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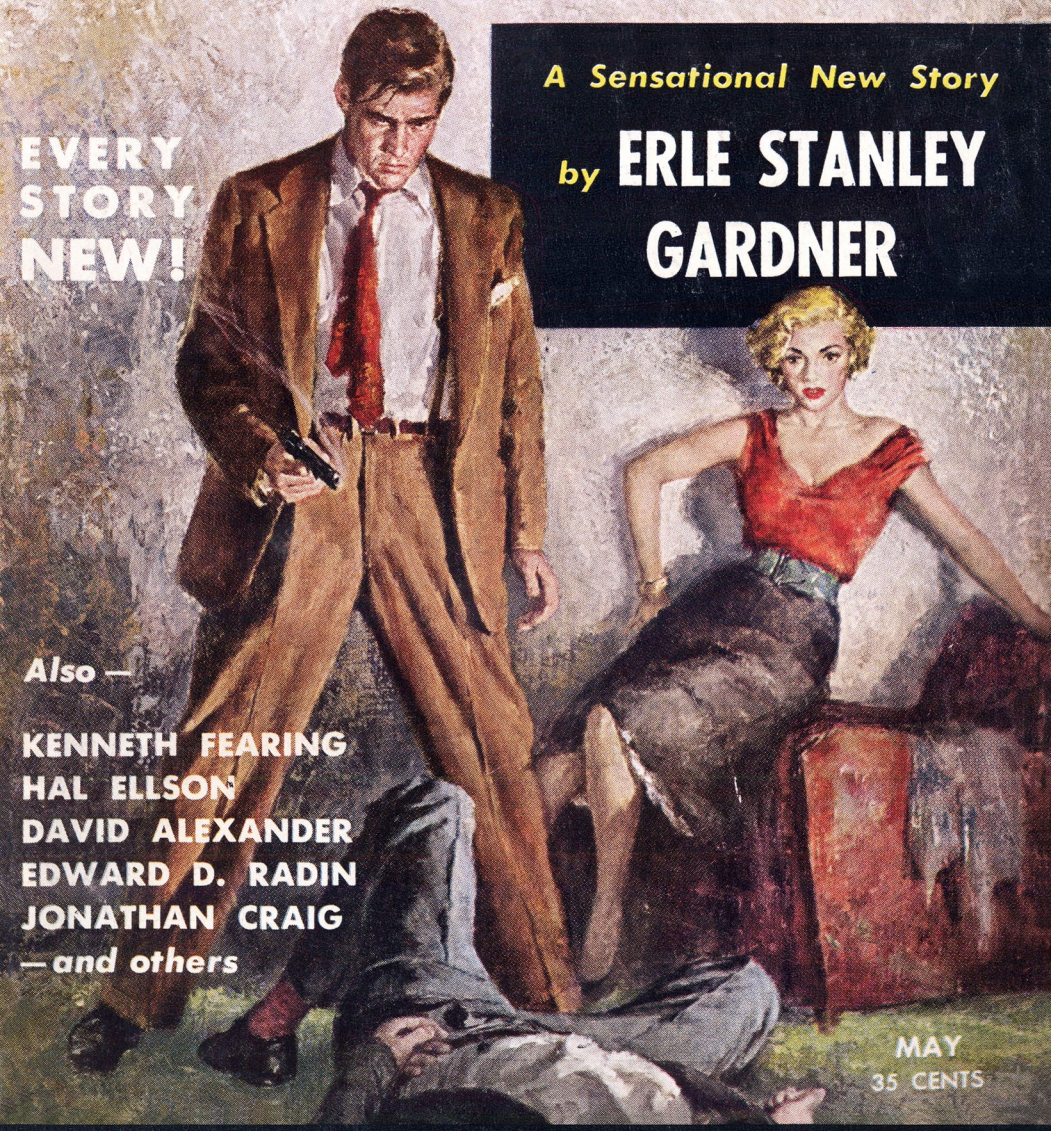

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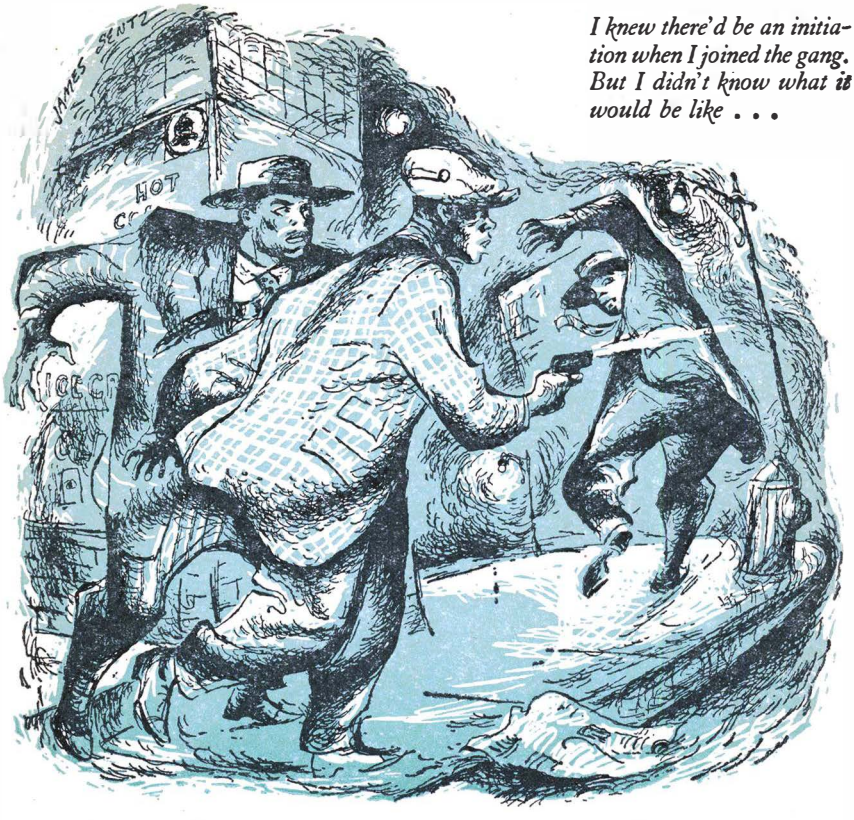


I knew there'd be an initiation when I joined the gang. But I didn't know what it would be like . . .

Wrong Way Home

BY HAL ELLSON

It's quiet, nobody home. I can't listen to them records no more. I switch off the player, go to the window and look down at the street. Chiller ain't in sight. It's a dismal scene. I go back, stretch on the couch and light up.

Cats start up in the backyard, fighting over garbage. Then them people in the next apartment, that thin one that gave me the eye yesterday. Yeah, that husband knows what he's got and it ain't sugar. He got a wino wife with a roving eye.

They going to be black after tonight. If she don't put a knife in his belly.

She got a voice sharper than any shiv. Damn, it goes right through me. I get up, go to the wall and listen.

"Yeah, hit me," she says. "Go ahead, you so big. You nothing but trash. It's my money and my business where I get it."

Girl, you is crazy, I say to myself. Cause she is. I saw that man of hers come up the stairs yesterday. Got a build like a piano, a neck like Marciano, a face no mother could love.

"Go ahead, hit me, hit me!" she says again.

Then I hear that big man move, hear his footsteps clear as day through the wall. He don't say nothing. A chair crashes against the wall. That witch screamed and my skin crawled. He must have missed her. I hear scuffling, furniture going down. Damn, somebody going to be dead. Cops'll be here.

The noise stops. It's quiet enough to hear a mouse breathe. People is in the hall, nobody talking, everybody listening, waiting.

I'm about to move away from the wall when I hear that crazy juiced-up witch laugh. It's like the wall is made of paper. I hear that man laugh. Man, they're both goofed.

"John," she says, "you can have half the money."

I hear him laugh again. Yeah, he beat it out of her and she liked it.

"Sugar, you going to fetch a bottle?" she says.

"Yeah," he answers.

I hear him clump to the door, open it. Bam, all them people in the hall scatter quick. Doors slam shut. They scared of Mr. Muscles. I hear him go down the stairs. It's quiet now. I stretch on the couch again, light another cigarette, and that wino-witch turns on the radio.

I look at the clock. Chiller's on the way. Got to be here soon.

Five minutes later somebody stomps up the stairs, stops before my door, knocks. I sit up.

"That you, Chiller?"

"Yeah, open up."

"It ain't locked. Come on in."

He comes in. "You ready, man?" he asks.

"Yeah, I been waiting too long already."

"We got all night," he says, and his eyes go round the room. They're nothing but slits. He got to open them with a can-opener. You don't know what he's thinking. Got a face that don't show nothing, no expression. Chiller's a good name for this stud.

I slip my jacket on and we go to the door. Moving down the stairs, we meet Mr. Muscles coming up. His shoulders is too wide and he don't give an inch. Got a bottle in his hand. We give him room to pass and hear him go stomping up.

"That stud smells funky," Chiller says.

"Keep it cool," I tell him. "He's

big enough to eat both of us. I know."

We go out. There's a wine-head laying on the stoop like he's dead, mouth open, teeth shining. We step over him like he ain't nothing and go down the block.

It's two blocks to the club house. We go down a slimy cellar and come up in a back yard.

I'm wondering now, kind of nervous. Maybe it's a trap. Maybe I'm going to get jumped.

"What's the jive?" I say.

Chiller laughs. "You got to climb the fire escape," he says. "It's the way in and the way out."

We lick up the fire escape, go in a window three flights up. Sheets is at all the windows, guys laying around, a record playing *Good Night Sweetheart*. Soon as them other cats see me everybody stops talking. I feel funny with all them new faces looking at me.

A slim guy with a scar on his face says to Chiller, "Who's this new cat?"

"One of my aces," Chiller answers and that made me feel good.

Chiller introduced us. "This is Bomber," he says. "President of the Imperials. Bomber, meet Butch."

I shook with Bomber, then with them other cats. There was Two-Gun, Sticker, Knife, Thirty-Eight, Jap, and some others. I couldn't remember all the names.

I still felt funny, not knowing these guys and being in their pad. It was too easy-like joining this new club. Yeah, just as I was thinking that the treasurer says, "Come over here and pay your dues."

I paid up, and then it started, what I figured was going to happen. Bomber tells me to stand on a box and fold my arms in front of me.

All of a sudden it's real quiet in the room, and everybody's looking at me like they ready for blood. My blood. I'm jumpy but I don't show nothing.

"Do you promise to protect anybody in this club?" Bomber says. "If we give you a pistol, you promise to do what you're told with it?"

"Yeah," I say.

Bomber is grinning now. "Okay, T-Bone," he says, and this cat steps up. Bomber taps him on the chest. "This boy is going to start a fight with anybody he can find in the Dragons. That's where you shine in. Soon as he does, you step up and shoot the Dragon. That's all."

Yeah, that was all. I was expecting much but nothing like this. I don't feel like shooting somebody I don't know, but I see all them new cats watching me. They're waiting to see, waiting for me to punk out. Maybe they going to stomp me if I do. It's too late to get out of this.

"Where's the gun?" I say, and everybody grins. Bomber hands me a .25 short that holds six.

"Kiss it for luck," he says. "When you come through this, you're one of us. Punk out and you might not survive to talk about it."

I didn't say nothing. I put the gun away, and Chiller says, "Let's go."

Chiller, T-Bone and me go down the fire escape and through to the street. We start walking and don't say nothing. I offer around and light up a cigarette.

"You nervous?" Chiller asks.

"I wasn't expecting nothing like this," I say. "But I'm ready."

"Good. . All them Dragons is punks. We'll play it cool and there won't be nothing to it."

Yeah, I thought, nothing but a dead guy I don't even know laying dead in the gutter. I touched that gun in my pocket and took my hand away. It was too cold.

We kept walking. I don't know this neighborhood good yet. Six blocks away we stop on a corner. It's kind of quiet. I can hear my breathing, my heart beating; sweat's popping out all over me. We're facing a dark block. One light in the middle, a light in a store on the corner.

"Kind of quiet," Chiller says. "That's good." He waved his hand and we followed him across the street, walked down the block and stopped on the corner opposite the store. He looked at the store, then waited for a taxi and whistled it to a stop.

"Move," he said to T-Bone and me. The situation's all yours."

The taxi is backing up when T-Bone starts across the street. I'm on his heels. There's a guy standing in the doorway of the candy store, jukebox music coming from inside but nobody there that we can see.

T-Bone stops at the curb. I stop behind him. Two of us and one of them. That gives me a good feeling but I got the jitters. Don't know what's going to happen. Suppose a squad car cruises in on us?

It's too late. I hear T-Bone say: "Are you one of them jiving Dragons that think they're so bad?"

That boy in the doorway straightened up fast. He looks around like he's looking for help and there ain't nobody to help him. He's got to grand, so he steps from the doorway and says, "Who wants to know?"

Yeah, but he's scared. Looking for a way to run and there's no place to run. He's got to bluff it.

"Keep coming and you're dead," T-Bone says. Then he steps aside.

That's the signal. That Dragon is my meat. Maybe he's got a gun. I don't know and I'm not waiting. I draw that .25 fast and that guy's running. I fire. I pull the trigger again and I hear that boy yell, but I know I ain't hit him. Somebody in that store screamed.

That done it. I turned and ran. Chiller is yelling from the taxi. T-Bone jumps in. I follow and that taxi flew out of there.

We rode over to the East Side, jumped out and caught us another taxi.

On the way back to the club house I say to Chiller, "How'd you hold that first taxi-man?"

"Same way Dillinger used to do it," he answers.

That was all. We didn't say nothing more till we left the taxi.

Back in the club house Chiller told them what happened and I was in, a member of the Imperials. Beer was brought in and we had a ball.

Next night it's raining. I went to the club house and it's crowded. There's much talk about it being a good night. Everybody's got the jumps. Four of the boys go out right after we come in.

Chiller walks over to me and says, "Are you in?"

"In what?" I say.

"We're going to prime a taxi. There's a good take when it's raining."

I nod. It don't make no difference to me and it's easier than a shooting. Chiller tells me to come on. There's four of us, Chiller, T-Bone, Knife and me. We go down the fire escape and out to the street.

It's raining cats and dogs but that don't matter. The harder the better. We find a dark block and wait in a doorway till an empty passes. Chiller whistles. He's already given instructions, what to do, which way to run.

The taxi backs up. We popped in and I see the guy turn. Pretty old, a hungry face. "Where can I drop you boys?" he says, friendly-like, like he knows us good.

Chiller tells him. He's got the place picked out. There ain't nothing there but old houses they're tearing down, a quiet spot, dark.

The taxi licks out for the address. Rain's coming down harder. Hardly nobody in the street. I'm all knots, tight inside already, scared. Everybody is sitting tight, not talking, and that's what got me. Right off, crazy ideas go through my head. I'm wondering how this is going to turn out. If the taxi will crash, if I'll get caught, how my mother will take it.

I'm listening to the rain falling on the car, seeing people running in the rain. Everything looked blurred, lights are yellow instead of white.

That taxi is racing. It swished a corner, straightened out, and the driver says, "It's a bad night. Why aren't you boys home?"

Nobody answered.

"Ain't you got no tongues?" he goes on. "I shouldn't pick you boys up. I could make more money on a busy street."

Nobody said anything to that, either. Everything is dim inside the taxi. I feel chilly cause I'm scared. I can hear the wheels underneath swishing through puddles. That taxi-man beeped the horn at another corner and I jumped. This is a short ride, but it feels so long.

We turned a corner, and I saw the long row of dark houses. No lights in the windows. We're going fast.

"Stop here," Chiller says and, as the taxi slows, the gun is handed to me.

T-Bone opens the door and stepped out. Chiller and Knife fol-

lows him. I got the gun up. I put it to the driver's head before he can turn.

"Move and I'll blow your head off," I said.

Damn, that guy started to blubber. "Don't shoot," he says, "I got four kids at home."

The others moved fast. They opened the front doors. One took the money, the other the car-keys. They closed the windows, then the doors.

Next second we're all running, scattered. I hear the rain louder, I'm thinking of the past, crazy-like, all the bad things I done. It all went through my mind at once, and I felt cold. My heart was beating to bust. I'm really scared now, scared of everybody I see, scared I might run into a cop and hit him by mistake.

I made it all right. The four of us did. We made it back to the club house. Chiller and T-Bone was there first. They looked jumpy. We had to wait for Knife. Chiller watched the window for followers. Five minutes later Knife came in.

Chiller put the money on the table and the Treasurer took charge. He split the money, bills and coins, and slid it to us across the table.

Everybody was quiet yet, still scared. "We'll bust it for the night," Chiller said.

We met the following night. It was Sunday, nice out, good for snatching pocketbooks. Everybody's out then and coming home late.

I snatched pocketbooks before but it was nothing like this. Chiller gave us the orders and we went down to the street and waited on the corner. Five minutes later a car pulled into the curb. We piled in, rode to another neighborhood, a kind of dark block just off a busy street.

We sat on a stoop, nobody talking, nobody smoking, waiting for a lady to come along. One did. We let her pass. Maybe she saw us, maybe she didn't.

Chiller moved fast, like a cat. Before that witch could turn, he had the gun in her back. The rest of us got around her to make it look good, like we're talking. Chiller made her put her hands on her head. He cocked the pistol to show her we meant business. T-Bone ripped open the front of her dress to scare her more, and Knife snatched the pocketbook.

I hit her so she couldn't make no sound.

Then we ran for the avenue, hit the crowd and scattered. I bought me a coke, waited twenty minutes and went to the corner we arranged to meet at.

The car came and took us all but Knife back to the club house. He didn't show there, either.

"You think he got caught?" T-Bone asked.

Chiller shook his head. His eyes looked mean. "We did that job good," he said. "He better show or it's his skin."

"We better wait. Maybe he'll come," T-Bone said.

But Knife didn't come and there was nothing to divide.

Next day we called on Knife. His mother said he didn't come home the night before. We left but we didn't believe her. For three days we don't see him, don't hear nothing. Then we get the word. Knife is back.

We went straight to his house and his sister answered the door. That was pie for us.

"Is Knife in?" Chiller asked.

"Yes."

"Can we wait in here for him?"

"Sure, come on in," she says.

We found Knife eating in the kitchen, and he looked at us sick-like. He knew what was going to happen and his sister and mother didn't.

"You coming down tonight?" Chiller asked him.

"I don't feel like it," Knife answered.

He was real scared but his mother didn't notice. "You go down," she said, "but better see you come back tonight."

Knife shook his head. "I don't feel so good."

We knew that and we waited till his sister left the kitchen. She called her mother, and Knife looked like he was going to pop out the window.

The television went on in another room and Chiller said, "You better come downstairs and talk with us or else. . . ."

Knife couldn't eat no more. He got up and said he was leaving.

"Come home early," his mother said above the television noise.

We all stepped into the hallway, and Knife balked at the stairs. He was scared and refused to go down.

Chiller put a gun on him. That tamed him fast. He went down the stairs. We walked six blocks to a lot and stopped.

Chiller turned. He had the gun out again. "Start running," he said.

"I'm not going to."

"Then I'm going to make you."

"You can't make me."

There was no more talk. Chiller fired at the ground and Knife took off. He was twenty feet away when Chiller fired again. Knife stumbled and went down on his face.

Next second, windows is opening everywhere and we're running. We got away and came back to make it look good.

Cops was there. Squad cars all over the place, a big crowd. I heard a lady say to a cop, "I saw three boys running." Then I looked down. The cops had throwed a blanket over Knife. But I knew before that that he was dead.

Nobody said anything. We went back to the club house. Chiller told the others what had happened and nobody said much. The three of us didn't hang around long. We went home.

I had a funny feeling, like I was going to be caught. We shouldn't have gone to Knife's house.

I couldn't sleep. It was hot in the house, hot in bed. I kept seeing the way Knife stumbled. I could see his face in the room. About two o'clock it got cooler, quieter. Then thunder busted out. I kept seeing flashes of light outside my window. Crazy noises started up. Scared, I crawled under the sheet cause I kept seeing Knife's face. It was coming closer.

At three o'clock somebody knocked at the door. I made believe I was asleep but my mother called me. That knocking sounded louder, loud as my heart was beating.

I wanted to run and couldn't. I got up and opened the door. Cops was there. They moved in.

"Go in the living room and sit down," one said. "We want to talk to you."

I went in and sat, scared, but I wanted to get it over with, cause I knew they had me.

One of the cops gave me a cigarette. I took it. He put one in his own mouth and asked for a match.

"Haven't got one," I told him.

"Get me one," he said.

I went to the kitchen and looked at the door. I thought of running for it but didn't. I came back with the matches and gave them to the cop. He lit my cigarette, lit his own, then looked at me. I knew this was coming.

"Were you on McCready Street tonight?" he said.

"No," I said, and my mother came into the room, pulling her robe together.

The cop turned to her and asked the same question about me.

"I don't know where he was," she said.

"What time did you come in?" he asked me.

"Ten o'clock," I tell him.

The cop turned to my mother and asked her. She didn't say nothing, but my brother was in the room now.

"You came in at one o'clock," he said.

"No, it was ten."

"You're lying."

I lost my head. "Go kill yourself," I yelled at him. "Go back to bed and die, you louse."

The cop that was doing the talking stepped between us. The other one asked my mother where I slept and started for my room. I followed him with my eyes, saw the light go on, saw him search the bed, lift the pillow, feel it, and my heart went dead.

He came back to the living room, lifted his hand and I saw the bullets in his palm.

"He has a gun," my brother said, and I swung at him, belted him in the face before the cops could stop me. They grabbed me then, and one said, "Get your clothes on, you're coming with us."

When I went down the stairs, they were dark. One cop flashed the light on the steps. The other had a wrist-chain on me. Behind me the door stayed open. I could hear my mother crying.

I knew everything that was going on. I'd known from the beginning. But I couldn't say a word then, and now

I'll Never Tell

BY BRYCE WALTON

I KEPT waking up earlier and earlier until finally I was waking up in the dark. Then I would sneak away from my shack out by the barn. The quiet morning would start turning gray. The houses and the trees would turn silverish gray and kind of black colored. The only sound then would be the clicking of the hens inside the henyard, and sometimes maybe a hoot owl catching mice in the barn.

Then I would sneak toward the house. I would walk under the singletree hanging up on the old cypress that they hung hogs up on to

butcher at pig-killing time. All I could think about was Anna. I guess I even thought about her at night and that was why I kept waking up earlier all the time.

There was this place in the bushes where I could hide and watch Anna get up. She always got up a little before Glenn did so she could start breakfast. She would move one leg out and throw the covers back and then stand up and stretch and look so pretty, just like an angel. My breath would get so loud I'd be afraid they would hear me. I'd start getting scared thinking about it.

Then I'd start to shake like I was cold and I'd have to stop looking. But I didn't have to stop thinking. I'd hate Glenn so much I'd have to run back to my shack by the barn. But I would think about Anna while I did my morning chores. I'd go around doing the milking, slopping the pigs, feeding the hens of a morning and thinking about Anna and how she was so pretty and like an angel and that she ought not to have to be married to Glenn because he was bad, he was evil. I knew that.

I kept thinking of how Glenn ought to be dead. I was the only hired hand out there in the winter and if Glenn was gone I'd be the only one there with Anna.

Glenn swore at her a lot. He wasn't good to her and couldn't understand her, but I could be good to her. I kept thinking how things ought to be and hoping and waiting for something to happen. It was happening all right. I had an idea it was happening, and I was waiting and watching and listening.

I was glad I was dumb and couldn't talk. I figured I'd have said something to give my thoughts away. You daren't give thoughts away. Glenn was a lot bigger than me.

The way Glenn acted that morning when we was supposed to have went hunting for a deer, I knew something was going to happen. He came out there to my shack after breakfast that I'd ate with them, biscuits and eggs and honey and ham. He carried his heavy .45–.90 rifle. He said he was going deer hunting.

We went under the singletree hanging on the cypress limb, and past the big iron barrel where the hogs were dropped into boiling water to scald. Now it had rust on it. I was supposed to fill up the woodbox that day, but I was glad to go hunting instead.

I felt a little sad when we walked past the three cows that were going to be driven to the butchers in a few days. They were dumb and innocent, and I knew how they really felt without being able to say it.

We walked across the stubble flats toward the hills and into the sagebrush where the birds were scampering. In the dew I could see the tracks of little rabbits and field mice as we walked toward the higher hills where the aspens and pines were. I spend hours sometimes out there watching the little animals playing

in the mornings when everything is still.

Glenn talked about everything to me. It was more like he was thinking out loud, but I had to nod to show I was listening even if I wasn't.

I knew where we could get a deer and motioned that way. But Glenn wasn't really going to get a deer and I knew it. We walked instead toward the hill from which you could look right down onto Igor Svenson's ranch.

Glenn took longer steps, and he kept walking faster. His hands moved over the rifle like I'd seen them move over Anna's arms sometimes. Glenn didn't care whether Anna was happy or not. All he cared about was himself. He wanted to keep her all to himself, that was all he cared about.

If I could have talked I could have told Glenn she was over at Svenson's ranch. But I couldn't talk.

My Aunt Geraldine told me once that when I was way back about eight years old I could talk a blue streak. But something happened. I'd never been able to remember just what it was. My mother was dead. My father was mean and I never saw him much except when he beat me with a harness strap out in the barn. My sister was older and she took care of me and I loved her, I remember. I saw something happen to her, my sister I mean . . . out in the barn . . . up in the loft. When I thought about it I got a headache, but it was some man who used to come over to see her, and I would sneak out there and hide in the corn crib and listen.

