I'd been slugged. I remembered the blue Pontiac. I knew it was night and I was on some beach. But, what beach? What night? I watched more drifting clouds, decided it was time to return to reality and sat up.

That's when I noticed the coarse strands of rope around my middle. Attached to the rope like some flag was a manila envelope. I yanked it off, untangled the rope and stood— not very well.

I climbed a steep bank and saw the distant quick wink of a passing

car's lights. Then another. The highway looked a good half mile off. I reached the road and turned south. A few minutes later, I popped over the hill and saw another hill. I topped that one and began to get my bearings. Soon, I was looking down on the scattered lights of Malibu. Then I was in a service station's phone booth calling Lash.

While I waited, I found the folded manila envelope in my back pocket. Scribbled across it in bold black crayon was the simple warning: BURNED ONCE TWICE SHY. I laughed. I couldn't help it.

Lash pulled up in his Cadillac as I was drinking lukewarm coffee from a passing catering truck. He wheeled in the station's open area briskly, threw open the door on the passenger's side and gritted his teeth. "Who in the devil do they think they're pushing around!" He exclaimed.

We were easing into Santa Monica when he finally let up. I told him in detail about coffee with Ginger, my barging in on Gold and about the blue Pontiac. I finished with the warning on the envelope. "Somebody's worried," Lash said, racing through an amber light. "Now, I'll give you one. Our bird has flown the coop."

"Shell? I asked stupidly.

"If that panty waist mentions my name just once, they'll have to keep him in jail for his own safety!"

I lay back on the soft cushioned

seat and closed my eyes while Lash's talk became a drone, then nothing. The next thing I knew, he was jostling me in his driveway. I came around but only briefly. He led me to one of his spare bedrooms, pulled back the spread and unloosed my tie.

A bed had never felt so good.

It lasted twenty minutes. I dropped off and returned quicker. Lash had said something about "for his own safety," referring to Shell. I hurried down the hall to his main library, found it vacant and discovered Lash in the kitchen. He was huddled over a cup of black coffee.

"Where would Shell go?" I asked bright eyed.

"That's his problem," Lash grumbled. "Yours is rest—go back to bed. We can go over it in the morning."

"Like we have all the time in the world." Without asking, I yanked down a cup from the cabinet and poured my own coffee. Lash glowered at me over the lip of his cup. "He'd either strike out for parts unknown or go to his red head, right?"

"Excellent deduction," Lash sneered.

I ignored him. "Suppose the police would find him innocent—by a quirk of fate, that is?"

"Our job would be over—just like it is now."

"But," I pursued, "they would continue to search for suspects."

Lash pushed back his chair. "What the Sam Hill are you trying to say? So far, you're running off at the mouth. Of course the police would continue the case, but that's their problem. Ours is Shell and I doubt the police would think him innocent, and he's flown the coop, and my neck is stuck straight out, and that's the gist of it this moment. So, go back to bed—or go home. Take your pick."

"All right," I shrugged. "He's your friend, boss."

"Don't boss me." He looked at me sourly. "You got something?"

"Nothing but ideas, however, I think we'd better hurry over to Ginger's if you want your man in one piece."

Lash squinted.

"Somebody sicked those goons on me," I started. "Who? David Gold? He'd had to work damn fast. Shell? Foolish question. The great phantom in the case whom we know nothing about? I'll leave that open. Ginger? Let's back track a moment.

"After I left Danny, I called on the cast as per your instructions. Ginger was stoned as you know. The leading man, David Prince, was painting an oil and couldn't care less. The rest of the company was the same way. This morning, I bumped into Ginger, after which I saw David Gold and Mike Mann. When I left them, I stopped for a sandwich then was sapped while waiting for a signal. Unless I had been tailed all of last night, in which

case the goons would have had ample opportunity, and all of this morning, only two persons would have been able to put an immediate tail on me, one being Gold whom I rule out."

"Get to the point," Lash demanded.

"She's lovely and she smells good, plus she's a dedicated hell cat. Boss, I hate to say it—"

"And, he could be there!" Lash shouted.

"She could take care of him and call it justifiable. Case closed."

"What're you waiting for?"

I whisked through the midnight traffic in Lash's big green Caddy—down Sunset, through the Strip, over Laurel Canyon to Hollywood Boulevard, then up two blocks to Franklin, then Highland, the Freeway, Burbank's Barham Boulevard, past Warner's and then left to Ginger's. There was a blue Maserati in front which I guessed was Shell's.

No light shone through the windows which meant nothing in a leading lady's home. I padded around to the side of the house opposite the driveway, protected by the abundance of bushes. The second window down allowed a hint of light. I pressed my ear close and heard an excited voice.

"Dammit! So I framed you!" It was Ginger. "I didn't plan it that way but that's how it worked out. Besides, the police would have found you innocent—one look at

you, Quent, and they would have known they didn't have a killer."

Shell was in anguish. "Ginger, you killed a man!"

"I killed a louse. Oh, honey, get that shocked look off your face. I phoned Billy, thinking I could change his mind, make it worth his while should he drop the whole idea. At least it was worth a try. Naturally, I didn't want him here and his place was out. I thought about my key to your apartment. Well, we went there and to make a long story short, after awhile it became obvious he wasn't going to deal."

"After awhile?"

"Oh, Quent—get with it. I'm not Florence Nightingale. Anyway, he got rowdy and started roughing me up. Nobody does that to me, Quent—nobody! I broke away from him, ran into your bedroom and slammed the door. While he was pounding, I dug through your dresser hoping to find some kind of weapon—anything. That's when I found your gun. I took one of your hankies, wrapped it around the handle and shot him."

"I still can't believe it," Shell said as if in a stupor.

"It wasn't very nice of me, I know," Ginger giggled shrilly. "You're not going to tell, are you?"

There it was, neatly packaged with a red ribbon around it. Only one item left—bringing Ginger in, a matter as simple as a broad jump

across the Grand Canyon. I flipped a mental coin over rushing to the nearest phone and calling the police or personally following through. Two things caused me to stay. One, they'd never believe me, and, two, there wasn't time.

The voices had stopped. I waited, then crept to the back door and jiggled it. The door was unlocked.

I tip-toed through a utility room and into the kitchen. What light there was came from the hall. There was silence. I peeked around the corner of the door to the big front room where I had played Mr. Inbetween with Ginger and the blond just in time to see Ginger facing Shell with a tiny automatic in her hand.

"You came to me, Quent," she monotoned, "a man wanted for murder. I tried to pacify you but when you advanced toward me—"

"Me, too?" Shell asked stupidly. "Me, too?"

"Why not, sweetheart? Too much at stake to be sentimental." Then came the laugh. It started deep in her throat, small at first, but gradually growing louder. More shrill. Soon, Ginger's entire body was shaking. "Where's your famous man about town look now, honey?"

I knew she'd pull the trigger any moment. She stood with her back three quarters of a turn away from me.

Bang!

I stopped dead still. Shell was still standing, his mouth more open than

a three car garage. The bullet had winged into the wall and it was obvious Ginger was playing cat and mouse.

She was giggling again. "Did you ever look silly—"

But hysteria had taken over. Her gun hand went down and she covered her eyes with the other. I lunged—not fast enough. The sight or sound of me caused her to react. She wheeled, her teeth showing like a bat, and fired wildly. I ducked for the floor as she splattered bullets all over the room. Then I rushed her like a Chicago Bear lineman.

It was like tackling a bobcat and I still have the claw marks on my face to prove it. I had never punched a lady before.

When he was sure it was all over, Shell arose from his position and came over. He looked at me as if I hadn't taken a bath for six weeks and bent down over the unconscious form of his red head. I checked her gun, found there was one round left and slipped it in my pocket. "Watch her," I said, "I'm going to call the law."

"Beast," he muttered.

Ah, writers.

The police arrived in a bunch. Six black and white patrol cars were out front before the ceremonies were over. Six patrol cars . . . that's twelve hard-boiled, dubious, suspicious cops. I talked, and talked, and talked. I'm convinced that there is just one sentence in a police-

man's vocabulary: "Now let's get this straight . . . from the beginning." By the time the third car had shown, Ginger had revived. She saw her plight and immediately began to purr with an Irish brogue into an Italian cop's ear.

Shell was a useless ass. He was trying to act tragic, outraged and gallant at the same time. His voice quavered and his knees shook. No one, absolutely no one, could force him to bear witness against his "beloved."

I could see, what with the wishy washiness of Shell, that I would be the only witness worth anything. However, I had the slugs all over

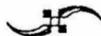
the room in my favor.

Ultimately, it came home to Shell. He had just two choices: either back me up or stand trial for the murder of Billy Joe Essex and most likely stand to enjoy the gas of California justice.

Shell's chivalry evaporated and, with self-righteous indignation, he did his damndest to strap his "beloved" in the chair.

Ginger was taken away and I was left alone for the moment. I called Lash. "Boss, it's all over," I began.

"Good, good," he interrupted. Now let's have it . . . from the beginning."



THE two men lay in the shallow water at the edge of the marsh and felt their breath slow to normal and the burning in their throats and chests ease away. Through the tall swamp grass, brown and stiff now with the coming of the winter, they looked up at the road on the top of the embankment, and at the big black cars that roared up and down the road, sirens screaming. Behind them, far back across the marsh,

Despite everything, Bert was something of a hero to his younger brother . . . and hero's die hard.

bad risk

BY JACK FARRELL

they heard the rising voice of the dogs.

They were brothers. The eldest, Bert, was about 27. He wore the gray work uniform of the prison on the other side of the marsh. It was dark now with wet. The other brother, Jim, was 10 years younger. His body was heavy and strong, older than his face. He was dressed in heavy dungarees and jacket that spelled out farmer.

The day was gray, the morning

sun did not shine through, and the rain was soft, almost a mist. Bert felt it gather on his face and neck. It was cold, but it felt warm compared to the chill water he was lying in. He felt the cold working its way deep into his flesh. He hadn't noticed the cold when he had been running. The voice of the dogs made him nervous.

It seemed to him that they had been running for hours, when it was actually only a little more than one hour, ever since Jim had jumped one of the two guards taking his detail out to work after breakfast. Jim had jumped from ambush, just as they had planned during the long visiting hours, and he had hit the other guard and in a minute it had been over, the guards lying in the water next to the pathway and all the convicts scattered. And then the running and the running, with Jim following, and now this embankment and road blocking the way, and the dogs circling around the marsh and coming up behind from both sides.

"Come on, Jim," he said. "We can't stay here. We've got to get across the road." And he crouched up.

Jim put a hand on him. "Wait," he said. "The dogs will smell us if we cross here. I know a better way."

And Jim eased back a bit into the marsh and started off parallel to the raised road. Bert followed.

He didn't like it. He wasn't used to following. They waded knee deep in the cold, still water, until they dropped, up to their thighs, into a channel that ran towards the road. They followed the channel.

Then Bert saw, through the grass, the culvert running under the road to the marshes on the other side. Its bottom was under a foot of water.

"Of course!"

Between cars they splashed fast for its entrance.

"Don't touch the sides," Jim called back, his voice turning tinny and hollow as he entered.

"So he's giving orders now," thought Bert, remembering the dogs, and keeping his hands tight to his sides.

He was about to answer when he heard the wail of a siren coming close, and he crouched down, shoulders hunched and mouth shut, listening. It wasn't until the siren had passed and faded away that he was able to stand up and at the same time realize how foolish he had acted. In the dimness, Jim hadn't seemed to notice his actions.

They reached the other side of the culvert and peered out and listened, Bert shrinking from the light that came in the opening. The channel on this side ran for 40 yards in the open until it reached the high, hiding safety of the marsh grass. There was no sound from the road above.

"Now!" said Jim, and ran in a

splashing crouch along the channel towards the grass. He followed, feeling the water holding his feet, slowing him up, watching the tall grass come towards him slowly, too slowly, and all the time feeling his back naked and cold.

Then he was into the grass, brushing it aside and sensing it closing again behind him, shutting him from view, covering him. He slowed up.

They continued their steady pace, heading now towards a distant, dark blob on the horizon that he surmised was a piece of land humping itself out of the swamp water. He followed steadily behind Jim, who seemed to know where he was going. The hump of land was far away.

They stopped only once, about noon, with the voice of the dogs far behind them. They squatted on a small clump of earth and grass that stuck out of the water, and ate meat sandwiches Jim pulled from his pocket. The food warmed them a little.

The wind was rising. He could hear its slight moan, and could see it bending the top of the grasses above his head. The warmth of the food was being offset by the chill of being still. He shivered.

"Never mind, Bert," Jim said, noticing. "I've got a nice, warm place waiting for us yonder." And he jerked his head in the direction of the still distant hump of land.

"I've been up here most a week,

getting in supplies and finding out the lay of the land." Jim paused, then laughed. "Some land," he said, splashing a foot through the water.

Only then did he get it. And he only smiled.

What bothered him most was Jim's enthusiasm. The way he kept rushing ahead, leading the way, turning constantly to tell him something new, and to look for compliments and appreciation.

"A kid," he thought. "He's only a kid, and a farmer to boot."

He'd have to show him a few things in the next couple of days. Give him some things to tell Papa.

He shivered again when he thought of his father, thought of the eyes that saw deep, that saw everything, thought of the smile that twisted his father's face when it looked into him. The smile that came every time some neighbor told him that his son had been brave in a fight. The same smile his father had each time he came home to offer him money.

And his father had dared to stand in the yard of that broken-down farm and say, "No stolen money for me." And he smiled that twisted smile at him.

He wondered how his father looked at Jim. Of course, he didn't look at anybody very much these days, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for death to come and take the smile from his face.

The moan of the wind raised a

notch. It had gotten colder. He shivered again. "Let's go," he said to Jim, jumping up. "We're not going to get anyplace sitting here."

Once they were moving, he began to warm up again. Occasionally Jim would turn to tell him something of the plan and how they would work their way down to the farm so he could see Papa once more before he died.

"Fat chance of me going anywhere near that farm," he thought. "Police will be staked out all over it, just waiting for me to show up." And he congratulated himself on having conned Jim into helping him escape. "Just so I can see Papa once more". He tried to laugh to himself but it didn't come off right. He gave it up and concentrated on the effort of splashing through the water and grass. He looked at the sky and wondered what time it was.

When they finally reached the hump of land, he was so tired he neither knew nor cared what time it was. Actually it was late afternoon. He was so tired he had trouble remaining on his feet. Suddenly he smelt the powdery dryness of Autumn-dry leaves and grass, and headed for the land. He had only one thought—to throw himself into leaves, to lie on grass, and earth, to close his eyes.

He was stopped by Jim. "No, Bert. Not here. They'll bring the dogs along the edge for sure. Come this way. I know the place."

Once again Bert followed. He was getting fed up with it. After all, Jim was younger by 10 years.

Jim led the way to where a sluggish, shallow creek came down from the woods and into the marsh. He went up it, keeping to the water. Bert followed.

He called to Jim, "No dogs will be able to follow us in this rain."

"No sense taking any chances," Jim called back.

"Don't take any chances. Don't ever take any chances," thought Bert. "That's him. And that's Papa, too. Scraping in that earth of what they call a farm, not letting anything move them off it, afraid to go out into the world, to try anything different."

The creek bed became rocky as it rose into the woods. Walking became more difficult. In his tiredness and anger, he cursed Jim, and cursed his father, too.

"Neither one of them would ever be able to go out and do what I've done," he thought. But it didn't make him feel any better, and he kept remembering his father's twisted grin, and what Jim had done for him this day.

When they had gone about three miles into the woods, Jim left the creek, and started climbing up the still rising land. It was late now. The rain was falling harder and the wind had grown stronger and colder. The voice of the dogs was far away now. He thought he would never be dry again.

In a short while, Jim cut down into a gulley and then into a small cave. He followed. About five feet inside the mouth of the cave, they pushed past a blanket strung across the tunnel. He heard Jim fumbling in the darkness, then a candle flared, and he saw a haven, warm and dry and comfortable.

The cave swelled slightly at this point, and at each end a blanket was strung. More blankets were spread on piles of pine boughs and grass, and on each such bed were piles of dry clothes. Between the beds was a pile of foodstuffs. He relaxed.

They changed, rubbing themselves hard with rough clothes. He felt the blood begin to flow. Jim lighted a little burner of canned heat and put a can of beans on it. With coffee and bread and cigarettes it made a fine meal. After it was over, they lay back on their cots, satisfied. The canned heat gave enough warmth to make their small enclosure perfectly comfortable. He was glad now that he had resisted that impulse towards the end in the wet and the cold to give up and go back to the prison where it was warm and where there was food.

He reached out and snuffed out the canned heat and then the candle. It was time for him to start taking over now. He lay back on the cot and pulled the blanket up to his chin. The roughness of the wool made him feel good.

"You certainly figured everything out nicely, kid . . . Jim, I mean," he said. But Jim didn't give any indication he noticed the slur.

"Papa know you're up here, Jim?" he asked.

"Yes," said Jim.

"What did he think of the idea?"

"He didn't like it much. Didn't think you're worth it."

"What do you think?"

"Of course you're worth it. You're my brother. And you'll see. Papa will change when you get there and he sees you."

"Yes," he said. "He'll probably change." But he felt hollow inside.

"Tell me about the time you held up the Farleyville Post Office, Bert."

He could hear the eagerness in Jim's voice. He settled back. It was going to be all right. He began to tell Jim about the Farleyville Post Office.

Everything was fine for two days. But on the third morning, he knew something was wrong as he woke up. Jim was nervous.

"We've got to move out today," Jim started. "The police will have laid off the guards around here. They'll have figured we got through somehow. And we've got to get to Papa pretty quick. He won't last much longer."

"I'm not going," he said flatly. "Out of here, yes. But not down to see Papa. They'll have every policeman in the state staked out on the farm by now."

Jim just sat back on his heels and looked at him.

"Don't look at me that way," he said to Jim. "You know yourself Papa don't want to see me. Why, you even told me he said that to you just before you left."

Jim finally opened his mouth. "But we planned all this just because you said you wanted to see him. Up at the prison, during the visiting hours, we planned all this because you said you wanted to see Papa before he died."

He laughed. "Maybe I did, but that's all changed now. It would be like trying to walk into a fort to go near that farm now."

Jim hadn't moved. "You never intended to go see him. You just wanted help getting out of the prison."

He laughed at Jim. He didn't say anything, just laughed. "The farmer," he thought.

Jim said, "Papa was right when he told me you weren't worth it."

He laughed.

Jim went on, "Maybe he was right about the other things he told me."

He laughed again, but it didn't quite come off. He saw, in memory, his father's twisted grin, his eyes looking deep into him.

But Jim wasn't looking at him the way Papa had. Jim didn't really know. He was just parroting Papa.

He laughed again, and the moment passed. They began dividing

up the gear they were going to take with them. Jim split the money he had with him, ten dollars to each of them. But Jim wouldn't touch the gun he offered him, one of the two guns they took from the guards when he escaped.

"Killing seems to be all right for you, Bert. It's your way of life. But I don't want to take anyone's life, and carrying that gun might make it too easy for me to do that."

They walked ten miles through the woods in the opposite direction of the swamp and hitched a ride on the highway. They dropped off at the nearest good sized town and walked to the bus station. Jim was heading south, to Papa and the farm. He was heading west, as good a direction as any.

They were saying their good-bys when it happened. Jim was no longer enthusiastic, he was depressed, but still there was a reluctant admiration in his face for his older brother and what he was—bandit (not thief), convict (not prisoner), expert gunman (not killer). Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement, quick and silent, and a hard hand grabbed his elbow tightly.

In an instant his attention had left the admiration in Jim's face, and focused on this new thing. He turned his head, his hand already digging into his waistband while his shoulders hunched forward and coldness suddenly gripped his belly. He saw a stocky, hard man,

with a heavy face, and a hand reaching into his coat.

There was little thought in what followed. His hand came out with the guard's gun, and he pressed it against the man's belly, twisting a little to do so, and he squeezed off two shots, feeling himself swelling in size and power and growing taller as he pulled the trigger. He was the biggest man in the world at that moment. Always he felt the same way when he had a gun on somebody.

The first shot was muffled against the man, but it knocked him back, away from the gun, and the second shot sounded indecently loud, and looking at the man's face, he saw he had made a mistake. The man was no cop. Instead of anger and frustration in the face, there was surprise and wonder. As the man slid and folded towards the floor, his hand came out of his pocket holding a bus ticket. He had been going to ask some sort of a foolish question.

He stood exposed, the object of everybody's attention, and he crouched, with shoulders hunched and gun slightly forward, facing the crowd in the terminal, all enemies, all pressing in on him.

Actually, few in the terminal yet knew anything was wrong. The few who had sensed something amiss were not professionals in this field of death, and had not yet been able to focus their attention away from normal, everyday oc-

currences. There were two exceptions, two policemen who had heard the last shot from opposite ends of the large waiting room, were now racing towards him through the crowd, guns drawn.

He was no longer the biggest man in the world. He felt quite a bit smaller than normal, and coldness had gripped his belly again. He took a step towards Jim, noting the open-mouthed horror on his face, eyes seeing nothing but the remembrance of the shooting. He took another step, past Jim, then turned and grabbed his brother as a shield. He got off two shots at the cop coming up on his right, and saw his leg give way and throw him, sprawling, on the floor. Then he turned towards the other cop and emptied his gun at him. Then there was no more firing, and both cops were lying, still, on the floor.

Everything, from his first pulling out his gun when he felt his elbow gripped, had taken but a few seconds. It had happened so fast, he was never able to remember which cop had fired the two shots he felt hit his brother, felt them hit with force that punched the body back into him, and heard the breath pushed out each time.

Now Jim's body was sagging, and Jim was mumbling, "Bert! Bert!" And he let Jim go and felt him drop to the floor as he turned to run, and still he hadn't had one real thought since it had started.

He was about 15 feet away and moving fast, when he turned, why he never knew, and looked at him. His brother was sprawled on the floor, his head up, looking at him. His mouth was moving. It seemed to be saying, "Bert! Bert!" And there was a thing in the face, in the eyes, that he didn't completely understand at that moment. And then whatever it was in the face, in the eyes, went away, and the eyes dulled and died, and he turned, and in a moment was out of the terminal and away.

In the night, after lying in watery ditches, half buried in refuse, he went out of the town hanging underneath a train. He traveled 500 miles before he left the train and started a wild crime spree that wound itself up and down and across five states.

His hold-ups were brutal and unplanned, quite unlike his old style, and he threw the money away in orgies of spending that seemed compulsive. As soon as the money was gone, he went on another job. His lack of planning was his success. The police could work up no pattern in his operations.

At the beginning, his flamboyance attracted a gang around him, but his senseless daring and brutality, and his inability to rest drove them away and at the end he was operating alone.

Then he disappeared, for a week, for two weeks, until he was

spotted heading for his Papa's farm, riding the buses, in broad daylight, making no attempt at disguise. Word went out to all police, "Don't go near him when he is in vicinity of other people. Extremely dangerous."

It was dark when he got off the bus at the road that ran up to his father's farm. He walked up the dirt road that stretched palely ahead in the darkness. The house was quiet when he reached it. "Papa!" he called, entering. There was no answer.

"Papa!" he called again. "Wake up, Papa. I want to show you something."

There was no answer. He entered his father's bedroom. It was empty. He wandered through the entire house, calling. There was no answer. There was only the darkness and his own footsteps in the darkness.

Then the darkness was gone and there was light. An explosion of light, hard and bright, that poured in through every window. And the booming of a loudspeaker telling him to come out.

"It's about time you got here," he thought.

"Papa!" he called. "Hurry. I want to show you something. Hurry, Papa." And he walked to the door, drawing his gun.

He opened the door and stepped out immediately. Straight into the blinding light of the spots. He walked towards the lights, his eyes

almost closed against them, firing straight ahead.

He didn't know how many times he had been hit before he went down. Actually, he had received 15 slugs in his body, all in a matter of a few seconds. He had been leaning forward as he walked, into the force of the bullets. He had fallen forward on his face when the firing had ceased.

He didn't feel any pain. He just felt nicely tired, tired and comfortable. He thought that now, perhaps, Papa would change that grin. He had gotten very tired of always remembering that grin. And recently Papa's grin had become the same as Jim's last look at him from the terminal floor. Every time he would relax he would see either Papa's twisted, sardonic grin, or Jim's face with the staring eyes and the silently moving mouth, and the something else that he didn't understand, that he wouldn't let himself understand, that he understood and didn't want to remember. And the two faces would alternate in his head when he was trying to sleep, and all the women and the booze and the hold-ups and the shooting couldn't drive the faces away. And the two faces would blend into one face and be one face, and that was silly, because they were two quite different faces.