But whatever it was, my Aunt Geraldine told me never to tell. It was nasty and it was evil she said and I wasn't ever to tell. So I never did. I had to run away and I never went back.

We stopped up there and looked down on the Svenson ranch. There was the station wagon down there beside Svenson's house. Anna sure hadn't wasted time getting over there this morning.

"She was going to bake today," Glenn said.

He sat down and put the rifle across his legs. His big shoulders hunched up almost to his ears.

"I told her I was going to be gone all day."

He had black hair and a big bony face. He was almost as big as Igor Svenson. He looked like a big Indian, only he had green eyes.

"She said she'd have blueberry pie for supper."

His words stuck all together when he talked all the time, just like a line of words that never came out of his throat right. He growled all the time in his neck like a hog eating corn.

He kept on talking to me. The sun moved up higher. I got hungry and wanted to move around. But Glenn

just sat there looking and smoking, and talking.

He talked about fixing the tractor tomorrow. About trying raising beets as well as beans next year, and also a lot more spuds. But then he'd have to build a spud cellar and that cost money. And the beets were trouble because the Mexican workers who came in to top the beets caused trouble. They were always cutting up one another, Glenn said, with beet-topping knives. But I knew that wasn't true. I'd topped beets myself and I knew. Beet-topping knives have hooks on the end so you can hook a beet on it and jerk the beet into the air and put the beet over your knee and whack the top off with the second chop of the knife.

I'd never seen Mexicans cutting one another up much. But Glenn told me about this one who hooked another one in the back of the neck with a beet-knife and dragged him across the rows of topped beets kicking like a big fish. He took a long time telling me about it. He seemed to like telling about it. You couldn't tell the difference, he said, between beet juice and blood.

He talked about Anna too. He'd met her at a dance in Twin Falls on a Saturday night. She was from a big city on the coast, and he'd thought she thought she was too good for him. She *was* too good for him, I knew that. But Anna never allowed herself to think so.

Glenn kept on talking and talking. He talked all the time. But I'd found out one thing. Pretty women don't like you unless you can talk. Women like to hear you doing it. You have to make the noises and say the words to them all the time. If you don't, then they don't believe you, no matter what you do. Up in Great Falls, Montana, there had been this pretty woman. For a while she seemed to like me. But when I got her down into that big chair she yelled and bit me. And I knew it was just because I couldn't talk.

The sun started down. Two big black buzzards sailed low down the side of the hill. Some animal had died down there, and I figured it was a rabbit. They make a big thing out of elephants going off to die. But did you ever find a rabbit's skeleton, or a squirrel's? Buzzards can find them though.

"Afternoon already," Glenn said.

I nodded.

"It's getting cold again," he said later. I nodded. That was all I did was nod when he talked, and do my chores.

The wind was going through my mackinaw. I was starting to shiver. Glenn kept on watching the Svenson ranch.

"He's got a way with the ladies," Glenn said as though it didn't mean anything to him. "That damn Swede. He can sure dance too. I always figured Swedes to be dumb and slow like yellow cows. But this one ain't. Always doin' something. Wonder if the louse ever sleeps?"

Glenn stood up.

"Crazy Swede. Sure got a way with the women."

Glenn moved stiffly. Anna was still down there. "Guess we'd better be mosyin' back now. I'm sure going to miss that blueberry pie for supper, won't you?"

I nodded and jumped around to get warm.

"Sure got a way with the women," Glenn said. "Guess he's sorry his old man up and died and left him the ranch. Now he has to stay out here too damn much. Guess he'll be selling out one of these days, so he can go somewhere where the women ain't so scarce. Pocatello maybe."

We walked real slow going back. When we got back, Anna was home. The station wagon was in the shed. Anna was in the kitchen cooking and looking pretty. She didn't say anything about being away. Glenn didn't say anything about her being away either. When he should have talked he didn't, and I was glad of it. It would keep things happening.

Anna was tall. Her skin was the color of ripe wheat. Her hair was the color of corn husk. I got all stirred up watching her move around in the kitchen because she just wore this thin cotton dress without anything on under it, and going barefoot. She was all flushed up from the stove heat.

Glenn sat with his chair tilted back against the wall over by the sink. He was looking at her too. She was strong. She had long legs. When she stooped down I could see the outlines of her legs. She came over to me with a salted piece of celery heart and pushed the length of it into my mouth. I was sitting on the floor by the door. When she bent down I could see right down the front of her dress. I was so stirred up that I stood up and turned away from them so they wouldn't see how stirred up I was. Maybe Glenn knew because he told me to go out and do my chores.

"Supper'll be ready in a few minutes," Anna said.

"Yeah," Glenn said. "But there won't be any blueberry pie."

She turned and gave him a kind of funny look. Then she giggled. It was a pretty laugh. She always was more alive than Glenn, except sometimes in the mornings, when he wouldn't let her get up when she wanted to. She was light. Glenn always sat around looking dark.

"Tomorrow night we'll have blueberry pie." She came over and stretched herself right up close to Glenn. He reached out and grabbed her and pulled her down on his lap. She laughed and shrieked and kicked. Her voice was thick.

"Haven't you learned yet, honey, that a ranch woman's work is never done."

"You know how I like my blueberry pie," Glenn said. He was kissing her. "You know how I like my blueberry pie."

Her hands were pulling at the back of his neck.

I didn't want to leave but I did.

I ran out and into the back yard and I ran around the barn twice I was so stirred up.

Next day I was out helping Glenn work on the tractor. Anna came out. She had on a tight green skirt and a red mackinaw and boot moccasins with sheep fur around the tops. Glenn jumped up when he saw her and dropped a wrench.

"How's the chevvy running, honey?"

"Fine," Glenn said. "Why? Going somewhere?" He was wiping at his big hands with a greasy cloth.

"I'd like to drive into Murtaugh, honey."

"Maybe I ought to drive in with you in case that bearing goes."

"Oh no, you fix that tractor. We don't want to get snowed in without a tractor, do we, honey?"

"No," Glenn said. "We don't."

She said to me, "I have the blueberry pies in the oven. You come in and turn the oven off at ten."

I nodded.

Glenn sat down and looked away from her and said, "You go on into town."

"Thanks, honey."

She shrugged and went off into the shed, backed the car out and drove away. Glenn jumped up and ran to the corner of the house so he could watch. I knew why. The roads forked down about three miles. One went past Svenson's ranch to Murtaugh. The other went straight to Murtaugh, shorter road. She took the longer one going past Svenson's ranch. Glenn stood there a long time. Then he threw the wrench. It sailed clear out past the barn and went clear through the side of a chicken coop.

I heard a squawk and a flapping. I went out there. A laying hen was in there with its head smashed up flat against the side of the coop. Its legs were still kicking. I picked it up by the legs and chopped its head off with an axe, and put it in the kitchen in the sink so that it could be fixed later. I like fried chicken. I liked anything the way Anna cooked it.

I went back to the tractor and Glenn was still standing there. His fists were clenched. His face looked grayish. He didn't tinker with the tractor any more. He didn't talk much either. That was the first time I had ever seen Glenn just not doing anything specially.

He'd come out of the house and he'd look up the road and then go back into the house again. I did the work I always did. I repaired some fence. I sorted some spuds out in the shed. I did some other things too that day but now I don't remember what they were. I turned the oven off at ten. The blueberry juice was bubbling up out of the holes in the top of the pie crust.

When the station wagon came back and drove into the shed, Glenn ran out the front door, right out into the cold evening wind without a shirt on. His bare skin was sweat-

ing. The black hair all over his chest looked wet.

He put his arm around Anna when she came toward the house. He lifted her and ran with her into the house. She was giggling, and laughing, and she was kicking her long legs up in the air.

I moved around close to the kitchen door. I could hear them. After a while, Glenn said, "That bag's empty. How come you didn't do any shopping?"

"Well, I was looking for some material for a dress."

"They've got plenty of material at Morgen's, haven't they?"

"Not what I wanted."

"You have to be there all day to know that?"

"I visited with Sarah for hours. You know how she is, honey, once she's wound up. Gab, gab, a mile a minute. Now, honey, don't be so inquisitive."

Glenn didn't talk much after that even during supper. We had the blueberry pie, and fried chicken, and gravy and mashed potatoes and green beans with bacon, and dumplings. I ate so much I got a stomach ache.

But Glenn didn't talk all evening. Before he had talked all the time. Now when he should have talked, he didn't. He didn't know the way things build up in you when you don't talk, not the way I knew it. Anna knew a little then about how he was feeling, but she didn't know how bad he really was. I knew, though. I knew and I was waiting. I couldn't do anything else.

Next day I went with Glenn. We went to repair the irrigation pump about two miles from the ranch and drain it so it wouldn't freeze up and crack the metal. Only we did that fast, then Glenn headed toward that hill over Svenson's ranch. Anna's car was there.

Glenn stood there a long time, but not nearly long as he had stood up there that other time. I was glad. It was getting colder. Glenn said, "Anna must have decided to take some more of her fancy cooking over to that damn Swede!"

He walked fast back to the house and went inside. I didn't see him the rest of the day. I saw him that evening though. That evening, Anna brought Igor Svenson home with her.

"Guess who I saw hitch-hiking down the road and looking hungry!" Anna said. She pushed the Swede in through the front door. He moved like he was dancing. I sort of liked the Swede. He talked too much too, but anybody who talks a lot is bound to say evil things sooner or later.

"Hi, Glenn," Svenson said. "Working hard?"

Glenn nodded.

Igor was a big man. His face was smooth and pink like a boy, only he was a giant. He had yellow hair. His eyes were light blue. Sometimes you could hear him laughing a mile away.

"What you doing walking down the road?" Glenn asked.

"Looking for a pretty girl to pick me up!" Igor leaned back and laughed.

"You been hunting dress material all day again?" Glenn asked Anna.

"Yep. Only this time I went into Twin Falls."

"Still didn't find anything?"

"Nope."

"What the hell you looking for?"

"Mink and sable," Igor yelled. "Like the movie stars wear."

Movie stars are all bad too, I wanted to say. They not only talk, they talk so that millions of people have to listen.

Anna laughed. Glenn didn't. He hardly ever laughed at anything.

"I brought Igor over to have pot-luck with us," Anna said.

"Best damn cook in Idaho," Igor said.

"Well, let's have it then!" Glenn said.

I didn't eat with them, having company and all. I went out into my shack and ate by the barn. I got the beet-knife out of my box and looked at it. I kept thinking of the story Glenn told me about the Mexicans. The beet-knife was still shiny and sharp and the hook was clean and shiny too. I heard the radio playing loud in the house. I heard Igor laughing. I heard Anna shriek. Once when I peeked through the window I saw Igor and Anna dancing a polka round and round the living room floor. Glenn was sitting in the corner. He was tapping his foot, only not in time with the music. He was drinking home brew.

The wind died so that it was kind of warm out there by the barn. I sat against the side of the barn. Barns are always warm. The manure and stored hay throw out heat.

Everything had a gray look. The moon was out over the barn. Frost was over everything, and the cypress trees looked black.

It was the kind of night you know something will happen.

Then I saw Glenn coming down off the back porch steps. He walked around in circles by the henyard. He kicked the rubber tire on the tractor several times. He was saying something to himself but I couldn't hear what it was. Then he walked real slow back to the corner of the house and sneaked back along the side toward the front.

I sneaked along the other side of the house and hid to the left of the front porch. Anna and Igor were standing close together just outside the front door. I could hear what they were whispering. I knew Glenn could hear too from the other side of the porch.

"He suspected anything yet, Anna?"

"You kidding? You'd have to hit him over the head with it!"

"We wouldn't want to do that."

"That would be too much."

"You'd better come over tomorrow. It'll be rough when the snow comes."

"I'll be there."

I knew how Glenn was feeling over there listening. I'd felt that way enough to know. But he did what he felt.

Once I saw a bear go crazy in Yellowstone park. It didn't roar. It just growled and ran into a bunch of people swinging its arms. Glenn came up over the porch railing that way. He looked just like a big bear going crazy.

Anna screamed like a horse when it's hurt. I saw her fall down the steps as I jumped out of the way. Glenn ran into Igor so hard they came clear across the porch and busted through the railing onto the ground.

They were like animals rolling and snarling over the ground. It should have been an even match, or close to it. But I think Igor must have been hurt right at first. I knew he was a good fighter, but he never fought very good this time. Once when the moon shone on Igor's face, the blood was running out of his mouth, only at night it looks like oil. And there was something wrong with one of his eyes. He kept making choking sounds as though he couldn't get his breath.

Glenn kept hitting him and they kept rolling and getting up and falling down again. They ended up out by the tractor in the back yard.

I stayed near enough to watch, but not near enough to get hurt. The chickens were squawking. I saw the hoot owls that stayed in the barn and caught mice flying out into the moonlight. The cows started lowing.

I was close enough to see Glenn using the hammer he picked up from beside the tractor. I could hear it hitting Igor's head. It made a dull sound like when you're cracking walnuts on a rock. I knew Igor was dead.

Glenn stood up. He was blowing hard like a horse. His shirt was ripped open. His breath was coming out in big white clouds. He acted drunk. He lifted Igor up. The moonlight shone on Igor's head and it was lopsided and looked like it didn't have any hair on it.

Then Glenn dragged Igor over under the cypress tree. Then he ran into the toolshed by the tractor and came back out with a knife. He looked up at the singletree that hung from the limb to hang butchering pigs on.

And then Glenn hooked twice with the knife and hung Igor up there on the singletree just like a hog. I tried to think of him doing to Igor what we did to the hogs, hooking the ankle tendons over the ends of the singletree and gutting the hog and flaying it, peeling the forelegs, snickering away with the knife. I could see the fat, and the big white body hanging naked. A hog hanging like that looks just like a big naked fat man.

Anna came screaming and beating at Glenn's back. Now she knew!

Now she knew! When he hit her she fell down. She started crawling toward him and screaming and Glenn kicked her in the face.

She knew now, and it wasn't too late. I was there. I was waiting. I'd forgotten about it but I still had the beet-knife in my hand . . .

. . . there hadn't been any sound up there in the loft, and then all at once I heard my sister scream. The horse started kicking at the side of the barn where I was hiding. A board broke out of the side of the barn. A mud swallow's nest fell off the rafter and three baby swallows fell under the horse's hoofs like pink little mice.

I could hear the boards thudding up there. My sister was screaming and screaming and I was trying to get up the ladder into the loft. The horse kicked and kicked at the barn. The hay smelled funny, and dust went into my nose. I looked and then the top of the barn seemed to spin like a top. He ran at me with the pitchfork. I saw the hay. It had red spots all over it.

I ran and ran. Don't you ever tell now, said Aunt Geraldine . . . don't you ever tell. . . . I'll kill him, I'll kill, I was yelling and yelling at my Aunt Geraldine. . . .

"I'll kill him! I'll kill him!" At first I thought I was just remembering it. And then I heard the words all around my head. They seemed like flies buzzing around. And then I opened my mouth and I heard the flies buzzing again, out of my mouth. I wanted to yell and yell now that I knew I was really yelling. But I didn't have time then.

I could see Anna staring past Glenn and staring at me. But Glenn didn't have time to turn around and see who it was yelling.

I ran up behind Glenn and swung as hard as I could and stuck the hook into the back of Glenn's neck.

I helped Anna back into the house. She was crying and leaning on me, but not saying anything. She dropped down on the living room floor and after she rolled over and looked out the window she didn't seem to want to move any more.

Her eyes were wide open and white looking. I stayed there on the floor with her and kept trying to tell her how I felt. It was hard and I tried to do it all at once and I kept choking up on my own words and trying to say them right. My mouth kept getting wet and I had to keep wiping at it and starting over and working on every word. I felt so good I wanted to yell and yell out everything all at once. But then I didn't need to. I had plenty of time.

No one knows now about me being able to talk, nobody but Anna. Anna talked a little during the trial. She told how it happened, and that I had just tried to keep her from getting killed. I didn't say anything. And nobody knew the difference.

I talk to Anna now all the time. But I'm not like Glenn was. I only say things Anna wants to hear. I know she likes to hear what I say to her because she just sits and looks at me and listens. I can touch her or do anything I want and I know she likes me because she just sits there.

She doesn't cook much any more. I do most of the cooking and all the chores too. Now I'm learning to bake blueberry pie. She never goes anywhere. No one ever comes to see her and we've been snowed in, just the two of us, for a long time. I guess there's a lot of folks like Glenn who can only think the worst of people.

I have so much to say, it's nice to have Anna here. She sits and listens all evening, every evening. The snow is piled up high all around us. And it's going to be a long winter.

I never thought I'd be so lucky.

Buck liked older women. He liked to hear them scream . . .

Mama's Boy

BY DAVID ALEXANDER

A Novelette

HE AWAKENED at noon. That was his usual hour unless there'd been something special the night before. If there'd been something special, he slept later. He was scrupulous about having eight hours of sleep. He yawned and rubbed his big hand over the blue briar patch on his jowls that always grew overnight no matter how late and how closely he shaved. The sandpapery touch of his beard gave him a sense of assurance. His beard was rough, rough like he was, he thought. A man's beard, not just fuzzy female down that some men called whiskers.

He lowered his hand and fondled his chest. The hair was thick and matted, like an animal's. He liked that, too. He was always seeking a sense of assurance from observing and touching his own powerful body. He liked to flex his biceps and square his shoulders and throw short, wicked punches at imaginary adversaries when he was alone.

As always, when he first awakened, he kicked off the covers and lay still in bed, regarding himself in the full-length mirror on the door of the closet across the little room. That was the only thing he liked about this flea trap — the big mirror. He guessed they had the mirrors in the rooms because the cheap hotel appealed to Broadway dolls, night club chorines and hustlers. There were also a few grifters like himself who roomed there.

He slept without pajamas, summer and winter. He lay there and admired himself in the mirror. He was six feet tall and had the bulging, hourglass build of a professional weight-lifter. His body was always bronzed. One whole corner of the little room was filled by an enormous sun lamp. He'd stolen it from the apartment of a middle-aged woman he'd picked up in a bar once. It was the biggest thing he'd ever stolen. He'd intended to hock it with a fence he knew on Sixth Avenue, but he'd decided to keep it. It made him look as if he'd just stepped off a train from Florida, and he liked that.

He suddenly realized it was Friday. That meant he'd have to be on the prowl again tonight. The room rent was due again tomorrow and there was less than ten bucks in cash strewn over the dresser-top. He hadn't paid the rent for two weeks. By tomorrow the bill would be thirty-four dollars and they wouldn't let it ride any longer. They'd lock him out tomorrow night if he hadn't settled up at the desk. They'd hold his clothes and his sun lamp and his toilet articles and even his stack of magazines. Tonight he had to go down to one of those traps in Greenwich Village that were patronized by unaccompanied middle-aged women. He'd have to pick a well-dressed one with jewelry, one that looked like ready money. Usually they didn't carry much cash in their pocketbooks, of course. Just enough for the drinks. But they almost always had cash and jewelry and other valuables in their apartments. All you had to do was get them to take you home. He knew where to look for cash and valuables. The old dolls all hid them in the same places, like the medicine cabinets in their fancy bathrooms. Sometimes, if you couldn't find what you were looking for, you had to smack them around a little.

He liked that. That was the real kick, beating them up. That was what he liked. It was a bigger kick than finding a shoe box full of hundred-dollar bills and diamond rings in their apartments.

He got up and posed in front of

the mirror, flexing his muscles, throwing short jabs and uppercuts at his image. Then for ten minutes he did sitting-up exercises, bends and pushups. There was a pile of magazines and paperback novels on the glass-topped table that served him as a desk. The magazines were all physical culture publications. The ones he'd saved, a dozen or so, all had his picture in them. He often made a few bucks hiring out as a photographer's model. The soft-cover books were all murder stories with lurid covers. They concerned the adventures of guys who spend most of their time beating hell out of naked blondes who were on the make for them. Usually they wound up putting a forty-five slug into the blondes.

He lifted a magazine off the top of the pile and admired his picture on the cover. "Buck Crowley, a Leading Mr. America Candidate," the caption read. In the cover photograph he was wearing only a loincloth. He was standing spraddle-legged and holding aloft a bar bell that wasn't as heavy as it looked.

He put the magazine down and picked up a letter from Moira, who was living at some place down in Florida now. Moira was one of the middle-aged women he'd picked up in a Village trap one night, and she'd been a good source of income for him for months. She was always giving him little presents that could be converted into cash. Moira was a widow, but she had married this rich old man who was retired and she had gone down to Florida to take care of him. Moira was cagey. She'd given him only a post office box for an address. He took the letter out of the envelope, read it again, and threw it down angrily.

Jesus, what mush, he thought. Could you imagine the dumb woman putting stuff like that on paper? That was really leading with the chin. He grinned and read his own scrawled writing on another sheet of paper he hadn't mailed yet.

Dear Moira,

I got the 25. It's not enough. I got to have a lot more, at least a couple hunderd. If you havn't got it you can get it from that rich old man you married alright. You better. If you don't I'll find out how to write to him and tell him some things about you and me maybe.

Your friend,
Buck

He went into the connecting bath he shared with the tenant of the next room. He tried the door of the neighbor's room. It was locked from the other side. He didn't bother to bolt it from his side. He never did. There was a puny little guy lived in the next room. Crowley was always halfway hoping the puny little guy would blunder into the bath while he was there so he could show him what a real man who took good care of his body looked like. There wasn't any use in fooling around with the puny little guy, though. He couldn't have

any dough or he wouldn't be living in a trap like this, in the Forties west of Eighth.

Crowley used almost a whole cake of wafer-thin hotel soap in lathering his shaggy body under a warm shower. Then he turned the cold water on full-blast. His teeth chattered and his body shook, but he endured the icy torture for two full minutes. That was part of his daily regimen. He dried himself with the last of the three sleazy bath towels the hotel issued to its guests in the course of a week. Then he slapped rubbing alcohol on his body, kneading the muscles as he applied the pungent stuff. What he really needed was a good rubdown, he reflected. But in his present financial state he couldn't afford a gym or a Turkish bath. As he shaved, he thought: Maybe after tonight I can afford a few little luxuries. A Broadway haberdasher was displaying a new line of tight-fitting pink sports shirts, but they cost $8.95 a copy. Moira used to give him presents of expensive haberdashery from time to time, he recalled. He'd got twenty bucks from a hock shop for a gold tie clasp with twin hearts on it that Moira had given him. What the hell did he need with a tie clasp? He seldom wore a tie. He liked open-throated shirts that showed the hair on his chest.

Crowley returned to his room. He pulled the sun lamp apparatus over to the bed and turned on the current. He lay down on the bed, letting the lamp toast his body. The warm rays from the big bulb flowed over him and made him feel pleasantly relaxed. For minutes he let his mind dwell comfortingly on his strong, perfect body. The feeling of surging power inside him was almost sensual. But then he got to thinking about Moira and he became bitter about the tiny crumb she'd sent him when he'd appealed to her for a little financial help.

When Crowley had baked his front for ten minutes, he turned over and baked his back. When another ten minutes had elapsed, his daily regimen was finished. He'd had his sitting-up exercises, his cold shower, his sun-ray treatment. It was time to dress and get breakfast.

Crowley led a very orderly life. A good, clean life.

2.

He dressed very carefully because this was his night to prowl and he wanted to look his best. He'd discovered the Village traps, where the middle-aged, unaccompanied women hung out, quite by accident. Often, when the need for sheer physical exertion asserted itself, he would walk at a rapid pace from one end of Manhattan Island to another, with no destination at all in mind. One such walk had carried him to the Village and he had arrived there physically exhausted. He did not like to drink. Drinking was not part of the good clean life he led. But a bar had

seemed the only place where he might pause and rest for a moment.

There had been an aging woman with a painted face at the bar and she had been a little drunk, and that was the start of it. He had learned that there were many such women, well-heeled, women who had lost their men through death or divorce and who had lost their youth through the inexorable flow of time, and who were frantically determined to recapture the excitements of the past by bribing some young man with liquor or food or money or little luxuries. They came to these places in the Village because here they could find husky young men who were painters and sculptors and writers and didn't have a dime and the aging women could retain some shred of respectability by pretending an interest in the young men's work instead of the young men themselves and by calling them their protegés instead of their gigolos. Crowley was not a painter or a writer or a sculptor but his abundant physical assets made him attractive to such women, even without this thin coat of respectability.

Crowley took Moira's letter and put it under a pile of shirts in his drawer, to hide it from the maid. He'd mail his own letter, but he could hardly expect Moira to come through in time for the rent, so he had to prowl tonight. He kept several things hidden from the maid under the shirts. He took out a small jar of cream deodorant and a bottle of rose hair oil. He glanced over his shoulder guiltily, as if he expected someone to be spying on him, before he rubbed the cream deodorant in his armpits. He poured several drops of the fragrant oil into his black, curly hair and massaged his scalp vigorously. He combed his hair, letting one curl spill down over his forehead. Moira had liked the way the curl hung down. She said it made him look like a mischievous little boy. He glanced again behind him, as if he were making sure he was alone in the tiny room, and then put a drop of the perfumed oil on his fingertip and rubbed it into his thick eyebrows. His eyebrows grew together in a straight line over his nose.