And it had been impossible to sleep, and he was very tired of not sleeping, of not being able even to relax, and very tired of seeing the faces all the time, and now he would not see them anymore. Everything was squared away now.

There were no more faces, and he relaxed, and he felt he smiled, although he didn't. Then the pain came, very fast, and completely filling him, and then there was no pain, only blackness, and then there was nothing.

A sergeant and a young policeman walked slowly up to the body. The sergeant carried a high-powered rifle held down by his hip. It was aimed always at the body. He stopped and toed the body over on its back. It rolled loosely, like a sack of salt. The sergeant had personally pumped three bullets into the body when it was still a man.

"He must have been very brave," said the young policeman.

"Brave, hell," said the sergeant. "He was nuts."

"What was he yelling inside the house?" asked the young policeman.

"He was calling for his old man, who's been dead for over a month."

The sergeant turned and walked away from the body. "Not brave, just plain nuts," he said. "Not brave at all."



the men



from the boys

It was obviously puppy-love . . . but this pup had teeth.

BY ALLYN DENNIS



RAMONA CAHILL was probably the most seductive witch who ever wriggled down the back alleys of Alderbrook. She had the kind of face you see in ads for sexy cigarettes, and the way she wore her clothes left no doubt in anybody's mind that everything she had was real and ready.

But her so-called charms had no effect on me. I wanted to kill her before I ever layed eyes on her.

I don't know exactly what I was looking for the day I found those sickening letters in Danny's room, but there's no getting around the fact that I was looking for something. He'd been spending enough time in there lately to invent a new use for the atom, but I knew darned good and well he wasn't doing any homework in chemistry—or Latin—or English—or anything else that would get him out of high school with enough credits to get into college. No kid that age ever gets glassy-eyed from too much studying. There was some-

thing else on his mind, **but I** couldn't find out what it was.

I tried the motherly approach a couple of times. That is to say, I grabbed him by the chin and made him look me in the eye.

"What's the matter with you?" I demanded.

"Leave me alone," he'd groan, then stumble off to his room and slam the door.

I also tried good old reliable Frank de Julio, but for the first time in several years, I got no help there.

"Do like the boy says, Amy. Leave him alone. And above all," he warned, "don't go barging into his room with some lame excuse, like bringing him milk and cookies. You won't fool him—and you won't catch him at anything. All you'll do is tip off the fact that you're trying to."

I could feel my ears getting warm, so I stormed out of Frank's office before the tell-tale blush spread to my face. I'd already tried the milk-and-cookies routine. Like Frank said, it didn't work. I was sure I'd heard a rustling noise of some sort (and I know, now, what it was) but by the time I got the door open, Danny was stretched out on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

"You forgot to knock," was all he said.

Suddenly, I was aware of his voice. It was deep and resonant, like a man's voice. I looked from

the snack tray I was holding to the six-foot form on the bed, and I got a crazy impulse to ask this stranger what he was doing in my little boy's room. What I actually said was even sillier.

I said, "Get your feet off the bed-spread."

By the time I got the tray back to the kitchen, the cookies were soggy with spilled milk and tears. Oh, Damn! Why couldn't I ever say the *right* thing to that kid? Why couldn't I reach him? Other people tell me their troubles. They tell me when I'm not even interested! Out of twenty or thirty customers who come into my beauty shop every day, at least five will force me to listen to things they shouldn't tell anyone but a psychiatrist. I could get enough on Mrs. Jones to blackmail her, simply by saying "Hi. How are you?" . . . but I couldn't find the right words to get my own son to open up to me.

I can't claim that I always know when Danny's in trouble. There have been times (too many, in fact) when I've been the *last* one to know. That's one reason I was so worried. He hadn't even tried the usual cover-up tricks to keep me from getting nosy. His only defense was a wall of silence . . . and every time I tried to break through, it just grew a little thicker.

Well, I had to do *something!* I didn't know what, but something. I didn't exactly plan it, but— The

first time I saw a few blank spaces in my appointment book and had one of my operators free to watch the reception desk, I grabbed a broom and dustpan, and ran upstairs to "clean" Danny's room. Clean, ha! Who did I think I was kidding? The room, like Danny, was cool and immaculate. The only thing out of place was me. Many's the time I've pounded on the door and demanded that he open it, but I'm sure it would never cross Danny's mind that I might sneak in sometime when he wasn't looking.

I guess that's why he hadn't gone to any elaborate pains to hide the letters. I found them in a white leather keep-sake box, along with a few other mementos he really treasures; a picture of his father, merit badges he earned in Scouts, and my wedding ring. Among such things as these, I found the kind of unspeakable filth that even a modern-day novelist couldn't write without vomiting.

At first, I refused to believe what I was reading. I tried to tell myself it was something he'd copied from a trashy book. But the letters weren't in his handwriting, and most of them were signed "Ramona". Later on, she had more intimate ways of identifying herself, but by the time I got that far, I was too sick at my stomach to do more than blink at the signatures.

The first few were just mushy. There was much talk of his "beau-

tiful strength" and the "sweet agony of unfulfilled love". Those were dated back to early summer . . . back to when I had the right idea and let Frank talk me out of it. I'd wanted to yank Danny out of that Little Theater Group and find him some healthier outlet for his energy.

"But he doesn't *want* to be a box-boy in a supermarket," Frank had protested. "He wants to be an actor."

"He just thinks he wants to be an actor," I snapped. "That's exactly why I want to get him away from those beatniks! They're filling him with all sorts of crazy ideas! He should be with kids his own age, doing things that normal kids do."

That was the wrong thing to say to Frank, and I knew it the minute the words were out of my mouth. I flicked my eyes away from the "checkmate" expression I could see coming, and tired to get interested in what the pigeons were doing on the courthouse steps, three stories below. I kind of hoped he'd let that pass and go on to a safer subject, but of course, he didn't.

"When was the last time you noticed Danny chumming around with kids his own age?"

I kept my mouth shut and my eyes on the pigeons. I wasn't going to get trapped into another one of *those* arguments. I always lost. Frank claimed that Danny was a

loner by choice, and that I was giving him all sorts of complexes by trying to make him over into *my* idea of an average boy. Well, I was not! I just wanted the kid to have some fun. I hated to see him off in some lonely corner with nothing but a book for company, when all the other boys were playing Kick-The-Can or Stickball. And how could he *know* he wouldn't like things like baseball or football if he wouldn't even try? But every time I'd talk him into getting out and mixing it up with the other kids, something always went wrong. That's how I first met Frank. Lieutenant de Julio is his title, and Juvenile Detail has been his assignment for the past ten years. Danny was only about twelve or thirteen the first time Frank brought him home to me instead of booking him. (Danny had been out getting some fresh air and exercise, all right. He and two or three other little sports had been systematically shattering the windows of every vacant house in the district.)

"Okay," I surrendered, giving up on the pigeons, "so every time I push him toward a crowd of normal, happy kids, he manages to side-step them and latch onto some other misfit. Okay, I get the message. The boys I consider nice, he considers dull. I know, I know," I rushed on, blocking Frank's attempt to start on his favorite lecture. "You say Danny is more ma-

ture than most boys his age. Well, I say he's getting too big for his britches, and I say this Little Theater Group isn't helping one damned bit!"

Fank sighed and gave me his what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you look. "Danny's getting too old to jump every time you clear your throat, my dear. If you want to discourage this acting kick, you're going to have to find some other way of doing it besides bellowing at him like a drill sergeant. At this age, it's instinctive for him to start bucking authority. Particularly," he added with a teasing grin, "his mother's authority. What he needs—"

"Don't!" I cut him off sharply. "Don't tell me again that what Danny needs is a father."

Add that to the things I wish I hadn't said. The room grew very quiet, with a nobody-home feeling, and I tried not to watch the birthmark on Frank's cheek flare up like somebody'd slapped him. The redness disappeared in a second or two, like it always does, and his face took on the color and consistency of granite.

"I wasn't going to say that," he replied evenly. "And I won't ever say it again—under any circumstances. I was going to say that what Danny needs is a *mother*—a mother who might at least try to understand that a sensitive boy isn't necessarily a sissy, and that one who is different from the common herd isn't necessarily a freak."

"I never said that!" I tried to yell at him . . . but the words got caught in my throat, choking it up like wet tea-leaves clogging a drain.

Frank didn't say anything. He didn't have to. I knew what he was thinking. His eyes were like mirrors, forcing me to look at an image of myself that I didn't want to see. And I got the uncomfortable feeling that I'd done exactly the same thing to Danny. Sometime or another, maybe I'd given *him* that kind of a look . . . the kind of a look that makes you want to crawl away and cry because you know you're not very nice, but you don't know what to do about it.

"Well—well, could *you* talk to him, Frank? You know how—"

"I'm not his father," he said with cold finality.

Oh God, I thought despairingly, I must have cut him awfully deep for him to turn so mean. Why do I always say the first thing that pops into my head? Won't I ever learn to give some thought to other people's feelings before relieving my own? I'd had enough signs in the past year or so to warn me that Frank was getting serious, and that I was going to have to do something about it—but I didn't realize he was *that* serious, and I wouldn't have cooled him off *that* way for anything in the world. I just wasn't thinking about Frank. I was thinking about Danny.

"Maybe I'm wrong," I mumbled, beginning to doubt that I'd ever

been right about anything. "I'll have to admit that Danny hasn't been in trouble since he started taking such an interest in debate and dramatics at school. B-but he's not in school now," I blurted, getting all worked up again. "And these aren't kids he's playing around with!"

"They aren't wild and wicked actors, either," Frank said with biting sarcasm. "They're just ordinary people, who'd rather get up on a stage and wave their arms around than go bowling. That doesn't make them beatniks. What else have you got against them—besides the fact that their idea of fun isn't the same as yours?"

"Well, . . . they drink a lot," I muttered, beginning to feel about as foolish as I probably sounded.

For that, I got a derisive snort. "So does the butcher and the baker and the candlestick-maker. So do an appalling number of 'nice' boys. For that matter, so do I—and if you'll excuse me," he said in an unmistakable tone of dismissal, "I think I'll go out and tie one on right now. Best idea I've had all day."

He stood up, buttoned his coat, and reached for his hat. For a couple of breathless seconds, I thought he was kidding. But my feeble attempt at a smile didn't thaw him one bit. He'd obviously had all he could stand of me, and he didn't care how plainly it showed. I'd never seen him like this!

"Frank, wait!" I found myself

pleading. "There's more. Listen! I—I guess I should have told you this in the first place instead of beating around the bush, b-but I was afraid it would sound silly. Maybe it is silly. I don't know. I just don't *know*, Frank."

That's when I told him about my first glimmering suspicion of Ramona. I must have sounded like a 33rpm record set at 45 and I guess I didn't make much sense. Frank kept his hand on the doorknob all the time I was talking, and the more I jabbered, the more I realized how little I had to say. When Danny first got in with the Little Theater Group, he'd talked about a "Mrs. Cahill" as if she were a cross between Joan of Arc and Ethel Barrymore. Now, he was calling her "Ramona" and I didn't like the way he said it.

"Is that all?" Frank asked impatiently.

"Well, it must mean *something* when he begins every sentence with 'Ramona says' or 'Ramona thinks'. Just who in the hell *is* this Ramona? That's what I want to know!"

"Some glamour-girl he's got a crush on," Frank shrugged indifferently. "Big deal. When I was his age, I had the hots for Betty Grable. I got over it. He will, too." He settled his hat purposefully and opened the door. "She probably doesn't even know he's alive. A lot of us poor saps throw our hearts away on women who couldn't care less. But we all get over it, Amy,"

he said pointedly, then added with a grim smile, "It only hurts for a little while."

He didn't slam the door when he left. He just closed it like a book he'd finished and was about to forget.

It's easy to look back now and see what happened and why, but at the time, I didn't have a crystal ball—or much insight, either. All I could do was follow the habit-pattern of half a lifetime and listen to the small voice inside me which kept saying "Take care of yourself, kid. Nobody's going to do it for you". I learned that at the age of sixteen, when my stepmother decided she'd had enough of me. I had a refresher course at eighteen, when my husband left me with a six-month-old baby and no visible means of support.

I'm not offering that as an excuse. I'm just trying to explain why it was instinctive for me to shove Frank's personal feelings to the back of my mind and only remember what he'd said about Danny. In short, he'd said I should leave Danny alone to work out his own problems. He'd also said, in effect, that he was through acting as go-between when Danny got too much for me to handle.

So I'm on my own, I thought defensively. So what's new?

It was a long summer—a *very* long summer . . . and, in spite of the heat, I found I'd developed a strange habit of clutching myself as

if I were cold. The last time I caught myself doing that, I woke up to the fact that I'd been fighting the impulse to call Frank about a Danny-type problem.

Don't be silly, I lectured myself severely. Who's raising this kid, you or Frank? I wished I hadn't brought that up. It reminded me how many problems I'd had with Danny before I met Frank, and how few I'd had since.

On the other hand, since I'd stopped taking problems *to* Frank, I hadn't had any problems *with* Frank—and that's the way I wanted it. I'd spent nearly seventeen years in a back-breaking, heart-breaking struggle for survival, and I'd finally won. Now, I had everything under control—under *my* control . . . and I meant to keep it that way. The last thing in the world I wanted, or needed, was another man messing up my life. Frank was a nice guy, but there was no getting around it; he was a man. I was willing to overlook that, but he wasn't.

So I gritted my teeth and told myself that summer would soon be over. When school started, I figured Danny wouldn't have time for his freakish friends. He'd be too busy living it up as a mighty Senior; the last school play, the last school dance, the last big fling at the care-free life.

But it didn't work that way. By October, when Danny got the only Poor-Work (flunk warning) slip

he'd ever had in his life, I knew my troubles weren't over. They were just approaching some terrible climax. The kid wouldn't eat, he couldn't sleep, and he wouldn't talk.

That's when I panicked and ran back to Frank for help. That's when Frank told me, for the last time, to leave Danny alone . . . and, for the last time, to leave *him* alone.

That's why I practically tore Danny's room apart that day, searching frantically for *anything* that would give me a clue to whatever was eating him. And that's why, when I found the letters, I didn't even consider turning them over to Lt. Frank de Julio.

"She probably doesn't even know he's alive," he'd said, way back in June.

She knew he was alive, all right—every inch of him! In a couple of those letters, she paid "glorious tribute" to parts of that boy's anatomy that even *I* hadn't checked since the last time I dusted him with baby powder!

I had to quit reading at that point. I was sick—physically, retchingly sick. The emetic effect of those words doubled me up and sent me reeling into the bathroom, then, gagging me past all endurance, finally threw me to my knees. After what seemed to be hours, when I was sure there was nothing left in my stomach, I doused my face with cold water and went back to my reading.

She left nothing to the imagination. The whole sordid affair was spelled out, from the first time she introduced him to the "sweet mysteries of love" to the last time she was "consumed and consecrated" by his "tender demands". Every stroke she'd taught him, every caress he'd improvised; all were described in erotic detail. Those weren't love letters. They were blueprints of corruption, designed to keep him in a constant state of wild desire. She knew what she was doing.

Ramona Cahill was twenty-eight years old. My son was seventeen.

I never did finish the letters. I couldn't. Waves of nausea kept clouding my vision, beginning with blinding flashes of red that faded to a kind of sickening gray haze. I sank to the floor and leaned my head against the bed, closing my eyes to shut out the awful contrast between the boyhood souvenirs that decorated the walls and the collection of pornography that told how my son had become an imitation-man. I was still trying to bridge that shocking gap when something warned me to raise my head.

I don't know how long Danny had been standing in the doorway. From the look of him, it might have been twenty years. One hand was clutching his schoolbooks and the other pushed against the doorframe as if he were holding up the wall. All that moved were his eyes,

black and enormous against a dead-white face. His glance kept flicking from me to the scattered letters and back again, hating me a little more each time.

As I struggled to my feet, his voice cut across me like a whiplash.

"Don't!" he warned in an oddly pleading tone. "Don't come near me, Mother. I don't want to hit you."

For a second or two, I just stood there blinking at him. I couldn't believe my ears! Danny? Threatening *me*? Why, that little— Then I stopped and took my first really *good* look at him. He topped me by at least ten inches, out-weighted me by about eighty pounds, and was just a breath away from going completely berserk with rage. One wrong move or one wrong word from me, and he'd snap. But with that shock came the certain knowledge that if I backed down now, I'd lose what little control I might have over him.

"Sit down," I ordered thickly. "We've got to talk about this. I don't like it any better than you do, but we've *got* to talk it over, Danny."

Our eyes locked together like they'd been magnetized . . . then, very slowly, he eased into a chair. I tried not to explode the breath I'd been holding. My so-called "upper hand" was still pretty shaky. I couldn't hold him in that chair any longer than he wanted to be held.

"I'm not going to yell or make a

big scene," I said carefully. "I just want to know one thing." I took a deep breath and picked up one of the letters. "Is this past history, or are you still involved with that woman?"

He snatched the letter out of my hands and, for a moment, I thought he was going to ram it down my throat. Instead, he got down on one knee and began picking the rest of them off the floor where I'd scattered them. He tucked them back in their envelopes like a mother putting a baby to bed.

"Danny?"

"I love her, if that's what you mean by 'involved,' he finally answered. "And don't call her 'that woman'. Her name is Ramona."

It's a good thing he had his back to me, because I know my face twisted. I could feel it. The awful thing was that I didn't know whether I was about to laugh or cry. I jammed both hands against my mouth and literally *held* it shut. That poor, stupid kid! He'd just die if he knew how ridiculous—how pathetic he looked and sounded. Such dignity! Such nobility! He challenged me like Launcelot defending Guinevere . . . but in a voice that still had an adolescent quaver. Oh, God. He reminded me of a gangly pup, barking savagely at a mailman.

What do I do now?, I wondered helplessly. How do I rip away that veil of romance she's thrown over everything and make him see what

a distorted mess it really is? How do I explain the difference between love and sex? How does a mother tell a seventeen-year-old boy about the birds and bees when he already knows about the Flowers of Evil?

"Will you listen to me for just a minute?" I begged. "And for once, try to believe I know what I'm talking about. Please, Danny . . . listen!"

He gave that long, drawn-out sigh teenagers use to express the utter futility of trying to cope with dim-witted parents, and walked over to stare out the window. The urge to slap him silly was almost more than I could bear, but I fought it down and tried to keep my voice calm.

"First of all, I want to make one thing very clear. I'm not blaming you for what's happened. I'm shocked. I'm disgusted. I'm mad enough to kill somebody—but not you, baby . . . not you. I'll deal with her later. Right now, I'm more—"

"Don't you go near Ramona!" He whirled on me with both fists clenched, poised like a panther. "Don't you dare! I won't have her upset at a time like—"

"Upset?" I shrieked, losing all control. "Why, you damp-eared little punk! I could have her put in jail for what she's done to you—and that's exactly what I *will* do if you push me one step further!"

That hit him like a well-aimed kick. He opened and closed his

mouth a couple of times, but nothing came out. While he was still gasping for breath, I let him have it with both barrels.

"You're still a minor, young man, and I'm still your legal guardian. Maybe I don't have what it takes to keep you away from trouble, but I sure as hell know how to keep *trouble* away from *you*. I can charge her with statutory rape, and that's the last you'll see of her until she's eligible for parole."

For the first time, I saw real fear in his eyes.

"You wouldn't," he whispered hoarsely.

"Try me!"

Staring him down, then, was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. It was like sticking a knife in him and holding it there until he died. He came apart slowly, beginning at the knees. He sank to the bed, rather than sat . . . but still he kept folding. His hands were shaking so bad he could barely lift them to cover his face.

Mine were cold and clammy, and they hurt from being gripped too tightly together. I didn't dare tell him I hadn't meant what I said—that the last thing in the world I'd do would be to drag him through a public scandal. As usual, I'd said the first thing that occurred to me—but I only meant to pin his ears back, not cut his heart out! Dear God, what kind of a hold did that woman have over him?

Well, for the moment, mine was

stronger. I hated having him see me as some kind of monster, but if that's what it took to keep him in check, so be it. I had to use any means at hand to get him away from her and *keep* him away until I could talk some sense into him.

I started to do the right thing then. I started to walk out of there and leave him alone for awhile. But, like Lot's wife, I looked back. He was so young and defenseless—and so *miserable!* I couldn't leave him like that. I just couldn't.

I knew better than to throw my arms around him, or even to touch him—but I got as close to him as I dared and began to talk in what I hoped was a soothing murmur. I don't know what all I said but, at first, it seemed to be doing some good. He stopped trembling and started breathing normally. That, too, would have been a good time to shut up and leave him alone. He hadn't been listening to what I said, any more than I had. He'd simply been lulled by the sound of my voice . . . like a child coming out of a nightmare. But I kept talking. God help me, I kept talking.

All of a sudden, he was on his feet and headed for the door.

"Danny! Where are you going?"

"Some place where I don't have to listen to you," he spit. He stopped at the door and looked back at me—a look of such utter loathing that I had to close my eyes. "You make me sick, talking about what love is and what love isn't.

You **don't** know anything about love—or much else, for that matter. All you know is how to make money. And that," he said with quiet contempt, "is something *anyone* can learn."

By the time I found the strength, or the courage, to open my eyes, he was gone.

For a horrifying few minutes, I really thought I was paralyzed. No part of me would move; not my arms, not my legs, nor my mind. I could feel a terrible urgency welling up inside me, but I couldn't think why. I had to do something and do it quickly . . . but what?

Gradually, my brain began to turn over like a sluggish wheel. I got its message, but without any real meaning. It was just a sort of mechanical order to move. And, mechanically, I did.

"If you can't keep Danny away from trouble," something kept repeating over and over, "then you've got to keep trouble away from him."

I didn't know where those crazy words came from, but I didn't stop to wonder about it. I just grabbed a phone book and started searching through the C's . . . Cahill, Cahill. I needed an address. Cahill, Sgt. Thomas J.—902 East Walnut; the only Cahill in the book. That had to be it. That had to be where Danny was headed; 902 East Walnut.

For once, I blessed the heavy traffic that slowed me down and

force me to concentrate on driving. The narrow streets were slick with rain and jam-packed with tried and hungry wage-earners, hurrying home for dinner. After I'd inched my way through that mess, I had time to realize where I was going and sense enough to be scared at how far I'd gone without knowing it.

I parked a few doors down from the Cahill home, and sat there for a few minutes until I was sure I had my wits about me. Every nerve in my body was tingling with the urge to do something violent; to scream, to claw . . . to kill. I had to fight that down before I went in there. All I cared about was Danny. I didn't want him any more shook up than he was already, so whatever I did had to be done as quickly and quietly as possible. No big, dramatic scenes that might give Ramona a chance to play Camille—and above all, no cat-fights that might attract the neighbors.

It's a good thing I waited. If I'd been thirty seconds quicker getting to Ramona's front door, I'd have bumped into the man who came out. Thank God, he didn't see me!

I didn't see much of him, either. The nearest street light was a full block away, and he turned in the opposite direction from which I was approaching. But I saw enough to know it *was* a man, not a boy. I figured I'd just missed Sgt. Thomas J. Cahill, and I heaved a sigh or relief. For one thing, I

didn't want an irate husband around to make things worse than they already were. For another thing, I was now sure that Danny wasn't with Ramona. Not yet, anyway. He might be skulking out in the alley, waiting for the all-clear signal—but she wasn't liable to open the back door while I was pounding on the front.

I didn't waste time with polite introductions. I brushed right past her, found my way to the kitchen, and locked the back door.

"What do you think you're doing?" she screeched, trailing me at a safe distance. "You get out of here, or I'll call the cops!"

"Do that," I smiled grimly. "And when they get here, I'll tell them about some letters I read this afternoon—the ones you wrote to a seventeen-year-old boy. Ever been up on a morals charge before?"

In the dead silence that followed, I had plenty of time to size her up. She had a lush little figure that would go to fat in another five years, and a cascade of golden hair that was too long to be stylish but probably looked beguiling as hell on a pillow. From a purely professional viewpoint, I could see it wouldn't be any trick at all to make her look ten years younger—but not until she wiped the pinched, trapped-animal look off her face. That *added* ten years.

"Who are you?" she croaked.

I told her, then had the satisfaction of watching a few more years

bite into her baby-doll face. Too bad Danny can't see her like this, I thought. On top of everything else, her make-up was smeared. Obviously, her husband had gone away dumb but happy.

"You got no call to come barging in here, threatening me," she began shakily. "It takes two to tango, you know, and nobody held a gun at Danny's head. As a matter of fact—"

"Never mind the details," I cut her off. "I'm not interested. Now, get this through your over-bleached head and get it good. Do you know what happens to nasty old men who seduce young girls? Well, the same thing happens to nasty old *women* who seduce young *boys*! It's called statutory rape, and you can get five or ten years in jail for it. Ask any lawyer. And while you're at it, make sure he's a damned good one. Those letters are enough to hang you."

I saw a momentary flicker of panic in her eyes before she dropped them and turned away from me. Then, like any cornered rat, she zeroed in on the basics of sheer survival. I could almost see busy little thought-motors churning as she paced the room, aimlessly picking things up and putting them down. Knowing her type, I half-expected her to smash a bottle and come at me with the broken end.

"I sure hate to see Danny get hurt," she said finally, with an elaborate sigh of mock regret. "I really

do. He's a nice kid." Suddenly, her voice lost its tiny-girl softness and began dripping with venom. "But he's not going to *look* like a nice kid if I have to defend myself in court—and he's not going to *feel* like a nice kid if you start making a public fool out of him. That's all he needs right now," she snorted, "having the whole town watch while Big Mama throws her weight around."

"Now, look," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady, "I didn't come here to exchange insults with you. I came to warn you. Get away from Danny, and stay away. If you've got a brain in your head, you'll take that warning and back off. I'm only going to tell you once. After I leave here, you've got exactly *one hour* to send that kid home. Either you get rid of him—and make a good, permanent job of it, or I'll get rid of you. It's as simple as that."

"Hey, wait a minute!"

I didn't stop, or even slow down. I'd done all the talking I was going to do . . . to her. Maybe I couldn't scare her, but I was willing to bet her husband could.

"You'd better get away from that door," I told her calmly, looking at my watch. "Your home is dwindling to—"

"No! You're not leaving me holding any bag like that! If you know anything at all, you know I gave Danny the brush a long time ago—and you probably know why.

So just **what** are you trying to pull, and what makes you think I'll sit still for it?"

She wasn't bluffing. One look at her face told me that. Something also told me I'd better take it easy. While I already knew more than I wanted to know, I was beginning to suspect I didn't know all I *needed* to know.

Unfortunately, it didn't take Ramona long to figure that out. She wasn't as dumb as she looked. By the time I'd satisfied myself that she'd made a final and complete break with Danny, I'd also betrayed my own ignorance. From then on, she fed me just enough information to get me off her back.

I thought the broken romance explained Danny's fits of black despair and, as far as I was concerned, it was good news. Let him brood. He'd get over it. And my worst fear (that she might play him like a yo-yo just for kicks) was quickly dispelled when I found out she had her hooks into someone else. I was glad to hear it, but her gall left me breathless.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, shaking my head. "If your husband ever—"

"He shipped out of here months ago," she said tiredly. "He's the least of my worries."

"Then that man who left, just before I came in, wasn't your husband?"

"Not yet," she said wryly, with a funny little smile flicking off and on. She gave me an oddly specu-

lative look, almost as if she'd consider letting me in on the joke if I really wanted to know.

I didn't. My only interest in Mr. X was the fervent hope that he wouldn't skip town. I wanted Ramona kept busy for a good, long time.

"Are you sure you can handle a man?" I couldn't resist digging. "They aren't as easy to con as little boys."

That brought her chin up. It wasn't the steadiest chin I've ever seen, but it gave a small hint of the dignity she was trying to put across.

"Mrs. Devlin, no matter what you think of me, you've got to believe one truth. I swear to God, I had no idea how young Danny was. I had no way of knowing! I met him—"

"I know where you met him, but the theater couldn't have been *that* dark—not all the time." I let my eyes drift slowly over her selling points, making no attempt to conceal my revulsion. "I can understand what he saw in you. He's got normal glands. But I'll never understand what a drooly babe like him could do for a woman like you."

"Well, for one thing," she retorted, eyes blazing, "he didn't treat me like I'd just crawled out of the woodwork. For the first time in my life, I felt like a real—" She stopped suddenly, as if she'd just realized who she was talking to.

Shrugging her shoulders, she turned away from me and lit a cigarette. "Oh, why don't you just write me off as a sex-fiend and forget it," she muttered.

I almost made it to the door. If she just hadn't given me that parting shot. . . .

"And give Danny a chance to forget it," she added, putting so much authority into her tone that I instinctively stopped and turned to look at her. "This could be your last chance to do something right for that kid. Just this once," she fairly begged, "do him a favor, huh? Keep your big mouth shut."

My voice couldn't have been more than a whisper. I barely heard it myself.

"Why, you filthy tramp! How dare you stand there and tell me how to take care of my son! After what you've done to him, I may never get him clean again—but I'll try. I'll do my best to teach him the difference between the act of love and the rotten perversions you've taught him. I don't want him contaminating some nice girl with that kind of sick sensualism."

"It isn't women like me who ruin boys like Danny. It's mothers like you!" she screamed at me. "Fools who feed them peanut-butter sandwiches when they're starved for affection! Battle-axes who make them wonder if women rule the whole world, and if there's any use in fighting it!"

Through a fog of fury, I saw her

dim outline moving toward me like a creeping cat.

"Don't curl your lip at me," she snarled. "I at least headed him in the right direction. With the start you gave him, it's a wonder he didn't turn into a goddam queer! But kept it up, Big Mama. You could still—"

She got too close. The next thing I knew, she was lying in a heap on the floor and my right arm hurt clear up to the shoulder.

But I'm *sure* I only hit her once. I'm sure!

I don't remember driving home. I haven't the faintest idea what time I got there. I'm not even sure what time it was when I heard Danny come in.

But I know it *was* Danny. I know I spoke to him, and I know he answered me. I'll never forget how soothing he sounded, and what a flood of relief swept over me.

"Yes, Mother," he whispered. "I'm home. You can go to sleep now."

I must have dropped off immediately. Numb with exhaustion and lulled by the assurance that Danny was safe, I slept like I'd been drugged. It was the last peaceful sleep I was to have for a long, long time.

I came groggily awake, irritated by a noise I only half-heard. Someone was pounding on the door with one hand, and leaning on the bell with the other. I blinked daz-

edly at my watch, and practically fell out of bed. Ye gods, who would make such a racket at six o'clock in the morning?

It was Frank. He wanted to know where Danny was.

"In bed, of course! Where did you think he'd be at this hour?"

I started to ask him what he wanted, but he didn't give me a chance. He was past me and down the hall before I could get the words out of my mouth.

"Amy!" he shouted. "Come here!"

He was standing in the middle of Danny's room, pointing a trembling finger at the bed. With a lack of awareness bordering on stupidity, I noticed how neat and tidy it looked. There was nobody in it.

Frank cleared my head by shaking me until my teeth rattled.

"He isn't here, Amy! He hasn't been here all night! Now, snap out of it. You've got to help me find him."

Frank did his best to break it to me gently, but there is no easy way to tell a mother that her son is being hunted by every policeman in town, on or off-duty.

"They don't know who they're looking for yet," he told me. "All they've got is a general description. But I knew the minute I heard it—that, and the name of the victim. Oh, God!" he cried with helpless anguish. "Why couldn't he have been in bed when I got here? I wanted to find him asleep! I never

wanted anything so bad in my life."

At five o'clock that morning, acting on an anonymous phone call, detectives from the Homicide Division had gone to an address on East Walnut; there, they had discovered the body of a white female American, between twenty-five and thirty years old, tentatively identified as one Ramona Cahill. She had been beaten to death. Her assailant was unknown, but police were seeking a white male American, youthful appearance (probably under twenty), who had been seen in the vicinity shortly before the crime had been reported.

That ran through my head just as matter-of-factly as I've put it down here. I wasn't hysterical. I've never been more controlled in my life.

"Danny didn't kill her," I said calmly. "I did."

Frank was the one who got all choked up. He put his arms around me and rubbed his cheek against my hair. "Honey, you can't help him that way," he murmured. "Let me handle this. Don't try to—"

"Rule the world?" I burst out wildly. "Is that what you were going to tell me not to do? Please don't say that to me, Frank. That's what Ramona said to me just before I killed her. I don't want to kill *you*, Frank—b-but I'm afraid I c-can't s-stand having anyone else t-tell me. . . ."

The rest was smothered out in sobs that nearly strangled me. I wanted so badly to make him understand what I'd done, but the more I tried to talk, the harder it was to breathe. Finally, I gave up and just sagged against him.

It was warm and dark and quiet in his arms. It was like going to sleep when you think you can't sleep. He held me there until all the agony drained out of me and into him. I know that's where it went, because I saw it in his face when he sat me down and began to question me.

I told him the whole story, from beginning to end, and he listened without interrupting me . . . the first time. Then he took me back over some of the high points, starting in the middle and working both ways. By the time we were through, I was all confused and he seemed to know more than I did.

"You didn't kill her," he said flatly. "Even without the time element, I'd know that. You aren't strong enough. I saw the body," he added gently, stopping me before I could point out how small Ramona was . . . or had been. "Whoever worked her over did an almost professional job of it. I'd say he was either a mighty big man, or an insane one." The faraway tone of his voice matched the look in his eyes. He was seeing something horrible. "I can't believe Danny did that."

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, then got down to

business. He wanted to see the letters. Most particularly, he wanted to check the ones I hadn't read.

"She thought you knew they'd broken up, and she suspected you'd figured out why. I think the answer is in those last few letters, and I think it's something we need to know."

Yes, it was something we needed to know—but we didn't find it in the letters. They were gone. I hadn't dreamed that bit about Danny coming in last night. He'd been here just long enough to pick up the letters.

"No, it isn't your fault!" Frank said furiously. "None of this is your fault. It's mine. You tried to tell me this was building *months* ago, and I wouldn't listen. Me and my hurt little feelings! Me and my pig-headed pride!" He slammed his fist against the wall. It stayed there like it was nailed, while his head slowly came to rest in his arm. It muffled his voice, but it didn't cover up the tears he was trying to hide. "I could have stopped this before it ever got started. Why didn't I? Danny needed me. You needed me. Where was I all that time?"

It might have been Danny I pulled away from that wall. At the moment, I didn't know one from the other. I wasn't seeing Frank and Danny separately. In a strange sort of way, I saw them as one. They were both part of me, and we all hurt. If we were ever to get

well again, we had to do it together.

And that's the way it was. From then on, Frank didn't try to spare me any of the details. Everything he knew, I knew—just as soon as he could get to a phone. Waiting was the hard part; waiting for the phone to ring, hearing the news . . . good or bad, then waiting for the phone to ring again.

Sgt. Thomas J. Cahill was A.W.O.L. from a base somewhere in Alabama. He'd been gone long enough to get here, even if he'd walked most of the way. That was good news. Sgt. Cahill was a trained Commando. He could kill almost anyone with his bare hands, and he'd had plenty of reason to kill his wife. Did he know that?

While I waited, I also had to wonder if Sgt. Cahill knew about Danny. Was Danny running from the police, or Sgt. Cahill? Had Sgt. Cahill found him? Frank hadn't.

Neighbors hadn't noticed any unusual noise or activity at the Cahill residence the night before. They said it was always noisy at the Cahill residence, men coming and going at all hours of the day and night; some in uniform, and some not. They didn't know any of them, and cared less. It was a milkman who'd spotted the tall, dark-haired youth stumbling down the street in the early morning hours. He thought the kid looked drunk, and he thought he was too young

to be in such a disgraceful condition. That was the only reason he'd taken a second look.

"I know he didn't kill her," Frank said with conviction, "and I just hope he isn't a material witness. But I do think he was the one who discovered the body and called in the report. Whoever it was tried to get my extension. Who but Danny," he laughed shakily, "would report a murder to the Juvenile Division? Who but Danny would remember my phone number when he was in a state of shock?"

We both agreed that he was still wandering around someplace, not knowing where he was or even who he was. But neither of us was really convinced of that. We wanted to believe it because it was the least of what could have happened to Danny. We didn't remind each other what an awful amount of time had elapsed, and how unlikely it was that a dazed boy could stumble around that long without *somebody* finding him.

Somebody found Ramona's last lover. That wasn't what it said in the report, but that's the way it stacked up. The body of a man, later identified as Lt. Arnold M. Stokely, had been found in a drainage ditch a few miles out of town. He, too, had been beaten to death. At one time, Sgt. Cahill had served under Lt. Stokely. To put it crudely, but briefly, so had Mrs. Cahill. The lieutenant had last been seen

at approximately four o'clock the previous afternoon, when he left the base after receiving an urgent message to "call Ramona".

He had to be the man I'd seen coming out of her place. Chances were, Sgt. Cahill had been stalking him even then. But where had Danny been all that time? Where was he now?

The last phone call was the worst. That was the one Frank tried to hedge. He didn't want to tell me all of it, but he gave himself away when he said the coroner's report showed *why* Ramona had been killed. He didn't say "how"; he said "why." Then he quickly started talking about scrapings under her fingernails. I stopped him cold and made him go back.

"I meant *how!*"

"No, you didn't. You were too anxious to change the subject. *Why* was she killed, Frank?"

"She was pregnant," he finally admitted.

"How long?" I demanded, blocking another rapid discourse on the fingernails.

"It—uh—it's pretty hard to—"

"How long?"

He took a shuddering breath, and tried again. "It could have been any one of a dozen guys."

He was still grabbing at that straw when I hung up. I might have believed him, and I'm sure Sgt. Cahill was way ahead of us on guesswork. Ramona herself, **might** have had some doubts.

But Danny wouldn't.

Now, at last, I knew what had been in those last few letters . . . and how little it would have mattered if I had read them all yesterday. There was nothing I could have done for Danny yesterday—or the day before, or the week before. And with the merciless clarity that comes with hindsight, I also knew I wouldn't have been of any more help to him a few months ago than I was at this moment.

Now that I didn't want to look, I could see the whole thing clearly. I could even see Ramona more objectively. She'd been telling the truth when she said she hadn't known how old Danny was when they first met. I knew when she found out, though. It must have come as a dreadful shock to her when, finding she was pregnant and knowing she couldn't pass the baby off as her husband's, she discovered that her one "noble" lover needed his mother's consent to do the "right" thing by her. I don't know how long it took her to size up the situation and start scrambling around for alternate solutions; I just know it was too late for her, or anyone else, to convince Danny that he wasn't responsible for what happened to her after that.

Poor little boy. He didn't know he was taking on problems that a grown man couldn't handle, but how he must have tried! And every time he tried, he could only have succeeded in making things worse.

If he finally realized there was nothing he could do, then he just had to sit still and watch things get worse all by themselves . . . while someone he loved paid a terrible price for his inadequacy. Without understanding why, he had to learn that love does not conquer all; sometimes it destroys.

I was learning and I didn't understand, either. All I had to go on was a meaningless montage of accusations, coming at me from nowhere and going nowhere.

"—What Danny needs is a mother—"

"—It isn't women like me who ruin boys like Danny. It's mothers like you, mothers like you, motherslikeyou—" There was an answer there someplace, but I couldn't find it. I didn't know how.

Or maybe that was the answer. I hadn't been a good mother because I didn't know how. It wasn't anything I had done to Danny that made him run from me instead of to me. It was something I hadn't done. I hadn't given him the understanding he needed. I didn't know how.

The search for Danny shouldn't have started at dawn. It should have started years ago, while there was still some hope of finding him.

It ended at a place called Cooper's Crossing, about twenty miles downstream. That's where they pulled him from the river.

"He didn't jump," Frank told me. "He *walked* into the river. He

didn't know where he was going. He just walked until his strength gave out, that's all. Thank God, it was broad daylight. If it had been a couple of hours earlier"

He clamped his mouth shut and hit the accelerator even harder. We were already doing eighty, but it wasn't fast enough.

Danny was alive, but he didn't know it. Nor did he care. That's what worried the doctors. Beyond the first involuntary response of his heart and lungs, their efforts to revive him hadn't amounted to much.

"His condition is unsatisfactory," was the way they put it.

He looked cold . . . grave-cold. With a cry that must have sounded like a she-wolf, I knocked people and things away from him and grabbed him in my arms. My body had warmed him to life seventeen years ago. I hadn't done much else for him since, but at least I could do that. I was *sure* I could—if I could just hold him close enough . . . long enough.

The first sound he made didn't reach beyond my ears—but it was something I could have heard a million miles away.

"Mother?"

It was the whispering wail of a lost and frightened child; a sound that could have awakened a dead woman . . . and did.

I loosened my hold so he could breathe more easily, but I didn't let go—not for a very long time.

When I was sure he recognized me, enough to have a fuzzy sense of comfort at my being there, I eased him back into bed. I would gladly have rocked him to sleep, but something told me that wasn't practical. I thought he'd rest more comfortably if I put him down.

I guess I took my arms away a moment too soon. Suddenly, his eyes flew open—seeking mine wildly, then clinging in helpless agony.

"I didn't know what to do," he whimpered.

"Neithre did I, darling . . . neither did I."

He looked bewildered for a second; then, with a crooked little smile, he patted my hand and drifted off to sleep. I'd finally said something he wanted to hear.

I wish I could say it ended there, at least for Danny—that I was able to give him all the comfort he needed forever after, or that Frank was able to shield him from the dreadful aftermath of Ramona's murder.

But that wasn't possible. Danny *had* been the one who discovered her body, and that fact had to go into the official report. Naturally, the police wanted to know what he was doing there at that hour of the morning. As you know, it was a long, unpleasant story.

Frank did his best to keep the questioning as brief and impersonal as possible, but he wouldn't soft-pedal the one point I wish he

could have covered up entirely; the letters. They were gone, and I saw no good reason why anyone but the three of us need never have known they existed. Frank and I had a bitter argument about that.

"Sure, they tied him to Ramona a lot closer than you want people to know or him to remember," he agreed angrily, "but they also explain his actions during a critical period of time that he might otherwise have one *helluva* time accounting for!"

Most of Danny's time had been spent watching Ramona's house for a chance to get in and warn her that I was on the rampage. First, he was blocked by Lt. Stokely; then me. It was only by the grace of God that he slipped in during the time when Sgt. Cahill must have been following the lieutenant. At any rate, Danny didn't stay long. Ramona was nearly hysterical with fear and rage. Why hadn't he destroyed those letters long ago? After all her efforts to set Arnie up for a quick trip to Mexico, where she could get divorced and remarried with some hope of cheating the calendar, *this* was a fine time to get slapped in the face with those stupid letters! Now, what was she going to do? She was trapped!

So Danny came home to read his beloved letters for the last time, then burn them like he'd promised her he would. He even saved the ashes so he could show them to her, and she would know she was safe.

"Sure, that explains why he went back," I raged at Frank, "*if they believe him*. If they don't, he could be a real handy suspect—in case they can't find Sgt. Cahill."

"They'll find Sgt. Cahill," he said with forced calm. "Don't worry."

"That's easy for you to say! Danny isn't *your* son!"

The stricken look in his eyes will haunt me for the rest of my life—that, and the quiet defeat in his voice when he said, "I keep forgetting, don't I?"

I'll never forgive myself for that. I won't even try. I need that painful memory to remind me what a deadly weapon I have in my mouth, and what cruel, crippling wounds I've inflicted on those I least wanted to hurt.

When they found Sgt. Cahill, I began to realize what an awful strain Frank had been under. Technically, he hadn't been assigned to the case. He'd had to beg and battle just to sit in on those questioning sessions with Danny. The officers in charge knew he was trying to protect the boy, and they knew why. Their personal sympathies were deep, but their professional judgement was not affected. They watched Frank warily. If he'd made the slightest effort to suppress any pertinent information, or even guide Danny away from damaging testimony, Frank would have been immediately suspended and Danny would have been in

triple jeopardy, if there is such a thing.

As it turned out, Sgt. Cahill was tried for Lt. Stokely's murder, so Danny's involvement with Ramona never got to the newspaper-headline stage. It was just a local rumor—which, in some ways, was harder to bear.

Danny couldn't bring himself to go back to school as if nothing had happened.

"I was always an odd-ball," he said, trying to sound as if he didn't care, "but now, I'm an *old* odd-ball. I don't fit anyplace—least of all, in a crowd of teenagers."

It was Frank who arranged for him to finish his studies at home, with some tutoring and lots of correspondence courses. So Danny won't graduate with his class. He won't even earn his diploma in time to enter college this year . . . but at least he has something to work for, some hope for the future.

It isn't going to be easy. And there, again, I can see I'm not going to be much help. I never got through my sophomore year of high school, so I don't even know what he's talking about when he asks me if some government body is legislative or judicial.

"I guess you'll have to ask Frank," I tell him—and he usually does.

It was a long time before I could even look at Frank when he'd drop by to see Danny. I was so ashamed of the way I'd treated him, but I was afraid it was too late to tell him I was sorry. I'd have given anything in the world to smooth out the lines in his face—the ones I'd never noticed before—the ones etched in with thoughtless words and years of indifference. I'd done that. How could I undo it? Surely not with words. I didn't trust myself with words anymore.

But they fairly exploded from me one evening when Frank, looking up suddenly, caught me staring at him. Instead of being irritated, or even embarrassed, he just seemed concerned.

"You look tired," he said kindly. "Why don't you go to bed? I'll see that Danny does his homework."

He got all shook when I started to cry—rushed over and began mopping at my face with a handkerchief the size of a sheet, and begging me to stop.

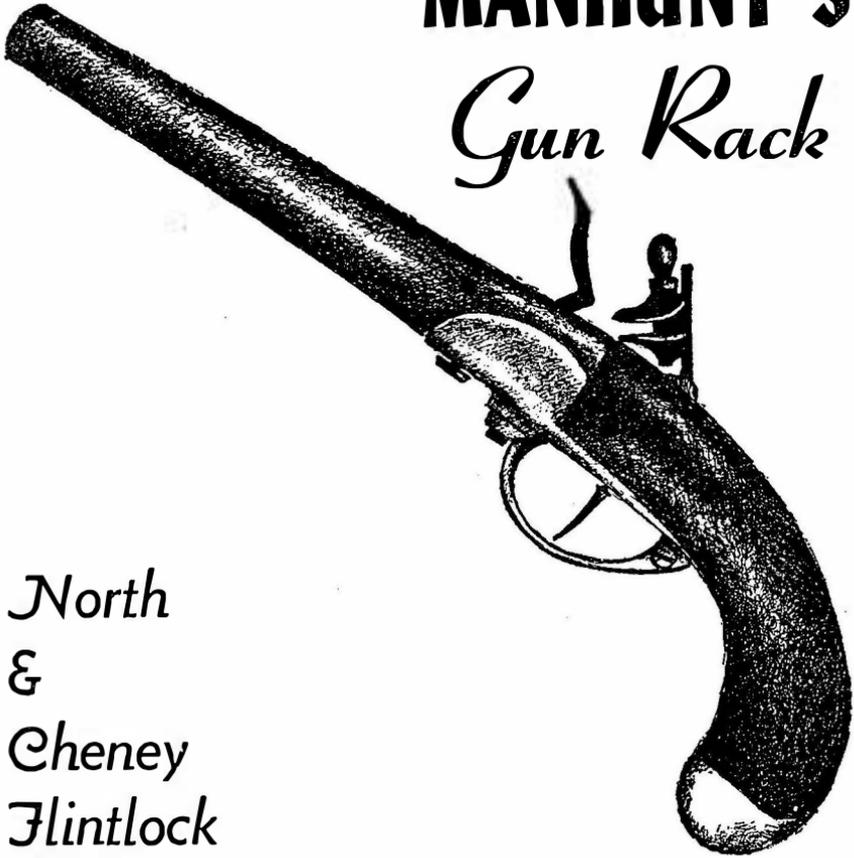
"After all I've done to you," I sobbed, "Why should you care if I'm tired? Why should you care how I feel at all?"

He gave me his famous what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you look, then said very simply,

"Because I love you, that's why."



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trans-atlantic lam

BY
DON LOWRY

*Tebeau lowered his voice. "It's called
'fourth class' around the docks here."*

I'M NOT backing away from a heist in this country," Morley Card insisted, "I'm worried about getting out of this country after the heist." He sat across the heavy oak table in Southampton's Lion Head Pub with Freddie Tebeau, looking furtively around.

Both Card and Tebeau were out on bond, "at the pleasure of Her Majesty's Home Office," officials of which had picked up passports from both Card and Tebeau when they had been arrested at Plymouth on suspicion of armed robbery.

"And I'm not worried about getting out of England," Tebeau shot back. "I'm worried what these Limeys will do when they discover

those passports are forgeries. If anyone from the American Consulate gets a look at those beautiful products of that Boston forger, we'll be locked up in some Seventeenth Century stir before you can say "border jumper." Tebeau finished his split of Bass's Ale and watched the bar maid's display of svelte curves. "Could we have another round, miss?"

"Never could get used to this warm beer and ale, Freddie," Card protested.