He replaced the hair oil and cream deodorant beneath the shirts. He put on a pair of shorts and chose a tight-fitting knit rayon gaucho shirt. It was white and showed off the deep bronze of his skin. He had almost as much trouble forcing his big, upper torso into the shirt as a plump woman has squeezing her thick body into a latex girdle. He selected a pair of slim-legged, fawn-colored slacks with a pleated waist. He wore a wide leather belt with a Western buckle. His socks were soft wool argyle and his shoes were saddle leather with thick crepe soles. As a final adornment, he hooked on a slave bracelet with heavy sterling silver links that Moira had given him. His wrist watch was in hock.

He preened himself in front of the

mirror and nodded with satisfaction. He'd qualify. The tight shirt and slim-legged trousers showed off his fine body to perfection.

He had to get a stamp for his letter to Moira, but he wouldn't get it at the desk. He always avoided the desk when his rent was overdue. He went down the back stairs and crossed a yard of lobby at one long step and entered the lunch room which was connected with the hotel.

It was around two o'clock as usual before he breakfasted. He sat on a stool and he was a long time getting served because the girl behind the counter knew he never tipped. His breakfast was a very light one, considering the lateness of the hour and the fact he was a large, athletic-looking young man. He always ordered a certain brand of cereal because he believed implicitly in the ads which stated it was a breakfast of champions which furnished the principal nourishment for the most publicized heroes of the sports world. He never drank tea or coffee. He had milk, two boiled eggs and dry toast.

He handed the girl a dollar bill and showed her his strong white teeth in a smile. She didn't react. As usual, she glared at him when he pocketed his thirty-five cents change. The tramp, he thought. They're all alike, even the young ones.

He walked to Eighth Avenue and found a stationery store and stamp machine. He stamped the letter to Moira. As he dropped the letter into the mailbox he thought: I'll show her. Going off and leaving me all alone like that, without even enough money to eat on. I should have asked for five C's instead of two.

He walked to Broadway.

3.

The world's most blatant midway was alive with women, it seemed. He hated them all. He especially hated the aging women, the old actresses with the thick paint on their withered faces who dashed from agent to agent desperately seeking a job. I'd like to smash them, he thought. God, how I'd like to smash them. But he couldn't afford kicks. He was in this business purely for money, he reminded himself. Broadway wasn't his beat. His beat was the Village. That's where the ones with the gold hung out. The wealthy ones. The ones worth fooling with.

Trouble was the old dolls didn't start hitting the Village bars until late afternoon and usually there wasn't any real business to be done until after midnight. Sometimes you didn't get picked up until almost closing hour. That bothered Crowley, having to hang around the bars so long. You couldn't hang around unless you had a drink in front of you and he didn't approve of alcoholic beverages. He didn't think a clean-living man like him should drink at all. But he had to sip beer in the Village bars. He always took as long as he could over a bottle. A lousy bottle of beer cost half a buck in

those dives. After half an hour or so of nursing your beer, the bartender started looking crosseyed at you and you had to buy another bottle — or go to another bar. It could be expensive if there wasn't some bag around giving you the eye and paying for your drinks. What was worse, drinking beer ruined your health. If he started getting a waistline, his career as a model would be over and he wouldn't stand a chance in the Mr. America contest.

Crowley loafed around Broadway for a couple of hours, and then dropped by a photographic agency to see if there were any calls for muscle models. When he found there weren't, he turned up Jacobs Beach and went to Stillman's Gym. He didn't like to spend the half a buck they charged to watch the sparring, but he went in anyway. Boxers were men, rough guys like himself. They had hairy chests and hairy hands and they knew how to hit and cut and hurt.

He watched the sparring in several rings, watched heavy-shouldered men with broken faces pound their gloved fists into weighty bags. That's what I want, he thought. I want to smash. I take care of myself. I lead a good, clean life. My body's made for smashing.

He remained in the gym for several hours, breathing in the mingled odors of stale sweat and stale smoke and rubbing alcohol and liniment, hearing the steady thud of cushioned fists that plummeted into leather bags and human flesh with the peculiarly rhythmic and insistent sound of dark hands beating jungle drums.

It was late afternoon when he reached the street. He decided to have an early dinner. He went to a Riker's Restaurant and sat at a counter and paid a dollar sixty-five for a T-bone steak, potatoes, salad and milk. His money was rapidly disappearing, but he thought he needed the steak. Steak gave you strength. Fighters always had a steak a few hours before they went into the ring, he'd heard.

He was restless as he left the restaurant. He was quivering inside with a kind of excited anticipation. It was almost evening now. Soon he would go down to the Village and find the woman who would supply the money to pay the rent. But he hardly thought about the money or the rent he owed. He thought about what he was going to do to the woman.

He was breathing heavily when he went into his stuffy little room. He raised the window that the maid had lowered. He paced the floor, hearing the animal sound of his own breathing and the screech and hum of the city outside the window.

He picked up one of the paperback books and lay down on the bed. He skipped a good deal of it because he'd read it before, but he read the part about a guy branding a girl with a red-hot poker. He branded her with a double-cross because she'd

framed a pal of his for murder. The story excited Crowley. He read the part again, his lips moving. There was a picture of the girl on the jacket of the book. She was young and red-mouthed and full-bosomed. But Crowley thought of her as being middle-aged, an old bag trying to find a strong young man. I could do that, he kept telling himself. That stuff with the hot poker. I could do that.

The room was cool but he was sweating. There's something inside me, he thought. It's got to break. He caught a glimpse of himself in the full-length mirror. His big fists were clenched tight. He was biting his lower lip. His body was rigid.

Jesus, he thought, I've got to smash.

He began to tremble with excitement. When he'd started out this afternoon it had been strictly business, solely a matter of dollars and cents. But now it was something different. I've got to get one tonight, he told himself. It's not just the money. I've got to pound one with my fists. He kept thinking about the guy branding the woman. It would be a hell of a kick, he thought. I could brand my initials on one of 'em. I could do it easy.

4

It was after eight o'clock when Crowley finally walked out into the night to start his prowl. He started downtown on foot. It took him nearly an hour to reach the Village, walking fast. The first bar he went into was on Sheridan Square. There was nothing there for him. Collegiate-looking kids, laughing too loudly, a few characters in beards and berets to give atmosphere to the place.

He stopped in two bars on West Fourth Street. Each was crowded and filled with raucous sound and swirling smoke. Their patrons were the self-conscious bohemians, the men in corduroy jackets and baggy pants, the girls in smocks or blue jeans, chattering about matters Crowley did not understand.

He tried a bar on Sixth Avenue, and then another. He hardly paused in either place. They were filled with working-class men.

His eagerness was mounting unbearably now. It had never been like this before, he thought.

He passed a brownstone walk-up, saw the girl a few steps back in the dimly-lighted foyer, and almost passed on before he realized what she was doing. She was standing with her back to the door, leaning over, adjusting her stockings. A small purse lay on the floor beside her feet.

Crowley moved almost without conscious thought. He looked both ways, saw that no one was watching him, glanced again into the foyer to make certain the girl was alone, and then opened the door silently and crossed the floor to her in three noiseless steps. Just as he reached her, she dropped her skirt and straightened up and started to turn.

His fist caught her just beneath the ear.

The girl went down without a sound and lay there, jerking a little. Crowley studied her for a second, and then, certain she was out, dumped the contents of her purse on the floor and picked up the man's billfold. He flipped it open. It contained two one-dollar bills. He shoved the bills in his pocket and threw the billfold at the girl's face as hard as he could. "Two lousy bucks," he said aloud. "For Christ's sake."

Thirty seconds after he had first spotted the girl, he was on the street again, walking rapidly, but not rapidly enough to interest anyone. The girl he'd robbed was almost forgotten. Even the vague regret he'd felt because there hadn't been time to do a job on her was nothing more than a memory now. It could have been last night that he'd slugged the girl in the foyer, or last week. His last thought of her was that she had been just an appetizer. Hell, he'd hardly slugged her at all. What he needed was somebody like Moira, and a place where he could really take his time. He began to think about how it would be to brand one of them, and now he had forgotten the girl in the foyer completely.

Finally he hearded through the Minetta for Macdougal Street. He walked toward Bleecker and went into Ernesto's. This was the place. This was where he had met Moira and many of the others. This was where the wealthy uptown ladies of uncertain age came to pick up their "protegés."

But there was no Moira at the bar, no one who resembled her even slightly. He felt wildly angry. He'd been cheated. But this was the last chance. He had to stay here. There was no place else to look.

He pushed his way to the crowded bar and ordered a beer he did not want.

The bartender said, "Weekends we serve only bottle beer, fifty cents a copy. You can get a shot for the same price. We gotta keep the sippers out. The place gets crowded weekends."

"Beer," said Crowley righteously. "I never drink hard liquor."

There was a mixed crowd of Villagers and "tourists" from uptown in Ernesto's. The Villagers, who were elaborately casual in their attire to mark them as artistic souls, seemed mainly occupied in cadging drinks from the well-dressed visitors. Tourists were fair game every weekend for the regulars of such taverns.

Crowley sipped his beer slowly and urgent restlessness grew inside him. The crowd shifted every few minutes. A party would leave and another would come through the door to replace it at the long bar. But the one Crowley was looking for did not arrive. He became sullen and angry. He was in a crowd, but he was alone again.

A pair of street musicians entered

the bar. One carried a violin, the other a piano accordion. They took a stance away from the crowded bar and began to play an old tune. And immediately afterward she came in. Crowley knew at once that she was the one he had been waiting for.

She was about Moira's age, he judged, past her middle forties, pushing fifty. She wore a beautifully tailored suit of grayish lavender. There was a clip of sparkling stones at her lapel and Crowley thought the stones were diamonds. Her hat was small and smart with a jaunty feather. Her face was expertly made up to hide the lines and crowsfeet of middle age. A high, ruffled collar concealed the sagging flesh of her throat. She wore glasses, but they were very special glasses, harlequin-shaped, the rims twinkling with gold work and tiny stones. She was alone.

Crowley shifted his position, used his weight to make a place at the bar. As she passed him, he called to her, "You can get in here, lady. There's quite a crowd tonight."

She nodded to him coolly, murmured thanks. She took the place beside him, but seemed unimpressed by the muscular young man. She's playing it cagey, Crowley thought. She's like Moira. The well-dressed woman ordered a dry martini and Crowley exulted. Moira had drunk dry martinis. Dry martinis worked on them fast. This was going to be easy. Crowley looked speculatively at the alligator bag the woman carried. It was a large bag. It must have cost at least a hundred dollars. It would hold a lot of money and a lot of expensive gadgets like gold cigarette cases and lighters and jeweled compacts.

The woman finally looked at Crowley. There was neither great interest nor distaste in the look she gave him. It was just a look of calm appraisal. She said, "Since you were good enough to make a place for me, the least I can do is offer you a drink."

Crowley decided his little-boy act was best for this situation. "I'd appreciate it, ma'am," he said. "I'm kind of broke tonight. I've just been locked out of my room, in fact."

A shadow of suspicion flickered on the woman's face, but she ordered Crowley's beer. She handled her martini like an experienced drinker. She didn't gulp and she didn't sip. She drank. She was out to get a lift, obviously, and she was going to.

She finished her martini before she spoke again. She said, "You're a husky young man. I'd think you could get a job that would pay enough for your room rent. Don't tell me you're one of these artists who like to starve in attics. You hardly look the type."

Crowley said, "I'm kind of a model. I pose for photographers mostly, but I pose for artists, too, now and then. Artists say I've got a good body. I come down here to the Village to see if maybe some artist would pay me to pose."

The woman gave a short laugh that was almost a contemptuous snort. "Artists don't look for models in saloons at ten o'clock at night."

Crowley thought, The stinking phony. A goddamn know-it-all. Just wait till I get my hands on you, you phony. He said, "Are you a painter, ma'am?"

She ordered another drink and took a swallow from it before she answered. She said, "As a matter of fact, I do paint, and I paint rather well in an academic way. But with me it's strictly a hobby. And don't get ideas, young man. I've done some portraits and figure studies, but since my husband died three years ago I've concentrated on still-life. A bowl of fruit can't get you in any trouble. A living model can, sometimes, especially if he's a muscular young man like you."

Crowley said, "I didn't mean anything. I'm only trying to get a little honest work, that's all."

The woman turned toward Crowley, drank from her glass, regarded him squarely for the first time. The bright brown eyes behind the harlequin glasses studied his face, wandered over his big body. She said, "You're a rather strange young man. You have a queer look. It's even rather frightening. With your build, you should be driving a trailer truck or playing professional football. But all you want to do is make a few miserable dollars displaying your body for a photographer or an artist. It must be some kind of complex. A narcissus complex, maybe. You want something, I can tell that. You want something rather terribly. Everyone does, I guess."

Crowley said, "Maybe all I want is a little friendship."

She nodded slowly. "You know, that could be true. I've learned to understand loneliness since my husband died. This is a lonely city. The loneliest in the world. I'm well enough off and I have friends, but it's not the same. Are you married?"

Crowley shook his head. "No," he said. "Maybe we're both lonesome. Maybe we could be friends."

Her regard was speculative now. At length she said, "Friends? I suppose we could be that. But don't get wrong ideas. You're an extraordinarily attractive young male animal and I'm a woman. But I don't kid myself. I'm forty-eight and I admit it. I'm old enough to be your mother."

God, Crowley thought, she just had to say that. How many times had he heard that line? They just had to say it. All of them did. He smiled sadly, "I never had a real mother. My mother died when I was born. I was brought up in an orphanage."

The woman said, "Maybe that's what you're looking for. A mother. Well, it's a new role for me. My husband and I never had children. So maybe I'm looking for a son." She smiled wryly. "Maybe I can be a mother instead of a sister to you. Let's have a drink on it. My name's Kate Maynard."

Crowley said, "My name's Joe Harvey." He never gave them his right name the first time. If he merely robbed them and beat them and left, they wouldn't know his name in case they hollered copper. If he decided it was more profitable to play them along for a while — the way he had Moira — he could always give them his right name later. But there wouldn't be any more nights for Kate Maynard. She was going to get the big treatment tonight. The works.

Kate laughed. "Harvey," she said. "Harvey, the rabbit. You're a hell of a big rabbit, Harvey."

They had another drink. And another. The beer was choking Crowley. He hated it and stalled her when her own glass was empty and she signaled the bartender, telling her he'd finish the beer in his bottle. He kept trying to get her out of the bar, to make her take him home with her, but she was cagey, even though the martinis were creeping up on her. Damn her, Crowley thought. I'll make her pay for stalling me. She'll pay for making me beg like this. Just wait till she pokes that face of hers up against a mirror in the morning, if she's able to get off the floor by then. Jesus, Crowley thought, I'll go crazy if I can't start soon.

He'd never before been so impatient for the conclusion of an affair like this. He knew somehow that this would be different from all the others.

By midnight Kate Maynard was tight and she admitted it. She wasn't a messy female drunk. She held her liquor like a lady. Her legs were under her and her tongue wasn't thick. But she was laughing too loudly and her bright eyes had a glazed look in them. She said, "The party's over for little Kate. Get me a cab, Harvey. Get me a cab, son, like a nice little boy."

Crowley said, "I'll take you home."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Just take me to a cab," she said.

When Crowley finally found a cab, he climbed in after her. She didn't protest too much. She said, "Now I'll have to pay your cab fare back. But I guess it's worth it. I live in a supposedly exclusive neighborhood, but the young hoods wander into it at this time of night and the doormen in the big apartment houses are usually snoozing."

5.

Kate Maynard's house was a remodeled private dwelling overlooking the East River in mid-Manhattan. There were three apartments in the house, one to a floor. The brick facade had been painted charcoal black. The door and the shutters were enameled bright red. There was a big ornamental brass knocker made in the shape of a spread eagle on the door. It was class. Rich people lived in houses like this, Crowley gloated. This one was really the payoff.

Kate Maynard protested again

when Crowley insisted on going in with her. "I have to get up early tomorrow, Harvey. My sister's picking me up at nine."

"Look," he said. "I'm lonesome. Can't you understand? I just want to sit around and talk a little while. I'm not in a hurry to sleep on a park bench. I got no place else to go."

She hesitated before she put her key in the lock, but in the end alcohol overcame her natural caution. She said, "All right, Harvey. You come up with me for just a little while. I'll give you enough money for a hotel tonight. And maybe I could inquire around about a job for you next week." She lingered just a little longer in the doorway. Finally she said, "I guess it's all right, really. I confess I'm a little afraid to go in alone. This is a co-op with no night man. And I'm alone in the house. My neighbors haven't come back from their summer vacations yet. I can't really flatter myself into believing you have designs on me."

She opened the door to him.

Crowley walked through it stiffly, his fists clenched tight, hardly daring to say anything. Now that the thing he'd brooded about all day was about to happen, he was like a lecher sweating out the last few minutes before his tryst with the woman he desires.

Kate's apartment was on the second floor. The living room was large. It was furnished with traditional English pieces and it shone with polished wood and bright upholstery fabrics and brocaded damask drapes. Kate's oils, in gold frames, hung on the walls. There were still lifes, landscapes, a portrait or two done with sure brush work and a competent sense of balance. It wasn't like Moira's place had been at all, Crowley thought. Moira had gone in for that low-slung modernistic stuff, a lot of divans and ottomans and coffee tables a foot or so off the floor, and her walls had been decorated mainly by pictures of naked young men with bulging muscles.

Crowley stood quite still in the middle of the room. Kate Maynard took off the hat with the jaunty feather and tossed it carelessly on a divan. "I've had it," she said. "No nightcaps for me. I don't have any beer, but there's Scotch and gin and stuff if you need a drink."

"I never drink hard liquor," Crowley told her. "I got to take care of my body."

Kate regarded him quizzically. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, "I guess your body is important to you. It's about the only thing you're proud of, isn't it?" When Crowley didn't answer, she said, "There might be something in the ice box if you're hungry."

"I'll have a glass of milk," Crowley said. "It's not good for the stomach to eat late at night."

He wanted to get the woman out of the room so he could appraise any portable assets that might be lying

around. There was a silver table lighter that might be worth something and a gold-mounted desk set, he noted hurriedly. He was opening one of the desk drawers and looking for a bankbook when Kate came into the room.

Kate set the glass of milk down on a library table. She said, "Look here, I don't like people prying into my things. What are you looking for?"

Crowley turned slowly toward her. "That's too bad," he said. "Now let's get down to it. Why'd you bring me up here? You didn't just want to watch me drink milk, did you, sweetheart?" He moved toward her deliberately, grinning. "I want some money, Katie. I want all you've got in that fancy handbag. And I want what you've got hid around the house, too. You better be a sweet girl and give it to me, Katie, or I might get nasty. If I got to look for it, I might wreck the joint."

Kate stood her ground. She said, "You told me you wanted to talk a while. That's why I brought you here. I was lonesome myself, I guess, and I was trying to be kind. You'd better get out now. I won't give you any money."

Crowley was moving slowly toward the woman, still grinning. His eyes were slitted and crazy and, most terrifyingly, he had begun to sing, very softly, the same song the street musicians had played at the Village bar.

Jesus, he thought. This is the one. This is the one I've been waiting for. I always knew I'd kill one of them some day. This is the one. I'm going to kill you, Katie.

Kate stood still, gaping at Crowley, fascinated by the panther grace, the mad and evil look on his face and the song he was singing.

Oh, sweet Jesus, this is good, thought Crowley. She's the one. She's the one I've been waiting for all my life. I'm going to kill you with my fists, Katie. I'm going to show you how a real man kills. He doesn't need a gun. I'm going to smash and break and keep on pounding until you're dead.

Crowley was a couple of feet from Kate now, and Kate didn't back away. Crowley's left flew straight and hard like a mallet that is hurled. Kate's harlequin glasses flew off and shattered against a television console. She staggered back, almost fell, braced herself against a heavy table. Crowley had begun to laugh. His laughter was a treble giggle like a girl's.

Amazingly, Kate Maynard fought back. None of the other women had fought back. But Kate hurled her frail body forward, her small fists flailing ridiculously against Crowley's solid body.

It didn't do her any good, of course.

Crowley simply ignored her blows. Crowley was busy.

Finally he sank into a chair, looking down at her, entranced.

He said aloud, "You see, Katie? I didn't need a gun."

But Kate Maynard didn't hear. Kate had been dead for quite a while.

6:

There was nearly a hundred dollars in Kate's alligator bag. Kate hadn't wised up like the others. She carried her cash right on her. Crowley had some trouble getting the rings off Kate's fingers. He took Kate's wrist watch and the silver lighter and the gold-mounted desk set and a gold pencil and a jeweled cigarette case. Then he searched the apartment thoroughly. In an envelope, hidden beneath a pile of lingerie in one of Kate's dresser drawers, he found another sixty dollars, all in fives, and two diamond rings.

Then he went into the bathroom to wash up. He let the cold water run over his bleeding knuckles for a long time. There wasn't any hurry. He felt as calm and relaxed as a man could feel.

Crowley was closing the door when he remembered something. He re-entered the apartment and drank the glass of milk that was still sitting on the table.

He always had a glass of milk before he went to bed.

It made him sleep good.

7:

When Crowley hit the street he started walking west, looking for a taxi. The knuckles of his right hand were beginning to bleed again, and he took out his handkerchief and wrapped it around them. The knuckles of his left hand were swollen and raw, but the bleeding had stopped.

He had walked almost a block when the police car came by. It crawled past him, and Crowley looked after it and laughed softly. The bastards, he thought. You take their guns away from them and they wouldn't know what the hell to do. They'd kill you with a gun fast enough, but they'd never have the guts to beat you to death with their fists.

The police car slowed, then drew to the curb and stopped.

Crowley kept walking, but there was tightness in his chest now, as if he'd run too long and too fast. As he came abreast of the police car, one of the patrolmen got out and moved toward him.

"You have an accident, son?" he asked.

Crowley glanced down at the handkerchief around his knuckles. He shook his head. He wanted to say something, but somehow the words wouldn't come.

"Maybe you had a fight," the patrolman said. He moved a little closer to Crowley.

"No," Crowley said. He couldn't take his eyes from the revolver on the policeman's belt. "I — I tripped on a curb," he said. "I fell down and scraped my knuckles."

The patrolman stared at him.

"You're lucky you didn't hurt your clothes any, aren't you?"

The other patrolman had moved over in the seat to watch, and now he got out and walked up beside the first one. He looked Crowley over slowly. "You been down in the Village tonight, boy?" he asked. He said it the same way he would ask someone the time of day.

The goddam New York coppers, Crowley thought. You never know what the hell's going on in their mind. He shook his head again. "No. I haven't been downtown at all."

One of the patrolmen looked at the other. "That assault and robbery we got on the radio about nine o'clock," he said. "The guy was dressed just like this." He looked back at Crowley. "And the physical description matches up, too."

"Listen —" Crowley began.

"Suppose you just step over to the car there," the patrolman said. "Just lean up against it with your hands flat on the top."

"You got no right to search me," Crowley said. "Just because I fell and hurt myself don't mean —"

"Up against the car," the patrolman said, almost pleasantly. "We don't like to do it this way, son. But there's an alarm out for a guy could be your twin. He slugged a girl down in the Village earlier tonight and took two whole bucks off her. She —"

Crowley whirled and began to run. And almost instantly he heard the two fast warning shots which meant that if he took another step a third shot would kill him. He stopped.

8.

In the police car, on the way to the station house, one of the patrolmen said, "Where'd you get all that junk in your pockets, son?"

The other patrolman said, "That girl you slugged in the Village. She was a cool one. You didn't knock her out, but she was smart enough to make you think you had. She gave the precinct detectives a damn good description of you."

But Crowley wasn't thinking about the girl he'd slugged in the foyer. He was thinking about Kate Maynard, and remembering she'd said her sister was coming by the apartment at nine o'clock in the morning. She'd find Kate, and she'd know exactly what was missing from the apartment. And when the police matched the list up with the things they'd taken off him a few moments ago . . .

"You got that girl's mad money," one of the patrolmen said. "She was waiting for her date, and she'd just stepped into that foyer for a minute."

It was just a kind of appetizer, Crowley thought. Just a little warm-up. And all I got was two bucks. Two stinking, lousy bucks. Her mad money, for Christ's sake.

"Stop the car," he said suddenly. "I'm going to be sick at my stomach."

What's Your Verdict?

No. 11—The Escaping Man

BY SAM ROSS

BILL BOWLES became a policeman because he hated criminals. His father had been a detective-sergeant, and had been killed by a safecracker one night when the squad had moved in for an arrest. Bill grew up hating any kind of criminal, from murderers to petty thieves, and when he joined the Force his hatred worked to his advantage. He was fast and efficient, and he quickly rose to the rank of detective-sergeant. He had put a lot of people behind bars by that time, but his passion of hatred hadn't abated a bit.

Then he found out that Arthur Eggers was seeing his girl too often, and Bill stopped police work almost entirely. His friends said he'd grown listless; he put in his time without complaint but without any interest whatever.

Bill's girl was Rhoda Francis. They were engaged to be married as soon as Bill had saved up enough money. The news that she was seeing Arthur Eggers while Bill was on duty rocked him. Instead of hating criminals, he now began to hate Eggers.