"It's ice cold compared to the heat that will be on us if we don't get a new bankroll and get out of this country," Tebeau grinned. "Why don't you go along with me and

knock this payroll off in London? I can guarantee you we'll be back in New York with no trouble—and a bundle of English Pounds to shove across the counter of the foreign exchange desk in any Uptown bank." He stopped talking when the bar maid brought another round for the two "American tourists."

"You tell me how we can get aboard a ship or a plane bound for New York without a passport, Freddie, and I'll heist the crown jewels with you. But with, or without, a bankroll, I want out of this country. These Limey dicks may be polite but they're not stupid. How do we make it Stateside without passports?"

Tebeau lowered his voice. "It's called 'Fourth-Class' around the docks here. Crew members on the Trans-Atlantic liners hustle a buck by sneaking stowaways aboard, feeding them and keeping them hidden 'til their ship reaches New York. The going rate is around fifty bucks per sneak-job."

"I'll go along with you, Freddie," Card whispered, "if you can make reservations with one of these black market travel agents *before* we hit that London payroll. I'd hate to be on the lam in this Rhode Island-sized country and have no place to run except into the Channel or the Thames."

Card was convinced in a waterfront pub meeting with a docker and crewman. He watched as Tebeau handed over two fifty dollar

bills to the crewman and listened to final instructions, "Be here tomorrow evening and I'll have two visitors' passes for you blokes. I'll do the rest."

"Satisfied?" Tebeau asked.

"So far. Let's get up to London and knock off that payroll." Card sorted out cards in his billfold. "This thing shouldn't be hot yet." He handed an international car rental credit card to Tebeau. "Get some wheels and I'll get the pieces. I'll meet you at the garage."

The only opposition Card and Tebeau met in robbing the furrier's payroll messenger was verbal. "A lot of bloody nerve!" the unarmed messenger snorted when Card handcuffed him to his car's steering wheel. Card and Tebeau were speeding back to Plymouth before plainclothesmen from London's Metropolitan Police Department had freed the indignant messenger. They returned the Triumph to the car rental agency and walked casually to their rooms in the Lion Head.

"No luggage, Morley. That's what the crewman said. Remember, we're visitors at a *bon voyage* party; not passengers embarking for New York." Tebeau emphasized his reminder by carefully choosing a business suit for wearing aboard the steamer and idling in its lounges and bars.

At the gangway, Card and Tebeau were permitted to board without surrendering their visiting pass-

es. The same crewman with whom they'd contracted for the stowaway passage took advantage of the crowded boarding confusion to let them keep the passes. When the ship sailed its tally sheet of visitors on and off was in order.

As instructed by the crewman, Card and Tebeau moved to the tourist-class bar of the *United States*. Neither crew members nor legitimate passengers gave either man a second look as they quietly sipped Scotch at the bar.

"This is good now, Freddie," Card murmured, "but where do we lay up tonight?"

"Drink your drink and don't worry, Morley. We do like the fourth-class ticket salesman says. He'll be around."

"The way all these legitimate passengers are milling around," Card laughed, "I don't see how the crew can keep track of anyone."

"We do like we were told," Tebeau growled. "Let's go out and walk on the deck."

In one of the public washrooms in tourist class, they met their crewman. "Now, mates," he explained in a whisper, "I'll meet you here after breakfast, lunch and dinner. You won't eat like a first class bloke but you'll eat what I can filch and bring to you. You can shower and shave in here. At night, just keep moving around—in the ship's library, in the bar, at the movie, or in the writing room. You won't be alone or out of place in any public

room between midnight and dawn. If a bloody sweeps spots you, he won't think you're any different from a hundred other passengers who suffer from insomnia or too much brandy. I'll be around and keep an eye open for you. Just make like you're genuine passengers and enjoy your voyage."

In an uneasy sense, Card and Tebeau did enjoy the voyage. They found the bar, the movies, the lounges, writing room and library safe havens. And they discovered solicitious stewards on deck anxious to pass out tea, sandwiches and cakes. When the *United States* docked at Manhattan's Pier 86, their crewman had a further set of instructions for disembarking.

"Don't panic and try to go ashore with the crowd of passengers milling to the head of the gangways. You have to hand over a landing card there and, even if I could get you a landing card, the gangways are out because they lead to the customs enclosure. The crew gangway is your shore ticket. Hide in the toilet for a while 'til I come for you. By that time the guards will be back aboard drinking coffee. Just wait for me."

Card and Tebeau waited impatiently. "Think we'll have any trouble getting these English pounds exchanged Uptown?" Card asked.

"Our problem right now is getting Uptown!" Tebeau was passing the time idly moving off and on the safety of his automatic.

"Come on, mates, get a move on," the crewman interrupted their conversation. "Now's your chance. Just head down that gangway and you'll be on 12th Avenue in a few minutes. Good luck to you."

Card and Tebeau went down the crew gangway with renewed hopes of once more walking on U.S. and Manhattan asphalt. At the foot of the gangway they were met by the Master at Arms, chief of the ship's police.

Tebeau swore. "If this fly cop tries to play policeman here, it'll be his last play." He kept his pocketed hand closed on his .38 and pushed off its safety.

But the Master at Arms made no effort to stop them. He smiled, "Have one for me, boys." Card noticed the searching look in his eyes rather than his disarming smile. When he and Tebeau were a few feet past the ship's officer he looked back at him. Tebeau looked over his own shoulder at the same time. At that moment, when the two men looked back at the *United States* and its Master at Arms, they were trapped.

"Keep looking back, boys, and get your hands up, high! Real high!" a voice cracked from the pier. It came from one of three NYCPD detectives and two Port of New York Authority policemen. Before Card and Tebeau knew what had happened, they had been disarmed and handcuffed—as se-

curely as the London messenger had been handcuffed by them.

Only after they had been booked at the precinct did the intercontinental heist team learn where their lam plans had gone astray.

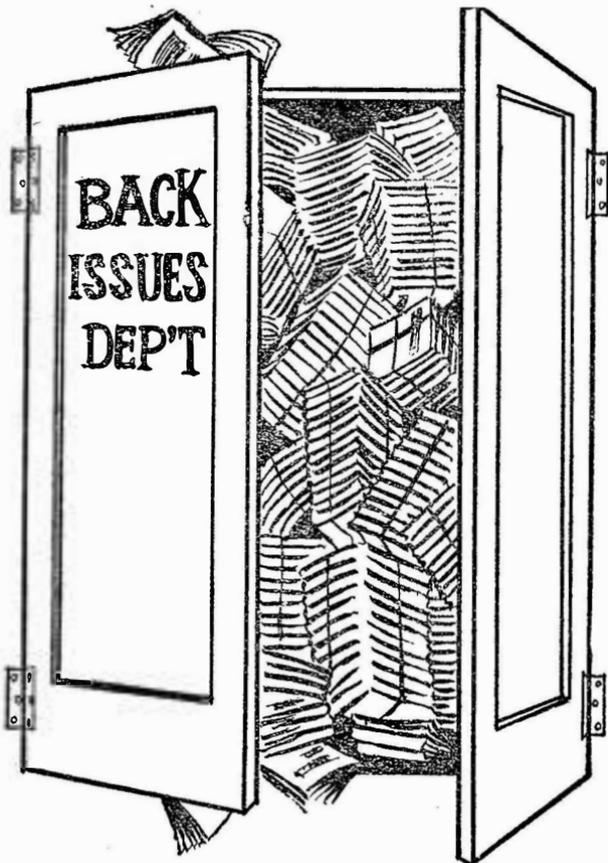
"You were made before you landed here," a detective lieutenant jeered. "When you paid your hotel bill in Southampton; when you paid for that English U-Drive; and when you paid that Southampton taxi at the dockside, you tipped off the English police that you were on your way out of England. They didn't know who they were looking for but they had the serial numbers of those crisp, new, English bank notes you took from that payroll messenger. Those numbers were sent to every ship's purser whose ship cleared from Southampton that day. As soon as you began to lay those five pound notes that bartender aboard the *United States*, her purser and Master at Arms made you. They let you walk ashore at our instructions. You might find a way to beat that robbery rap in England, but we have plans for you here. Know what I mean? Sullivan Act? The old charge for which you jumped bond and took off for Europe?"

"You," snarled Morley Card, "can go to hell!"

"And that goes for me too, shamus!" Freddy Tebeau growled.

The lieutenant laughed, "See you in court, boys!"





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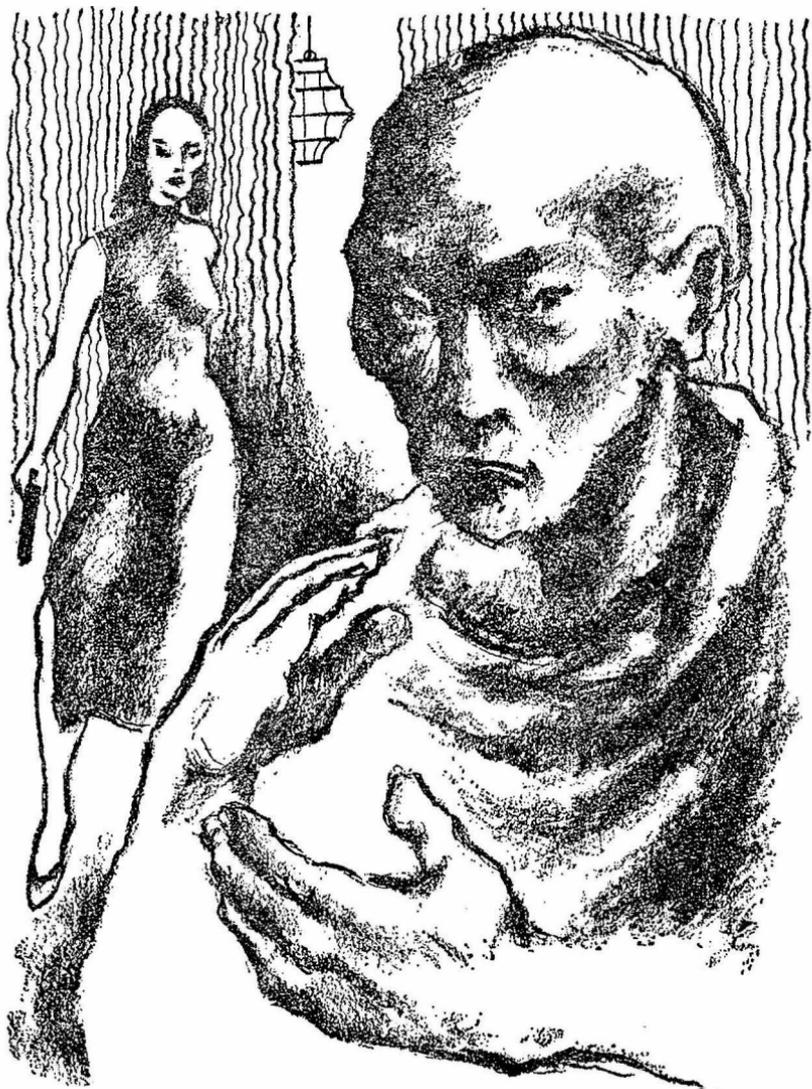
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5 DAYS TO KILL



The hand was long, but seemed stubby. The joints of the fingers were gnarled and enlarged. There was an edge of thick horny callous from the wrist down to the little finger. The end of each finger was thickly calloused far out beyond its' nail. It was a remarkable hand . . . the hand of a karate man.

A Novel

BY
JERRY BAILEY

SATURDAY NIGHT

IGNACIO LUNA lay face down in the dirt of the alley. He did not stir in the blackness of the hot summer night. There was scarcely a breeze in the air to stir the miasma of human excrement over the rice paddies on his left, or to rustle the rows of laundry drying on bamboo poles behind the Hondo Laundry to his right. The only creature that was aware of his existence was a tailless cat which bolted past his motionless head after having sought for rats behind the dark shack that housed Charlie Chong's First Class Hong-kong Tailor Shop.

Only the cat could hear the bursts of music that came as doors opened and closed, and the sound of the high piping girl voices that called farewells to one another in the

night. Only the cat could hear. Ignacio Luna was very, very dead.

At that moment I didn't know where the hell my pal "Spanish Man" Luna was. He and I had spent the better part of Saturday night, up until almost eleven p.m., doing the usual thing.

That was, supporting our favorite working girls and enriching the Japanese economy, at two hundred yen per shot or bottle. We were doing this in our favorite night spot, the Paris, which is the fifth joint on the left as you go up Bar Lane in Minami-bashi.

These Saturday night blasts in the Paris Bar had become a habit in the year we had spent in Japan. Why, we figured, should we go to Tokyo and pay tourist prices when the same things were right there at the airbase gate? After all, airmen sec-

ond class had only so much loot to blow on the good things of life.

Our shift was on break for the weekend, but all of Saturday morning was taken up with inspections and a big parade, all in full Class A uniform. The unit Spanish Man and I belonged to was a detached tenant unit. We should never have had to pull the parade. Unfortunately, First Lieutenant Vandervoort, our commander, was out to make some brownie points with the base commander. Our shift was off duty. So there we were, standing tall throughout that hot Honshu morning.

Have I forgotten the introductions? Well, the handsome Latin type, standing five-six, with a haircut that was almost a D.A., that was Spanish Man.

The six footer with the crew cut, standing next to him in the third rank, the guy with the face like a stepped-on map of Ireland, that was me, Pat Killane. Where was I? Oh yeah. Parading on a hot Saturday morning. Noon came, and we wild-blue-yonder boys were dismissed. Our tongues were hanging out, almost to our toes, at the thought of all the tall cool ones awaiting us at the Airmen's Club. We hurried through our showers and into our standard off-duty wear: chino slacks, wild Hawaiian shirts, and comfortable moccasins. On base, the shirt tails had to be tucked in. Once out of the gate everyone let them flap in the breeze. Dig man, the hip

ones would say, the Kanto Plains in summer are like hot!

We killed the afternoon at the club, alternately sipping on the aforementioned tall cool ones, and fighting the one-armed bandits which you find in overseas clubs but not in stateside ones. Blue laws have a habit of stopping at the water's edge, unless some shocked jeep writes his mother and she writes her congressman. Anyhow, our bandits played on and payed off in slugs.

Spanish Man and I sent one of the club's cute little slant-eyed waitresses to the kitchen for hamburgers and potato chips. That was dinner. Then it was six p.m., by my Omega watch. The girls would all be to work in the bars outside the gate. It was time to go. We changed a fistful of our military script into yen at the club cashier's window and left.

The airbase was south of Minami-bashi town, with the Chuo Main Line and a four-lane highway separating the two. From the base's main gate, always guarded by A.P.'s and Japanese Civilian Guards, Sakura Avenue ran north to the tracks and then into town.

Between the base and the highway intersection Sakura Avenue was almost a boulevard, with rows of trees planted between street and sidewalks. Both sides of the street were lined with unpainted clapboard buildings standing shoulder to shoulder. These were souvenir shops, silk stores, tailor shops, and

restaurants, all catering to G.I.'s and their dependents. We were interested in none of these.

We walked out of the gate, with Charlie Chong's Tailor Shop and the Hondo Laundry to our right, around the Ohta Grocery on the corner, made a right oblique, and were in Bar Lane.

This was a ten-foot wide strip of gravel that angled off from Sakura Avenue in a northeasterly direction. Half of its length was taken up by bars. Beyond them were crowded little houses which the owners rented out to business girls and G.I.'s who shackled steady. The far end of the Lane opened on to the highway that led east to Tokyo.

Just behind the Ohta Grocery, we passed an ancient fixture of Minami-bashi. This was a bent old man who wore old-style Japanese robes of black. He could be seen almost every night, kneeling in some sheltered niche.

There was an antique air about him, aided by the long white beard and domed bald head he possessed. He was always seated behind a glowing crystal ball placed upon a little pedestal-case. He told fortunes for the girls of Bar Lane.

We did not waste a second thought on the man. Our attention was on the Paris Bar. Mamma-san Watanabe hired four girls at a time. They were all on duty already, hanging out of the open door of the place with their war paint on, ready to drag customers in off the Lane by

hook or by crook. For that matter, so was every girl of every bar on the Lane. They had to work for their rice and sushi.

Chieko, Michiko, Tomiko and Chi-chan squealed happy greetings in unison as we approached. Spanish Man ploughed through the middle of them, laughing, managing to hug, pat, or pinch each one as he went in.

"At ease, desease! God's gift to women is finally here!"

From behind the bar, Mamma Watanabe gave the first customers of the evening a big grin, using all of her protruding gold-filled teeth. "Pat-san, Spani-san, komba n wal What you speak?"

Spanish Man and I settled into seats opposite each other in our favorite booth. I called, "Two oki Nippons, Mamma-san, and they better be cold!"

Michiko was close behind me, and dug an elbow into my ribs, "Oh yeah," I added, "and two for the josans."

"You better believe it!" Michiko murmured in my ear, in a satisfied tone. She and little Chibi-chan went over to the bar and came back with two big bottles of beer, clean glasses, two ashtrays, three minute matchboxes, and two mixed drinks between them.

Chieko and Tomiko milled hopefully around for a minute, waiting to see if we were buying drinks for all. We had been around too long for that, though. They went back

to their duty stations outside the door.

I handed Michiko a thousand-yen note, which she trotted over to Mama Watanabe. She returned with two hundred-yen bills. She slid something like a small poker chip to Chibi-chan, and dropped a similar disc down the vee neck of her cottom summer dress. Chibi-chan reached inside her own white blouse and dropped her chip somewhere inside.

Perhaps I should explain things right here, for the benefit of those poor souls who were never in the Orient. At that time and place the going price of a tall beer or a mixed drink was two hundred yen. The price of a customer's drink went to the house. The price of a girl's drink was split down the middle between house and girl. She got a chip for every drink she hustled, one hundred yen per chip. When the bar closed each night chips were cashed in and each girl could count her earnings. Fringe benefits generally included a meal or two a day on the house, and a pad upstairs if the girl had no place else to sleep. What money a girl made on her own time was her own business. The official exchange rate was 360 yen to a dollar.

By now the girls were snuggled in next to us in the booth, going into the usual routine. They sat on the outside, as was customary in Japan, ready to fetch and carry. They poured our beers for us, held

matchboxes poised ready to light our cigarettes for us, and generally generated the feeling that our slightest whim would be their command.

We relaxed together, suffused with that sense of bliss which the old sultans of Arabia must have had, when they took their shoes off in the harem, after putting in a hard day at the palace.

Chibi-chan, as her name implied, was a tiny little thing, not over four feet six. According to Spanish, she was a real wildcat in the futons. I could believe it, for my buddy would come back to the barracks after nights with her, with his tail dragging, hickies up one side and down the other, and claw marks all over his back.

She had been his first piece in Japan, liked him, and kept him coming back for more. He had been paying her rent for months. Spanish wanted her to stop working and shack steady, but Chibi refused. She said his airman deuce pay was not enough for that; besides she needed something to keep her amused while he was working night shifts. She would hustle drinks with any stud who walked in, but she took absolutely no one home but Spanish Man.

The way things were going with those two, he would be putting in marriage papers before he shipped out.

With Michiko and myself, things were different, I wasn't about to shack steady. That was too much

like settling down and being married. I had too many good years left for that. For me and Michiko, pleasure was still a business and business was still a pleasure, if you know what I mean.

A description? Okay. Michiko might have been a couple years older than myself, but she was still well on the right side of thirty. She was tall for a josan, around five four, and had the aristocratic high-bridged nose instead of the more common Mongolian pug. Her eyes were very slitted and gleamed like polished jet. She wore her heavy black hair long, past shoulder length, inviting a man to grab that hair and tip her head back, lifting those lush inviting lips up to be kissed and bitten.

She had full, firm breasts that always seemed to be fighting their way out of whatever cloth held them. Below those she had a tiny waist, nice but not excessive curves below that, and the whole wonderful body moved on a pair of the most beautiful long legs I had ever seen. When she wore shorts around the house and yard in summer time, she turned male heads from five to ninety, and gave every ochusan and josan for blocks sour faces and acid stomachs.

Lieutenants, captains, once even a bird colonel found their way to the Paris to make dates with her. They were proud to show her off in the Officer's Club. Still, while they were paying ten and fifteen thou-

sand yen a tumble, it was mine whenever I wanted it, a night to remember for just two grand.

Sex aside, Michiko depended on me to take her on base whenever there was yen bingo at the Airmen's Club, or Elvis movies on at the base flick. In return, she would take me downtown to the gory samurai flicks that I liked; or whip up a mess of sukiyaki at the house whenever I was tired of G.I. chow.

By eight p.m. the base movie had let out and troops hit the Lane in a flood. Chibi and Michiko had to leave us and join Chieko and Tomiko at waiting tables and rubbing against guys at the bar. Mamma Watanabe was a blur of motion, juggling bottles, making change, and keeping platters going on the joint's hi-fi set. Every place specialized in one type of music; the Paris ran heavy to blues and ballads.

The oki bottles were piling up on the table between us. Spanish Man seemed to have a bad case of the sulks, and was making faces at his beer. He didn't look good, like a Saturday night G.I. should.

"Hey, buddy boy!" I kicked him under the table. "What's with you?"

"Cojones! Chibi says we ain't making it tonight!"

"Why?"

Spanish shrugged. "Wrong time of the month. Oh, mierda! And I'm so horny I could . . ."

"Cool it, buddy. Drink up and smile."

"Think I will . . . think I'll get

good and drunk . . . hey, Mamma-san! Bottle of Akadama!"

I frowned at him. "That's no good! What do you want to get stinko for?"

"Shit fire, why not? I ain't going any place but the barracks tonight, anyhow!"

Spanish looked to be off on a good one. Anything I said would be useless. Chibi brought the quart of port wine over and collected for it. She gave her lover a look of complete disgust.

"Whassamatta you, baka? Akadama with bieru, takusan dame desho! Gonna get stinko, baka boy, more better you don't speak me!"

Spanish waved her away without replying and tossed down his first glass of wine. Akadama was the cheapest quick drunk there was in Japan. On top of beer it was a real head-buster. I left Spanish alone. He was over twenty-one, if not very far over. Also, we hadn't stayed best buddies for so long by trying to be each other's consciences. I leaned back and dragged on a butt and watched the studs fight for turns dancing with Michiko.

They held her as tight as she would allow. They brought her back to the bar and bought drinks one after another, trying to bring smiles to those luscious lips.

"Have your fun, boys," I said to myself. "But all that's mine tonight."

A little diversion wandered into the bar at about this time. This was another Japanese character who, like

the old fortune teller, was a fixture on Bar Lane.

He was a skinny middle-aged old kook, bowlegged, who always wore patched old levi's, a spanged and fringed cowboy shirt, a ten gallon hat, and two cap pistols in low-slung holsters. He hobbled along in runover cowboy boots, and always carried a beat-up guitar. He was known as Billy the Kid.

Billy seemingly made his living trudging from bar to bar, night after night, picking lousy tunes and singing worse lyrics in garbled English. He ended every performance by passing the hat, and most threw him something or bought him a shot of Torgys whiskey just to shut him up.

He went through his usual routine, garnered a few coins, and left.

The bars all closed at eleven, and G.I.'s were supposed to be on base or off the streets by midnight.

At about ten forty-five, Spanish had finished his Akadama, and it had about finished him. He lurched up and out, swaying, and blundered through the dancers toward the door. I started up to help him but he waved me off.

"'s nada, compadre, nada . . . m'bueno . . . gonna hit the sack. . . ."

Some staff sergeant had crowded Chibi into a corner, propositioning her urgently, and she was shaking her head in polite but stubborn refusal. When she saw Spanish going out the door, she pushed the ser-

geant away and hurried after Spanish. He was gone into the night when she reached the door.

She stood in the door a moment, looking after him, with care written in every tense line of her tiny body. Mamma-san Watanabe's voice called her sharply back to business. Everyone was busy with the last round before closing time.

I stepped into the benjo and put quite a lot of beer back into the Japanese economy. Feeling much relieved, I stepped out and looked around for Michiko. She and Chibi approached me together, Chibi rattling like a machine-gun.

"Pat-san! I worry takusan. Please, you go after my Spani-san, make-o sure he go barracks dai jobu?"

Michiko nodded at me. "You go, Pat. Put him to bed and come back. I'll wait for you at osoba shop."

"Okay, see you later."

I pushed through the guys who were leisurely leaving the bar and out into the neon-lit Lane. It was crowded with stags going toward the main gate, and shackrats heading uptown with their girls. I walked fast to the grocery-store corner and went left around it to the pedestrian entry beside the main gate. I kept looking for Spanish Man, in case he had gotten hung up somewhere. I didn't see him.

A couple A.P.'s stood with the Civilian Guards at the gate, boredly watching the guys returning from an evening on the Lane. As long as they could walk without bouncing

off too many walls, and made no noise, the cops never hauled anyone in. I was sure Spanish had had no trouble here.

Back on base, I soon entered the barracks. Spanish and I shared a room on the third floor. I checked all the latrines and the dayroom on the way upstairs, in case he had passed out on the way up. No Spanish, anywhere.

I glanced into our room. No wrinkles on the bunks, no clothes on the floor, Spanish had not gotten there yet. Now I started to worry. I checked down the hall, but no one else was back in yet. Spanish was nowhere in the building. That meant that he hadn't yet made it back on base. Now what in . . .

I almost ran back to the gate. One of the air cops called to me, "Eleven thirty, cat! You ain't got much time left!"

"Just looking for a buddy!"

The cop laughed. "Get the mother in here fast, or we gonna write you both up!"

I was at the crosswalk in front of the shuttered grocery. Across Sakura Avenue glowed the lights of the Fuji Restaurant, that stayed open late to catch the crowd that wanted some late chow after the bars closed. I ran across the street and flung open the door. Faces looked up from a lot of tables, but Spanish Man's was not among them.

I crossed Sakura Avenue again, hurrying up the diagonal of Bar

Lane. All the joints were locked and shuttered now, the neon lights turned off, the many hi-fi sets stilled. Just this side of the Paris Bar, one lighted doorway stood open.

This was the little hole-in-the-wall *osoba* shop, where homeward-bound business girls stopped for a bowl of buckwheat-noodle soup before going to bed. Beside the hunched little Japanese proprietor, the only ones there were Michiko and Chibi-chan.

"Spanish okay, Pat?" Michiko asked casually.

I was breathing hard from my run. "No! He never got to the barracks. I didn't see him either way. He's not in the Fuji. So where . . ."

Chibi gasped aloud. "Pat-san! Where you look?"

"Up and down the street. All over the barracks. Nothing!"

Chibi was crying now, dragging me by the shirt out of the shop, pointing across Bar Lane.

"Oh, no, Pat-san!" Her eyes were panic-stricken. "Span-san don't go street! I see! He go shortcut, go that way!"

She was pointing at the Matsukawa Hockshop directly opposite us. It loomed like a fort in the night, for it was two-storied and was the only place on the Lane built of fire-proof cinder blocks. The display window had steel shutters over it for the night, and the front door was metal-sheathed. All the tiny windows on the ground floor were barred.

Along the far side of the hockshop ran a narrow rutted lane or alley. I knew that it came out by the air base outer wall, not far east of the main gate. Spanish might well have cut through it, although it was only little shorter that way than down the main drag to Sakura Avenue.

Chibi and I started together across the Lane and into that alley. Michiko came close behind us. The alley was flanked on the west by the concrete wall of the hockshop, and on the east by a tall bamboo fence. On the other side of the fence was a private residence and then open rice paddies. The paddy stench was terribly strong over the alley.

The alley was barely seven feet wide. Dried ruts from the motorcycle trucks that used it caught at our feet.

On our right hand we passed the closed gate that gave on the walled yard behind the hockshop. Two more steps and we had passed the corner of the wall and heard the creaking and rustling of the drying racks of the Hondo Laundry.

Off of the alley, here, was an open space bounded by the hockshop's southern wall, the back of the Hondo Laundry building, and the back of Charlie Chong's First Class Hongkong Tailor Shop. The open space was almost filled with laundry poles and two parked little tri-cycle trucks used by the laundry.

The east side of the alley was walled by that unbroken high bam-

boo fence. Just ahead of us was the crosslane beside the floorlit stone wall of Minami-bashi Air Base. We paced slowly, looking about us in the scarcely-illuminated night. Then I tripped over something in the alleyway and fell to my knees.

I crouched and felt about. My fingers encountered cloth, and a human back. On my knees, I fumbled out a matchbox and struck a light.

Michiko's deep gasp struck my ears, and then I heard Chibi-chan's wild shrieks ripping the night apart. I laid hold of a shoulder and rolled the limp form over on its back. The head seemed to hang loosely from the body. The bulging eyes stared off at an impossible angle.

Spanish Man . . . my buddy Ignacio Luna . . . was very, very dead.

SUNDAY

"All right, Killane, let's take it from the top once more!"

It was Sunday afternoon, and I had been sitting on the same wooden chair for seven hours, there in the interrogation room of the base guard house. Across the cluttered desk, Special Agent Harmon of the O.S.I. glared at me, as if he were measuring me for the electric chair. Behind him, his sidekick Special Agent Smith stood smoking a cigarette and gazing aimlessly out of a window.

Against the far wall of the room were seated First Lieutenant Vande-

voort, my commanding officer, and Granitepuss Dawson, my first sergeant. The two of them had been called to the guardhouse during the morning, and had been listening to the grilling I was getting ever since.

Their looks said that they wished that I was cold meat along with Spanish Man, for causing them so much trouble. Vandevooort wanted to spend every Sunday on the golf course; Dawson, I was sure, would much rather have been sleeping off his Saturday night head.

"But, dammit," I told Harmon, "I've been over it a hundred times already!"

"Don't get wise, airman, or you'll be here till hell freezes over!" Harmon snarled, "You're in enough trouble as it is!"

"I'm in trouble! You think I did it? All I did was find him, for cripes sake!"

Harmon half rose from his chair and seemed about to come over the desk at me, "That's enough, you young punk! Shut your goddam mouth and keep it shut or I'll . . ."

Smith turned from the window to place a hand on his colleague's shoulder. "Simmer down, George. We're all as tired of this as you are. Maybe you better go out front and get a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah, sure. Sorry, Harry."

Harmon left the room and Smith came around in front of me. He lounged with one hip on the desk.

"Okay, Killane. At ease. I know **this** seems pretty repetitious to you,

but this is how we do our job. Maybe you forgot something . . . some vital detail . . . go over it often enough and it may come back to you. Now then, you found him at what time, would you say?"

I shifted wearily in the chair. "I went out the gate at eleven thirty. I looked in the Fuji for him, then went straight to the soba shop. I talked a few minutes to Chibi and Michiko, then we went down the alley looking for him. Probably around eleven forty-five. So I stumbled over him not later than eleven fifty."

"And you saw him alive last, at . . ."

"Ten minutes before the Paris closed. Ten fifty."

"You saw him go down the alley."

"No! I told you, Chibi saw him go down the alley instead of straight down the Lane. She didn't tell me that until we met back at the soba shop."

Smith nodded. "One hour on the dot, between when he was last seen and when he was found. A lot could have happened in that hour."

"A lot did. Somebody killed him!"

Lt. Vandervoort spoke from across the room. "Oh, come now! Luna was drunk. Probably the kid just tripped over something and hit head-first."

Smith shook his head. "No, lieutenant. If it were only a simple ac-

cident case you wouldn't be here now. It was obvious, even to the Air Police, that foul play was involved. That was why we were called at once. His wallet and watch were still there, so it was not a simple robbery with violence."

To me, he said, "That means he had enemies. Somebody wanted to do him in. Who were his enemies, Killane?"

"He didn't have any! I ought to know."

"That's right. You've been his best friend for how long?"

"Since we met in basic. We were rainbows together, then in tech school, then we shipped over here together."

"Was Luna ever in trouble?"

"No," I told him honestly. "We had a few fights along the way, but . . ."

"What kind of fights?"

"Nothing! Pachucos tried to gang us a couple of times in the border towns, that happens every night. And over here, once, some chimpanzeos tangled with us. . . ."

"Where?"

"Tokyo. Asakusa. That was nine months ago. We never went back to that part of town and never saw them again."

Smith scratched the back of his neck reflectively. "How about girl trouble? This Chibi-chan?"

"They loved each other. There wasn't anybody else."

Lt. Vandervoort butted in again, twitching his long nose and tossing

his blond hair. "Love, hah! A little streetwalker!"

"She was straight with him," I told Smith earnestly. "Ask anybody on the Lane. Everybody knows who sleeps with who, and when."

The O.S.I. agent nodded. "Our Japanese opposite numbers will check that out. They know what goes on off base. Of course they are not interested in enforcing any American moral codes. Black marketing, now, that would be something else."

"Spanish wasn't involved in anything like that!"

"Perhaps not, Killane. We'll see. That leaves one other possibility. Luna, like you, worked in the base communications center. That means he had regular access to classified materials, highly secret military information. . . ."

That one brought me up out of the chair, fists clenched.

"What are you calling him, a lousy Commie agent? A spy or something?"

"Sit down, Killane! I am not accusing . . ."

I was shouting at Smith now. "Spanish was a good American! He would clobber anybody that even called him a Mex or a wetback! His people were in Texas before Davy Crockett or Jim Bowie ever got there! He was as loyal as you or me or . . ."

"All right, Killane, at ease! Calm down! I didn't say that Luna wasn't loyal. I was exploring possibilities.

Sit down. Right. Now have a cigarette and calm down."

Smith even lit my butt for me. I sat back, doing a slow burn. It was bad enough that this flatfoot had intimated that Chibi might have been back-dooring Spanish Man, and worse to imply that Spanish had been black marketing. But to suggest that Spanish could have been selling out his country or something, that took the prize for asininity!

The moment of quiet was shattered as Harmon barged back into the room with a fistfull of papers.

"Hey, Harry! The final autopsy report is here from the Flight Surgeon. And a messenger just dropped off the report from the Jap police."

Smith took the papers from him and studied them for several minutes. Then he looked up at all of us.

"The local police have completed interrogation of the two girls and released them. Killane, you'll be glad to hear, they collaborated your statements on every point."

"Interrogation of everyone in the Bar Lane area last night, results negative. No one seen entering or leaving the alley between the time Luna entered it and the time Killane and the two girls entered it one hour later."

"The Hondo Laundry and Chong's Tailor Shop were empty and locked by six p.m. The Matsukawa Hockshop and nearby residences . . . the occupants were all asleep by ten or ten thirty. They

heard no disturbance until the body was discovered.”

“Area of the incident . . . a thorough search. No weapons, suspicious objects, or other clues found. Any tracks that might have been in the dust were obliterated by all the rushing to and fro once Luna was found.”

Harmon snorted in disgust. “In other words, a big fat zero!”

Smith smiled in an odd way. “Just one little thing, George. The Flight Surgeon’s report. Probable cause of death.”

We all stared at him, waiting.

“Luna was killed, his neck vertebrae shattered, by one blow from behind by some hard, padded object. You couldn’t hit a man hard enough with a sap to do that. Maybe some kind of wrapped-up club . . . but this is Japan. It is the considered opinion of the surgeon that Luna was chopped . . . once . . . by a Karate expert!”

Everything after that was anticlimax. Smith told me that I was free to go, and I would hear from them if they wanted to see me again. Both he and Harmon gave the impression that they were up against a blank wall, and would have to let the case ride until something else developed.

Vandervoort cursed aloud at all the paperwork that would now have to be accomplished on Luna. Dawson said little but agreed on the last point.

Was that all that the whole thing

meant to them? A great deal of personal inconvenience? Was it just “Scratch one more airman, they’re cheap?”

I stepped out of the base guard-house and faced toward the main gate. Out there was a different world, a foreign world, a world of scurrying yellow millions who met questions with the inscrutable faces and the sing-song “Wakari-masen! Wakari-masen!”

They didn’t understand.

Rage boiled up in me, a hot scalding lava of emotion. Rage at the paper-shuffling, triplicate signing, Air Force. Rage at the world outside those gates. In that world my buddy had died. Somewhere out there was the reason, and his murderer. I was going to find them.

To pay for Ignacio Luna, someone had to die.

MONDAY

On Sunday night, a procession arrived at the barracks to take charge of the personal effects of my deceased room-mate. Special Agent Harmon came, with the key to his wall locker, that had been on Spanish Man’s body. First Stud Dawson and Tech Sgt. Ed Riley, the barracks chief and our duty sergeant, completed the procession.

They tumbled all of Spanish Man’s uniforms, civvies, and personal possessions onto the floor. Harmon went through everything for clues to the murder, down to

the last sock and razor blade. He gave his disgusted verdict and left.

"A big fat negative zero!"

Dawson looked on while Riley helped me pack the personal possessions and stand the baggage in the hall. An orderly room flunky would see that they were dispatched to my buddy's parents in Texas on Monday morning. Dawson told me to be sure and have the houseboy turn in Luna's issue gear, bed, and bedding to the supply room in the morning. I said that I would. Riley gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder and the two men left.

I showered and hit the sack, but sleep did not come for hours. I lay in the dark and relived Saturday night. I shouldn't have had the date with Michiko. I should have gone along with Spanish, and nothing would have happened. I should have but I hadn't. I would have to do a lot of making up, for having let my buddy down that once.

Monday my shift worked the day shift at the comcenter. There were Staff Sgt. Duncan, myself, and two airmen third class—"Pineapple" DeCosta, a Portuguese-Polynesian-Japanese mixup from Oahu, and "Honky" Kovacs from Cleveland. Duncan was trick chief. The other two were good guys, but still rattle-headed from not having had all the jeep knocked out of them yet.

There should have been one more man on the shift. He was somewhere in a pine box, booked for a one-way plane ride to Texas. The

guys did not mention Spanish Man, nor did I.

Monday was when we delivered the weekend accumulation of teletype messages to the adutant for distribution, so the morning went by swiftly. The early afternoon was slow but things picked up toward the end of the day as outgoing messages came in.

They had to be logged and routed and punched into perforated tapes for the transmitter distributors. I worked like an automaton, scarcely aware of the content of either incoming or outgoing messages.

Pineapple nudged me once, whistling. "Here's a hot one, boy!"

My curiosity was aroused and I read what he held. The missive was from the local commander, routed to several higher commands, saying that all was in readiness at Minami-bashi Air Base for the imminent arrival of a shipment of the deadly Rattlesnake missiles.

There was a fighter wing at the base, equipped with the latest operational type of delta-wing jet fighter aircraft. This was public knowledge on both sides of the Pacific. The Rattlesnake was a small airborne missile with a nuclear warhead. It was supposed to be unstoppable. This was public knowledge.

The big secret was that jet fighters in Japan were being equipped with the missile. This was a big move ahead for our side, in the Cold War checker game.

An hour later the word Rattlesnake caught my eye again, this time on one of the incoming printers. That message was from the State Department, Washington, to the local base commander. It reminded him that, although the missiles were being shipped to Japan with the knowledge and approval of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces high command, the presence of the missiles must not become known to the general public. Having been the world's first and thus far only nuclear guinea pigs, the Japanese were naturally sensitive about the presence of any nuclear weapons in their vicinity.

If word got out, State reminded the general, Communist agitators would see to it that the Japanese government and the U.S. Air Force were given a very bad time indeed.

Duncan tore the message from the printer, filed it in the proper folder for delivery in the morning and told us to get the comcenter in order for our relief. At four thirty the swing shift took over and we were free until the morrow.

I stopped long enough to change into civvies, before heading off base. I joined the column of pedestrians pouring out the gate. Most of them were Japanese employed on the base. The rest were G.I.'s going out on the town.

I noticed one bunch of troops that stood out in the crowd. They were going out in uniform, obviously cherry-boys newly arrived from the

States. They rubbernecked and pointed, laughed too loudly at everything, and pretended to be strangling as they got their first strong dose of benjo and rice paddy aroma.

The paddy stench grabbed me a lot deeper than the lungs. It hurt me deep in my guts, for since Saturday night when I had tripped over Spanish Man's body, it was no longer the smell of excrement, it was the smell of death itself.

The doorway of the Paris Bar loomed before me suddenly; I paused in surprise. From long habit, my feet had brought me here.

"Good a place to start as any," I told myself.

I walked on in.

I was early. The girls and Mamma Watanabe were having chow, all five crowded into a corner booth. There was a handleless teacup and a bowl of rice and vegetable gravy in front of each one. Everyone but Chibi had been digging in, eating and talking about something in mile-a-minute Nihongo. Chibi's rice was untouched. She had put no makeup on and her eyes were swollen from crying.

The rapid-fire Japanese stopped when I stepped through the door. Five animated faces turned toward me and went blank. Mamma-san's lips twitched once, as if she were about to throw me her usual Fort Knox smile and had then thought better of it.

Pause.

"What you speak, Pat-san?" she came out with, finally.

"I speak roku Torys, one for everybody, and make mine a double! And gomen nasai, I want to see Chibi and Michiko alone."

Mamma-san looked at Michiko. Michiko nodded once. Mamma-san, Chieko and Tomiko scrambled out of the booth. While Mamma-san went behind the bar, the two girls gathered all cups, dishes, and chopsticks and ducked around the end of the bar. They went into the kitchen behind, which was always off-limits to customers.

Mamma-san Watanabe was pouring the whiskey into shot glasses. I could have ordered Scotch from the dusty imported bottle on the shelf, but I would have been drinking Torys just the same. I left seven century-notes on the bar, carried three of the glasses to the booth, and slid in across from Chibi and Michiko.

"Cops give you a bad time?" I asked for a starter.

Michiko shrugged. Chibi sniffled.

"Takusan talk. We speak matte-sans wha' hopen They speak only round-eye business. Finish."

"Now what?"

"I think Chibi-chan will sayonara this place," Michiko told me, with a sideways glance at her friend.

"What do you mean?"

"She will go far away, and work some other place. It is better. She can no more be happy, here."

"Hai!" Chibi nodded. "Ashikaga-

sama speak me today. Stars say mo' bettah I go, hyaku, no stay this town!"

"Who says?" I interrupted.

"A shikaga-sama!"

"You know, Pat," Michiko pulled at her chin, mimicing a long beard. "Tells-fortune man."

I nodded in recognition. They meant the old fortune teller with the long white beard. I had heard that most of the girls, particularly the ones from the country, were madly devoted to fortune tellers.

They sought advice from these charlatans on most phases of their hectic lives . . . when to change jobs, when to change boy friends, so on and so on. Chibi-chan, of peasant stock, would be susceptible, of course. But then even Michiko, who was a hip Tokyo girl, was superstitious in many ways.

So I didn't laugh at Chibi's message from the stars, but only replied, "Ashikaga-sama? So that's his name."

We had finished the Torys and Mamma-san was giving me some long hard looks. I signalled, and Chieko soon came over with a double and two of the bar specials for the girls.

Chibi frowned and called something to Mamma Watanabe. Chieko took back one glass of pop and returned with a good double shot of Torys with a little cola on top. Apparently Chibi had insisted on the real thing. I paid Chieko and we were left alone again.

There was the sound of feet, and six of the cherry boys in suntans came in, that had been clowning all over the street earlier. With more clowning, they found stools at the bar, ordered, and Chieko and Tomiko went into action. In a few seconds they had drinks on the wood too.

Mamma-san waited for money.

The boys started forking out the M.P.C.'s they had been given in exchange for their long green, upon entering the country via Tachikawa Terminal. Mamma-san squawked in dismay.

"Funny money, desho! Whassa-matta you? No Yen?"

"Now ain't this hell, Pete?" said one, "Here we come downtown without buyin' any of these here yen."

Pete turned and hollered my way, "Hey, buddy! Got any yen to sell?"

I shook my head at him.

He turned his back to me and said to Mamma-san, "Guess you gotta take this stuff, ma, or else pour all these drinks back in the bottles."

Mamma Watanabe surrendered, muttering to herself, and grabbed military script with both hands. She whisked the bills out of sight, shot a worried look at the door, and handed back change in Japanese coins.

All this was quite illegal, and happened in bars all over Japan, every day. I had done it myself. A guy ran short of yen but wanted to

keep on drinking. Or a guy came offbase with no yen at all. Almost any bar would change a dollar for yen, discounting sixty yen in the process, which would be clear profit when the bills were redeemed on the black market. I thought no more about it and turned back to Chibi and Michiko.

"Enough bullshit! I came out here to do a job, and I want you two to help me!"

Michiko raised an eyebrow at me.

"Nani desuka, Pat?"

"Somebody killed Spanish. I'm going to find out who, and why, and then I'm going to put the bastard away for keeps!"

It was the first time that evening that Spanish's name had been mentioned. Chibi gave a low moan and buried her face in her hands. Michiko's face was stiff, but I saw her eyes narrow to mere slits. Those eyes of black jet flashed once at me. She shook her head slowly.

"Dame, Pat! No good! Spanish is dead, you can no bring him back. You just catch takusan trouble for self. You let matte-sans worry about that!"

"Matte-sans, hell! Nobody is going to do anything. Chibi just said that your cops said it was American business. They aren't doing any worrying about it. The O.S.I. may have the base sewed up, but they have no investigating authority out here, over Japanese. They would put these bars on the Lane off-limit given an excuse, so nobody would

tell them anything. That leaves it up to me."

"Pat, don't be baka! Is no good, you messing around. Let it alone!"

"No, damn it, I will not let it alone! Spanish was like a brother to me! It's the least I can do for him."

Michiko and Chibi were both staring at me, their faces stiff, although Chibi's eyes were streaming tears. They did not reply, and I felt like hitting them to arouse some emotion.

"Listen to this, then! A Jap killed Spanish! The doctor said his neck was broken by one . . . just one . . . Karate chop. That means by an expert!"

Both girls jerked erect. Chibi's eyes popped and her mouth fell open. She gasped one word at Michiko.

"Sheechee-yo!"

Michiko shut her up with a burst of Japanese that was too rapid for me to catch. Chibi cringed back in her seat and again buried her face in her hands.

She knew something. They both did. I thought of the points that Special Agent Smith had mulled over the day before. My words jabbed straight at Chibi.

"What was it then? Were you and Spanish working the black market? Or were you doing the butterfly bit? Is that it, Chibi-chan? Were you back-dooring him? You have another boy friend who wanted him out of the way"

Michiko growled something in

her husky voice, but Chibi flared at me in honest anger. "No, Pat-san! What you speak? You know I loved only him, honto! I don't hurt Spani-san! No, no, no!"

"What was it then? Why? Who did it?"

Michiko grabbed Chibi's arm and shook her hard.

"Warui! Warui, desho!"

Chibi turned her twisted streaming doll's face to me pleadingly. "Shiri-masen, Pat. I no can speak! Dozo, dozo, you don't ask!"

I decided to give it up. Whatever Chibi knew was tearing her apart, but I wasn't going to get it out of her this way. Michiko looked about ready to kill me or Chibi or both of us.

"Okay, okay, forget it. Sorry I asked. Gomen nasai. Won't happen again."

Michiko looked relieved and relaxed instantly.

"More better, Pat. If you friend, you don't give Chibi hard time. Okay?"

"Okay. Another drink?"

"Arrigato, but I go work now. Cherry boys spending much more money."

She nodded to where the jeep troops were all wound up and going strong, singing and dancing and buying drinks as fast as the girls could hustle them. Quite a bit of script was changing hands.

"Pat-san, you help me?" Chibi quavered.

"Sure, kid. What?"

"I no can put on happy face tonight. You buy for me drinks, okay mamma-san I sit here. Dai jobu?"

"dai jobu."

So we remained in the booth, Chibi crying silently to herself, and me smoking and sipping and watching the floor show that the customers were providing.

A loud shout of laughter exploded. Billy the Kid had just walked in. He was in the usual cowboy boots, rodeo shirt, levis, and ten gallon hat. He limped inside bowing and smirking in all directions, wrinkled hands clutching his beat-up old guitar.

He struck a cord and started moaning the "She Ain't Got No Yo-yo" number. The young troops hooted in derision.

"None of that, Pops!" the one called Pete demanded. "Give us some shit-kickin' music!"

"Ah, so!"

Billy the Kid bowed again, and started thumping out "Red River Valley." That went over well, so he continued singing about what a lone cow hand he was.

The jeeps jiggled for a while with the girls, downed some more drinks, and laughed at Billy. He sensed when they started losing interest, stopped playing, and passed his hat around. The troops tossed in a few coins and then ignored him.

Billy sidled up to the end of the bar and said a few words to Mamma Watanabe in a low voice. She nodded and put a shot of

Toroy before him. They spoke a few words more to each other.

The Kid tossed off the shot. Then he ducked around the bar and into the kitchen door, still carrying his guitar. In a moment he slid out again and disappeared out the front door.

"Chibi. . ." I said idly.

"Hai, Pat-san?"

"What was Billy the Kid doing in the kitchen?"

Chibi blinked twice, shrugged, and toyed with her glass.

"Mebbe so catch chow?"

"Maybe," I agreed.

I didn't think so. Billy hadn't been in the kitchen long enough to eat anything. Also, he hadn't had anything in his hands when he came out, aside from his old guitar.

The troops had gotten tired of standing now; they were settling into the booths, with the girls giving them the standard cuddling treatment. Michiko was in the next booth to mine with the boy called Pete. She was nodding to everything he said and asking him questions to keep him going.

"How long you stay Japan?"