Eggers was a little, sharp man with grey skin and quick hands. He was a few years older than either Bill or his girl Rhoda, and he earned his living delivering packages for a small candy concern in town. He had an insistent voice and a fast line of talk, and Bill, while he couldn't figure out what Rhoda had seen in Eggers, finally came to the conclusion that it was the fast patter that had won her over.

He met Eggers once in the street and knocked him flat with one punch. He stood over Eggers and watched him get up, and knocked him down again, before anybody in the watching crowd stopped him.

Bill couldn't take it. He started hanging around in cafes and barrooms during his off-hours; patrons would find him just sitting at a table, staring straight ahead at nothing at all. He went about his daily duties with a complete lack of interest. There was a rumor that he was to be demoted.

Then, one evening, Bill was sitting in Roberts' Tap Room, all alone at a table, when Arthur Eggers walked in. Eggers was already drunk, loud and boastful. "I can put something over on anybody in this

room," he shouted. "Look what I did to that damn cop. Like it was nothing — hell, I could steal you blindfold and you'd never know it."

Bill had risen to his feet. He looked at Eggers and came toward him. "You mention some damn cop, buddy?" Bill asked quietly.

Eggers grinned. "Sure I did. Making something of it? You hit me once. Lots of good that did you, didn't it?"

"I'll try it again, then," Bill said.

"Now you'll see something," Eggers said. "Little trick I learned. Steal you all blindfold." He was pretentiously ignoring Bill, talking to the other standees at the bar.

"Hell you will." One old, white-haired man finally took the challenge.

"I will," Eggers said. "Put a buck down on the bar there."

The old man fished in his pockets, brought out a crumpled dollar bill and put it on the wet bar. "Now what?"

"Steal you blindfold," Eggers said triumphantly. He grabbed the bill and ran for the door. "Never believe strangers," he shouted. He laughed like a child. Then he was gone.

Suddenly the men around Bill realized that he was gone, too. They caught sight of him at the door, running for the street. There was a short silence. Then they heard two shots.

Bill came back into the bar a minute later. "Let me use the phone," he asked the bartender.

"Bill. What happened?"

"Just a petty thief," Bill said. "He's dead; I shot him trying to escape." Then he went to the phone. Before he dialled: "I hate criminals," said Bill Bowles.

It must have come as quite a shock when Rhoda Francis' lawyer called him just that.

Bill was brought to trial on a charge of murder. Rhoda had hired a lawyer to prove that Bill had been in the bar, seen the whole thing, and shot Eggers while he was trying to escape. Bill, confused, didn't deny a word of this.

"Of course I shot him trying to escape. I'm a cop. He was a criminal. That's my job — to stop criminals, no matter how I do it."

"It was only a small offense," the lawyer said. "He didn't deserve to die for it."

"I was just doing my duty," Bill insisted.

Who was right?

What's *your* verdict?

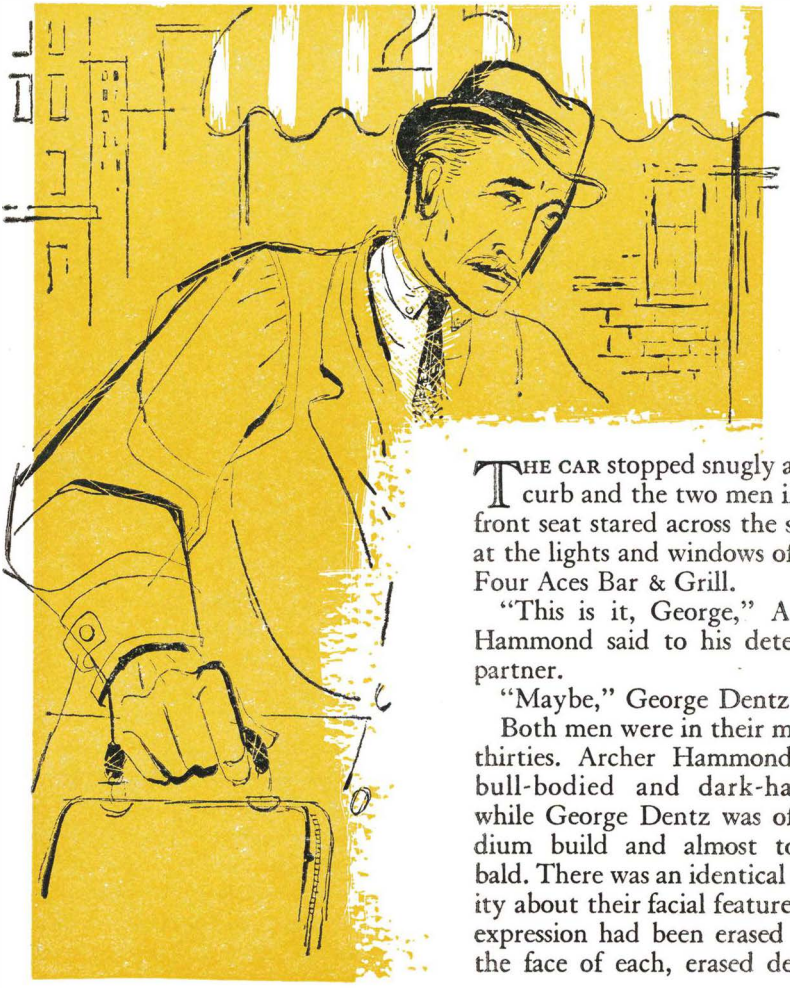
ANSWER:

The lawyer was right. A policeman may shoot to kill if the perpetrator of a major crime against person or property is escaping — but he can't do this if the crime was only a minor one. Bill was convicted of murder in the second degree and sent to prison. His conviction was undoubtedly made more certain by the fact that he'd previously battled with Eggers, and had an ulterior motive for the shooting.

It was the kind of mistake anybody could make. But this time, the mistake involved a dead cop . . .

Shake-Up

BY KENNETH FEARING



THE CAR stopped snugly at the curb and the two men in the front seat stared across the street at the lights and windows of The Four Aces Bar & Grill.

"This is it, George," Archer Hammond said to his detective partner.

"Maybe," George Dentz said.

Both men were in their middle thirties. Archer Hammond was bull-bodied and dark-haired, while George Dentz was of medium build and almost totally bald. There was an identical quality about their facial features. All expression had been erased from the face of each, erased deeply,

and often, as though the last erasure had been permanent, and long ago.

"They'll be in there, don't worry," Hammond said. "We clocked them down to the minute, didn't we?"

"It's going to look phony as hell," Dentz said.

"What do we care how it looks? When we do it, it sticks. It's got to stick, then, because it's been done."

Dentz ran his tongue slowly across his lips. "You take Showalter and I take Stenner, right?"

"Sure. What's the matter with you? We've been over it a hundred times."

"We could still slip up. Supposing they aren't together?"

"You sweat too much. If there's only Stenner, we cancel."

"It's that Harley that sweats me," Dentz said. "Everything depends on how smart he is with the signal."

"Forget it," Hammond said. "Harley is going to do just exactly what he's supposed to do. All we got to do is watch him. When he goes, we go. And he'll go, all right, because he knows damn well what'll happen to him if he doesn't."

The two men left the car and moved toward the bar and grill. Night covered the sky like an ancient, soot-blackened roof, held there by many walls and lights, equally dim and old. The district echoed with a blend of sounds, none of them loud, or close. There were people on the street, but none of them were near.

Hammond opened the door, held it for Dentz, then followed him inside. The room was small and the bar short. There were three people at the bar, a girl sitting alone at the far end, brooding over her drink, and two middle-aged men at the near end talking earnestly to each other. The bartender had his back to his customers, arranging bottles on the glass display shelves. All the booths on the other side of the room were empty, except the one immediately opposite the two men who stood together at the end of the bar. In this booth sat a thin, flat-faced man in a soiled shirt and rumpled suit.

Archer Hammond glanced at the two men standing together at the end of the bar and then at the man in the booth. "Get set, George," he whispered. "Here we go." He slipped his hand inside his coat and partially drew his gun.

Suddenly the flat-faced man in the booth rose halfway to his feet, hands held high. "Don't shoot!" he yelled. "Go ahead and stick us up, but don't shoot!"

The two middle-aged men at the end of the bar wheeled instantly, and almost as quickly, their hands held guns whipped from shoulder holsters.

They were fast, but not fast enough. Archer Hammond triggered four shots in one long roar and the two middle-aged men dropped their guns and sank to the floor.

Hammond moved his revolver in a lazy arc around the room. "Police officers," he said, and moved to the

middle of the room. The bartender had ducked behind the bar, and now he stood up slowly, his face ashen. The girl at the bar sat round-eyed, fingers splayed before her face, as if ready to scream.

Hammond nodded to the girl. "Take it easy, miss. It's all over now."

The bartender was breathing heavily, holding to the bar for support. "Mister . . ." he began, then swallowed hard and started again. "Mister, you made a mistake."

"Why?" Hammond asked. "You like stick-ups? Where's your phone?"

"You don't get it," the bartender said. "Those two guys —"

"Your phone, your phone. Come on, where is it?"

The bartender jerked his head toward the rear. "Back there. But listen. I'm trying to tell you —"

"Relax," Hammond said. "Just take it easy." He turned to George Dentz. "Call in, George."

Dentz walked slowly toward the phone and Hammond knelt down to look at the two men he had shot. There was a sudden movement behind him and the flat-faced man was out of the booth and through the door before Hammond could whirl and straighten up. Hammond raced for the door, tripped, and sprawled headlong. He got up, grimacing with pain, and hobbled to the door and opened it and looked outside. In a moment he turned back to the room, shaking his head. "Got away," he said bitterly. "Didn't want to be a witness, so he lammed out. That's the thanks you get for keeping him out of a heist."

George Dentz came running up from the rear. "What happened?" he asked.

"We lost a witness," Hammond said. "But we still got a couple. Go ahead and call."

The door opened and a uniformed patrolman cautiously thrust himself in from the street. "What's going on here?" he asked.

Hammond grinned at him. "I'm Detective Hammond. This is my partner, Detective Dentz." He took out his folder and showed the patrolman his badge. "We walked in on a couple of heisters, right on the button. They had guns on a customer with his hands up, yelling not to shoot." He looked at Dentz. "What're you waiting for, George? Go on and call."

Dentz moved toward the rear again and the patrolman stepped close to look at the men on the floor. "My God," he said softly. "It's Showalter and Stenner."

"You know them?" Hammond asked.

The patrolman stared at him for a long moment. "They're cops. Detectives. They work out of my precinct." He went down on his knees between the two men. "Showalter's dead," he said. "But Stenner's still breathing. He's got a bad crease, but that's all."

Hammond put his gun away

slowly, staring straight at the patrolman. "Detectives, you say? Well, what the hell do you think of that?" He shook his head. "Cops pulling a heist in their own bailiwick. Jesus."

The girl at the bar got to her feet and moved on stiff legs to a booth. She sat down and folded her arms before her and rested her face against them. Her whole body shook, but she made no sound at all.

The precinct captain arrived five minutes later. He brought two detectives and two patrolmen with him. The captain was a tall, box-shouldered man, grown gray at the temples. He glanced once at the scene and in a clear, loud voice, demanded, "All right, boys. Let's have it."

"My partner and I walked in on a stick-up," Hammond said. "We saw two men with guns, and another man with his hands in the air begging them not to shoot. They saw George and me coming in the door and they swung their guns away from the guy and put them on us." Hammond paused, smiling thinly. "I was lucky. I got both of them before they could squeeze off any lead."

Two white-coated internes came in and began ministering to Detective Stenner.

"Where's the guy they had their guns on?" the captain asked.

"He got away," Hammond said.

"How?"

"He was a fast man on his feet. I started after him, but I tripped. Sort of wrenched my ankle a little. When I hit the street, he was out of sight."

The captain turned to the bartender. "You corroborate this?"

The bartender spoke uncertainly, with careful reserve. "Well, not exactly."

"What do you mean, not exactly?" the captain asked. "Was there a stick-up, or wasn't there? We can see the guns on the floor there."

"There was a crazy guy in the booth back there hollering don't shoot, yeah. But I didn't see any stick-up going on. I had my back to the room when the guy started hollering. When I turned around, this man here — Detective Hammond — he was blazing away, and then the two men went down, and that's just about all I saw."

"But you heard this guy in the booth yelling not to shoot?"

"Yes, sir. He said not to shoot, to go ahead and hold us up, but not to shoot."

The captain turned to the girl sitting in the booth. "How about you, miss?" he asked.

She was looking at a point midway between the captain and Archer Hammond. Her voice was so taut that her words were almost inaudible. "The man in the booth was looking at the men at the bar when he started yelling about a stick-up and for them not to shoot," she said. "He had his hands up and the men

at the bar had guns in their hands. I — I didn't even see those other men" — she gestured toward Hammond and Dentz — "until after I heard the shots. It all happened very fast."

Hammond stared down at the floor, his face grave. "I'm sorry as hell, Captain. This isn't our precinct and we don't know any of the detectives over here. There wasn't anything else we could do. They had their guns on this guy in the booth, and then they put them on us. It was either let them get away with it, or draw and pray and shoot for keeps."

The captain watched while the internes took Detective Stenner out of the room on a stretcher. "These things happen," he said quietly. "God knows why they have to, but they do. The man in the booth must have been crazy. A hophead, maybe. Showalter and Stenner would never have tried to heist anybody. What probably happened was that they recognized the guy for a suspect in something, tried to make a pinch, and the crazy bastard flipped."

"I'm sorry as hell," Hammond said again.

The captain looked down at the dead man on the floor and said nothing at all.

The hospital room was small and square and filled with the smell of medications.

"All right, Stenner," the Police Commissioner said. "Sorry to bother you." He started to rise from his chair beside Stenner's bed. "I just thought there might be a chance you had something to add to the picture."

Detective Val Stenner's back-rest was propped at a high angle. Bandages and tape covered the top of his head like a large white bowl, but his voice was full, almost hearty, and very firm.

"It was just one of those things," Stenner said.

The Commissioner picked up his hat. For a moment he looked at the detective, his face reticent, but showing traces of disbelief mixed with sympathy. His tone, though, seemed accusing.

"All the same, Val," he said, "that stuff doesn't do us any good. There was another one of those things, as you call it, about three months ago." He took a step toward the door. "Anyway, Hammond and Dentz are under suspension, pending a departmental hearing. So that's that, for now. Get well, Val. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The question was purely one of routine courtesy, and the commissioner was surprised when he got a thoughtful reply.

"Yes, there is one thing," Stenner said. "A couple of weeks ago I put in for retirement. My length of service, and my —"

"We know about that," the commissioner said. "It's going through. Too bad this had to happen last —"

"Well, what I had in mind to request — I'd like to withdraw that original request."

"Withdraw it?" All the commissioner's earlier suspicions seemed to return. "You mean, now you don't want to retire?"

"Not for a few years yet," Stenner said with a lop-sided smile. "Lying in bed here like this, I've been thinking it over. I realize, at my age, I need a few more years of active duty. I'd go crazy, being on the shelf."

"I see," the commissioner said, and stared hard, trying to do just that. "All right. Put it in writing. I guess we can tear up that previous request, if that's what you really want."

The commissioner went away, taking with him a set smile that challenged anyone, ever, to deceive him. For a long time after he left, Val Stenner lay quite motionless on his bed, eyes narrowed in thought. He was a small man, but extremely muscular, and he seemed to have no neck at all. Only the sheet above his huge chest moved with his breathing.

Barney Frolich came in. Barney was the detective who would be Stenner's new partner when Stenner was on his feet again. He had a red face and prematurely white hair. They had known one another most of their lives, for years before either had joined the force.

Frolich sat down on the chair beside Stenner's bed and grinned at him. "You look like hell," he said. "Even worse than usual."

Stenner smiled. "Has the precinct got a line on that guy who got away? The victim of the stick-up, I mean."

"You kidding?" Frolich said. "You'd know that, if anybody would. Who was he?"

"I only saw him for a second or two," Stenner said. "But I did think I recognized the guy. I think it was a loft worker. Furs and silks. Three or four falls, but not for a long time. Harley Madsen, or Harley Maddigan, or sometimes Harley Moran. Anyway, Harley something."

"We'll pick him up, sooner or later," Frolich said. "What about Hammond and Dentz, Val?"

"That's why I sent word for you to come over here," Stenner said. "Hammond and Dentz didn't make any mistake, Barney. They knew who Showalter and I were. They made a mistake, all right, but it wasn't in thinking Showalter and I were trying a stick-up. Their mistake was in not pumping a few more slugs my way."

Frolich shook a cigarette from his pack, placed it between his lips and lighted it, all without looking away from Stenner's face. "Spell it out for me, Val," he said.

"Mainly, they wanted to get Showalter," Stenner said. "He was the guy they really meant. I was just a dividend." He paused. But I couldn't tell that to the commissioner, Barney. In the first place, I couldn't prove it on them. They had it set up pretty good. Of course, their timing was a little off. They

stood there at the door so long I was going to invite them for a drink. I got a fast look at them in the bar mirror just before Harley started yelling for Showalter and me not to shoot him. But that's neither here nor there. It's nothing I could tell the commissioner, you can see that. This commissioner's only been around three months, and besides, there's going to be another commissioner next month. That'll mean another shake-up. And who knows, after that maybe another one. So if I said anything, what would it amount to except another black eye for the department? With nothing accomplished. But those slugs were meant for me and Showalter. Showalter especially."

"But why?" Frolich asked.

"All I can do is guess, Barney. But sometimes I guess pretty good. I've got a hunch Showalter had a line on that mink coat job in our precinct. I think he was ready to make a pinch, and I think Harley was the guy. I think Showalter put it up to Harley, and he laid it on the line he knew where the goods went, he could prove it, and he wanted a cut of the take. But Harley already had an agreement with Hammond and Dentz, for that job and a lot of others. See how it went? I think Showalter let Hammond and Dentz know he was doing all the business in our precinct — otherwise Harley was going to take a fall, and then nobody was going to be in business. So Hammond and Dentz explained to Harley what he had to do, and he did it. They made him stand up in that booth and holler stick-up, at the right time."

Barney Frolich took a deep drag on his cigarette and hunched his chair a little closer to Stenner's bed. "Go on," he said.

"I traced that load of mink coats," Stenner said. "The retail value was around a hundred thousand. And that's as far as we got. Showalter must have tagged this Harley somehow, and kept it to himself. But Hammond and Dentz didn't know that, of course. They just knew what Harley told them — that Showalter demanded a cut. Maybe they figured I was in on it with him."

"I'll be damned," Frolich said.

"Yeah. Well, it's not just a question of some cops on the take. Hell, everybody has to make a fix, sooner or later, even if it's only squaring a pinch for the wife's third cousin's nephew. But this is something else again. Hammond and Dentz aren't working for anybody but themselves. You know that massacre the commissioner mentioned the other day? That was no accident, either. That was another setup. Do you know about that one?"

Frolich shook his head. "I knew it stank, that's all."

"Stank is right," Stenner said. "It was about that big diamond recovery. Scheverell and Sons. It was worth about eighty-five thousand bucks. Hammond and Dentz knew where the stuff was, through one of

their stools, but the precinct detectives had the heister booked under a different charge. Hammond and Dentz couldn't pry the guy away from the precinct men. If they couldn't get the guy, they couldn't make a deal for a cut, so they did the next best thing. They taught the force a lesson. One night the two precinct men were at a public dance hall. About eleven o'clock Hammond and Dentz turned up — just accidentally, of course. Somehow or other a fight got started —"

"Just accidentally, of course," Barney Frolich said.

"Yeah. Just accidentally. And then, accidentally, the two precinct detectives got hit for keeps."

"Uh-huh," Frolich said. "And naturally Hammond and Dentz had to make the recovery then, or it would have stunk too much even for them."

"That's right. But you see what it means. Hammond and Dentz were giving warning. If anybody gets in their way, like Al Showalter did, or me, he gets the full treatment. And they want the whole department to know it."

Frolich leaned forward to rub out his cigarette in the tray on Stenner's bed table, and then sat silent for almost a full minute. "All right," he said finally. "They're killers. But what can anybody do about it? There's no evidence — there never can be any evidence — and if any of this stuff ever gets to the public, the whole force might as well quit."

"There's just one thing that can be done about it," Stenner said softly. "If some cop should happen to kill a cop-killing cop, then there wouldn't be any more of it. It's just another job that has to be done. For the department. And there's no other way to do it."

Frolich studied him, his face almost expressionless. "And just who is going to elect himself to that job?"

"Maybe someone already has," Stenner said.

"Well, he'd need help," Frolich said. "He'd need somebody who felt the same way he did." He leaned back in his chair, shook another cigarette from his pack, and took his time lighting it. "You'd better hurry and get well, Val. I'm kind of anxious to get started."

Night covered the city like a grimy ceiling that had been there forever, sagging over tall buildings checkered with lighted windows that had seen everything, and not once or twice, but many times over.

Archer Hammond came out of the corner cigar store and slid neatly into place behind the wheel of the unmarked sedan, reached to close the door, then sat relaxed against the back of the seat. In the dim light of the dashboard he saw and felt the mute query of his companion, and presently responded to it.

"Everything's all right, George," he said. "I was talking to the skipper. There hasn't been a whisper since

the hearing and the reinstatement two weeks ago. The skipper may be thicker than hell, but he's got ears. If there'd been any smell, he couldn't have hid it from me. He thinks just like everybody else — just the way we want them to think. It's the guys on the take we got to think about, George, not dumb brass like the skipper."

"Who was worrying?" George Dentz demanded hoarsely.

"Nobody," Hammond said. "Forget it. . . . The skipper said he'd just been talking to a detective from the Old Armory precinct. A guy named Barney Frolich. You ever hear of him?"

"No," Dentz said. "Why?"

"Well, this Frolich is working on a heist. Some jewelry salesman called him and reported he'd been boosted out of a briefcase full of stones. About a hundred and fifty thousand bucks worth. But all Frolich's got is the salesman's name and the license number of the getaway car, which the salesman caught." Hammond absently repeated the license number and described the car. "A gray '53 Cadillac coupe. The job was pulled by two men, both middle-aged, one of them short and heavily built. The other guy was a little taller, with white hair. But so far, Frolich hasn't been able to locate the salesman. There was some mixup about his address, or something."

Hammond slid his hands over the wheel and started the motor. "I wish it had been us that caught that squeal. We might've worked it into something. A hundred and fifty grand . . . Jesus." He pulled away from the curb, cruising slowly. From the speaker on the roof of the car came the faint, clear drone of orders, addresses, and code numbers. Hammond reached for his notebook and flipped it open. "We ought to talk to a few stools tonight. Maybe we might get a rumble on that guy who boosted the briefcase full of —" He broke off, aware that Dentz had leaned forward tensely, not hearing him. "What's the matter?"

Dentz' breath was ragged with excitement. "What the hell's wrong with that guy?" His eyes were on a car that passed them, traveling fast, then swerved dangerously close, momentarily slowed down ahead of them, and again picked up speed. Mechanically, Dentz added, "A gray Caddy coupe. What was the license number in that jewelry job?"

It was an empty question. Both men recognized the combination of figures and letters on the plate of the car now swiftly receding before them. Wordlessly, Hammond accelerated the sedan, until the two cars were maintaining an even distance. After six or seven blocks, the lead car sharply swerved down a one-way street, and Hammond spun the wheel in pursuit.

"There's only one man in the coupe," Hammond said. "We can take him right now, but if we tail him to where he's going, this might be a jackpot."

Then he braked sharply as the coupe slowed, veered toward a stretch of the curb already filled with parked cars, came to a halt in the center of the street. Hammond let the police car roll slowly forward, approaching the scene.

A middle-aged man with white hair got out of the coupe and hurried toward the canopied entrance of a corner apartment building. There was a briefcase in his hand, and for a moment, in the lighted entrance, he glanced hastily up the street, then darted inside. The whole action was a pantomime of guilt and fright.

Hammond and Dentz looked at each other.

"It can't be," Hammond said. "It's too good to be true. But maybe it is. Maybe we've got it made."

"Even the briefcase," Dentz said, and he said it like a prayer.

Hammond cut the sedan a little in front of the coupe, and both men jumped out, leaving the motor idling, not even shutting the doors as they sprinted for the apartment entrance. They ran through the empty lobby to the elevator shaft. The moving floor-indicators placed both cages as somewhere above.

Hammond and Dentz were standing in taut absorption when three faint but distinct sounds reached them, echoing in the lobby over and above the subdued murmur of the city. The door of an automobile being slammed shut, then another door, and the sound of a motor whining, racing, not yet in gear.

Without a word the two detectives wheeled and ran back the length of the lobby. On the sidewalk, they were just in time to see the receding rear of their own car, the unmarked department sedan. At the next intersection a red brake-light winked briefly before the car turned the corner.

Hammond's eyes turned to the empty Cadillac coupe, and he jumped for it, Dentz following. Hammond tore open the door, looked once at the dashboard where a chain of keys dangled from the ignition lock, and scrambled behind the wheel.

"That guy must be nuts," he snarled. "Come on, George. This fixes him, but good."

The surge of the car brought the door shut with a bang, and slammed Dentz back in the seat. At the next intersection Hammond waited for nothing, taking the turn with screaming tires. Only one pair of lights showed, two blocks away. Hammond moved up on these, horn blasting, as though the lead car had, momentarily, been double-parked.