"WE'll be here two . . . oh, you mean how long have we been here? As a matter of fact, we all got in yesterday."

"Takusan new boys come?"

"Hell yes, a whole squadron of us. Why?"

"I am business girl. Like to see many new customer. And maybe

"Yeah, baby?" Pete was interested.

"Maybe some day comes boy who will love me, marry me, and take me back to States."

Pete laughed aloud at her, and Michiko joined him in laughing at her dreams. They were supposed to be the dreams of every girl in her line of business.

"Whole new squadron?" Michiko went on fishing. "What work you do? Fly plane? Sit-in-office job? Repair man?"

"We ain't supposed to talk about our work, baby. But you're right in a way. We're maintenance types."

A buddy down the line called out, "Hey, Pete! Shut up about work!" Obviously, the boys had been given some security briefings lately.

"You're drunk, Pete!"

Pete laughed again. "Hell, I ain't drunk! But I bet you I'll be seeing snakes tomorrow!"

"Shut up, anyhow!"

"Yeh, sure." Pete raised his glass again, still laughing at his own joke. "Be seeing snakes every day, in fact!"

The talking and drinking went on. I looked at my watch. It was getting late and I had nothing to show for my night's efforts. Pretty soon it would be closing time. I had to work the next day.

"Pat-san?"

I looked at Chibi in surprise. I had left her drinking her Torys shots, and had been paying more attention to what was being said in

the next booth. Chibi had stopped crying. She was sitting upright, like a little soldier at attention. Her eyes were bloodshot and her breath reeked with the rotgut whiskey. Surprisingly, her little fists were clenched and her chin was up in a determined manner.

"Pat-san, I thinking. I thinking I one baka ojosan. When I love a man, I help him. When he is dead, I must help his tomodachi."

"What do you mean, Chibi?"

"Mo sukoshi, I sayonara this place. Have to do. Before I go, I do last thing for man I love. I help his tomodachi find who kill him!"

Here it was! The break, the first step on the way to whoever had killed Spanish!

"You know who . . ."

Chibi's eyes flickered about in fright. "No speak here! After close, we go someplace!"

I looked at my watch. Ten forty-five. Not long to go. The last-round rush was underway. It seemed that none of the green troops were eager to shack up that night. They had come off base in a bunch and intended to go back that way. They were all still a little bashful.

"Where'll we go?" I whispered. "Your house?"

She lived in one of the cluster of little houses at the far, or northeastern, end of the Lane. It was a little colony of nothing but business girls and shack rats. Again, a spasm of fright made her shoot worried glances around the Paris Bar.

"You wait. I speak Michiko."

The customers were all shooed out. The girls gave the place a quick cleaning out before they left. Mamma-san was figuring profits and losses on a pad. I leaned against a table and waited.

In a few minutes Michiko and Chibi came over to me and we put our heads together. The girls tossed a lot of talk back and forth in Japanese, Michiko sullen and reluctant to do something, and Chibi insistent. Finally Michiko surrendered. She explained in English.

"Chibi-chan go her house. You, me, go other way to my house. Don't question now. I explain on way."

I was beginning to understand now. Chibi had something to tell me, but she was afraid to do it in public. She was afraid to be seen with me in any way. She had planned some sort of rendezvous; she needed Michiko's help to pull it off. Her friend had finally, however reluctantly, agreed to the plan.

We all left the bar.

Chibi turned up the Lane toward the housing development. Michiko wrapped both arms firmly around one of my own and turned me down the Lane toward Sakura Avenue. The girls called to each other as they parted company.

"Oyasume, Chibi-chan."

"Oyasume nasai, Mi-chan."

Sleep well. They were playing roles. They were pretending to be two innocent business girls con-

cluding a night's work, one of whom had made a catch and the other of whom would sleep alone for once.

I wondered for whose benefit this performance was being acted out. For Mamma Watanabe, locking up the Paris? For old Billy the Kid, limping home to some den after dragging his guitar from bar to bar? For the osoba man, dishing out bowls of soup to Japanese men and women? For someone among the night people and drunken G.I.'s who were drifting aimlessly up and down the Lane?

Or for the whole crawling mess of shack town, squatting like a waiting octopus outside the airbase, with its obscene tentacles writhing into thousands of lives? Bar Lane was an evil entity, pretending to resign itself to sleep. All the while it watched the world with a hundred veiled eyes.

Michiko and I rounded the Lion Bar at the corner, and turned north up Sakura Avenue. The sidewalks were almost deserted and all the shopfronts were shuttered and dark. Ahead of us the lights flashed and the traffic hummed on the highway that went down to Tokyo. Michiko talked in a low voice as we walked.

"You have yen, Pat?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"For hotel. Chibi-chan says, you go with me as far as hotel. I go home. You go hotel, have room. You wait there. Chibi-chan will

come back way to hotel, so no one sees. Wakaru?"

"Wakar'mas."

I understood. Once across the tracks in Minami-bashi proper, the eyes would no longer be watching. Michiko would go alone to the house where she rented a room. I would wait out of sight in the hotel for Chibi to come and tell me who had murdered Spanish Man.

I checked my watch. Eleven thirty. We were at the highway, waiting for the light to change. It did and then we were across it. Ahead was the Chuo Main Line, with one of the expresses from Tokyo sliding into the station. Until the early hours of the morning, fast trains came and went every ten minutes. We crossed the tracks as soon as the train was past.

Across the street, in a niche between two stores, I saw the old fortune teller sitting on his mat with his black robes about him. His glowing crystal ball was on its pedestal in front of him. Its glow dimly illuminated his high smooth forehead and white beard.

Two business girls were squatting before him on their haunches, in their American-style clothes. They were getting the word direct from the stars, how to run their drab little lives.

What was his name again? Ashikaga, Ashikagasama. There was something funny about that man. I could not put my finger on it.

Michiko shot one glance across

the street. Her fingers tightened momentarily upon my arm. She said nothing. We walked on.

We were in front of the hotel now. It was on the east side of the street, looming up three stories and stretching back into the night, parallel to the railroad. We halted.

"Oyasume, Pat. Good luck."

I stood a moment watching Michiko walk on northward under the street lamps, then I turned and pushed open the door.

Inside was a cement-floored entry way. At one hand was a rack for shoes. Ahead were two steps up to a sliding shoji-type door. The light of a naked electric bulb showed through the oiled paper.

I slipped out of my moccasins, stepping onto the wooden inner sill. I picked up my shoes and slid them into an empty pigeonhole in the rack, along with all the other shoes and geta that were parked for the night. There were rows of slippers waiting. I slipped my feet into a pair and slid open the inner door.

Going in, I found a sort of counter serving as a front desk. The noise of the door brought up an old woman, silent on tabi-clad feet. She had a white smock on over her tattered dress. She squinted at me from behind rimless spectacles.

"Got a room?"

"Hai. Go haku yen."

I laid five century notes on the counter.

"Catch-O joson?"

I nodded.

"Sen yen."

A thousand. I laid out five more bills.

The hotel was notorious for one-night stands. There was nothing out of the ordinary happening. The girl would be along in a little while. So desuka.

The old woman palmed the money, nodded, and without a word led me down a hall toward the back of the hotel. At one door she halted, indicating the key that was in the lock.

"So, Ofuro soko, benjo soko."

She pointed in the direction of bath and toilet. Nodding to herself, she turned and silently went back up the hallway. I took the key from the lock, pushed down on the door handle, and went in.

Bare floor, bare walls, a peeling ceiling. Curtain across the one window. One light bulb in the middle of the ceiling. A bed, a tiny nightstand with an ashtray on it, two chairs. Two pillows and two folded cotton kimono on the bed. That was it.

I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to relax. I looked at my Omega. Five minutes to twelve. I lit a cigarette, smoked it down, and stubbed it out in the ashtray. Twelve ten.

I lit another cigarette.

And another.

And another.

Twelve-thirty.

One.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong indeed. Chibi was long overdue. She had chickened out, or . . . or . . . or what?

I didn't know.

I came off the bed with a rush. I left the door unlocked, with the key inside. Shuffling in the slippers, I hurried down the hall. The old woman was nowhere in sight.

I slid the inner door open and shut, trying to be as quiet as I could. I found my shoes and slipped them on, cursing the delay under my breath. Then out the heavy door, closing it carefully so that it did not bang.

Sakura street was silent and empty. Not even a breeze stirred the trash in the gutters. The death-stench of rice paddy hung over the whole town. The train station was quiet. The light over the highway intersection blinked red and green to itself. There was no traffic to regulate.

I paused for a moment, once I was across the highway. Let's see now. Not down Sakura Avenue. A roving A.P. patrol might come out the gate. I didn't want to be hauled in and written up for being out after midnight. I didn't want to risk the hundred night eyes of Bar Lane.

I turned left along the highway edge and jogged east. Maybe it was a quarter mile, or a little more, to the spot where the northern end of Bar Lane gave onto the highway.

High walls and thick hedges were between me and the cluster of paper houses on my right.

A pause again at the mouth of the Lane. There was a light pole perhaps every hundred yards along it. Not enough to do more than cut the darkness in spots. Every house ahead of me was dark.

I threaded my way between cars that were pulled off the Lane for the night. Renaults, Datsuns, Toyopets, ancient Fords and Chevvy's, and one Buick. This was the place where shackrats and one night customers parked their cars, if they had any.

There was a footpath between the first row of houses and the second. I knew where I was going. Chibi and Spanish Man had often entertained me and Michiko at Chibi's place, the one Spanish had paid rent for since he had been in Japan.

Many a night we had spent there, playing game after game of gin, listening to the music on A.F.N., the four of us killing a case of beer before crawling two by two into the futons on the straw mat floor. Chibi and Spanish had even been saving up their money for a teevee set, before.

Before he was dead in an alley.

I was at the house in the third row. Like all the others, it was dark. I stood on a little patch of cement and fingered the sliding door. It was unlocked.

I slid inside and pulled the door

shut behind me. In the dark, from habit, I slid out of my shoes and on to the tatami in my sock feet. This was the little room that did duty as a kitchen.

My right hand felt along the wall to the edge of a door, the one to the bed-living room that made up the other half of the little house. A curtain always hung over it.

I ducked into the next room. I could hear someone's slow, regular breathing. I swallowed twice and whispered one word.

"Chibi?"

The light struck my eyes like a blow. Strong hands seized both arms and held me powerless. I blinked and stared hard.

A little man knelt motionless across the room. His feet were folded beneath him and his hands were on his knees. He was short and slight, almost fragile built. He wore a creased and shiny black western suit, and a starched shirt gleamed behind his narrow necktie.

He smiled at me and nodded once, without speaking.

I looked right and left, at the men who held me fast. Then my knees almost gave way beneath me. They were police, not police in the dark blue of the locals. These men wore the slate gray uniforms of big city cops.

I looked right and left and ahead again, into three pairs of slitted eyes.

The little man in the black suit spoke.

"Welcome, Mr. Killane! We were

waiting for someone . . . and you came. Sit down, please."

His eyes flickered at the two policemen. They released their grips on me and I sank to my knees.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am Inspector Mori, of the Prefectural Police. Tell me, Mr. Killane, what were you seeking here?"

I ran a dry tongue over my lips. "Chibi-chan."

"Ah, yes. The pretty little Miss Chibi-chan. That is so sad. She could not have been here. Yet you expected her to be here? That is interesting."

"What . . ."

"So very sad. You see, Miss Chibi-chan had, ah, shall we say bad luck? She fell, precisely at twelve twenty, beneath a train on the Chuo Main Line."

I swayed, there on the floor, staring wildly at the smiling face before me. The silken voice went on.

"Perhaps fell is the wrong word. Pushed, or thrown, would be more correct. You see, before this happened, her so-pretty little neck was broken by one karate blow."

TUESDAY

We sat four hours in darkness, without speaking. After dropping his bombshell, Mori ordered the light switched off again and complete silence maintained. Like a spider he crouched in darkness waiting for another fly to blunder into his web.

As cocks began to crow in distant farmyards and the first glow of dawn pushed back the night, it became obvious that no more flies were coming. Mori shifted his body on the tatami and spoke to his men.

They switched the lights back on. One stepped into Chibi's little kitchen. Using her utensils, he set about making toast and brewing tea. The other cop turned both rooms inside out searching for something. The disorder before he started indicated that the three had made a hurried search earlier, probably with flashlights, before my arrival.

Mori shook his head as he inspected articles and papers of possible significance.

"I must confess to much disappointment, Mr. Killane."

"We came here immediately after seeing Miss Chibi-chan's body. I thought that perhaps something of importance was in her possession, and that the killer might come here searching. So. Only you came."

"You think I killed her?"

"No, Mr. Killane. One has only to look at your hands. Obviously you are no karate expert. I do not believe that any of your friends are such, either."

I relaxed and stretched my cramped muscles. "That's a relief!"

Mori's voice was silken again.

"You have not told me what brought you here so impetuously, at such a late hour. I think that you had better do so now, please."

"We had a date to meet someplace. She didn't show up."

"Ah, so, a date. For what purpose?"

I felt my face getting red. "Why . . . for the usual thing!"

"For sex, Mr. Killane? Do not, as you say, attempt to put the wool in front of my eyes. Miss Chibichan was not your girl friend, and never was. She was faithful to your friend Mr. Luna, who was so recently removed to another cycle of existence. With the exception of a few instances in Tokyo, you yourself have confined your attentions to a Miss Michiko. For your own sake, Mr. Killane, please do not lie to me!"

It was weird. The guy seemed to know everything. I decided I had better level with him. The Prefectural Police were too big to play games with. I tried to guess what they were doing on the scene.

"Okay, here it is. Last night I found out she knew something about who killed my friend. She wouldn't tell me at the time. She was afraid of somebody. So we set it up to meet later at the hotel uptown."

"Ah, so! The hotel. That explains what she was doing at the railway, where the path crossed it opposite this lane. That would be the route she would take to approach the hotel from the rear, in order not to be observed using the usual entrance."

"Yeah. But somebody knew she was going that way."

"More likely followed her, and overtook her just as the train was approaching the foot crossing, Mr. Killane. At that late hour, there were no witnesses. The crossing is obscured by tall bushes on both sides. The train crewmen saw only the body falling before the east-bound train, and used up some little time and distance in halting the train. The trunk and limbs were much severed and mangled, but the already-broken neck was quite obvious to the trained eye."

"Yours?"

"Quite so. A phone call to the local police station brought me to the scene immediately."

And, I thought, to this house only moments later. The Inspector seemed to have us all thoroughly pegged, and he hadn't found all this out in just one night.

"I take it you've been in town some time?"

"You are an impetuous young man, Mr. Killane. Your curiosity has just cost the life of an unfortunate young woman. It is likely to result in risk to your own life. Such curiosity is scarcely commendable."

"When my best friend is murdered and nobody seems to give a damn, I say it's my business to get curious! If I don't, who will?"

"Some one is curious, Mr. Killane. But more is at stake here than the death of one American airman, or even the death of a Japanese citizen of however low a class. These are but minor incidents in the op-

eration of a machine that reaches to many places beyond Minami-bashi."

"My superiors are concerned with many things. My humble self is concerned only with certain manifestations of this machine here in Minami-bashi."

"A machine? You mean a gang of some kind? You know what is going on?"

"To a certain degree, Mr. Killane. The operations of a karate-killer indicate that the machine is vulnerable here. Such violence is stupid. It attracts attention. It has attracted our attention."

"The one who permits such stupidity has made a mistake. He is likely to make more mistakes, and finally the mistake which enables us to act."

"That sounds like you know who's behind this!"

"We are able to make an educated guess, Mr. Killane. For instance, are you aware that the possessors of karate abilities are required to register their hands with the local police, as with dangerous weapons?"

"I've heard it. Then you know who the killer is!"

Inspector Mori gazed at me blandly and permitted himself to smile briefly. I felt the anger stirring in me again, at the nameless omnipotent authority that knew, but did not try to prevent the harming of such innocent victims as Chibi and Spanish. I wanted to shout a protest that they were im-

portant, even little people were important!

"You do know! Then why in hell haven't you pulled him in and prevented this?"

"Gently, Mr. Killane, gently! Suspecting someone and being able to convict them are two different things. What is the motive? Where are the eyewitnesses? Where are the fingerprints? We have none of these. Therefore we do not start out with the half of a cock, as you Americans say. We wait until the whole fowl is within our grasp, then we cook him."

He shook his head pityingly.

"You Occidentals! Always the hurry, the impatience. You blunder about like the foolish children that you are, and wonder why your toys are broken."

"All right then, Inspector. You know who but you won't say. Can you at least tell me why?"

"No, Mr. Killane. I can only repeat that this thing that you are pitting yourself against is much bigger than you think. Not only this base is involved, but all of your bases in the Kanto Plain. Fuchu, Tachikawa, Johnson, Yokota, and more. I warn you, Mr. Killane, exercise patience. Permit those with more abilities than you possess to deal with this thing!"

I didn't argue with him. I was sure of one thing. I wasn't about to wait for anyone.

The two cops brought in breakfast, scalding tea and toast. The

four of us ate silently. Then Inspector Mori looked at his gold watch.

"It is past six a.m., Mr. Killane. I believe that you have duties at the base?"

He was right. I had a day shift to work in less than two hours. After six I would have no trouble going in the gate, and I would have time enough to shower before I climbed back into the old khakis.

I stood up and gave him a bow from the waist, just for the hell of it. He and the two silent cops gravely returned it. I left the house.

The local police would see to it, I knew, that Chibi's meager possessions, along with her ashes, went to her ancestral village somewhere in the back of Honshu.

That morning, as I walked to work at the communications building, I heard the roar of approaching planes, coming in for landings on the Minami-bashi strip. One swung overhead, then another, and a third. More were behind. They were huge transports, and the arrival of so many at one time meant something special was on.

The gang was already at the center, shooting the bull with the mid-shift before officially taking over. Sarge Duncan, Honky, and Pineapple all gave me knowing grins and shook their heads admiringly.

"Look at the circles under those eyes!"

"He never came in at all last night."

"Pat, you're sure turning out to be a real skibby hanchol!"

"Ah, go get laid!" I snarled in mock disgust.

Pineapple winked. "Who was it this time? Same old Michiko? She sure musta give you a rough time!"

I played along with the gag. "You shitbirds don't know the half of it!"

More nods and grins. I ignored the wisecracks. Duncan told the mid shift boys to drag ass, they were officially relieved. We settled down to work.

Incoming traffic was steady and messengers constantly dropped off handfuls of messageforms for transmission. Duncan put me to cutting tapes after he routed them, while Honky and Pineapple worked the floor. At nine o'clock a courier from base operations dropped off a hot operational immediate for instant transmission. I cut the thing, reading for content as I typed.

It was about the series of transports that had landed an hour earlier. They had just arrived from Guam, ferrying in the Rattlesnake missiles. The missile maintenance squadron had assumed control and security precautions were redoubled.

These items, I reflected, were the snakes that Pete and the rest of the new boys would be seeing every day.

The morning passed with nothing else unusual. We split for chow

at noon; we put in a fairly busy afternoon. Four-thirty arrived, the swing shift took over, and we cut out for the barracks.

"Huh," grunted Honky as we got close. "Whassat down by the gate?"

We squinted down the street and could make out a clump of people outside the base entrance. They were milling around waving some kind of banners. A loudspeaker was squawking loudly in Japanese. That was the sound we heard.

"The J.N.'s must be havin' some kind of demonstration," Pineapple decided.

I thought fast. A demonstration. That meant the base would declare a "Condition green", which in turn meant that the base would be restricted as soon as the news worked its way up channels and down again.

"Dig you later," I called to Honky and Pineapple, and took off running down the street. I was still in uniform but didn't have a minute to lose.

There was considerable confusion at the gate, with vehicles blocked and backed up by the mass of people that were milling around in the street. The A.P.'s were standing in front of the guard shack, looking very confused and unhappy. The Civilian Guard was standing with his back to the pedestrian exit, listening with head cocked to whatever the loudspeaker was saying.

I wiggled into the middle of the stream of homeward bound base employees, ducked my head low, and let the stream carry me with it out the gate and down the street.

No one wasted a second glance at me, the lone round-eye making his getaway. The tide of hurrying people carried me along past the Hondo Laundry and the Ohta Grocery. I had to get off the street in a hurry. I fought my way out of the pack and into Bar Lane.

The first bar on the corner was the Lion. Its girls were crowded around the door, rubbernecking at all the confusion. All the way down the Lane, its denizens were doing the same. I shoved the girls aside with both elbows and plunged into the Lion.

Once inside, I went to a side window and checked the street. No cars were moving in either direction. The married personnel who lived off base were temporarily detained. The civilian base employees were not wanting to get mixed up in any trouble. They were legging it to the station and home as fast as they could go. Down the middle of the street a column of people ten-abreast was moving toward the gate.

There were boys and girls in student uniforms. There were bow-legged little workers with red scarves tied around their heads. There were tattered tramps that looked like the sweepings of Shim-bashi and Asakusa in Tokyo.

The marchers linked arms and started singing. They weaved into a sort of snake-dance as they advanced. Some carried red banners, hastily painted with slogans in kanji, kana, and English.

The banners read:

"Ban The Bombs!"

"Japan Says No To The Atom!"

"Students And Workers Unite In Protest!"

"Peace Lovers Denounce Missiles!"

"Wall Street Killers, Get Out Of Japan!"

I got the picture, all right. The Rattlesnake missiles were in the country now. Eight hours after they arrived in utmost secrecy, the Reds had whipped up a demonstration here at the very spot where they had landed.

How had they found out?

These were not locals who were storming down the street. This mob had probably come up by train from Tokyo. That meant organization, and time to assemble activists from radical student groups and labor unions and intellectual clubs. I had heard the Commies even hired bums off the streets in Tokyo, to carry banners and demonstrate, for so many yen a day.

A demonstration on the street, hotheads of various shades of pink and red around, and a Condition Green in effect until it all blew over. The town was off-limits and here I was in the middle of the whole mess.

I might be stuck in the Lion Bar for some time. I had to make some friends. I turned around to find a scowling mamma-san and a couple of girls regarding me.

"Hi," I smiled. "How goes it?"

"Komban wa! It go takusan dame."

"Yeah, mamma-san, it sure will be dame for business tonight."

"Hucking democrashee!" One of the girls growled. "No customer stay tonight!"

"Well, this customer made it."

"Hai! You want drink?"

"Hi, an oki Kirin," I told them. I felt in my wallet. Plenty of rustle there. Good. Now to build up a little good will.

"And a drink for all the josans!" smiles now. She bustled behind the

"Hai, hai!" Mamma-san was all smiles now. She bustled behind the bar. One of the girls inside called to the girls outside. They all came trooping in to collect their chips and soda water.

"Mamma-san . . ."

"Nani desuka?"

"Some Tokyo boys, or maybe some A.P.'s, may come sniffing around. You don't want any trouble, do you?"

"Hai." Mamma-san meant yes, she did not want any.

"So it might be better if I stayed in the back room."

"Ah, soka! Dai jobu!"

It was all right. I deposited some thousand yen notes on the bar and ducked through the little door at

the back of the room. There were two sections, a primitive kitchen and a tatami-floored alcove the girls used as a dressing room.

Sitting on the edge of the alcove, I unlaced my low-quarters and removed them. I shoved them into a corner. I removed my flight cap and unbuttoned my shirt partway. There was a stack of zabutons in a corner of the alcove, and one of those six inch high tables in the middle.

I dug out my pack of cigarettes, which was just about empty, and lit up. With the cushions at my back I had something soft to lean on and I could stretch my legs out on the mat. I decided the Lion wasn't such a bad place at that.

It was the first time in two days and a night that I had had a chance to fully relax. With the streets full of demonstrators, there was nothing else to do.

A girl poked her head through the entry from the bar, saw me, and smiled. In a moment she joined me with a beautiful tall bottle of Kirin beer, one of the best brews in the world. She set a clean glass on the little table and poured. The stuff was cold and foamy. This was the good life.

"My name Candy. Okay I sit with you?"

Detailed to keep an eye on the one customer. She was about fourteen, built chunky with a nice balcony that was probably real, and black hair in a pony tail. Her eyes

were laughing at me and her rosy cheeks were dimpled. I gave her a friendly pat on the fanny and grinned back at her.

"Hell, yes. Any time."

She put her own half-empty glass beside mine on the table and nestled up against me in a purring little ball.

I sipped on the beer and with my left hand explored the balcony. It was genuine all right.

"Whassamatta y ou? Think I got PX chest?"

"Just checking, baby."

"I honto sexy girl. How come you never stay this bar before?"

"Didn't know you were here, baby, or I would have."

"Name not baby-san! Name Candy!"

"Sure, Candy. Nice name. Pick it yourself?"

"Mamma-san Ogawa pick. All josans must have G.I. name, this place."

"Ah, so."

Now I was starting to sound like them. But what else was there to say? The relaxation and beer were making me sleepy.

"You want more bieru?"

"Yeah, might as well. One more, and get yourself something."

"Hai, arrigato!"

She left and came back in a minute with two fresh drinks and the change from my bills. I smothered a yawn, and then a second.

"Whassamatta you, daiyo? Go sleep already?"

"Takusan tired, Candy. No bed last night. Do me a favor?"

"Nani?"

"Wake me up in a couple hours, huh?" I murmured, and then my head sank back and I let my eyes close.

It was more like three hours, when Candy woke me up. It was eight p.m. by my watch. I stretched, feeling like a new man. I was also hungry as a wolf. I looked around the alcove and out into the kitchen. Nothing stirring.

"What's happening outside?"

"Tokyo people still sing song and make speech. A.P.'s come one time, meter-meter bars, nobody stay."

"Think the Tokyo people will be out there all night?"

"Sukoshi stay. Student people go back train already."

"Any trouble on the street?"

"No trouble. Takusan yackety-yak, only."

That meant that the demonstration was intended to be noisy, but well-behaved. Strictly for propaganda purposes, with no storming the basel or rock throwings, or car burnings, as had happened on other occasions. It was uncanny, though, how the Reds had been able to mobilize within hours of the arrival of the Rattlesnake missiles. They must have had a very good espionage system somewhere.

The important thing was that things had quieted down. If I stayed clear of A.P.'s, I should be

able to proceed with the investigation. But first I had a damn lot of thinking to do.

"Hey, Candy!"

"Hai, boy-san. What you want?"

"Think somebody could slip over to the Fuji and order some chow?"

"You got okane?"

In other words, money, honey. I dug out some century notes and handed them to Candy.

"You want?"

"Some katsudon will be okay."

"Hai. I go."

The bar had a sort of kitchen, but no one was doing any cooking at the time. Most of the citizens did it the lazy way, which was to order stuff delivered hot from the restaurants or the soba shop. A boy or girl would bring the chow as soon as it was prepared, and would call again later to retrieve the dirty dishes.

While waiting, I lit my last cigarette and thought about the last three days.

Inspector Mori had hinted that they, whoever they were, knew who the killer was. I assumed that they were the Prefectural Police, or possibly someone higher up in the Japanese government.

They knew who the killer was, but were not ready to pick him up. That meant that I still had a chance to locate the killer and settle his hash first. Mori had also said that the killer was part of some vast machine. I would have to watch

out not only for the killer, but for his buddies too.

Whatever racket they were in did not concern me, unless it helped lead to the man I wanted. Mori could pluck his own chickens, for all I cared.

I thought back past Mori, to the previous night when I had last seen Chibi and Michiko. They had known something, had in fact argued quite a while about whatever it was that Chibi wanted to tell me.

Chibi had known that someone must have been watching her. Hence the set-up to meet me in secret at the hotel. When we separated, the killer must have followed her instead of me. He had not been thrown off the track by her ruse of going home first.

Or perhaps the whole gang, whoever they were, had had us all under surveillance at the same time.

Perhaps, maybe, if!

My thoughts were going around and around inside my skull and I was getting no place fast.

Someplace among the happenings of Monday night, there had to be a clue to the identity of the killer.

Then I had it.

I had thrown the fact, or rather the manner, of Spanish Man's death at the girls. It had taken them by surprise. Chibi had blurted out one word before Michiko had shut her up.

Chibi had said, "Sheechee-yo!"

Or had she?

Translated, that would have

been, "Seven, yes!" Or maybe I hadn't heard right. Maybe what Chibi had said had been "Sheechee-ya?" That was Nipponese slang for hockshop.

Spanish Man had been killed just a few paces past the Matsukawa Hockshop.

But the girls already knew that. They had been right there when I tripped over Spanish Man's body.

Wait a minute!

It was the manner of death—a karate chop—that had shocked them. The fact that it was a karate killing had caused Chibi to cry out. She had connected karate with a hockshop instinctively.

There was only one hockshop in Minami-bashi. Matsukawa's. Now I knew where to look for the killer.

Candy came through the little door, a tray full of covered dishes in her hands. She set the tray down and started spreading dishes on the low table.

"Cath cha-han for watakushi, dai jobu?"

I nodded. Might as well have company while I ate. Katsudon was a sort of casserole affair, hot rice with a slice of pork on top, and some sort of sweet gravy poured over all. Cha-han was rice fried with bits of pork and various vegetables. Either dish made a full meal.

Candy set out the usual handleless cups and hefted a teapot.

"O-cha?"

"Sure."

Japanese tea was just so much

hot water to me. But it had been boiled, and was one way of getting a safe drink of water.

I split apart the warabashi—plain wooden chopsticks—that came with the meal, and started in. Those things were something that every rice-paddy daddy in Japan had to become accustomed to sooner or later. I managed.

When our meal was finished, Candy stacked the dishes on the tray, to be left by the front door for pickup. Then she looked at me thoughtfully.

"What you do tonight, boy-san? Gate close. You no can go bar-racks."

"Stay someplace out here, I suppose."

"You like stay me?"

"Maybe, but . . ."

"Nani?"

"Sukoshi okane."

"Whassamatta you? You got watch."

"So?"

"Go hock."

She was right about the gate, and I did have a good Omega on my wrist.

The hockshop! Here was my reason to get inside.

I assumed a reluctant attitude.

"Dunno. Never hocked anything here before. What kind of a gyp joint is it?"

"No cheat. Give good price. You can catch watch next payday, no trouble."

Candy shoved herself on top of

me, there on the tatami, with both arms around my neck and that famous balcony flattening against my chest. She wriggled her body suggestively.

"Whassamatta, you cherry boy? I show you takusan good time!"

My good resolutions sank while something else rose hard and strong. I quit fighting it.

"Okay."

I collected myself and my gear, slid on my low-quarters, and buttoned up my shirt. Time to get cracking.

In the front part of the bar, the girls had a couple gin rummy games going to pass the time. Mamma-san Ogawa was leaning on the bar talking in a low voice to a man. I hesitated for a split second. It was Billy the Kid.

He was in his duty uniform, the cowboy clothes, and his guitar was firmly gripped in one hand. He looked up sharply and sucked air through his teeth. He grinned at me and ducked his head.

Mamma Ogawa muttered something to him and he relaxed. I gave him a nod back and kept on toward the door.

I stuck out my head and checked the summer night. The street was clear of all but a few people, and everyone in sight was Nipponese. Down in front of the gate, along both sides of Sakura Avenue, men were squatting around bonfires, singing.

The demonstrators had rammed

the poles of their flags and banners into the ground for the night, and all the peace-loving slogans dipped and rustled in the breeze.

Across the street just in front of the guard shack was a portable barbed wire barricade. The base was sure enough closed down for the night. No one was about to get in or out before morning.

The only thing moving on Bar Lane was the boy from Fuji's, picking up dirty dishes from doorsteps. I pushed my cap to the back of my head and started off.

I have said before that Matsukawa's looked like a fort. This time the fort was open, for it seldom closed before nine. A light showed through the open door. A man was leaning over a pile of shutters in front, preparing to put them over the display window for the night. He straightened up and stood looking at me as I approached.

He was at least five-six tall, and so lean that he looked like a skeleton in the white cotton shirt and pants.

His face was like a granite crag in the night, all planes and shadows, with the very dark skin tight over the jutting cheekbones and the high hawk nose. His eyes were mere slits, deep-set; his mouth was a thin razor-slash across the lower part of his face. Over all was a heavy shock of uncombed black hair.

He remained silent as I halted in front of him. I put on my most stu-

pid grin, and shoved my hands into my pockets.

"You still open for business? I wanta hock a watch."

The razor-slash opened briefly. Otherwise, not a muscle moved on that face.

"Matsukawa-san is inside."

"Oh, you ain't the hanco here?"

"I am Katana-san. I work here. Matsukawa-san is inside."

"Okay. Thanks."

I turned my back on the man and went into the shop. There was just room to turn around between the back of the show window and the counter. Close behind the counter a glass-front case went up to the ceiling. It was full of watches and clocks, radios, record players, boxes of rings, and one accordian. Tags dangled from each item.

In front of the case stood a man tall as the one outside. This one was soft and fat from good living. This one wore a tight black suit with spotless linen. He gave me a big smile from the center of his fat face; one gold tooth glowed dully amid his white teeth.

"Good evening. You want?"

I held up my left wrist to show the watch.

"How much for this?"

"How much you want?"

"Ten thousand."

"I am so sorry. Can give only eight."

"That's okay."

I unstrapped the watch and laid it on the counter. Matsukawa

reached for a pad and a ballpoint pen and started filling out a pawn ticket. Outside the worker slid the shutters into place and closed them with a bang.

"You catch a josan tonight?" asked Matsukawa casually, as he wrote.

"Could be."

"Paris Bar josan?"

He did not look up as he kept on writing.

A chill ran down my back. We had never met, but the bastard knew me. I kept my voice steady as I replied again, "Could be."

"I.D. card, please."

I pulled out my wallet and extracted the card. I passed it to him. Matsukawa glanced at it, wrote my name on the ticket, and handed it back. He tore off the top slip and passed it across the counter. He reached into a drawer that was out of my sight.

I heard the man from outside stepping into the shop, behind my back. I heard the shuffle of his feet as he slid to one side.

"So, eight thousand. Good night."

The bills were on the counter before me. Matsukawa nodded pleasantly and turned away. The other man, Katana, laid a hand upon one end of the counter top, which was hinged so as to flip up. He lifted the top and moved to walk through the space.

My eyes travelled from the bills on the counter, down along it, to

the hand that gripped the hinged section in plain sight.

Katana's hand was long, but seemed to have a stubby quality about it. The joints of the fingers and hand were all gnarled and enlarged, somehow out of alignment. There was an edge of thick horny callous down from the wrist to the little finger. The end of each finger was thick and calloused far out ahead of the nails. It was a remarkable hand.

The hand of a karate man.

WEDNESDAY

I was going to kill a man.

That cold knowledge filtered relentlessly through my being, quenching the hot rage that had driven me for four nights, turning that rage into a cool hardened thing like steel.

I knew the who. Katana. I knew the what. Execution. I knew the why. Spanish and Chibi. That left only the where and when.

He worked at the hockshop, probably ate and slept there. So the hockshop was where it would have to happen. I needed time to decide how I was going to do it; say twenty four hours. So Wednesday night was the when.

Katana was the man. The O.S.I. didn't know he existed and had no jurisdiction in any case. Mori's outfit knew about him but had no evidence upon which to make an arrest. That left it up to me.

Me, Pat Killane, judge and jury and executioner.

Katana was condemned by the oldest law of the human race. A life for a life. For two lives, in fact. My best friend and his girl. It was the only thing I could do for them. I would do it.

It was still Tuesday night, though, and I was walking down Bar Lane with the Matsukawa Hockshop locked up and dark behind me. I walked all the way down, to the Lion Bar on the corner. Candy was waiting.

"You catch okane?"

I nodded. "No sweat."

"Ichi ban! Mamma-san say we can go now. No business so close bar early."

Arm and arm we walked back up the Lane on the way to Candy's pad. She said it was across the tracks in Minami-bashi somewhere. We both knew that I didn't want to risk running into either the demonstrators or air cops along Sakura Avenue, so the back way out it had to be.

I glanced aside at the Paris Bar as we passed it. The door was shut and no one that I knew was in sight to call out to me. Opposite, the hockship was a fortress sullen and menacing in the night.

We went past the little housing development where Chibi had once lived. We crossed the highway during a lull in the traffic. We passed between two rows of bushes that edged the short footpath.

We stepped across the double tracks of the Chuo Main Line on the very spot where Chibi had been thrown beneath a train. Then we were walking down a back street of Minami-bashi.

"Josan die back there, last night," Candy told me. "Step in front of train. You know?"

"No," I lied. "I didn't know about it."

"Baka girl. I think she probably drunk."

"Yeah."

We walked on and turned a couple corners.

Candy had an upstairs room in a kind of two-story tenement. She also had a stateside-type bed of which she was very proud. We gave it quite a workout. Before we drifted off to sleep, Candy whispered.

"You like fry-egg, boy-san?"

"Uhuh."

"Dai jobu. In morning, I make."

Wednesday morning, the day of the execution. Fried eggs, rice, and PX coffee that some G.I. had bought for Candy made up the breakfast menu. After that, all I had to do was thank Candy for the hospitality and make it to work.

The demonstrators, those that still hung around, were brewing tea over their all-night bonfires. The banners were limp on the poles. No one bothered to sing me a propaganda song as I walked past. There was a big A.P. sergeant at the gate, as well as the usual air-men and Civilian Guards.

"Hey, boy! What you doin' off base? Don't you know they's a restriction on?"

"Hell no, sarge," I said, trying to look amazed. "When did that go on?"

"Last night at five, when these here J.N.'s mobilized. Where you been, boy?"

"I've been shackled up, uptown, for three days, sarge. Didn't hear nothing about it. Just coming in to go back to work on a day shift."

"Lemme see your pass, boy!"

I pulled out my wallet and showed him. It was in place between the I.D. card and my chow pass. He seemed convinced.

"Well, if'n you didn't know about the restriction . . ."

"Give me a break, sarge. I got to get to work!"

"Well, this once. Watch it though, that poontang will get you in trouble, boy."

"Sure, sarge. Thanks."

That was that. I went on to the barracks to shower and put on clean khakis. Pineapple and Honky were not in their room, so I knew that they had probably gone to chow before reporting for duty. I went past the mess hall and met them coming out.

"There he is!" Pineapple sang out. "The old shakrat made it back on base, after all."

Honky grinned at me. "We thought you was nuts, takin' off like that."

"Not nuts," Pineapple chaffed.

"Just hurtin' for a piece. Right, Pat?"

"Right," I nodded. "And cut out the bullshit before we're late for work!"

We were on time and settled down for another day at the old grind. I processed messages and worked the teletype circuits automatically, for my mind was full of my problem.

In a few short hours I would be setting out to kill a man. I wanted to do it with the quick efficiency of the one who pulled the hot seat switch in the big house. The problem was, just how was I going to do it?

This was a trained, experienced karate man, probably a black belt, who had twice killed by single chops with those lethal hands. I didn't doubt that he had twice the speed and coordination of myself. When threatened, such a man would counter with reflexes sharpened by years of training for just such a moment.

I wouldn't stand the chances of a snowball in hell if I took him on bare handed. An attack with a club or knife would result in me getting a broken arm and then a broken neck, all in a split second.

I had seen exhibitions by karate instructors, given on base. With ease they had smashed bricks and tiles with their hands. With knees and elbows, in the flick of an eyelash, they had fractured braced two-by-fours. One little professor

had demonstrated on a canvas dummy, that fascinating maneuver with which a karate man could jab through an opponent's rib cage and rip the beating heart out of his body, all in one savagely easy motion.

No, I decided, there was only one thing that was faster than a Karate man.

A bullet.

Where was I to get a 'gun? Private householders were forbidden by law to have pistols on the premises, in Japan. They were not available at hockshops or sporting goods stores. The mere purchase of a rifle or shotgun involved months of official red tape. I could hardly steal a carbine or an M-1 and waltz out the gate with it.

It would have to be a pistol. I had access to five, there in the comcenter.

The duty section had five issue Colt 45's, with belts and holsters. All five normally reposed in the top drawer of a filing cabinet in a corner of the comcenter. They were used only when practice alerts were called. Then the operators would put them on and pretend that they were ready to repeal the whole Red Army.

The guns were withdrawn from the cabinet, then, only for alerts and an occasional cleaning. They were inventoried once a day, at eight a.m., by the trick chief coming on duty. If I could withdraw a gun and smuggle it out of the

comcenter when going off duty, and then return it before eight the next morning, I was certain it would not be missed.

There was the freak chance that an alert might be called that night. One chance in a hundred of getting caught. I decided that with such odds I couldn't miss.

Around ten, Duncan took in a message at the window from a special courier. Honky cut a tape on it and passed it to me for transmission. I read it on the sending printer as it went out.

The base commander was reporting to higher headquarters, all the way to the Pentagon, on the occurrence of the previous evening. He emphasized the uncanny timing of the left-wing demonstration, precisely on the day of the arrival of the Rattlesnake missiles at Minami-bashi. There had been no violence offered to U.S. personnel or property.

The harangues of the loudspeakers had been directed mainly at the J.N.'s employed on the base, both as they had left work Tuesday night and as they had come to work Wednesday morning. Thus far, base workers had made no protests of their own, such as going out on strike.

Representatives of all news media, both Japanese and foreign, had come out from Tokyo that morning to cover the event. World-wide publicity, portraying the Americans as reckless atom-brandish-

ing war-mongers, would naturally follow.

After performing for the benefit of teevee and movie cameramen, the demonstrators had allowed their activity to taper off. They had then dribbled away via trains and busses to Tokyo until Sakura Avenue was once more bare of outsiders. The message concluded with the statement that USAF investigation to determine whether there had been any local leaks, was continuing.

My shift split for chow starting at eleven. We were all back to work at one. Then the local spy catchers showed up to investigate us.

Lt. Vandevort came in, accompanied by Harmon and Smith of the O.S.I. Duncan called us to attention and Vandevort gave the at-ease. We stood in a row while Harmon asked us individually whether we had talked about classified material while off-duty. We all denied this vigorously.

"Now, men," Vandevort bustled up and down before us, "I have told these gentlemen that we are all loyal Americans, here at the comcenter. We have all had complete background investigations and have signed the loyalty oaths. However, some of us might get careless and maybe discuss our work within the hearing of unauthorized personnel at the club, or downtown. Do any of you recall talking about the missiles, outside of shop, within the last few days?"

Duncan, Honky, Pineapple and myself shook our heads.

Vandevort smiled in relief and nodded his pleasure. "There, gentlemen! I told you. No leaks in this section. I maintain, if I do say so myself, a high level of security consciousness among my men."

Harmon growled, "That's fine, Lieutenant, but somebody around here must have talked. The Comies had advance notice on this deal."

Smith noticed that I was frowning.

"What is it, Killane?"

"You guys are barking up the wrong tree. I could tell you how the word got out."

Harmon turned on me swiftly.

"You can tell us, wise guy? I suppose you squealed yourself!"

"Wait a minute!" Smith told him. "Go on, Killane."

"The missile maintenance squadron. The whole new bunch moved in a few days ago. You couldn't hide several hundred guys. The J.N.'s naturally got curious. The troops went out on the town. Green troops seldom can hold their liquor. The bar girls pumped them, like they do all new troops, about how long they were going to stay, and what they did for a living. So some drunken jeep spills everything!"

Smith nodded, thoughtfully. "You may have something there, Killane. We'll have to check that out with Missile Maintenance."

"See, I told you. "Vandevoort beamed in all directions. "I have a fine bunch of men here. No security leaks in this section."

The three wheels left. The shift got back to work. I had told them enough to get them off of our backs. I had not been so specific as to say that I had heard any leaking in progress with my own ears.

I thought about Michiko pumping the airman called Pete. No doubt it was only one instance among many on Monday night. I could see no point in getting Pete in trouble by fingering him, or Michiko either. Let the legal eagles do their own footwork.

We put in a busy afternoon, S.O.P., and at four o'clock began getting the place in shape for the swing shift. This was my chance.

I grabbed a rag and commenced dusting stuff off, consoles and desks and filing cabinets, until I had worked my way to the back of the comcenter. My fingers gently undid three buttons of my shirt front.

At the old cabinet in the corner, I blocked the view of what I was doing with my body, and waved the rag about with my left hand. With my right I opened the top drawer and felt inside.

My fingers encountered the top holster of the pile and wormed beneath it toward the bottom. I felt for the flap of the bottom holster, unsnapped it, and closed my fingers around the cold steel butt of a Colt 45.

I wriggled the pistol out of the holster and with one quick motion slid it up out of the drawer and inside my shirt. I nudged the file drawer shut and moved on, dusting. I buttoned up my shirt and let it bag a little in front. My belt held the pistol flat and hard against my belly, concealed beneath my shirt and pants.

I scarcely breathed as I fooled around, waiting for our relief. It seemed that every eye must detect the pistol beneath my clothes. Cold sweat ran down my back.

What I was doing could get me twenty years in Leavenworth. But that was nothing to what I was planning to do. They wouldn't call it justifiable homicide, when they found Katana. They would call it murder. Yet the purpose was as hard and unyielding within me as the gun that was flat against my navel. Katana had to die.

Four thirty. Free again. I breathed easier as I walked out of the comcenter.

"Goin' to chow, Pat?" Pineapple called after me.

"Nah, I'm going out and hit the Lane," I called back. "See you guys tomorrow."

Honky and Pineapple waved and turned off toward the messhall. I continued on to the barracks. By five, I was walking out the gate in chinos and the fullest sport shirt I owned. With its bright folds loose about me, I was relaxed. The .45 stuck inside my belt was concealed.

The demonstrators were long since gone and life flowed down Sakura Avenue just as on any other summer night. J.N.'s were going home and G.I.'s had not yet come out in any numbers. I had several hours to kill, I thought, and then chuckled at the unintentional pun.

I had several hours to pass before performing my soul-satisfying act of vengeance.

The Paris Bar seemed as good a place to pass the time as any. Michiko was not there. Mamma-san Watanabe gave me the message as soon as I walked in the door.

"Pat-san, Michiko-san say tell you come her house. She not coming work, tonight. Say you come, honto, see her before you do anything else. Takusan importante!"

Well, now.

I hadn't seen Michiko since Monday night, since we had parted in front of the hotel. As far as she knew I was still looking for Spanish Man's killer. She did not know, she could not know, that I had found him. She could not know what I was planning to do that night. Then what was this urgent message all about?

There was only one way to find out.

Again I walked down Sakura Avenue, across the tracks, into Minami-bashi. I walked past the hotel and partway up the curving street. I crossed it and entered a side street that led northwest. Michiko lived down one block.

She had a small house on the corner, or rather she shared it with two other girls. Each of them rented one of the house's three rooms. The other two girls would have gone to work by this time of the evening. Michiko would be alone.

I turned off the gravelled street. Three steps took me across the miniscule yard. I reached the sliding outer door of the house and opened it. The door was never locked. The various girls and their assorted customers could come and go freely at any hour of day or night.

Inside the door was a few square feet of cement floor, with the usual wooden knee-high landing beyond that. Four doors opened onto it. One to each girl's room, and one to the corner benjo. The inside of the entry way was hung with an assortment of raincoats and hats. The floor was strewn with a mixture of overshoes, geta, buckets and a broom or two. I slipped out of my shoes, stepped up onto the landing, and rapped at Michiko's door.

It slid open with a small thump. Michiko's worried face looked into my own.

She had a light yukata belted around her body. Her heavy black hair was loose on her shoulders. She had no makeup on. One ivory knee showed where the yukata fell open at the bottom. Her bare feet were thrust into a pair of fluffy white mules.

"Oh, Pat! You camel!"

Before I could move, she flung herself at me and threw both arms around my neck. She was nude beneath the yukata. Those proud unrestrained breasts flattened against my chest. Her flat stomach and eager thighs surged at mine. Then she gasped and recoiled to arms length. She had felt the pistol under my belt. Her eyes opened wide.

"Pat . . . what . . ."

"You have a . . ." her hand felt quickly at my waist I pushed it aside. ". . . A gun!"

"It isn't a samurai sword, baby!"

"But why, Pat? Why?"

"To shoot with."

"Shoot? Then you . . ."

"I know."

"How you . . . I mean . . . you know who?"

"I know who."

"Pat, Pat . . . how you find . . . who told you?"

"Chibi told me, baby. Little Chibi-chan."

Michiko was panic-stricken now. She backed into the room, one hand over her mouth. I followed her in and closed the door.

The room was the same as ever, as familiar to me as my own. Tatami floor, paper walls, paper ceiling. A heavy porcelain hibachi was in the middle of the floor, the kind that was filled with sand for insulation, with the charcoal glowing red within the pot's iron core. A teapot was hissing above the coals.

Against the shoji-type window was the stateside bed; opposite it

was a western type settee. A tall chest of drawers and Michiko's floor-level bureau completed the furnishings. Pinned to the walls were pictures of Michiko's idols that she had cut from magazines—Marilyn, Liz, Brigitte, Reiko Dan. Among jars and bottles on the bureau were a little bronze Hoteh and a pair of Kokeshi dolls I had bought for Michiko when we visited Enoshima.

"Chibi-chan! But she could not! She was dead, dead before . . . before . . ."