The two detectives recognized it as their own, and then Dentz had just enough time to say, "Arch, it's our guy! It's the heister! Hell, he never went up in that elevator. He must have ducked out the side entrance of the lobby just as we were coming in the front."

And then the sedan again receded, dwindling away as its driver gave it a sudden burst of power. It made a

wide sweep around a corner and a moment later Hammond followed, swearing under his breath at finding they were now racing against traffic on a one way street.

"George," Hammond said tightly. "Blast him."

Dentz found the unfamiliar handle and rolled down the window. On his side, Hammond cautiously did the same.

Dentz poked out his head and one arm, gun in hand, and fired twice. But the car ahead was already turning again, and now it raced away down a wide traffic artery, a two-way avenue with four lanes.

Traffic was light at this hour. Dentz fired again at the sedan, a block ahead of them, and Hammond, coldly vengeful, carefully spaced two left-handed shots.

"Arch!" George Dentz said. "God, man, we've got to get out of this Caddy."

Hammond's eyes jerked toward him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"This is a wanted car. The whole force knows the number and description. Arch, use your head. We'd better —"

"They're turning again," Hammond said, following the police car into a side street. "Hell, they're going to park!"

Ahead of them the police car drew to the curb, slammed against it hard, and jerked to a stop. Archer Hammond swung the Cadillac toward the curb behind it, clawing with one hand for the door handle.

Then Hammond screamed once as a bullet shattered the glass in the rear window and tore through the side of his neck. His scream broke off abruptly as a second bullet bored into his brain. Beside him, George Dentz jerked once, and then again, the top of his head torn almost completely away. The Cadillac plunged over the curb and crashed into a brick retaining wall.

The unmarked police car, which had fallen in behind the Cadillac half a block back, stopped in the middle of the street. Detective Val Stenner dropped his still hot gun into his lap, put the brake on, got out, gun in hand again, and cautiously approached the Cadillac. His partner, Barney Frolich, was already there, peering into the Cadillac from the other side. When the two detectives had satisfied themselves that Hammond and Dentz were dead, they looked at each other for a long moment, and then Val Stenner said softly, "It looks like we elected the right men for the job, doesn't it?"

Frolich stared again at the slumped figures of Hammond and Dentz, and nodded. "You did some beautiful shooting, Val. I never saw anything like it."

"The only thing I don't like about this," Stenner said, "is that we had to steal this Caddy. The owner'll get the damage out of the insurance company, of course, but he'll still be pretty sore."

"He did the city a hell of a favor without knowing it," Frolich said. "Hammond and Dentz gave me a real chase in it, before I let them catch up with me." He took off the gloves he had been wearing and tucked them into his pocket. "No prints on the other police car, Val. I was careful."

"You had me a little worried," Stenner said. "I was beginning to think you'd never get here."

"Don't complain," Frolich said, grinning. "All you had to do was sit here in a nice, safe police car with a gun in your hand, waiting to get in a little target practice." He glanced both ways along the street. "Well, here comes the crowd to see what all the shooting was about."

"I guess we'd better call in," Stenner said.

"You've got the story all straight, I hope," Frolich said.

"Sure," Stenner said. "We were cruising in our regular precinct car. We saw this department car go past like a bat out of hell, with the Caddy just behind it. We recognized the Caddy's description and license number just about the same time the guys in the Caddy started shooting at the department car. We overtook the Caddy and fired a couple of warning shots. When they didn't stop, we gave it to them where it hurt — thinking they were the jewel heisters. Just as the Caddy headed for the brick wall, we saw the department car stop and a couple of guys jump out of it. But we didn't pay them any attention because we figured they were cops and were coming back to help us. By the time we saw who was in the Caddy, it was too late. The other guys were gone."

"The brass is going to do a lot of wondering about what Hammond and Dentz were doing in the Caddy, chasing their own department car," Frolich said.

"Let them," Stenner said. "We'll help them wonder, Barney. Everybody knows Hammond and Dentz were crooked cops. They'll figure they were in on a deal with the jewel heisters, and everybody got to double-crossing everybody else. There'll probably be a hundred different theories — but none of them will be right. As I say, let 'em wonder. We'll help them all we can." He paused. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you a little more with the action tonight, though, Barney. If you'd been a better shot, I'd have traded places with you."

"You wouldn't have been up to it," Frolich said. "Hell, you've only been out of the hospital two days, boy."

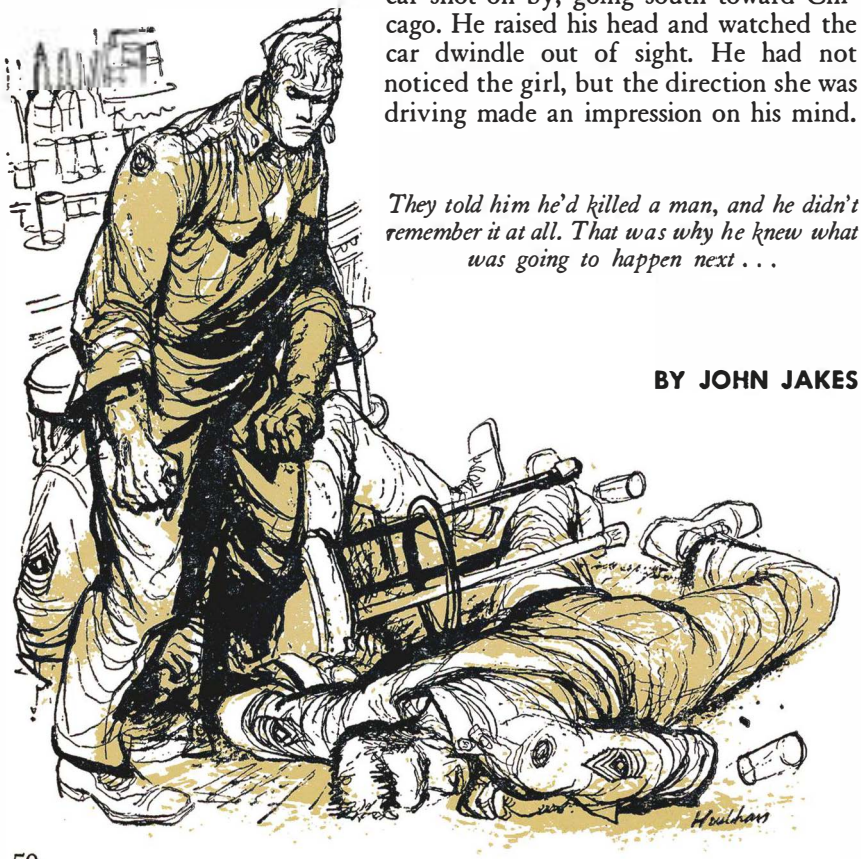
"Maybe so," Val Stenner said as he turned toward his police car, "but I never felt better in my life."

Tex

HE WALKED out through the gates of Fort Sheridan with his dishonorable discharge in his pocket. Once free, he stopped along the edge of the highway, set down the plaid cardboard suitcase which contained some khaki underwear and a Gillette razor, and lit a cigarette. A fin-tailed powder blue El Dorado came roaring down the highway, and slowed a little, as a blonde girl with sunglasses and a silk scarf, tied around her flying hair, gave him an appraising glance. The car shot on by, going south toward Chicago. He raised his head and watched the car dwindle out of sight. He had not noticed the girl, but the direction she was driving made an impression on his mind.

They told him he'd killed a man, and he didn't remember it at all. That was why he knew what was going to happen next . . .

BY JOHN JAKES



He ought to go back. It was a long way, but he ought to go back.

Fixing this idea firmly in his mind and concentrating on it, he crossed the highway to the electric railway station. The hour was shortly past noon, of a gray, somewhat chilly day. Long gray clouds were blowing down from Wisconsin and Canada.

In ten minutes the train of two green cars came along, and he boarded it. He got off in the small suburban town of Lake Bluff, because he spotted a Chevrolet agency as the train came to a stop. He crossed the same highway which ran by the army post and went into the agency, a blond boy with huge shoulders, only twenty-one years old by the calendar. Forty minutes later he drove out of the agency in a new two door sedan, maroon in color. The automobile smelled fresh, of leather and metal. He headed west on Highway 176, humming a little tune. After several minutes he realized he could no longer avoid the thought that was badgering him. He had no reason to go south, all the long way back to Texas. No one was waiting for him there. Nothing was waiting for him. So when he came to the four-lane span of U. S. 41, the Skokie Highway, he turned north toward the Wisconsin line, admitting defeat. After a quarter of a mile he saw a car stalled by the side of the road, and as he slowed down, he saw the trouble, a flat left rear tire. A well-dressed woman was standing by the rear wheel, twisting a pair of white gloves in confusion. He pulled off onto the bumpy shoulder and climbed out.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Oh . . . if you would . . ." The woman seemed close to tears.

He studied the situation. The car had evidently swerved a bit when the flat tire forced it off the road, and the right rear wheel had dropped six inches over a ditch edge on the shoulder. He took off his coat, asked the woman to put the car in neutral when he gave the word, and stepped down into the foot-deep gully. He braced both hands on the bumper, called, "Put her in neutral," waited a moment and then heaved. A muscle vibrated in his temple. The car rocked backwards a fraction, he grunted softly and heaved, and it went up and over the lip with a tiny crash of pebbles. He clambered up again and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

He drew the ignition key and opened the trunk, saying, "You got a jack?"

The woman said she didn't know, although he had the trunk open and the woman was looking inside and the jack was in plain view. "Here we go," he said softly, and went to work. In ten minutes he had the spare on, and he handed the keys back to the woman, who still sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. She began to work at the clasp of her handbag.

"Please let me pay . . ."

"No, that's all right," he called,

already under the wheel of his own car. In the rear vision mirror he saw the woman drive onto the highway behind him. He lit another cigarette and began to hum again. After a while he managed to convince himself that the state of Wisconsin might be something pretty interesting to see.

At the end of three miles he felt thirsty. Nope, he said to himself. He drove past one roadhouse, and half a mile later, another. As soon as he started thinking about liquor, he began to notice the dismal gray clouds, and all of a sudden the discharge — which he had forgotten for a while — slipped into his mind again. His defenses crumbled. He saw gas pumps up ahead, and a sign which read, as he drew closer, *Billy's Cabins, Café, Dine and Dance*. He swung the wheel with a feeling of defeat and the tires crackled on gravel. He looked at his watch. Lord, it was already quarter to seven. No wonder it was so dark.

He went toward the café door. There were no other cars parked outside, and the dirty windows of the café were closed up with green blinds on which he could see the blisters of paint. He walked inside and blinked a moment, for the light was poor. The only illumination came from a large lamp sitting on the back bar. The place had a few tables of flimsy wood, with chairs upended on top, and a space for dancing and a pinball machine lit up with drawings of girls in bathing suits. It was called Yacht Club.

No one was at the bar. He pulled up onto a stool. He could feel it coming now. He had been nuts to think it could be any different. Why, he'd even expected Billy's to be a comfortable little spot. He didn't really have a concrete notion of what he had expected it to be, but he knew definitely what he hadn't wanted it to be, and this was it.

"Hey!" he called.

A door in one corner led into a small room which also had tables. Out of his line of vision a pair of feet scraped on the floor.

The bar was old-fashioned, with a large mirror. He stared at the rows of bottles with their silver pour spouts and looked away. The end portion of the back bar was a writhing confusion of plaster of Paris statuettes, no more than three alike: stallions, kewpies, coolies, blackamoors. There was also a wire rack of postcards featuring cartoons about vacations and outhouses. The lamp which threw the only light stood among the knicknacks. It was plaster of Paris too, larger than the others. It represented a Chinese girl, and the bulb came out of the top of her head. The light filtered through a bright red shade. The Chinese girl was dressed in a purple gown and held a gold mirror in front of her face. Her right leg was crossed over her left in a sort of figure 4, and in the triangle of the figure 4 somebody had stuck a card, now dirty and brown, marked $4.95. The bar

looked cheap and nightmarish. He wanted to get out, but then the proprietor came out of the other room and he felt embarrassed, so he stayed.

The proprietor was a woman, with a doughy face. She must have weighed three hundred pounds, and she wore a dirty pink dress. He could not tell if she was pregnant, or just fat. A large plaster which looked like a Dr. Scholl's was stuck on her gray-looking neck. The plaster matched the color of her dress. He felt revolted. He wanted to run away, but he was pretty certain now this was the kind of place he belonged in. The woman came to a stop under a sign which hung on the top of the bar, and read *Kwitcherbelliakin.*

Still, he wasn't completely sure.

"Yessir," said the woman.

What would it be? Only one, he said to himself.

"Bottle of Schlitz."

She opened a silvered cooler, uncapped the brown bottle, and set it on the bar. She also set out a tumbler and a black plastic ashtray, and he bought a nickel bag of Chesty potato chips. He opened the bag but did not touch the beer. He ate a chip and stared at the brown and gold Schlitz label. The woman went to the other end of the bar, sat down on a stool and began to read a comic book.

Reluctantly he filled the tumbler with beer, watched the head rise, and drank part of it. He waited carefully to feel the effect. None. He swivelled his head and looked at the deserted room. The floor looked unwashed. From outside came the steady, certain hiss of tires, as the traffic roared north and south. He drank more beer, feeling now that he would probably have another after this one.

Things began to slip back into his memory, answering his own question to himself of how he had gotten here. He recalled the farm in Texas, and the taste of dust always in his mouth. He saw his father and his mother, dusty people, the man in overalls bleached nearly white, with the buttons no longer a shiny brass color, the woman in a dress that had once been a color but was now gray. They always read the Bible at night, and he remembered how his father had whipped him with a belt, using the buckle end, when he came home from town one night when he was about twelve, and said he wished he could taste whisky. He had meant no harm. He had been curious about the signs displayed in the windows of only certain places, and he had just wanted to taste it. But sitting in Billy's and staring at the way the lamplight threw shadows on the Chinese girl he could feel the tang of the buckle on his flesh.

One thing he had always had, strength. The huge shoulders. He never wanted to lick the other kids in grade school, but he could do it if it was necessary, as it sometimes was. Then high school, and though

he had a tough time with his subjects, he learned football. They couldn't stop him when he was on the line. He remembered how the man in the linen suit had driven out to the farm, his senior year, and pulled up in a late model Oldsmobile and talked his father into letting him accept a scholarship to the state university.

There he learned to drink for the first time, and heavily. And when he got drunk he wanted to fight. He failed three courses his first semester, and without letting his folks know, left school, and enlisted in the army, rootless. Once he had written home, but the letter had come back unanswered, so he wrote to a friend of the family who told him his mother and father had been killed in a highway accident while on the way to the state fair. In the army he played football, and they wanted him to box, but he wouldn't, because he had to be sober when he boxed, and then he didn't like to fight, or thought he didn't. He only fought when he got drunk.

The first bad time was in a bar in El Paso, and two other soldiers who had been in the place said he had walked up to three Air Corps lieutenants who were drinking martinis.

"You don't like me," the other soldiers said he said.

"Shove, dogface," they said one of the lieutenants said.

He remembered nothing. He never remembered, once he got heavily drunk. He had been drunk, they told him, and had broken the arm of one of the lieutenants before the MPs dragged him away. He got in bad trouble for that one, because one of the Air Corps lieutenants had a father who was a Brigadier General in Washington.

In between the big fights, there were all the small ones in bars and barracks when he took on just one man at a time. The second big fight was in a bar in Tiajuana, when a Mexican stumbled and spilled tequila on him. It was six Mexicans against him, and when he woke up in the base hospital, he had two knife wounds in his side, but his buddies laughingly (and truthfully) said he had damn near killed every Mexican in the place. He got sick when he heard this, because he thought he didn't really want to fight.

The third time, two months ago, he had been in a bar in Highwood, near Fort Sheridan, and three master sergeants had been making loud remarks about his outfit. He didn't remember that either, of course, but learned the story afterwards. One of the master sergeants died of a broken neck, and another, they said, would be crippled for life.

Sitting in Billy's, he remembered the whole road. Even the interview with the doctor who wasn't a regular doctor, Major Nevins. Even at this very moment he could not make sense out of the questions, though he remembered some of them:

"Did you ever feel you hated your parents, subconsciously, because of the way they restricted you?"

He said he didn't know what subconsciously meant.

Dr. Nevins, who had a mustache and talked like an Easterner, smiled patiently. "Well, did you ever think that about your parents and not want to admit it to yourself?"

"I guess so."

"Can't you remember?"

"Well, I guess I did think that. I always wished they wouldn't read the Bible so much."

And then about drinking:

"Why do you drink?"

"I like to."

"Why do you like to?"

"Well, I didn't like to at first, when I went to college, but after I got in trouble, fighting, I just couldn't stand to think about what I'd done, so I'd take a drink."

"You drink to keep from remembering what you did the last time you got drunk."

"I guess so."

"You're too strong, do you know that?"

"I guess I am strong, all right."

"If you were a weakling, it wouldn't make any difference. But you've got shoulders like a bull. You broke Master Sergeant Preebie's neck with one twist."

"I don't remember that."

Because he had gotten drunk and killed the master sergeant, but couldn't remember, they had to discharge him. Dr. Nevins wanted him to go to a hospital, but he didn't want to, and Nevins said he couldn't force it because on the surface it was just drunkenness causing the trouble, and the inquiry board called the killing accidental, even though they had to discharge him, of course, for it. Now, sitting in Billy's, with the traffic all heading someplace out on the highway, he wondered whether he should have gone to the hospital.

"Let me have another beer," he said.

The woman put down her comic book and got the beer. He felt a little lift now.

So that was where he had been. Now, where could he go?

Well, he knew, all right. He couldn't keep a job, not remembering he'd killed the sergeant, who was really a pretty good guy. He'd have to keep on drinking. He couldn't even be decent, or have a home. Maybe become a crook. Outside of the army they put you in prison for killing someone. All of a sudden, he knew that he would probably one day be executed for killing someone. It was only a question of time. That's all. Just a question of time.

Now that he had finally admitted it, finally told himself the truth, things seemed a little easier. At least he didn't have any wild ideas about pulling out. He just couldn't escape it. That was the way it was. He didn't feel like fighting any more. But it was a matter of time.

The door opened and a man came in. He was not over five feet three, and wore a yellow t-shirt and a greasy hat. He had a small, pointed face. The fat woman said, "Hello there, Mr. Tod. Haven't seen you for a week."

"I'm always around," said Mr. Tod. "Gimme a bottle of Miller's."

He drank again. He'd kill someone again, sure. It must be in the cards. He was never meant to do anything else, and though he didn't exactly understand why it had to work out so, he accepted it now. No use fighting it. No use prolonging it. It was just a matter of time.

He drank two more beers, and slowly felt the edge of reality going dull. His watch showed eight-thirty. The door opened and a girl came in. He stared at his glass, hearing her take a stool near him, and the fat woman said, "Hi, June."

"Hi," the girl said disgustedly. A car without a muffler gunned away, close outside. He turned his head slowly, curious, to look at the girl. She had brown hair, and was very thin. She was wearing blue jeans and a man's white shirt, open at the throat and with sleeves rolled up. She had a narrow face, and small breasts. She wasn't pretty at all. On the other side of her he could see Mr. Tod still sitting.

"Bourbon and water, will you?" June said to the fat woman.

"You sure got your dander up," said the fat woman. She poured the drink from one of the bottles.

"Oh, it's that Jim."

"Was that his car outside just now?"

"Yes."

The fat woman heaved a snort. "What did he do, throw you out?"

"No, sir! I *got* out. I'm through with him, he ain't worth my time. Stubborn. I wanted to go to the Drive-In, but no," she mimicked acidly, "he wanted to go to his old stock car races. I got fed up. I told him to let me off."

"He always was stubborn," the fat woman agreed. June took a sip of her drink, shuddered, and glanced sidewise toward him.

"Oh, there's plenty more."

He licked his lips. Well, why not?

He waited until the fat woman went into the next room on an errand. Mr. Tod walked over and began to play the pinball machine. The lights flickered across the ceiling, buzzers stuttered like machine guns, and bells pinged. He picked up his beer glass and walked toward the girl. He sat down next to her.

"Kin I buy you one?"

"When I finish this one." She smiled. Her lipstick was a crooked, thin red line. Up close he could see she had hardly any lips at all, and had painted the lipstick up over flat skin.

"You from Sheridan?" the girl asked.

He nodded. "I got discharged today."

"Oh, you did! Where you from? Down South?"

"Texas."

"I'll bet they call you Tex."

"Yes, they do."

"Well, my name's June." She smiled again, making no pretenses.

After a moment he said, "Like to go for a ride? My car's outside."

"That maroon Chevvy? That new one?"

"Bought it this afternoon."

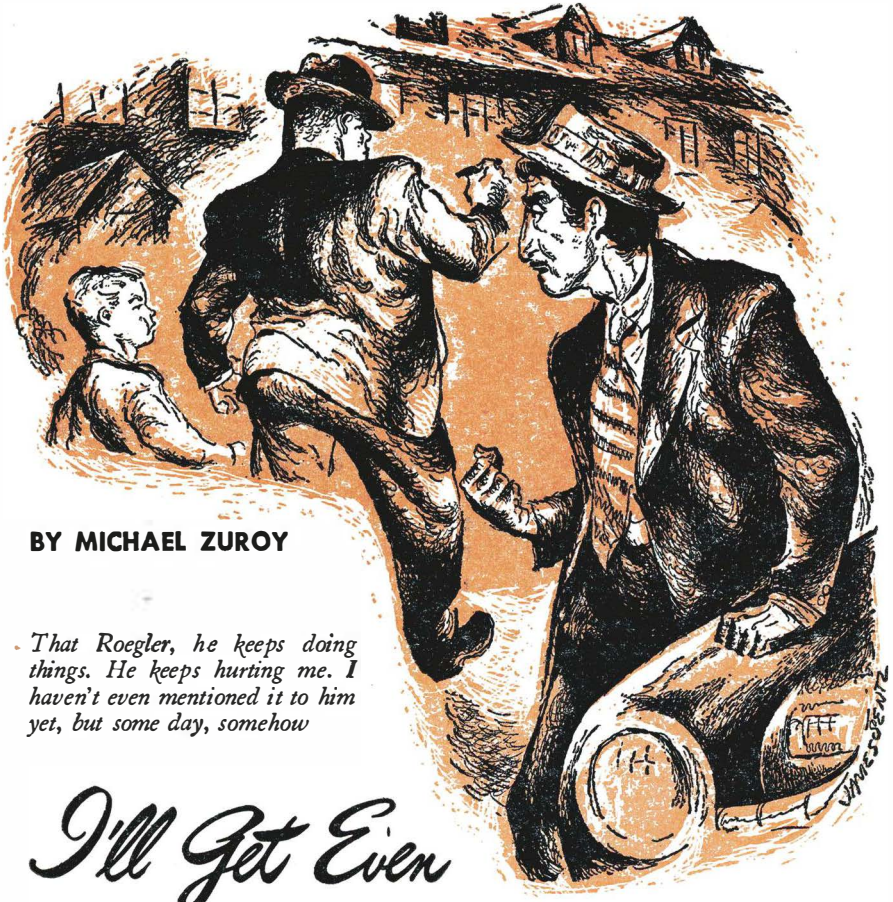
"Oo!" She clapped her hands, then seized his arm. Her hand felt hot. "Listen, honey. Let me go to the little girl's room and fix my face and I'll meet you in the car. How about it?"

"Fine," he said, not meaning it.

He watched her vanish out a side door, and noticed how thin her rump was beneath the jeans. Then he remembered what he'd been thinking about when she walked in. Couldn't forget it for long. He looked around. Mr. Tod still worked the pinball machine. Outside the traffic roared, all going someplace. He shook his head. No go. In a year, or maybe ten, or maybe twenty, he'd kill somebody good and that would be all. It was just a matter of time. He felt like he wanted to lie down and have a nice long sleep, where he could forget it all. He didn't want to live all those years out.

The fat woman with the plaster on her neck came back. He started for the door, thinking of the girl. They could go for a ride. She ought to know some dark side road. It was just a matter of time anyway, now or ten years from now, what difference did it make, except that he was tired and knew the score.

He walked back to the bar, his mind made up, past Mr. Tod. He brushed Mr. Tod's shoulder but the man did not look around. He put his hands on the bar, feeling the wood, feeling worse and yet better. The woman had started to read another comic book, and she looked up. He said to her, "I want to buy a fifth of whisky."



BY MICHAEL ZUROY

That Roegler, he keeps doing things. He keeps hurting me. I haven't even mentioned it to him yet, but some day, somehow

I'll Get Even

PARKING, Roegler's big Olds backed into Sam's car hard. Pain and apprehension curdled in Sam. That knock might have damaged his car. The bumper might have been loosened or the front end sprung out of alignment or the steering gear cracked. Taking a curve at fifty someday with Doll and the kids in the car the steering might go.

Because of that slob, Roegler.

How could you keep a car in top condition the way he tried to do, Sam thought, with people like Roegler around?

Charley Roegler and his twelve-year-old son came out of the Olds,

Roegler stepping around to inspect his bumper. Satisfied, he walked away, not looking at Sam's car. He was a big man with fair hair and an open shallow face, not yet fat, but with the flesh beginning to settle on his cheeks and under his chin.