I leaped at Michiko and grabbed her shoulders. I shook her, hard. I yelled my question out.

"Dead before WHAT?"

"Oh . . . before she . . . got . . . to . . . hotel!"

"How could you know that?"

"Eta! Eta! Pat! You hurting me!"

My fingers were digging deep into her shoulders as revelation exploded in my brain. Facts were falling into line. Bits of memory were cascading into a pattern.

I released my grip and propelled Michiko backward onto the bed. She fell on to it, long legs flailing. I stood over her, fists clenched, watching as she gasped deeply and pushed herself up to a sitting position.

"Go on, baby, tell me. Tell me how you know she was dead before she even got to the hotel!"

Her jet eyes went blank and her face froze, expressionless. She

shook her head from side to side. I flung words at her, raging.

"All the time I thought someone had followed her! She wasn't followed, she was ambushed!"

"Only three people knew we were going to meet at the hotel. Me, you, and Chibi! Only you were against it! Only you could have told someone where she would be going!"

"It was eleven-thirty when we crossed the tracks, Monday night. No later than eleven-forty when we said goodbye in front of the hotel. Chibi was killed at twelve-twenty. Forty minutes, Michiko! Plenty of time for you to wait until I was out of sight, then double back and squal on Chibi! Who did you meet, Katana?"

"No, Pat! Not Katana-san!"

I leaned over her and grabbed a fistfull of that long hair. I menaced her with the other hand.

"Who did you tell then, who?"

One of her long legs, free of the hiked-up yukata, came up. Her foot caught me in the stomach and drove me back just as her searching hands found the gun under my belt and jerked it free.

She squealed as I fell backwards, taking a handful of hair with me. I almost tripped over the hibachi before I jerked upright.

Michiko flung back her head to toss the hair from in front of her face, gripped the Colt 45 with one hand, and expertly jacked the slide back and brought the pistol to full

cock with a round in the chamber, with the other hand.

I stared into the round black muzzle of the gun, only a couple feet from my face.

"Back up, Pat, or I shoot! I can do!"

The gun did not waver. The jet eyes behind it flashed. I backed up.

"Pat, why did you be so stupid? Why you didn't let it alone? I warned you. I warned Chibi."

Regret and sorrow in her voice, regret on her face, and the hands rock-steady around the gun.

"Why? Because I couldn't see letting whoever killed Spanish get away with it!"

"But they didn't plan to kill him. It was all stupid, a stupid accident. You had to make worse, getting Chibi to help you. I warned her!"

"Your best friend, and you had to send a murderer after her! Why?"

The jet eyes were filled with tears now. Her voice quavered, "It was my duty. She was going to betray the association by telling you Katana-san's name. It was my duty to report it."

"Report to who?"

She told me between sobs, still holding the Colt level.

"Ashikaga-sama."

The fortune teller. There was something queer about that name. Then I had it. The "sama."

In Japanese honorifics, "chan" was for kids and "san" for adults. "Sama" was hardly ever used now-

adays, except when referring to ancient gods or emperors.

"Why "Sama," Michiko?"

She shrugged, idly stating a fact. "He is a great man, Pat. He speaks with the old gods, who ruled before the foreigners came to Nippon. He and his friends will rule Nippon again, soon. He is most powerful man in Minami-bashi. People fear him, tell him everything, do what he says."

"I told him what you and Chibi planned Monday night. He commanded me to tell how Chibi-chan would go to hotel. Then he sent Katana-san to stop her. You see, Pat? It was my duty!"

I shook my head in amazement. I couldn't understand this mentality that put duty before friendship.

"But, Chibi had already told me who the killer was, only I didn't know it at the time. She told me when she blurted out about the sheechee-ya. I didn't remember that until later."

"Yes, Pat. When you told us Spanish was killed by karate man, we knew he was mixed up with the secret. I wanted you to let it alone!"

"But I didn't, and here we are. Michiko, what is going on at that hockshop?"

"It cannot hurt to tell you now. Hockshop is head place for the money association."

"Money association?"

"G.I. money. All the bars take. Billy the Kid comes, takes it to

hockshop. Matsukawa-san changes for yen, sends yen back to bar mamma-sans. All people of Bar Lane know the system. Know that no one must tell foreigners of secret. If they do, Matsukawa-san sends Katana-san to punish."

There we had it. The old black market thing, dealing now in military script instead of cigarettes and coffee. Matsukawa ran the operation using the hockshop as a front. Billy the Kid was the runner and Katana the enforcer. I had read someplace, where it all led.

The script was fed into a network that somewhere along the line got the script changed into greenbacks. Valuta, it was called, money that was good anywhere in the world. The green money the black markets generated went to finance Communist activities everywhere in the Free World.

That brought up another point. I stood staring down at Michiko and the gun she held.

"You told Ashikaga what that kid said in the bar, about seeing the snakes. You knew he was talking about the Rattlesnakes!"

"Of course, Pat! That is another duty. What the G.I.'s speak of their business, the girls must tell Ashikaga-sama."

"Baby, you and your great Ashikaga are working for the Communists!"

"No, Pat. We work for Nippon. Ashikaga-sama and his friends only use the Communists, un-

til they will rule Nippon. Then they throw out the Red people just as they will throw out the Americans. All gaijin can go jigoku, then, and Nippon will be great again!"

"You call me stupid! You think you are using the Commies, and all the time they are using you! You don't want to rearm, and you don't want us here, when we're all that protects you!"

"You do not protect us, Pat, with your jets and your Rattlesnakes and your atoms! You can only bring the bombs down upon Nippon again, if you stay here! That is why you must go!"

I shook my head in amazement. "You live off us, you make love to us, and all the while you hate us!"

"Yes!" Michiko spat at me. "All the while, we . . . I . . . hate you!"

"Stupid little Josans betray us, turn their backs on Nippon and marry Americans and go home with them. Ones who remember their duty stay, and take your stupid money and listen to your stupid talk and use it against you!"

"Honto, I hate you, Pat Killane! You know where I was born? I told you Tokyo? No! I lived there, became a woman there, but I was born in Hiroshima!"

"Hai, born a chesai girl in Hiroshima. Little girl who spend all night in bomb shelter with family because B-29's go over. Little girl who cannot sleep because so many people in shelter."

"So in morning is all-clear, and people go above ground, and I was so tired I begged mother. She left me to sleep in shelter. Then a terrible noise and I woke up and went to see."

"City gone, Pat. Father gone, mother gone, brothers and sisters gone. No place for little girl to go but Tokyo. No way to earn rice but to do push-push with round-eye soldiers!"

"You see why I help Ashikaga-sama, Pat?"

She held the gun up, jabbing it toward me, eyes daring me to make a move.

I nodded. I saw, all right. What was more, I didn't blame her now. My revenge campaign was stalled by one which far outranked it. I had slept with this girl many times. Only now did I finally know her.

"Mitchi . . ."

"Yes, Pat?"

"Mama Watanabe said you had something to tell me. What was it?"

"Nothing, Pat."

"Then why the word to come here?"

"My duty, Pat. You went too far. Ashikaga-sama told me to make you come here, keep you here until . . ."

"Until what?"

I heard the room door behind me open with a slight thud.

"Until Katana-san arrived."

The skeleton figure in the white shirt and pants stood in the door and grinned at me. It made a short

mocking bow, greeting me. Its eyes found Michiko and the gun she pointed at me. The razor-slash grin grew even wider.

Death stepped lightly into the room, like a ballet dancer, soundless on stocking feet. Michiko, with a sigh of relief, drew her yukata about her and stood up. She let the hand holding the gun sag slightly, as she spoke to Katana in Japanese.

He replied abruptly, his grin subsiding into a tight-lipped gash. They both looked at me.

"Before you do anything," I said through dry lips, "I would like to know one thing."

Katana raised one eyebrow. "That is?"

"Just why did you kill Spanish Man?"

Katana shrugged.

"It was accident. Your friend came down alley behind hockshop, drunk. I was just let Ashikag-sama in back door. He sees us, laugh and wave, and go on. I think in hurry, no round-eye must see . . . connect . . . Ashikaga and hockshop. He may remember, tell friend. Must not be. I go quick, out gate, after him. So."

I nodded. "So."

Bars to hockshop to Ashikaga. That was where the money went. Ashikaga to the Tokyo Communists. From Communists to activists to fellow travelers. The dollar spent for booze came back home in the shape of a slogan on a banner.

One side moved a rocket forward. The other side countered with propaganda. Checkmate, until someone thought up another move.

And Ignacio Luna had stumbled happily down an alley and waved at two men in the shadows.

Here, in this room, life and death and I were waiting.

Katana rasped an order to Michiko, telling her to leave the room while he did his job. She started to obey.

"Michi!"

She paused and looked at me.

"Think a minute. Once I'm dead you're next. You know too much about them to live now. They won't give you a chance to try and explain to the police, how a murder happened in your bedroom!"

Michiko tensed and started to bring up the gun, her face turning toward Katana.

Quick as lightning he stepped forward on his left foot, shooting his left hand out, fingers stiff. The jab, too swift to dodge, caught Michiko just under the breastbone.

The killer hand seemed to go deep into her. A roar filled the room as the gun went off. She seemed to crumple and collapse inward around that hand. The Colt automatic dropped from her limp fingers.

Katana whipped his hand back to his side and advanced on his right foot. His right hand hacked like an axe at her bent neck. Michiko's body tumbled to the floor.

Smiling again, eyes gleaming joyfully in his parchment skull face, Katana slid forward with his left foot advanced, hands and arms straight as sword edges from elbows to fingertips, left arm up and right held close to his body.

Chopping hands ready, smiling, he stepped toward me.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Even as Katana was chopping Michiko down, I saw my one chance for life and seized it. The heavy hibachi was on the floor between us. I lunged for it and with one mighty effort swung it up with both hands and hurled it at him. The teakettle flew to one side, spilling boiling water as it fell.

The massive porcelain pot took Katana by surprise, crashing against his raised left arm and then into his face. The force of it knocked him backwards, off balance. I took one quick step forward and kicked him hard in the crotch.

Doubled over, Katana smashed back into the paper wall, going half way through it. I did not give his Karate reflexes time to react, but tipped his head back with a left uppercut and then drove my right fist, with all my force, full into his Adam's apple.

At our feet was a tangle of shattered hibachi, spilled sand, and fiery charcoal. Flames leaped up eagerly across the straw mat floor. They caught on the paper wall and

flashed toward the ceiling. The house would go up in mere seconds.

Caught half in and half out of the hole in the wall, Katana threshed helplessly with his limbs. The skull-like face tipped back, eyes bulging and mouth gaping in soundless agony. I seized the shock of black hair with my left hand and tipped the head forward. For Spanish and Chibi and Michiko, I threw all my fury and hate into one rabbit punch down upon the back of that bony neck.

It pitched Katana forward out of the wreck of the paper wall, down atop the shattered hibachi on the blazing floor. He was stunned or dead, I did not know which, there on the flames.

My own feet were burning now. My pants were catching. The room was one hellish box of flames.

I leaped back to Michiko's body, grasped her and pulled her up. I saw the Colt 45 beneath me on the floor and took the time to ram it into the belt beneath my shirt. Then I leaned forward and clasped Michiko in my arms.

Behind me was the flaming bed, and behind that the stick and glass shoji window. Backwards, dragging Michiko, I staggered on scorching feet. Up onto the bed, pausing to brace my feet and hunch my head between my shoulders. Then I straightened my legs and flung myself backward and through the shoji.

I struck dirt hard, amid an explosion of shattered wood and glass, with Michiko's limp body still clasped in my arms. I was up and staggering a few steps, bent over, seeing only that battered, long-legged, lovely body with the flaming yukata still around it.

The low board fence of the yard tangled my legs and I fell again, taking more lumber with me, onto the gravel of the street. I lay there hot and gasping, with the house a raging inferno above me in the night.

There were people all around me. Chattering, excited, yellow-faced people. Their eager hands separated the limp bodies of Michiko and myself and beat out the flames that licked at our clothing. The voices spoke in a staccato of Japanese that I could not understand. They were comforting in tone.

Somewhere there was a bell clanging, a fire alarm, and the rattle of approaching fire carts. Behind the flames was the sound of voices shouting instructions and then much splashing as surrounding houses were drenched before they could ignite.

I hitched myself up to a sitting position, there on the gravel, and stared at the still form of Michiko a few feet away. Some kind soul had taken away the remnants of the yukata and had spread blankets above and beneath her. Only the bleached ivory of her face showed

amid the tangle of her dark hair. In the firelight I could see that a stream of dark liquid was coursing from one corner of her mouth.

A little man in a western suit, carrying a black bag, appeared in the crowd. He knelt by Michiko and made a quick examination. He looked up at the faces and shook his head. Low hisses of sympathy came from the crowd.

A young worker in singlet and jeans clattered over to me and patted me on the back. He offered a pack of cigarettes. I allowed him to thrust one between my lips. Someone else supplied a match. I drew the soothing smoke deep into my lungs.

I smoked the cigarette, of the brand called "Peace." I felt my body and spirit relaxing in the peace that followed a battle over and done.

My vendatta was finished. Spanish Man and Chibi could rest in peace, for their murders were avenged. Michiko could rest in peace, for her hate-filled life was done and in her dying she had given me my chance to live. In that burning house, I hoped, Katana had lived long enough to get a good preview of hell before he had died.

Anything else that happened now would be unimportant.

I heard sharp commands among the crowd. Uniformed men appeared around me. They were police in slate-gray. A tiny man in

black was giving the commands. Inspector Mori had arrived.

"Ah, Mr. Killane. So this is the climax of your impetuous actions?"

I ground the cigarette butt out in the gravel and nodded.

"I have had a man watching this house for days. Your arrival was not unexpected. That of Katana was, however, and my man had to come instantly to me for instructions. Tell me, where is Katana?"

I waved toward the subsiding fire.

"In there."

"Ah, so! The people here say that a gunshot was heard before the fire broke out. Did you shoot him, Mr. Killane?"

"No," I told him truthfully. "Michiko had a gun in her hand, and it went off when Katana hit her. Nobody was shot."

"The doctor says the girl is dead."

"He chopped her once on the neck and jabbed her once in the middle."

Mori turned and asked something of the doctor, who was still by Michiko's body. Then he spoke again to me.

"Yes. A fractured neck and internal bleeding, probably caused by the blow on the abdomen. Katana, of course. How is it that he did not kill you also?"

"While he was killing Michiko, I had a chance. I hit him with the hibiachi, and then my fists. Knocked him out. I didn't have

time to drag Michiko out, and him too."

"Of course not, Mr. Killane. I understand. You acted solely in self defense. Most commendable. Also most lucky for you, that Miss Michiko diverted his attention. Not so?"

"Yeah. By the way, I found out what was behind all this, before things started happening."

"Do you refer to the Matsukawa gang?"

"That's it. The money racket. Do you know where it goes?"

Mori shook his head.

"No, Mr. Killane. That was one of the things we wished to determine, before we moved in. We have long known, however, that the Matsukawa Sheechee-ya was the central depository for a ring that reached all over the Kanto Plain. Mr. Matsukawa is the leader of the ring, and to him flow the military scripts taken in by bars outside of your air bases."

"I can tell you where it goes from there," I said. "Ashikaga, the fortune teller, picks it up and turns it over to the Tokyo Communists."

Mori sucked in his breath in surprise.

"Ashikaga! We knew that he had certain unfortunate political connections, but we did not suspect that he was connected to Matsukawa."

"Yeah, that's the big secret. He's the link between the black market and the Communists. He is also a

spy. He collects information from the bar girls, who get it from drunk G.I.'s."

"Ah, that accounts for the timing of the demonstration. You have done well after all, Mr. Killane. Very well indeed!"

"Now, can you pick up the bunch? Or do you wait some more?"

"No, Mr. Killane. We are done with waiting. Even now, the leaders of the ring will be waiting at the hockshop, expecting Katana to return with the news of your elimination. His failure will decide them to fly. We will net them at once."

I climbed wearily to my feet, feeling the Colt hard and secure under my belt. There was no need to mention it to the little policeman.

"Oh, inspector . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Killane?"

I pointed to my bare and blistered feet. "Think you could find me some shoes? I left mine in the house, I came out so fast."

"One moment." Mori spoke to one of his men. That man sought briefly among the crowd, and returned with some objects in his hand.

"I am afraid that you will have to use geta, Mr. Killane," Mori told me. "No one present possesses shoes capable of fitting your so-large American feet."

I stepped into the wooden things, fitting the thongs between my toes. I shuffled gravel beneath them and

looked once more at the scene. I looked at the blanket-shrouded figure on the ground.

"What about . . ."

"The late Miss Michiko? An ambulance will be here shortly for the remains. We will see that her ashes are fittingly interred, at a later date."

Mori nervously consulted his gold watch. "Come, Mr. Killane. I think that you had better accompany us. My car is just below on the avenue."

Three unmarked Datsuns were parked at the mouth of the side-street. Mori and I and two of the city cops piled into one. There were enough grey-clad men along to fill the other two. Mori gave an order and the car moved off, leading the little procession down Sakura Avenue.

Mori halted his little car at the highway intersection. Men came up from the other cars and listened while Mori snapped instructions in rapid Japanese. The procession started off again. The end car peeled off, to come down the far end of Bar Lane. Mori's car and the second one rolled slowly toward the airbase gate.

The cars slowed almost to a halt opposite the entrance to Bar Lane, giving the end car time to approach. Its headlights came in sight, creeping down the Lane toward us. All up and down the Lane, in the neon-lit night, the traffic moved from door to door.

Mori barked an order. The car behind us nosed into the Lane in low gear, to meet the oncoming car in front of the hockshop.

Our own vehicle lurched ahead as the driver gunned it around the corner by the gate, past Ohta Grocery and Hondo Laundry, then up the little track past Chong's Tailor Shop. The driver hit the brakes.

We were at the gate behind the hockshop. The two cops and Mori exploded from the car with pistols in their hands. I piled out behind them. Mori snapped at me over his shoulder.

"Keep behind us, Mr. Killane!"

The gate in the concrete wall was locked. One cop placed his pistol to the lock and fired. The gate swung inward. The four of us rushed through.

We were in the rubbish-heaped yard. Mori halted us and we stood looking up at the two-story fort with its barred windows and massive rear door. We waited for a couple of minutes.

At that moment the two carloads of police were rushing at the front door. I could imagine the confusion that was ensuing as Bar Lane witnessed the abrupt descent upon the hockshop. The place would never be the same again.

From the front of the building we heard shots, two at first and then an answering fusillade. Mori and his two men tensed expectantly, pistols up.

The rear door burst open and

Matsukawa appeared. His eyes were wild and the gold tooth flashed in his open mouth. He started to raise his gun as he saw us waiting outside.

Three pistols cracked simultaneously. Once each, and that was all.

Matsukawa flung his arms up, stepped high from the back door, and pitched headfirst down the back step. His face skidded into the dirt of the yard. He lay face down, arms outstretched. The light spilling from the open door above him was reflected by the jeweled rings on both his fat hands. He did not stir.

I followed the policemen and the Inspector inside. We met the men who had come in the front way. One had a shoulder wound.

Billy the Kid had been in the front of the shop. He had panicked when the uniforms had appeared, and had whipped out a gun. Now his riddled body lay behind the counter, with the faded levis and rodeo shirt and old cowboy boots soaking up his blood.

We found his ancient guitar in the kitchen. Inspector Mori examined it for a moment. He held the guitar up for us to see, his fingers working at the back. A section of the back swung out, hinged, and many M.P.C.'s fell out to the floor. Inside the guitar was a little compartment. That was the way Billy had brought the money from the bars to the hockshop.

The first floor was cleared. That left the upstairs. Mori led the way, his pistol still in his hand. Some of us followed him up the steep staircase, and into a tatami-floored sleeping room.

There was a haze of burning incense in the air. It seeped through a curtained doorway. Mori flung back the curtain and stepped through. The little man froze, standing silent and almost reverent.

I pushed through the door and saw what Mori saw.

The far end of the room was a shrine, flanked by vermillion-painted pillars. The centerpiece was a great ceiling-to-floor scroll depicting what I knew to be the most ancient deities of Japan. To one side a bronze censer oozed perfumed smoke. It was the figure in front of the shrine that drew our attention.

It was a slight form, kneeling upon a white silk cushion, huddled low within the antique robes it wore. The high bald head was pointed toward the shrine. The end of the long white beard spilled forward over the bony knees. Beneath the figure a spreading pool of red soaked the cushion and the tatami.

Inspector Mori hissed one word. "Seppuku!"

Ashikaga had taken the ancient and honorable way of one who had failed his country and his gods. The shooting below had told him

that the game was over. He had committed hara-kiri.

We sat sipping tea later, in the kitchen of the hockshop. The police were busy putting all in order, removing the bodies and itemizing everything in the building. Mori had permitted me to reclaim my Omega, before the merchandise and furnishings were placed under government seal. There was little that remained to be done.

"Ah yes, Mr. Killane," the inspector was saying. "You have been instrumental, in a most unorthodox way, in the breaking up of a troublesome criminal and espionage ring. I can promise you that my government will not be ungrateful."

"In a few days your superiors will receive, through proper channels, a document that I believe you call a 'Letter of Commendation.'"

"It will come from such a high source that your Air Force will be unable to ignore it. It will, no doubt, go far in obtaining forgiveness for your escapades, and perhaps even promotion."

"Tonight I will accompany you on base myself, and answer any questions that your officers and the O.S.I. may have."

He reached into his pocket and extracted something.

"A little gift, which I believe you will find useful. My men found it and others on the premises."

He dropped an object into my palm. It was an issue .45 cartridge.

I looked up quickly at Mori.
"To replace the expended round,
in the weapon concealed beneath
your belt. It would save explanations."

I felt the blush start at my toes
and work all the way up to my
ears. I did not know what to say.
The inspector murmured on, his

face straight and his eyes sparkling
with amusement.

"Really, Mr. Killane! The young
are always so foolish. Did I not
warn you once before, not to at-
tempt to put the wool in front of
my humble old eyes?"

With repeating that obscure Oc-
cidental saying, he was content.





Lock Box # 62
Consville, New Jersey

Dear Cholly Bugs,

Coupl' a weeks ago Alley Sam, Benny Bimbo, Old Ears and me was sittin' around the yard gassin' about this story in Manhunt where there's this shill what's always scratching himself. Old Ears says, "Now, who does that guy bring to mind?" I says, "Why that's the spittin' image of Lousy Billy." So then Alley says, "Hell, I betcha' Cholly Bugs writ that piece. He was always the egg-head type."

Well, we writ the editors for the true name and address of J. Wyndam Briarly. Sure enough, it's our old classmate, Cholly Bugs!

We always knew you'd make it, boy. But, Leavenworth . . . man, that's big time!

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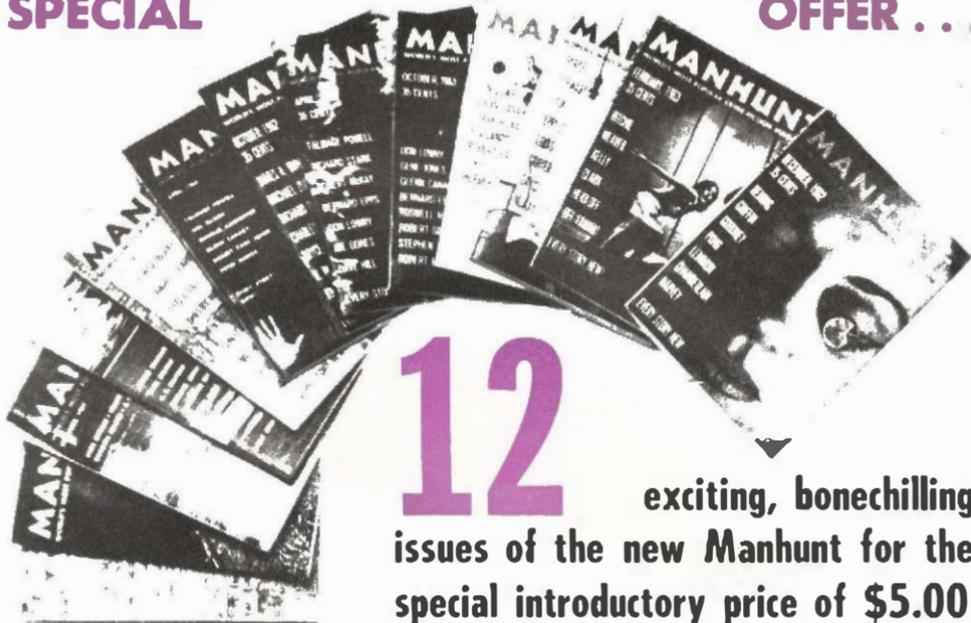
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