Vague impulses were eddying within Sam, impelling his thin cheeks to quiver a little and his thin brown mustache to twitch. He ought to tell Roegler a few things; he ought to tell him off good; he searched for words as the burly father and son approached. What he would really like to do, Sam thought furiously, was to plant one right in the middle of that fat mouth. Roegler was husky all right, but a fast punch to the face followed by a couple in the belly ought to cut him down some. Watching Roegler walk towards him, Sam pictured it. Fast. He'd be too fast for Roegler, backing him up the block until he went down bloody-faced.

"No more, no more," Roegler'd be begging. "Gonna leave my car alone?" Sam would spit, pulling Roegler to his feet by the slack of his jacket, clipping him again short and sharp. The neighbors would be watching, awed, scared. "Tough boy, that Sam Arkalian," they'd be telling one another. "Better not tangle with him."

"What's the good word, Sammy?" greeted Roegler heartily.

"Hello," said Sam.

He watched the Roeglers, huge man and small boy, swagger down the street of red false-brick faced three story houses until they turned in at their door. Why in hell, thought Sam, hadn't he told Roegler off? Was he afraid of the slob? No, Sam plowed the idea under, it just wasn't worth it. Cars got bumped in parking every day. He'd look foolish starting an argument over a parking bump, Sam told himself.

Still, Roegler could have been more careful. Maybe he should have said something, in a joking way, something like: "Hey, Charlie, take it easy next time when you land that boat of yours, will you?"

Sam walked over to his car, enjoying the trim lines, appreciative of the polished maroon finish. He leaned on the bumper and seemed to feel a new looseness. There was a minute scratch on the chrome that he hadn't noticed before. Roegler must have done that. Sam's eyes bulged a little, his cheeks quivering again. I'll get even, he thought, staring at Roegler's new car. A few slashes with a knife ought to fix one of those nice new tires.

Sam pondered this idea and dismissed it. Too many eyes around here, looking out of windows that seemed blank.

Forget it, he told himself, trying. Sunday afternoon and time on his hands. He'd polish up the car again, give it an extra special finish that would turn heads and make new car owners envy him.

He got out the new liquid polish

he'd bought yesterday, set the can on the sidewalk and went to work. Spread some on, let it dry a couple of minutes, then polish, carefully, lightly, using just enough pressure to produce a luster, but not enough to wear the paint.

A heavy hand dropped on his shoulder and he twitched his head and looked into Roegler's fleshy face, set in good-natured heartiness. "That's no way, Sammy," Roegler bellowed. "Use more polish and more elbow grease. Here, let me show you." He thrust Sam aside, poured a pool of polish over the hood, rapped the can down on the fender, pulled the rag from Sam's resisting hand and set to scrubbing.

Sam stared at the can sitting on his fender, still hearing the clunk it had made; there must be a scratch under it now, sure. He looked at Roegler rubbing his finish away; he had to stop him right now; stop him dead; make him stay away from that car.

"Hey, Charlie." The words wouldn't come. His voice went weak. "Hey, Charlie. I don't usually like to rub that hard."

"That's the trouble with you, fella," bellowed Roegler, not stopping. "Gotta wake up, fella. Put some heart into a job." Stupefied, Sam watched the back of the swaying thick neck.

At last, Roegler straightened and grinned. "Well, I ain't gonna do all your work for you."

"Sure," said Sam, staring at the foggy, discolored patch that Roegler had bull-dozed on the smoothly glowing hood. His eyes dropped before Roegler's, dropped to Roegler's neck and fastened on the bump that pushed through the heavy flesh. He'd heard that a hard blow to the Adam's apple could kill a man. He wouldn't want to actually kill Roegler of course, but if he hit him right — now — he ought to hurt him pretty bad. Ought to knock him out anyway; maybe injure him permanently. One hard fast punch. Sam tightened, almost, almost feeling the impulse unspring his knotted fist. He wasn't afraid of Roegler.

"Sure," said Sam. His mustache quivered; his mild, tenor voice went higher than usual. "Well, thanks, Charlie."

"It's all right," boomed Roegler graciously.

A window opened and Sam's wife called, "Sammy! Get some bread. Rye and some rolls."

Sammy waved a hand to show that he had heard. He removed the can from the fender, disclosing a faint ragged scratch. He got into the car. The bakery was only a few blocks away, but he felt that he needed to drive.

"Hey, Sam," said Roegler, "pick up some bread for us too, will you?"

"All right. What kind?"

"What kind?" Roegler had a way of roaring your words back at you as though you had said something stupid. "I better check with the

wife. Let it go, Sam; I'll send my boy later."

Sam nodded, started the motor and tried to edge the car out. It was difficult; Roegler's car was parked too close. He began to tire as he wound the wheel and shifted. As he struggled, he was aware of the amused eyes of Roegler and some of the neighbors.

"Charlie," he called. "How about moving your car down a little?"

Roegler gave a shout of laughter. "My car's all right. You better learn to drive, fella." Loudly, Roegler began directing Sam, as if Sam hadn't been doing the right thing. The neighbors watched with amusement. Several passers-by stopped.

All the way to the bakery and back, Sam considered Roegler. The slob could have easily moved his Olds down a little. No reason to have made him work so hard, straining the steering gear against dead weight, rubbing out the tires under two tons of motionless pressure. No reason for people to laugh at him when he was doing the right thing.

A man like Roegler, thought Sam, should not be alive.

Some one ought to kill the slob.

In fact, thought Sam, he wouldn't mind doing it himself.

Sam waited for a moral reaction, but none came. He felt pleasure and satisfaction at the thought, that was all. If he could get away with it, Sam admitted to himself, he would do it.

Hold on! Sam warned himself. You don't think about killing a guy for little things like Roegler had done. You tell him off. Maybe you give him a going over. But that's all.

Smash him up a little. Hell, he wasn't afraid of Roegler. He could put him on the sidewalk, maybe kick him in the stomach and the head a few times. With satisfaction, Sam envisioned the point of his shoe crushing Roegler's nose against his face.

The parking spot was still open when Sam got back. Have to figure just right to back into it, Sam thought. Roegler and the other men were watching; he didn't want to mess it up in front of them. Sam slid his car alongside the Olds, came back slowly, softly, wheeling in at precisely the right angle, straightening at the right time. Perfect, thought Sam. Just slick.

The end of Sam's bumper tipped the rear bumper of the Olds and he was in. "Chrissake, Sam!" roared Charlie Roegler. "when will you learn to drive! Don't go banging into my new car with your heap! I take pride in my car, boy. Watch it next time."

Carrying the white bag of bread, Sam stepped out, closed the door and started slowly towards Roegler. This was it. He couldn't let Roegler get away with another thing. This was the showdown. First he'd tell Roegler off and then work him over.

"Just be careful around my car," said Roegler.

Close to the man, Sam strove to

hold on to his intention. Something was thumping fast at the base of his throat, and he had become overwhelmingly aware of the power in the man's voice and the strength in his frame. He wasn't afraid of the slob, of course, but maybe he'd better take it slow at first, work up to it. "I'm sorry about that, Charlie . . ." he began.

"Just be careful," said Roegler.

Sam swallowed. "I wanted to talk to you about this kind of thing anyway, Charlie," he said. "Like before, when you were parking you bumped my car pretty hard, and . . ."

"I what!" bellowed Roegler.

"You bumped my car, and . . ."

"You're dreaming, man. Maybe I just touched your heap, but I didn't go smashing into it like you just did to mine. Just be careful, fella, and we'll say no more about it." Roegler's heavy face relaxed and turned jovial. He clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Run along with your bread, Sammy."

Sam turned and walked to his door. He heard Roegler's voice and a snicker from the other men. He was aware that the afternoon was waning and twilight spreading. On the hall stairway the fresh smell of the bread rose to his nostrils, and he accepted it with a detached appreciation. He walked into his apartment, greeted his wife, put the bread on the kitchen table and went to the front room to sit in the twilight.

The filthy, no-good tub of stinking lard, Sam thought. An hysterical something was running around inside him, and he tried to calm it. The filthy, rotten, no-good, fat-faced slob. He'd like to kill him. Why had he backed down, Sam asked himself contemptuously? What was the matter with him? Was he actually afraid of Charlie Roegler?

All right, maybe he was. The guy was big. So he was big, Sam told himself. What about a gun or a knife then?

Sam pictured it: Roegler trembling before the steady held gun; the night dark, moonless. "Please, Sam, please don't do it. Don't kill me, Sam, I'm begging you." The evenly spaced shots slugging into Roegler's belly, smashing his insides apart, sending him to the ground choking with pain and fear and blood.

Night had come and Sam sat in the dark room fascinated by the beauty of the picture. After a while, he frowned. It was beautiful but it wasn't perfect. Something wrong. The gun. Too cold. You could kill a guy with a gun and still be afraid.

That thick neck wouldn't stop a knife. Roegler's eyes would bulge in surprise when the blade sliced in, Sam dreamed. He wouldn't be able to talk, but the bulging, horror-stricken eyes would record their last sight of Sammy twisting the knife and grinning in triumph. Sam considered this situation, tasting it delicately. The frown returned. Not

just right, Sam decided. Not just right.

Sam's wife came into the room, switching on the lights. "Sleeping, hon?" she asked. "You get such a silly look on your face sometimes. Sam, I hate to bother you again, but there's no milk in the house for the kids. Could you run over to the bakery once more?"

"Sure, Doll," said Sam mildly.

He put on his jacket and started downstairs, feeling the visions fade. Oh hell, he thought, he wasn't actually going to kill anybody. A man didn't get away with it that easily.

What's the matter, Sammy, a small, clear thought said. Afraid again?

No, he told himself. Not afraid. A man just didn't do these things.

Outside, on the stoop, he stopped. A group of men were at the curb, shooting the breeze, sitting and leaning all over his car.

Roegler was sitting full weight on the fender. Fender's liable to collapse under that fat load, Sam thought wildly. Why didn't he sit on his own car? The other men were just following his lead. Oh, he was going to tell him now, Sam promised himself. He was sure going to tell him, going to tell him plenty.

The men were looking at him Had to say something, he thought wildly. What? What had he wanted to say? He clutched at another thought. After all, he didn't want them to think that he was a fusspot. "Charlie," he said. "I'm going to the bakery again. Want me to get you that bread?"

"Thanks, fella," said Roegler, "but I sent my boy for it just before."

"Right." Sam turned and walked away. He wasn't going to struggle with the car again. He would walk to the bakery. He felt that he wanted to walk.

What he would like, he decided, was to be strong, stronger than Roegler, a giant in comparison with Roegler, as Roegler was a giant to himself. It would be simple. He would step close to Roegler, brushing away his feeble hands, put his fingers on Roegler's throat and slowly throttle him. He would keep the pressure steel tight, inexorable, and look deep into Roegler's eyes and feel the last struggles of Roegler's body. He wanted to watch the life go out within Roegler, aware that it was Sam Arkalian who was doing this, Sam Arkalian who was strong.

After buying two cartons of milk at the bakery, Sam started back, taking the short cut across the empty lot. The night was dark; he did not at first recognize the small figure crossing the lot ahead of him. As he drew nearer he saw that it was Charley Roegler, Junior. "Hello there, Mr. Arkalian," said the boy.

"Why hello, Charles," said Sam mildly. "Wait a minute, will you?"

He set his bag carefully on the ground, stepped up to Charley Roegler and wound his fingers around the boy's throat.

Illustration by Ray Houlihan

We Are All Dead

The robbery went off almost without a hitch. Of course, Wally Garden got killed, but nobody cared about that . . .

A Novel

BY BRUNO FISCHER

THE caper went off without a hitch except that Wally Garden got plugged.

There were five of us. My idea had been that three would be enough, figuring the less there were the bigger the cut for each. But Oscar Trotter made the decisions.

Looking at Oscar, you might take him for a college professor — one of those lean, rangy characters with amused, intelligent eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. He sounded like one, too, when he didn't feel like sounding like somebody else. Maybe he'd been one once, among all the other things he'd ever been.

But there was no question of what he was now. He could give the toughest hood the jitters by smiling at him a certain way, and he could organize and carry out a caper better than any man I knew.

He spent a couple of weeks casing this job and then said five men would be needed, no more and no less. So there were four of us going in soon after the payroll arrived on a Friday afternoon. The fifth, Wally Garden, was cruising outside in a stolen heap.

Wally was far and away the youngest of us, around twenty-three, and he wasn't a regular. I didn't know where Oscar had picked him up; somebody had recommended him, he'd said. It must have been somebody Oscar had a lot of confidence in because Oscar was a mighty careful guy. Wally was supposed to be very good with a car, but I think what made Oscar pick him was that he was moon-faced and clear-eyed and looked like he was always helping old ladies across streets.

Protective coloration, Oscar called it. Have one appearance during the job and another while making the getaway.

So there was the kid, and Oscar Trotter who could pass for a professor, and Georgie Ross who had a wife and two children and made like a respectable citizen except for a few days a year, and Tiny who was an old-time Chicago gorilla but could have been your kindly gray-haired Uncle Tim.

As for me, I'd been around a long, long time in thirty-four years of living. I'd almost been a lawyer, once. I'd almost married a decent woman, once. I'd almost . . .

Never mind. I was thirty-four years old and had all my features in the right places, and whenever Os-

car Trotter had a job I was there at his side.

Wally Garden's part was to swipe a car early in the afternoon and pick us up on a country road and drop us off at the factory and drive slowly for five hundred feet and make a U-turn and drive slowly back. He picked out a nice car — a shiny big Buick.

The factory manufactured plastic pipe. It was in New Jersey, on the outskirts of Coast City where real estate was cheap. The office of the large, low, sprawling plant was in a wing off by itself. From that wing a side door opened directly out to a two-lane blacktop road that had little traffic. There was an armed guard who arrived with the payroll and stayed until it was distributed, but he was an old man who was given that job because he couldn't work at anything else.

Oscar decided it would be a cinch. And it was.

We were in and out in seventy seconds — five seconds under the schedule Oscar had worked out. We barged in wearing caps and T-shirts and denim work pants, and we had Halloween masks on our faces and guns in our hands. Tiny had the guard's gun before the sluggish old man knew what was up. Seven or eight others were in the office, men and women, but they were too scared to cause trouble. Which was just as well. We weren't after hurting anybody if we could help it. We were after dough, and there it was on a long table in an adjoining room, in several hundred little yellow envelopes.

Seventy seconds — and we were coming out through the side door with two satchels holding the payroll, pulling off our masks and sticking away our guns before we stepped into the open air, then striding to the Buick Wally Garden was rolling over to us.

Some hero in the office got hold of a gun and started to fire it.

The newspapers next day said it was a bookkeeper who had it in his desk. One thing was sure — he didn't know a lot about how to use it. He stood at a window and let fly wildly.

None of the slugs came near us. Anyway, not at the four of us out in the open he was firing at. But he got Wally who was still a good twenty feet away. Got him through the car window as if he'd been an innocent bystander.

The car jerked as his foot slipped off the throttle and it stalled and stopped after rolling a few more feet. Through the windshield we saw Wally slump over the wheel.

Oscar yelled something to me, but I knew what to do. Sometimes I could think for myself. I ran around to the left front door.

The shooting had stopped. No more bullets, I supposed.

Wally turned a pale, agonized face to me as I yanked open the car door. "I'm hit," he moaned.

"Shove over," I said.

He remained bowed over the wheel. I pushed him. Oscar got into the car through the opposite door and pulled him. Groaning, Wally slid along the seat. Georgie and Tiny were piling into the back seat with the satchels. There was plenty of screaming now in the office, but nobody was coming out, not even the hero. I took Wally's place and got the stalled engine started and away we went.

Sagging between Oscar and me on the front seat, Wally started to cough, shaking all over.

"Where's it hurt, son?" Oscar asked gently.

Wally pushed his face against Oscar's shoulder, the way a frightened child would against his mother's bosom.

He gasped, "I feel . . . it stabs . . . my insides . . . bleeding."

He was the only one of us wearing a jacket. Oscar unbuttoned it and pulled it back. I glanced sideways and saw blood soaking a jagged splotch on the right side of his shirt. It looked bad.

Nobody said anything.

2.

Tiny sat twisted around on the back seat watching through the rear window. It wasn't what was behind us we had to worry about as much as what was ahead. Pretty soon there would be roadblocks.

We traveled three and two-tenths miles on that road, according to plan. Then I swung the Buick left, off blacktop and onto an oiled country road running through fields and woods.

It was a bright spring afternoon, the kind of day on which you took deep breaths and felt it was good to be alive. Beside me Wally Garden started to claw at his right side. Oscar had to hold his hand to keep him from making the wound worse than it was.

Again I made a left turn. This time there was no road to turn onto but only an open field. Wally screamed between clenched teeth as the rough ground jounced the car.

Beyond the field were woods — big stuff, mostly, oaks and maples, with a fringe of high shrubs. Two cars, a Ford and a Nash, were where we'd left them this morning behind the shrubs. I rolled the hot car, the Buick, quite a way in among the trees.

It was dim in there, and cool and quiet. Wally's eyes were closed; he'd stopped squirming in agony. He would have toppled over if Oscar hadn't been holding him.

"Passed out?" I asked.

"Uh-huh," Oscar said.

Getting out of the car, he eased Wally's head and shoulder down on the seat. Wally lay on his side twitching and moaning and unconscious.

The Buick was going to be left right here — after, of course, we'd wiped off all our prints. The way we planned it, we'd hang around for two-three hours before starting

back to New York in the two other cars. Until then we had plenty of time on our hands. We used some of it to make a quick count of the loot in the two satchels.

When Oscar Trotter had cased the job, he'd estimated that the take would be between forty and fifty grand. Actually it was around twenty-two grand.

What the hell! After a while you get to be part realist and part cynic, if the two aren't the same thing in this rotten racket. Nothing is ever as good as you plan or hope or dream. You're doing all right if you get fifty percent, and don't lose your life or freedom while doing it.

Every now and then I'd leave the others to go over for a look at Wally. The third time I did his eyes were open.

"How d'you feel, kid?"

He had trouble speaking. He managed to let me know he was thirsty.

There wasn't any water, but Georgie had a pint of rye. Wally, lying cramped on that car seat, gulped and coughed and gulped and pushed the bottle away. I thought it probably did him more harm than good.

"I'm burning up," he moaned.

I felt his brow. He sure was.

I went over to where Oscar and Georgie and Tiny were changing their clothes beside the Nash. This would be an important part of our protective coloration — completely different and respectable clothes.

The alarm was out for five men in a Buick, at least four of whom had been seen wearing caps and T-shirts and denim pants. I felt kind of sorry for anybody within a hundred miles who would be in T-shirts and denim pants. But we wouldn't be. We'd be wearing conservative business suits and shirts and neckties, and we'd be driving two in a Ford Georgie owned legally and three in a Nash Oscar owned legally, and why would any cop at a roadblock or toll gate waste time on such honest-looking citizens?

Except that in one of the cars there would be a wounded man. This was one contingency Oscar hadn't foreseen.

I said to Tiny who was standing in his underwear, "Give me a hand with the kid. He'll be more comfortable on the ground."

Oscar stopped buttoning a freshly laundered white shirt. "Leave him where he is."

"For how long?" I said.

There was a silence. I'd put our plight into words. This was as good a time as any to face it.

Oscar tossed me a smile. About the worst thing he did was smile. It was twisted and almost never mirthful.

"Until," he said, "somebody blunders into these woods and finds him." He tucked his shirt-tail into his pants and added hopefully, "It might take days."

Wally was nobody to me. But I said, "We can't do that."

"Have you a better idea, Johnny?" Oscar said.

"You're the big brain," I said.

"Very well then." Oscar, standing among us tall and slightly stooped, took off his horn-rimmed glasses. "Gentlemen, let us consider the situation."

This was his professorial manner. He could put it on like a coat, and when he did you knew he was either going to show how bright he was or pull something dirty.

"The odds are highly favorable," he drawled, "that before midnight we four will be out of New Jersey and in New York and each safe and snug at home. But not if we're burdened by a wounded and probably dying man. We'll never make it. If by chance we do make it, what do we do with him? At the least he needs a doctor. A doctor finds the bullet wound and calls in the police. Perhaps Wally wouldn't talk. Perhaps he will. He may be delirious and not know he's talking." Oscar's smile broadened. "There'd no question, gentlemen, that we'd deserve to have our heads chopped off if we stuck our necks out so far."

Tiny said uneasily, "Yeah, but we can't just leave him here to die."

"Certainly not." Oscar's eyeglasses swung gently from his fingers. "He might die too slowly or scream and attract a passing car. There is, I'm afraid, only one alternative."

All right, but why did he have to say it in that mocking, lecturing manner, and why did he have to keep smiling all the time?

Georgie was down on one knee lacing his shoes so he wouldn't have to look at anybody. Tiny was scratching his hairy chest unhappily. I was a little sick to my stomach. And Oscar Trotter smiled.

"Tiny, your knife, please," Oscar drawled. "A gun would be too noisy."

Tiny dug his switchblade knife out of a pair of pants draped over the hood of the Nash. Oscar took it from him and moved to the Buick as if taking a stroll through the woods.

I turned away. I couldn't stop him, and if I could I wouldn't have. I'd seen that kid only twice in my life before today, the first time less than a week ago. I didn't know a thing about him except his name. He was nobody at all to me. But I turned away and my hands shook as I set fire to a cigarette.

Then Oscar was coming back.

"Well, Johnny," he taunted me, "from the first you wanted less men to cut in on the loot, didn't you?"

I had an impulse to take a swing at him. But of course I didn't.

3.

Much of the next three days I watched Stella jiggle about Oscar's apartment. She was a bit on the buxom side, but in a cozy-looking, cuddly-looking way. She went in for sheer, tight sweaters and little else, and she had what to jiggle with. She belonged to Oscar.

I didn't know what the dames saw in him. He was no longer young and

you couldn't call him handsome by a long shot, but he always had a woman around who had both youth and looks. Like Stella, who was merely the current one. She was also a fine cook.

I was staying with them in Oscar's two-bedroom apartment on Riverside Drive. I'd come down from Boston for that New Jersey caper, and afterward there was nothing to take me back to Boston. Oscar was letting me use the spare room while I was making up my mind whether to stay in New York or push on to wherever the spirit moved me.

On that third day Oscar and I went up to the Polo Grounds to take in a ball game. When Stella heard us at the door, she came out to meet us in the foyer.

"There's a friend of yours in the living room," she told Oscar. "A Mr. Brant. He's been waiting over an hour."

I stepped to the end of the foyer and looked into the living room. The meaty man sitting on the sofa and sucking a pipe was definitely no friend of Oscar's. Or of mine. He was Bill Brant, a city detective attached to the D.A.'s office, which meant he was a kind of free-wheeling copper.

Oscar touched my arm. "I expected this. Merely the M.O. I'll do the talking." He turned to Stella. "Go do your work in the kitchen."

"I haven't any. Dinner's cooking."

"Go find something to do in the kitchen," he snapped.

She flounced away, wiggling almost as much as she jiggled. But the thing is that she obeyed.

Oscar trained his women right. She was used to being sent out of the room or sometimes clear out of the apartment when business was being discussed. She was no innocent, of course, but in his book the less any woman knew the better. It might be all right to trust Stella today, but who knew what the situation would be tomorrow? So she went into the kitchen and we went into the living room.

"Well, what d'you know!" Bill Brant beamed at me. "Johnny Worth too! Another piece fits into the picture. I guess you came to town for the Jersey stickup."

"I did?" I said and went over to the portable bar for a drink. I didn't offer the cop any.

"What's this about New Jersey?" Oscar was asking.

"We're cooperating with the police over there. You're a local resident. So was Wallace Garden who was found dead in the Buick."

"You misunderstood my question." Oscar was using his mocking drawl. "I'm not interested in the jurisdictional problems of the police. I'm simply curious as to the reason for your visit."

"Come off it," Brant said. "That payroll stickup has all your earmarks."

I helped myself to another drink.

I hadn't been very much worried, but now I felt better. That, as Oscar had guessed, was all they seemed to have — the M.O., the modus operandi, the well-planned, perfectly timed and executed armed robbery that cops identified with Oscar.

"Earmarks!" Oscar snorted. "Do they arrest citizens for that these days?"

"No, but it helps us look in the right direction." Brant sucked on his pipe. "That killing too. It's like you not to leave loose ends, even if it means sticking a knife into one of your own boys." He twisted his head around to me. "Or did he have you do the dirty work, Johnny?"

That was one thing about Oscar, I thought — he did his own dirty work. Maybe because he enjoyed it.

Aloud I said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Brant sighed. What had he expected, that we'd up and confess all as soon as he told us he had a suspicion? We knew as well as he did that he didn't even have enough to take us to headquarters and sweat us, and likely never would have. But he was paid to try, and he hung around another ten minutes, trying. That got him nothing, not even a drink.

After he was gone, Stella came in from the kitchen and said dinner would be ready soon.

4.

Another day passed and another. I was on edge, restless. I took walks along the Drive, I dropped in on friends, I went to the movies. Then I'd come back to Oscar's apartment and there would be Stella jiggling.

Understand me. I didn't particularly hanker for her — certainly not enough to risk fooling around with anything of Oscar Trotter's. Besides, I doubted that she would play. She seemed to like me, but strictly as her husband's friend. She was completely devoted to him.

No, it was just that any juicy dame within constant eyesight made my restlessness so much harder to take.

We were playing Scrabble on the cardtable, Oscar and Stella and I, when the doorbell rang.

It was evening, around eight-thirty. Oscar, of course, was way ahead; he was unbeatable at any game that required brains. Stella was way behind. I was in the middle, where I usually found myself in everything. As it was Stella's turn to play, I went to answer the doorbell.

A girl stood in the hall — a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl in a simple gray dress and a crazy little gray hat.

"Mr. Trotter?" she said.

"You're right, I'm not," I said. "He's inside."

Without being invited in, she stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind her. "Please tell him Mrs. Garden would like to see him."

"Sure." I started to turn and stopped. "Garden?" I said. "Any relative of—"

I caught myself. In my racket you became cautious about naming certain names under certain circumstances, especially when you weren't supposed to know them. There were all kinds of traps.

Gravely she said, "I was Wally's wife." She put her head back. "You must be Johnny. Wally told me about you."

I gawked at her. Standing primly and trimly in the foyer, she made me think of golden fields and cool streams and the dreams of youth.

I said, "Wait here," and went into the living room. Stella was scowling at the Scrabble board and Oscar was telling her irritably to do something or pass. I beckoned to him. He rose from the cardtable and came over to me.

"Wally's wife is in the foyer," I said.

Oscar took off his eyeglasses, a sign that he was disturbed. "He never mentioned a wife to me."

"To me either. He wasn't much of a talker."

"What does she want?"

"Seems to me," I said, "our worry is what does she know. If Wally —"

And then she was in the living room. Having waited maybe thirty seconds in the foyer, she wasn't waiting any longer. She headed straight for Oscar.

"You must be Mr. Trotter," she said. "I'm Abby Garden."

Abby, I thought — exactly the name for a lovely girl of twenty, if she was that old.

Oscar put his glasses back on to stare at her. He seemed as startled as I'd been that such a dish could have been the moon-faced kid's wife. But he didn't say anything to her. In fact, his nod was rather curt. Then he looked across the room at Stella.

Stella was twisted around on her chair, giving Abby Garden that feminine once-over which in a moment took in age, weight, figure, clothes, make-up. Stella didn't look enthusiastic. Which was natural enough, considering that whatever she had the other girl had better.

"Baby," Oscar said to Stella, "take a walk to Broadway and buy a pack of cigarettes."

There were cigarettes all over the apartment. At another time he might have given her the order in one word, "Blow!" but this evening he was being polite about it in front of a guest. It amounted to the same thing. Stella undulated up the length of the room, and on the way her eyes never left the girl. No doubt she didn't care for being chased out for her. But she left, all right.

Me, whenever I told a dame to do anything, she either kicked up a fuss or ignored me. What did Oscar have?

I fixed drinks for the three of us. Abby wanted a rye highball without too much gingerale. Her hand brushed mine as she took the glass from me. That was sheer accident, but all the same my fingers tingled.

"Now then, Mrs. Garden," Os-

car said. His long legs stretched from the armchair in which he lounged. "What's your businees with me?"

She rolled her glass between her palms. "Wally told me his share would come to thousands of dollars."

"And who," he said, "might Wally be?"

"Please, Mr. Trotter." Abby leaned forward. "We can be open and aboveboard. Wally had no secrets from me. I didn't like it when he told me he was going in on that — that robbery. He'd already done one stretch. Six months for stealing cars. Before I met him." She bit her lower lip. "I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me."

Oscar looked utterly disgusted. He had no use for a man who blabbered to anybody, including his wife. Wally may very well have endangered us all.

"So?" Oscar said.

"Oh, you needn't worry I told the police. They asked me, of course. They questioned me for hours after they found poor Wally. But I told them I knew nothing about any holdup or who was in it." She gave him a piece of a small smile. "You see, I didn't want to get into trouble. After all, if I'd known beforehand, I was a kind of accessory, wasn't I?"

"So?" Oscar said again.

"There was one detective especially — a fat man named Brant. He kept asking me if I knew you." She looked Oscar straight in the eye. "He said you killed Wally."

"Now why would I do any such thing?"

"Brant said Wally was wounded during the getaway and then you or one of the others killed him with a knife to get him out of the way."

"My dear," Oscar said, more in sorrow than in anger, "can it be possible you fell for that line?"

"Is it a line? That's what I want to know."

Oscar sighed. "I see you're not familiar with police tricks. This is a particularly shabby one. Don't you see they made up this story to induce you to talk?"

"Then he wasn't killed with a knife?"

"No, my dear. The bullet killed him. He died in my arms. Wasn't that so, Johnny?"

"Yes," I said.

5.

That word was my first contribution to the conversation, and my last for another while. Nursing a Scotch-on-the-rocks, I sat on the hassock near Abby's legs. They were beautifully turned legs. I looked up at her face. She was drinking her highball, and over the rim of the glass her wide blue eyes were fixed with rapt attention on Oscar, who was, now, being a salesman.

He was as good at that as at anything else. His honeyed voice was hypnotic, telling her how he'd loved

Wally like a son, how he would have given his right arm to have saved him after that dastardly bookkeeper had plugged him, how the conniving, heartless coppers were out to make her hate him and thus betray him with that fantastic yarn that he, Oscar Trotter, would either have harmed or permitted anybody else to have harmed a hair of one of his own men.

He was good, and on top of that she apparently wasn't too bright. He sold her and she bought.

"Wally always warned me not to trust a cop." She split a very warm smile between both of us. "You look like such nice men. So much nicer than that fat detective."

Oscar purred, "Then I take it we're friends, Abby?"

"Oh, yes." She put her highball glass down on the coffee table. "And in a way we're partners, aren't we? When will I get my share?"

Suddenly there was frost in the room. The cheekbones ridged Oscar's lean face.

"What share?" he said softly.

"Why, Wally's share. He earned it, didn't he?" She was completely relaxed; she was free and easy and charming. "I read in the papers that there were twenty-two thousand dollars. One-fifth of that —"

"Young lady," Oscar cut in, "are you trying to blackmail me?"

"Not at all. I simply ask for what I'm entitled to. If money is owed to a man who dies, it goes to his wife."

She said that wide-eyed and innocent-faced, her earnest manner holding no hint of threat — merely a young and probably destitute widow to clean up financial matters after her husband's untimely demise.

Huh! A few minutes ago I'd thought she wasn't so bright. Now I changed my mind.

I spoke up. "She's got something there, Oscar."

"You keep out of this."

"Not this time," I said. "I suggest we each give her five hundred bucks."

Oscar pushed his fingers under his glasses to rub his eyes. Then he nodded. He had no choice. We'd be in a bad way if she were to chirp to the cops.

"How much will that come to?" Abby asked me.

"Two grand. Wally wouldn't have gotten a fifth anyway. He was only the driver. Believe me, we're being more than fair."

"I'm sure you are," she said, and gave me a smile.

This was why I'd jumped in to negotiate — to get some such smile out of her, a smile of sheer joyous gratitude. A man has already gone quite a distance with a dame who thinks she's beholden to him for money. And with this one I was after going on and on and maybe never stopping.

"Just a minute," Oscar said.

Abby and I shifted our attention from each other to him.

"Prove you're Wally's wife," he said.

"But I am."

Oscar looked stern. "I know every switch on every con game. We don't even know Wally had a wife. If he did, we don't know you were the one. Prove it."

"Why, of course," she said. "I have my marriage license and other things at home. If you want me to bring —"

"I've a better idea," I said. I wasn't one to pass up any chance when I was on the make. I got off the hassock so quickly I almost spilled what was left in my glass. "I'll go with you right now and look over whatever you have."

"That's so good of you," she said so sweetly that my heart did a complete flip.

Oscar nodded and closed his eyes. When we left, he appeared to have fallen asleep in the armchair.

6.

According to the marriage license, they'd been married seven months ago by the county clerk here in New York.

I sat in the only decent chair in the place. Nearby a train rumbled on the Third Avenue El. She didn't quite live in a slum, but the difference wasn't great. There wasn't much to this room, and there was less to the bedroom and kitchen and bathroom. They were all undersized and falling apart.

Wally's cut of the loot would have meant a lot to him and her, if he'd lived through it.

I handed the marriage license back to Abby. She fed me other stuff out of the shoebox on her lap — snapshots of her and Wally, his discharge papers from the army, the deposit book of a joint savings account containing less than fifty dollars, a letter from her mother from somewhere in Iowa complaining because she'd gone and married a man named Wallace Garden whom none of the family had met.

"Good enough," I said.

"How soon will I get the money?"

"Soon as I collect it from the others. Maybe tomorrow."

"Two thousand dollars," she reminded me.

"That's right," I said.

Abby put the lid on the shoebox and carried it into the bedroom. She didn't jiggle and wiggle like Stella. Her tight, slender figure in that trim gray dress seemed to flow when in motion.

I wanted her as I hadn't wanted anybody or anything in a very long time.

Take it easy, I warned myself while waiting for her to return. I could mark myself lousy in her book by rushing. All right, she'd been married to that round-faced kid, who'd been what he'd been, meaning no better than I, and she hadn't acted particularly upset over his death. But I didn't yet know what made her tick. I only knew that

she looked like moonlight and roses and that it would be wise to handle her accordingly. She was already grateful to me. She'd be a lot more grateful when I brought her the two grand. Then would be time enough to take the next step — a big step or small step, depending on how she responded.

So I was a perfect little gentleman that evening. She put up a pot of coffee and we sat opposite each other at the table and she was as pleasant to talk to as to look at. She spoke of her folks' farm in Iowa and I spoke of my folks' farm in Indiana.

When I was leaving, she went to the door with me and put her hand in mine. And she said, "I'll see you soon, Johnny."

"Do you want to see me or the money?"

"Both," she said and squeezed my hand holding hers.

I walked on a cloud clear across town and then a couple of miles uptown to Oscar's apartment. I hadn't as much as kissed her goodnight, or tried to, but what of that? My hand still tingled from the feel of hers.

I laughed at myself. Johnny Worth, the cynical hard guy, acting like a love-sick schoolboy! But I laughed at myself happily.

Oscar and Stella were in bed when I let myself in. Oscar heard me and came out of his bedroom in a bathrobe.

"She was Wally's wife all right," I told him. "Tomorrow I'll go collect the dough from Georgie and Tiny."

"You seem anxious," he said with an amused twist to his mouth.

I shrugged. "We promised her."

"I can read you like a book, Johnny." He nudged my ribs with his elbow. "Make much headway with her?"

I shrugged again.

"I guess not if you're back so early," Oscar said, leering amiably. "I can't imagine what she saw in that punk Wally. She has class. Well, good hunting."

"Good-night," I said and went into my room.

7.

Next afternoon I set forth to make the collection for Abby. Oscar had given me his five hundred in the morning, and of course I had my own, so that left Georgie and Tiny to go.

Georgie Ross lived out in Queens, in a neat frame house with a patch of lawn in front. His wife and two teen-aged daughters hadn't any notion of how he picked up extra money to support them. His regular job, as a traveling salesman in housewares, didn't keep him very busy or bring in much income. He had time on a weekday afternoon to be mowing his lawn.

He stopped mowing when he saw me come up the street. He stood middle-aged and pot-bellied.

"For God's sake," he complained when I reached him, "you know better than to come here."

"Relax. You can say I'm a bill collector."

"Just don't come around, that's all I ask. What d'you want?"

"To collect a bill. Five C's for Wally Garden's widow."

His eyes bugged out. "You're kidding," he said. Meaning, if I knew him, not about the widow but about the money.

I told him I wasn't kidding and I told him about Abby's visit last evening.

"Listen," Georgie said, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his suddenly sweaty face, "I'm not shelling out that kind of dough for anybody's wife. I have my own family to think of. My God, do you know what my two girls cost me? Just their clothes! And my oldest, Dinah, is starting college next year. Is that expensive! I got to hang onto every penny."

"Some of those pennies were supposed to have gone to Wally."

"It's his tough luck he wasn't around to collect." He leaned against the handle of the mower. "I tell you this: we give her two grand now, she thinks she has us over a barrel and keeps coming back for more. Oscar ought to handle her different."

"How?"

"Well, he handled her husband," Georgie said.

That was a quiet, genteel street, and he fitted into it, by looking at him, the way anybody else in sight did. He resumed mowing his lawn.

I tagged after him. "Use your head, Georgie."

"You don't get one damn penny out of me."

I knew I was licked. I'd ask Oscar to try. He could persuade him if anybody could. I left Georgie plodding stolidly behind the mower.

Tiny was harder to find. He was like me, without anywhere to stay put. He was paying rent on a mangy room he'd sublet downtown, but he only slept in it. I made the rounds of the neighboring ginmills. What with lingering in this place and that and shooting the breeze with guys I knew, I didn't come across Tiny until after nine o'clock.

He was sitting wide-shouldered and gray-haired at the bar, drinking beer. He was always drinking beer.

He said, "Gee, am I glad to see you." Picking up his glass, he slid off the stool and we went to an isolated table. "I've been trying to get Oscar on the phone," he said, "but he ain't in. Stella says she don't know where he went." He glanced around. "Johnny, there's been a city dick asking me questions this afternoon. A fat guy."

"Brant?"

"Yeah, that's the name. He's got it, Johnny. He knows who was in on it and what happened to Wally and all."

I thought of Abby.

"Go on," I said.

"Remember last Wednesday when the five of us went over the route in Oscar's car? It was hot and when we came back through the Holland Tunnel from Jersey we stopped for beer on Tenth Avenue. Remember?"

"I remember."

"Somebody that knew us saw the five of us sitting in that booth together."

I let out my breath. Not Abby.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Search me. This Brant, he wasn't telling. Some goddamn stoolie. He knew four of us — me and you Oscar and Georgie. The one break is he hadn't never seen Wally before. Brant is one cagy cookie, but I wasn't born yesterday. I figure they showed the stoolie Wally's picture, but he wasn't sure. If he'd been sure, they'd be piling on us."

"That's right," I said. "The cops can't make any move officially unless they can link us to Wally. I saw Georgie this afternoon and he didn't mention being questioned."

"He's been by now, I guess. The way I figure, this stoolie didn't spill till today." Tiny took a slug of beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "But I don't get it, Johnny. A stoolie sees four of us and a strange guy in a beer joint. What makes this Brant so all-fired smart he can tell from that Wally was the strange guy and we was the ones did the job way over in Jersey a couple days later?"

"Because Oscar is too good."

"Come again?"

"The caper bore the marks of genius," I said, "and Oscar is a genius. Then Brant drops into Oscar's apartment a few days ago and finds me staying there, so he's got two of us tagged. Then he learns we two plus you and Georgie were drinking beer with a fifth guy who could've been Wally Garden, and he's got us all."

"The hell he has! All he's got is thoughts running in his head. He needs evidence. How'll he get it if we sit tight?"

"He won't," I said.

This was a good time to tell him about Abby. I told him.

When I finished, Tiny complained, "What's the matter with Oscar these days? First he lets us all be seen together in a beer joint —"

"I don't remember any of us objected. In fact, I remember it was your idea we stop off."

"Sure, but Oscar should know better. He's supposed to have the brains. Then he don't know the kid had a wife and would blab every damn thing to her. Where'd he pick up Wally, anyway?"

"He never told me," I said. "But there's the widow and we promised her two grand. I want five C's from you."

Tiny thought about it, and he came up with what, I had to concede, was a good question. "You said you saw Georgie this afternoon. Did he shell out?"

"Not yet."

"Expect him to?"

"Sure."

"Bet he don't?"

"Look, Oscar will get it out of him. I'm asking you."

Tiny said cheerfully, "Tell you what I'll do, Johnny. When Georgie shells out, I'll shell out."

And he looked mighty pleased with himself. He had confidence in Georgie's passion for hanging onto a buck.

8.

So after chasing around for hours I had only the thousand I'd started out with. Well, that wasn't hay and the evening was young. I could bring the thousand to Abby and tell her it was part payment. She would be grateful. She would thank me. One thing could lead to another — and perhaps tonight would be the night, the beginning.

I took a hack to her place.

Through her door I heard music going full blast. I knocked. No answer, which wasn't surprising considering all the record a hot dance band was making. I knocked louder. Same result. I turned the knob and found the door unlocked.

Abby wasn't in the living room. The bedroom and the bathroom doors were both closed. The band music, coming from a tiny table radio, stopped and a disc jockey's voice drooled. In the comparative quiet I heard a shower running in the bathroom. I sat down to wait for her to come out.

The music started up again. It was too raucous; my mood was for sweet stuff. I reached over the table to turn off the radio, and my hand brushed a pair of horn-rimmed eyeglasses. She hadn't worn them when I'd seen her, but women were vain about such things. Probably only reading glasses.

She'd stopped showering. Now with the radio off, there was no sound in the apartment. Suddenly it occurred to me that I ought to let her know she had a visitor. Thinking she was alone, she might come trotting out without anything on. I wouldn't mind, but she might, and I was still on the perfect little gentleman technique.

I went to the bathroom door and said, "Abby."

"I'll be right out."

I hadn't time to wonder why she hadn't sounded surprised to hear a man in her apartment and why at the least she hadn't asked who I was. The explanation came almost at once — from the bedroom.

"What did you say, baby?" a man called.

"I'll be right out," she repeated.

Then it was quiet again except for the thumping of my heart.

I knew that man's voice. If there was any doubt about it, there were those eyeglasses on the table. A minute ago I'd given them hardly a glance because I hadn't any reason then to take a good look to see if

they were a woman's style and size. They seemed massive now, with a thick, dark frame.

The bathroom doorknob was turning. I moved away from there until the table stopped me, and Abby came out. She was wearing a skimpy towel held around her middle and not another thing.

Her body was very beautiful. But it was a bitter thing for me to see now.

She took two or three steps into the room, flowing with that wonderful grace of hers, before she realized that the man standing by the table wasn't the one who had just spoken to her from the bedroom — wasn't the one for whom she didn't at all mind coming out like this. It was only I — I who had been dreaming dreams. Her free hand yanked up and across her breasts in that age-old gesture of women, and rage blazed in her blue eys.

"You have a nerve!" She said harshly.

Again he heard her in the bedroom and again he thought she was speaking to him. He called, "What?" and the bedroom door opened, and he said, "With this door closed I can't hear a —" and he saw me.

Oscar Trotter was without jacket and shirt, as well as without his glasses.

I had to say something. I muttered, "The radio was so loud you didn't hear me knock. I came in." I watched Abby sidling along the wall toward the bedroom, clinging to that towel and keeping her arm pressed in front of her, making a show of modesty before me, the intruder, the third man. "I didn't expect she was having this kind of company," I added.

He shrugged.

A door slammed viciously. She had ducked into the bedroom where her clothes would be. He picked up his glasses from the table and put them on.

There was nothing to keep me here. I started to leave.

"Just a minute, Johnny. I trust you're not sore."

I turned. "What do you expect me to be?"

"After all, you had no prior claim on her." Oscar smiled smugly. "We both saw her at the same time."

He stood lean and slightly stooped and considerably older than I, and dully I wondered why everything came so easily to him — even this.

"Next time," I said, "remember to lock the door."

"I didn't especially plan this. I asked her out to dinner. My intention was chiefly business. Chiefly, I say, for I must confess she had — ah — impressed me last night."

This was his high-hat manner, the great man talking down to a lesser being. Some day, I thought wearily, I'd beat him up and then he'd kill me, unless I killed him first.

"You understand," he was drawling, "that I was far from convinced

that our problem with her would be solved by giving her two thousand dollars. I had to learn more about her. After dinner we came up here for a drink." That smug smile again. "One thing led to another. You know how it is."

I knew how it was — how I'd hoped it would be with me. And I knew that he had never for one single moment made the mistake of acting the little gentleman with her.

I had forgotten about the money in my pocket. I took it out and dropped it on the table.

"Georgie and Tiny weren't keen about contributing," I told him. "There's just this thousand. You've earned the right to worry about the balance."

"I doubt that it will be necessary to give her anything now. You see, I'll be paying all her bills. She's moving in with me."

"How nice," I said between my teeth. "I'll be out of there as soon as I pack my bags."

His head was bent over the money. "Take your time," he said as he counted it into two piles. "I still have to tell Stella. Any time tomorrow will do." He pushed one pile across the table. "Here's yours."

So I had my five hundred bucks back, and that was all I had. Before I was quite out of the apartment, Oscar, in his eagerness, was already going into the bedroom where Abby was.

I went out quietly.

9.

That night I slept in a hotel. I stayed in bed most of the morning, smoking cigarettes and looking up at the ceiling. Then I shaved and dressed and had lunch and went to Oscar's apartment for my clothes.

I found Stella all packed and about to leave. She was alone in the apartment. I could guess where Oscar was.

"Hello, Johnny," she said. "I'm leaving for good."

She wasn't as upset as I'd expected. She was sitting in the living room with her legs crossed and taking a final drink of Oscar's liquor.

"I know," I said. "When's she moving in?"

"Tonight, I guess." She looked into her glass. "You know, the minute she walked into this room the other night I had a feeling. Something in the way Oscar looked at her."

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shrugged. "I'm not sure I am. He was too damn bossy."

I went into the guest bedroom and packed my two bags. When I came out, Stella was still there.

"Johnny," she said, "have you any plans?"

"No."

"I called up a woman I know. She owns a rooming house off Columbus Avenue. She says she has a nice furnished apartment to let on the second floor, with kitchenette and

bath. She says the room is large and airy and nicely furnished. A young married couple just moved out."

"Are you taking it?"

"I think I will." She uncrossed her knees and pulled her skirt over them. "Two people can be very comfortable in it."

I looked at her sitting there rather primly with eyes lowered — a placid, cozy, cuddly woman with a bosom made for a man to rest his weary head on. She wasn't Abby, but Abby was a ruined dream, and Stella was real.

"You and me?" I murmured.

"If you want to, Johnny."

I picked up my bags. "Well, why not?" I said.

10.

Stella was very nice. We weren't in love with each other, but we liked each other and got along, which was more than could be said of a lot of couples living together.

We weren't settled a week in the rooming house near Columbus Avenue when Oscar phoned. Stella answered and spoke to him. I dipped the newspaper I was reading and listened to her say we'd be glad to come over for a drink that evening.

I said, "Wait a minute."

She waved me silent and told Oscar we'd be there by nine. When she, hung up, she dropped on my lap, cuddling the way only she could.

"Honey, I want to go just to show I don't care for him any more and am not jealous of that Abby. You're sweeter than he ever was. Why shouldn't we all still be friends?"

"All right," I said.

Oscar answered the doorbell when we got there. Heartily he shook Stella's hand and then mine and said Abby was in the kitchen and would be out in a minute. Stella went into the kitchen to give Abby a hand and Oscar, with a hand on my shoulder, took me into the living room.

Georgie and Tiny were there. Georgie hadn't brought his wife, of course; he kept her strictly away from this kind of social circle. They were drinking cocktails, even Tiny who was mostly a beer man.

"Looks like a caper reunion," I commented dryly. "Except that there's one missing. Though I guess we could consider that his widow represents him."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then Oscar said pleasantly, "Here, sour-puss, maybe this will cheer you up," and thrust a cocktail at me.

I took it and sipped.

Then Abby came in, bearing a plate of chopped liver in one hand and a plate of crackers in the other. She had a warm smile for me — the impersonal greeting of a gracious hostess. Stella came behind her with potato chips and pretzels, and all of a sudden Stella's jiggling irritated me no end.

Abby hadn't changed. There was

no reason why I had expected she would. She still made me think of golden fields and cool streams, as she had the first time I'd laid eyes on her.

I refilled my glass from the cocktail shaker and walked to a window and looked out at the Hudson River sparkling under the sinking sun.

"Now that was the way to handle her," Georgie said. He had come up beside me; he was stuffing into his mouth a cracker smeared with liver. "Better than paying her off. Not only saves us dough. This way we're sure of her."

"That's not why he did it."

"Guess not. Who needs a reason to want a looker like that in his bed? But the result's the same. And you got yourself Stella, so everybody's happy."

Everybody was happy and everybody was gay and got gayer as the whiskey flowed. But I wasn't happy and the more I drank the less gay I acted. Long ago I'd learned that there was nowhere a man could be lonelier than at a party. I'd known it would be a mistake to come, and it was.

Suddenly Georgie's face turned green and he made a dash for the bathroom. Oscar sneered that he'd never been able to hold his liquor and Tiny grumbled that the only drink fit for humans was beer and I pulled Stella aside and told her I wanted to go home.

She was not only willing; she was anxious. "Fact is, I don't feel so good," she said. "I need air."

We said our good-byes except to Georgie whom we could hear having a bad time in the bathroom. An empty hack approached when we reached the sidewalk and I whistled. In the hack, she clung to me, shivering, and complained, "My throat's burning like I swallowed fire. My God, his whiskey wasn't that bad!"

"You must be coming down with a cold," I said.

She wobbled when we got out of the hack and she held her throat. I had to half-carry her up the steps of the brownstone house and into our room. As I turned from her to switch on the light, she moaned, "Johnny!" and she was doubled over, clutching at her stomach.

For the next hour I had my hands full with her. She seemed to be having quite an attack of indigestion. I undressed her and put her to bed and piled blankets on her because she couldn't stop shivering. I found baking soda in the kitchen and fed her a spoonful and made tea for her. The cramps tapered off and so did the burning in her throat.

"Something I ate," she said as she lay huddled under the blankets. "But what? We didn't have anything for dinner that could hurt us. How do you feel, honey?"

"Fine."

"I don't understand it. That Abby didn't serve anything to speak of. Nothing but some chopped liver and —" She paused. "Honey, did you have the liver?"

"No. I can't stand the stuff."

"Then it was the liver. Something wrong with it. Call up Oscar and see if the others are all right."

I dialed his number. Oscar answered after the bell had rung for some time. His voice sounded weak.

"How are you over there?" I asked.

"Terrible. All four of us sick as dogs. And you?"

"I'm all right, but Stella has indigestion. We figure it was the chopped liver because that was the one thing she ate that I didn't."

"Could be," Oscar said. "Georgie seems to be in the worst shape; he's sleeping it off in the spare room. Tiny left a short time ago. Abby's in bed, and that's where I'll be in another minute. What bothers me most is a burning in my throat."

"Stella complained of the same thing. First I ever heard of indigestion making your throat burn."

"All I know," Oscar said, "is that whatever it is I have plenty of company in my misery. Abby is calling me."

He hung up.

I told Stella what he'd said. "The liver," she murmured and turned on her side.

That was at around one o'clock. At three-thirty a bell jarred me awake. I slipped out of bed and staggered across the room to the phone.

"I need you at once," Oscar said over the wire.

"Do you feel worse?"

"About the same. But Georgie has become a problem."

"Is he that bad?"

"Uh-huh. He went and died on my hands. I need your help, Johnny."

II.

Georgie lay face-down on the bed in the guest room. He was fully dressed except for his shoes.

"Tiny took him in here before he left," Oscar told me. "After that I didn't hear a sound out of Georgie. I assumed he was asleep. Probably he went into a coma and slipped off without waking. When I touched him half an hour ago, he was already cold."

Oscar's face was the color of old putty. He could hardly stand without clinging to the dresser. Abby hadn't come out of the other bedroom.

I said, "Died of a bellyache? And so quickly?"

"I agree it must have been the chopped liver, which would make it ptomaine poisoning. But only Georgie ate enough of the liver to kill him. Abby says she remembers he gorged himself on it." Oscar held his head. "One thing's sure — he mustn't be found here. Brant is enough trouble already."

"This is plainly an accidental death."

"Even so, the police will use it as an excuse to get as tough as they like with us. We can't afford that, Johnny, so soon after the Coast City job. Best to get the body out."

I looked him over. He didn't seem in much better condition than the man on the bed.

"I can't do it alone," I said.

He dug his teeth into his lower lip and then fought to draw in his breath. "I'll help you."

But most of it had to fall on me. I fished car keys out of Georgie's pocket and went looking for his Ford. I found it a block and a half up Riverside Drive and drove it around to the service entrance of the apartment building. At that late hour it was possible to park near where you wanted to.

Oscar was waiting for me on the living room sofa. He roused himself and together we got that inanimate weight that had been pot-bellied Georgie Ross down the three flights of fire stairs and, like a couple of men supporting a drunk, walked it between us out of the building and across the terribly open stretch of sidewalk and shoved it into the Ford. For all we could tell, nobody was around to see us.

That was about as far as Oscar could make it. He was practically out on his feet. I told him to go back upstairs and I got behind the wheel and drove off with Georgie slumped beside me like a man asleep.

On a street of dark warehouses over on the east side, I pulled the car over to the curb and got out and walked away.

Stella was up when I let myself in. She asked me if I'd gone to Oscar's.

"I was worried about them," I told her. "Tiny and Georgie left. Oscar and Abby are about in your shape. How're you?"

"Better, though my stomach is very queazy."

I lay in bed wondering what the odds were on chopped liver becoming contaminated and if a burning throat could possibly be a symptom of ptomaine poisoning. I watched daylight trickle into the room and I listened to the sounds of traffic building up in the street, and I was scared the way one is in a nightmare, without quite knowing of what.

Eventually I slept. It was past noon when I woke and Stella was bustling about in the kitchen. She was pretty much recovered.

Toward evening I went out for a newspaper. When I returned, Brant was coming down the stoop. Being a cop, he wouldn't have had trouble finding out where I'd moved too.

"Nice arrangement," he commented. "You shack up with Oscar's woman and Oscar with Wally Garden's widow. This way nobody gets left out in the cold."

"You running a gossip column now?" I growled.

"If I were, I'd print an item like this: How come Johnny Worth's pals are getting themselves murdered one by one?"

I held onto myself. All I did was raise an eyebrow. "I don't get it."

"Haven't you heard? George Ross was found dead this morning in his car parked near the East River Drive."

He had already spoken to Stella, but I didn't have to worry that she'd told him about last night's party and who'd been there. She wouldn't tell a cop anything about anything.

I said, "That's too bad. Heart attack?"

"Arsenic."

I wasn't startled. Maybe, after all, it was no surprise to me. Arsenic, it seemed, was a poison that made your throat burn.

I lit a cigarette. Brant watched my hands. They were steady. I blew smoke at him. "Suicide, I suppose."

"Why suicide?"

"It goes with poison."

"Why would he want to die?"

"I hardly knew the guy," I said.

"You've been seeing him. You were in a beer joint with him a week ago Wednesday."

"Was I? Come to think of it, I dropped in for a beer and there were some guys I knew and I joined them."

Brant took his pipe out of his fat face. "Two days later you and he were both in on that Coast City stickup."

"Who says?"

A cop who was merely following a hunch didn't bother me. We sparred with words, and at the end he sauntered off by himself. He hadn't anything. He couldn't even be sure that Georgie hadn't been a suicide.

But I knew, didn't I? I knew who had murdered him and had tried to murder all of us.

12.

Oscar didn't say hello to me. He opened the door of his apartment and just stood there holding onto the doorknob, and his eyes were sick and dull behind his glasses. Though it was after six o'clock, he was still in his pajamas. His robe was tied sloppily, hanging crooked and twisted on his long, lean body. He needed a shave. He looked, to put it mildly, like hell.

I stepped into the foyer and moved on past him into the living room. He shambled after me.

I said, "I suppose Brant came to see you before he did me."

"Yes."

"So you know what killed Georgie."

He nodded tiredly.

"Abby still in bed?" I asked.

"I made her dress and go to a doctor when I learned it was arsenic. Don't want him coming here, not with the cops snooping. Whatever he gives her for it, I'll take too."

"Better not," I said. "Likely she'll mix more arsenic with it."

Oscar took off his eyeglasses. "Explain that, Johnny."

"I don't have to. You know as well as I do why she put arsenic in the chopped liver."

He stood swinging his glasses and saying nothing. He was not the man I had known up until the time I had left the party last night, and it was not so much because he was ill. It was as if a fire had burned out in him.

"Boy, did she sucker you!" I said. "Me too, I admit. But it was mostly our own fault. We knew she didn't fall for your line that you hadn't killed Wally. We kidded ourselves she'd be willing to forgive and forget if we paid her off. We wanted to believe that because we wanted her. Both of us did. Well, you got her. Or the other way around — she got you. She got you to bring her to live here where she could get all of us together and feed us arsenic."

"No," he mumbled. He looked up. "She ate the liver too. She's been sick all night and all day. She's still in a bad way even though she managed to get out of bed and dressed."

"Huh! She had to put on an act."

"No, I can tell. And she wouldn't poison me. Look what she'd give up — this nice home, plenty of money. Why? For a stupid revenge? No. And she's fond of me. Loves me, I'm sure. Always affectionate. A wonderful girl. Never knew anybody like her. So beautiful and warm."

He was babbling. He was sick with something worse than poison, or with a different kind of poison. It was the sickness of sex or love or whatever you cared to call it, and it had clouded that brain that always before had known all the answers.

"Try to think," I said. "Somebody put arsenic in the chopped liver. Who but Abby would have reason?"

"Somebody else." That old twisted smile, which was not really a smile at all, appeared on his thin lips. "You, for instance," he said softly.

"Me?"

"You," he repeated. "You hate my guts for having gotten Abby. You hate her for being mine instead of yours."

I said, "Does it make sense that I'd want to kill Georgie and Tiny and Stella also?"

"There was a guy put a time bomb on an airplane and blew a lot of people to hell because he wanted to murder his wife who was on the plane. Last night was your first chance to get at Abby and me — and what did you care what happened to the others?"

"My God, you're so crazy over her you'd rather believe anything but the truth."

"The truth?" he said and kept smiling that mirthless smile. "The truth is you're the only one didn't eat the liver." He put on his glasses. "Now get out before I kill you."

"Are you sure she'll let you live that long?"

"Get out!"

I left. There was no use arguing with a mind in that state, and with Oscar it could be mighty dangerous besides.

The usual wind was sweeping up Riverside Drive. I stood on the sidewalk and thought of going home to eat and then I thought of Tiny. What had happened to him since he had left Oscar's apartment last night and had dragged himself to his

lonely little room? At the least I ought to look in on him.

I walked over to Broadway and took the subway downtown. I climbed two flights of narrow, smelly stairs in a tenement and pushed in an unlocked door. There was just that one crummy room and the narrow bed against the wall and Tiny lying in it on his back with a knife sticking out of his throat.

13.

I must have expected something like this, which was why I'd come. There had been four of us involved in the killing of Wally Garden. Now only two of us were left.

I touched him. He wasn't long dead; rigor mortis had not yet begun to set in. She had left her apartment on the excuse that she was going to a doctor and had come here instead.

There was no sign of a struggle. Tiny wouldn't have suspected anything. Lying here sick and alone, he'd been glad to see her — to see anybody who would minister to him, but especially the boss' lovely lady. She had bent over him to ask how he felt, and he must have been smiling up at that clean fresh young face when she had pushed the knife into his throat, and then she had quickly stepped back to avoid the spurting blood.

That was a switchblade knife, probably Tiny's own, the knife Oscar had borrowed from him to kill Wally Garden. Which would make it grim justice, if you cared for that kind of justice when you also were slated to be on the receiving end.

I got out of there.

When I was in the street, I saw Brant. He was making the rounds of Georgie's pals and he was up to Tiny. It was twilight and I managed to step into a doorway before he could spot me. He turned into the tenement I had just left.

I went into a ginmill for the drink I needed and had many drinks. But I didn't get drunk. When I left a couple of hours later, my head was clear and the fear was still jittering in the pit of my stomach.

I'd never been much afraid of anybody, not even of Oscar, but I was afraid of Abby.

It was her life or ours. I had to convince Oscar of that. Likely he would see the light now that Tiny had been murdered too, because who but Abby had motive? If he refused to strangle her, I would, and be glad to do it, squeezing that lily-white throat until the clear blue eyes bulged and the sweet face contorted.

I got out of a hack on Riverside Drive. The wind was still there. I huddled against it a moment and then went up to the apartment.

Abby answered the door. She wore a sleazy housecoat hugging that slender body of hers. She looked limp and haggard and upset.

"Johnny," she said, touching my

arm, "I'm glad you're here. The police took Oscar away."

"That so?" I stepped into the apartment.

She closed the door and tagged after me. "They wouldn't tell why they took him away. Was it because of Georgie?"

"No. I guess they're going to ask him how Tiny got a knife in his throat."

Abby clutched her bosom — the kind of gesture an actress would make, and she was acting. "It couldn't have been Oscar. He wasn't out of the house."

"But you were, weren't you?" I grinned at her. "You got only one of us with the arsenic, so you're using other methods, other weapons. Have you anything special planned for my death?"

She backed away from me. "You're drunk. You don't know what you're saying."

"You blame all four of us for Wally's death. You're out to make us pay for it."

"Listen, Johnny!" She put out a hand to ward me off. "I didn't care very much for Wally. When I married him, yes, but after a while he bored me. He was such a kid. He didn't tell me a thing about the holdup. Not a word. All I found out about it was from the police, when they questioned me later. I heard your name and Oscar's from that detective, Brant. So I tried to make some money on it. That's all I was after — a little money."

"You didn't take the money. Instead you worked it so Oscar would bring you to live with him where you could get at all of us."

"I like Oscar. Honest."

"Don't you mind sleeping with the man who killed your husband?"

She tossed her blonde hair. "I don't believe he did. He's so sweet. So kind."

I hit her. I pushed my fist into her lying face. She'd meant death for Georgie and Tiny, and she would mean death for me unless I stopped her.

She bounced off a chair and fell to the floor and blood trickled from her mouth. I hadn't come to hit her but to strangle her. But something beside fear possessed me. Maybe, heaven help me, I was still jealous of Oscar. I swooped down on her and grabbed her by her housecoat and yanked her up to her feet. The housecoat came open. I shook her and her breasts bobbed crazily and I slapped her face until blood poured from her nose as well as her mouth.

Suddenly I let go of her. She sank to the floor, holding her bloody face and moaning. At no time had she screamed. Even while I was beating her, she'd had enough self-possession not to want to bring neighbors in on us. She started to sob.

I'd come to do more to her, to stop her once and for all. But I didn't. I couldn't. I looked down at her sobbing at my feet, lying there slim and fair-haired, battered and bleeding, feminine and forlorn, and

there was nothing but emptiness left in me.

After all, hadn't we killed her husband? Not only Oscar, but Georgie and Tiny and I was well in a community of guilt.

I turned and walked out of the apartment. I kept walking to the brownstone house, and there in the room Stella and I shared a couple of plainclothes men were waiting for me.

14.

They grabbed me, and Stella rose from a chair and flung herself at me.

"Honey, are you in trouble?"

I said dully, "Not much with the cops," and went with them.

For the rest of that night they sweated me in the station house. No doubt they had Oscar there too, but we didn't see each other. They kept us apart.

Sometimes Brant was there, sucking his pipe as he watched the regular cops give me the business. There was no more fooling around. They still had questions about Wally and about Georgie, but mostly they wanted to know about the murder of my pal Tiny.

Once, exhausted by their nagging, I sneered at them like a defiant low-grade mug, "You'll never get us."

Brant stepped forward and took his pipe out of his mouth. "Maybe we won't get you," he said gently, "but somebody else is doing it. Three of you already."

After that I stopped sneering. I stopped saying anything. And by morning they let me go.

Before I left, I asked a question. I was told Oscar had been released a couple of hours before.

I made my way home and Stella was waiting and I reached for her.

But there was no rest for my weariness against her cuddly body. She told me Oscar had been here looking for me with a gun.

"When was this?"

"Half an hour ago," she said. "He looked like a wild man. I'd never seen him like that. He was waving a gun. He said you'd beaten up Abby and he was going to kill you. Honey, did you really beat her up?"

I had taken my jacket off. I put it on.

Stella watched me wide-eyed. "If you're running away, take me with you."

"I'm not running," I said.

"But you can't stay. He said he'd be back."

"Did he?" I said hollowly.

I got my gun from where I'd stached it and checked the magazine and stuck the gun into my jacket pocket.

She ran to me. "What are you going to do? What's going on? Why don't you tell me anything?"

I said, "I don't want to die," and pushed her away from me.

I went only as far as the top of the stoop and waited there, leaning against the side of the doorway. I could watch both directions of the

cheerful sun-washed street, and it wasn't long before Oscar appeared.

He looked worse than he had yesterday afternoon. His unshaven face was like a skeleton head. There was a scarecrow limpness about his lean body. All that seemed to keep him going was his urge to kill me.

Maybe if I were living with Abby, had her to love and to hold, I wouldn't give a damn what suspicions I had about her and what facts there were to back them up. I'd deny anything but my need for her body, and I'd be gunning for whoever had marred that lovely face.

I knew there was no use talking to him. I had seen Oscar Trotter in action before, and I knew there was only one thing that would stop him.

I walked down the steps with my right hand in my pocket. Oscar had both hands in his pockets. He didn't check his stride. He said, "Johnny, I—"

I wasn't listening to him. I was watching his right hand. When it came out of his pocket, so did mine. I shot him.

15.

And now we are all dead.

There were five of us on that caper. Four are in their graves. I still have the breath of life in me, but the difference between me and the other four is only a matter of two days, when I will be burned in the chair.

It was a short trial. A dozen witnesses had seen me stand in the morning sunlight and shoot down Oscar Trotter. I couldn't even plead self-defense because he'd had no gun on him. And telling the truth as I knew it wouldn't have changed anything. The day after the trial began the jury found me guilty.

I sent for Stella. I didn't expect her to come, but she did. Yesterday afternoon she was brought here to the death house to see me.

She didn't jiggle. Something had happened to her — to her figure, to her face. Something seemed to have eaten away at her.

"Congratulations," I said.

Stella's voice had changed too. It was terribly tired. "Then you've guessed," she said.

"I've had plenty of time to think about it. Oscar didn't have a gun on him. I know now what he was about to do when he took his hand out of his pocket. He was going to offer me his hand. He had started to say, 'Johnny, I made a mistake.' Something like that. Because he still had a brain. When he'd learned that Tiny had been knifed in bed, he'd realized I'd been right about Abby. But the irony is that I hadn't been right. I'd been dead wrong."

"Yes, Johnny, you were wrong," she said listlessly.

"At the end you got yourself two birds with one stone. You told me a lie about Oscar gunning for me, and it turned out the way you hoped. I killed him and the state will kill me. I've had plenty of time to think

back — how that night at Oscar's, as soon as we arrived you hurried into the kitchen to give Abby a hand. Why so friendly so quickly with Abby who'd taken your man from you? I saw why. You'd gone into the kitchen to put arsenic in the chopped liver."

"You can't prove it, Johnny," she whispered.

"No. And it wouldn't save me. Well, I had my answer why you were so eager to take up with me the minute Oscar was through with you. You had to hang around his circle of friends, and you had to bide your time to work the killings so you wouldn't be suspected. You succeeded perfectly, Stella. One thing took me a long time to understand, and that was why."

"Wally," she said.

I nodded. "It had to be. If you'd hated Oscar for throwing you over for Abby, you mightn't have cared if you killed the others at that party as long as you got those two. But there was Tiny's death — cold, deliberate, personal murder. The motive was the same as I'd thought was Abby's. The same master plan — those who'd been in on Wally's death must die. And so it had to be you and Wally."

Stella moved closer to me. Her pretty face was taut with intensity.

"I loved him," she said. "That wife of his, that Abby — she was a no-good louse. First time I ever saw her was when she came up to the apartment to see Oscar, but I knew all about her. From Wally. That marriage was a joke. You wouldn't believe this — you were crazy over her yourself, like Oscar was — but she was after anything wore pants. That was all she gave a damn for, except maybe money."

"I believe you," I said. "You must have been the one who persuaded Oscar to take Wally in on the caper."

"We fell for each other, Wally and I. One of those screwy, romantic pickups on a bus. We saw each other a few times and then planned to go away together. But we hadn't a cent. I knew Oscar was planning a big job. He thought he kept me from knowing anything that was going on. But I knew. Always. And I was smarter. I got a guy who owed me a favor to bring Oscar and Wally together. Oscar took him in on it." Her mouth went bitter. "How I hated the rackets! I wanted to get out of them. I hated Oscar. We had it all figured. We'd take Wally's cut, the few thousand dollars, and go out west and live straight and clean. A little house somewhere and a decent job and children." Her head drooped. "And Oscar killed him."

"He might have died anyway from the bullet wound."

"But not to give him at least a chance!" Stella hung onto her handbag with both hands. "You know why I came when you sent for me? To gloat. To tell you the truth if you didn't know it already and laugh in your face."

But she didn't laugh. She didn't gloat. She looked as sick and tired of it all as I was. She looked as if, like me, she no longer gave a damn about anything.

"It doesn't give you much satisfaction, does it?" I said. "It doesn't bring Wally back. It doesn't make it easy to live with yourself."

She swayed. "Oh, God! So much death and emptiness. And I can't sleep, Johnny. I've had my revenge, but I can't sleep."

"Why don't you try arsenic?" I said softly.

She looked at me. Her mouth started to work, but she didn't say anything. Then she was gone.

That was yesterday. Today Bill Brant visited me and told me that Stella had taken poison and was dead.

"Arsenic?" I said.

"Yeah. The same way Georgie Ross died. What can you tell me about it?"

"Nothing, copper," I said.

So that makes five of us dead, and very soon now I will join them, and we will all be dead. Except Abby, and she was never part of the picture.

Wasn't she?

Stella was kidding herself by thinking she'd killed Oscar and me. Georgie and Tiny and finally herself, yes, but not us.

I needn't have been so quick with my gun on the street outside the brownstone house. I could have waited another moment to make sure that it was actually his life or mine.

Now, writing this in my cell in the death house, I can face up to the truth. I had shot him down in the clear bright morning because he had Abby.

CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Wonder Drug

A young executive in Newark, N. J., arrested for robbing a bartender, told police that he had turned from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde when he had a drink right after taking the new drug, cortisone. His doctor promptly agreed with him and cited similar cases. "There have been some indications that it could effect transient personality change," he informed the judge. Instead of a five year sentence, the court placed the prisoner on probation.

Love, Honor and Obey

In Dallas, Tex., a male hospital patient, 29, told police from his bed of pain that his wife was just too darned obedient. During a violent argument he handed her a loaded rifle, shouting, "All right, I dare you, shoot me!" With no hesitation, she pulled the trigger.

The Customer Was Right

Two well dressed young men pushing through a crowded North York restaurant in Toronto, Canada, attracted attention by carrying a heavy object wrapped in a raincoat. "They're probably taking the safe," joked one of the customers. They were — and it held $3,000.

Gambling Loss

Chicago bartender Joseph Bruce told police disgruntledly that a customer ordered a beer from him, then said, "How about a little bet on your age, fellow?" Admitting to 36 years, Bruce was startled when the man, holding his fist in his pocket as if he had a gun, inquired if he wished to reach 37. Bruce lost $118 on that bet.

Wrong Number

Another Chicago liquor dealer had his bandit troubles lately when tavern owner Albert Tunick tried to protect his property. Leaning out of a second floor window, Tunick shouted down to a man below, "Hey, call the police — there's a robbery going on downstairs!" "Sure is," was the answer. "I'm one of the gang. Get your head back inside or I'll blow it off!"

In The Red

A matron of an old folks' home in Stockholm, Sweden, offered police a novel excuse for murder recently. Mrs. Ingeborg Rosenstroem, 52, murdered an 80-year-old inmate "to make her books balance."

Troubled by a clerical error, she reported that Mrs. Johanna Person died of natural causes, and then killed her.

Lazy Larcenists

Kelly G. Wiles of Jackson, Miss., was just too tired to get away with the goods. After burglarizing two stores he entered a third, but fell asleep under a furniture cover where police found him.

While in Washington, N. C., an inmate of a prison camp gained the honor grade into the ranks of the unguarded by his own inertia. The camp superintentendent explained his "promotion" thus: "He's just as sorry as he can be and not worth guarding. He won't run away. He's too lazy."

William McElroy had only travellers' checks to offer a San Francisco hold-up man recently, but the bandit wasn't discouraged. "We'll cash 'em," he told McElroy, and started with his victim on a tour of bars and cigar stores to cash several hundred in checks. But after seven bars and many blocks only $40 had been gained and the gunman complained of sore feet. "Keep your damn checks," he told McElroy, and walked away.

A True Fan

A Salt Lake City man, night watchman at a scrap metal company, is such an ardent fight fan that while listening to a Friday night broadcast of the heavyweight title fight, he failed to hear thieves enter the company lot outside and help themselves to two tons of scrap iron.

Mistake Department

A Chicago judge acquitted two men brought before him for stealing a Cadillac when he learned that they had taken the car on a shopping trip, each thinking the other owned the car. "This foolish mixup could have happened to anyone," concluded His Honor.

Loaded Loot

A resourceful California bandit didn't even let the lack of a gun handicap him lately. In Glendora, Miss Lucille Palmer, clerk in a sporting goods store, showed him by request a .45 calibre automatic. Inserting a clip of bullets, he pointed it at her and removed $35 from the cash drawer. Then he walked out with the cash and the gun.

She Got His Number

A Gypsy fortune teller in Baltimore, 19-year-old Stina Gilk, predicted to a housewife, Mrs. Mary McLaughlin, that No. 146 would hit that day.

When the woman complained that the fortune teller tried to do a disappearing act with $15 while "blessing" the money after reading her palm for 60 cents, Patrolman Thomas Tankersley arrested the Gypsy.

Stina received 30 days in jail, to which she retired undoubtedly somewhat awed by her own psychic powers.

Patrolman Tankersley's badge is No. 146.

Guilty Guests

In Aurora, Neb., an elderly couple whose car broke down driving through town complained pathetically to State Sen. Lester Anderson that they feared the garage operator was going to swindle them on the bill. Outraged at such suspicion of local hospitality, Anderson gave them the use of his private guest room in the hotel he owns there. Next day they left on the quiet, taking as souvenirs the bath mat and towels.

Builds Own Jail

The first prisoner of the new McComick County jail in Greenwood, S. C., was a construction worker who had been employed on the building since the foundations were laid. He was charged with drunk and disorderly conduct and locked in a spanking new cell.

Tell-Tale Clue

A juvenile gang, who looted the City Market at Indianapolis, Ind., one Sunday morning, left decisive evidence behind them. The clue which police discovered was a bound and gagged 16-year-old member of the gang, lying on the market floor. His three companions and he had quarrelled over division of the loot, the boy told police when he could speak.

Marksmanship Minus

A wishful bandit in Knoxville, Tenn., pulled a gun on a grocery-store keeper's wife. When she grabbed it, he fired twice and missed. She seized a pistol and fired with the same ill luck. Then running in with a third gun, her husband fired and missed three times. The bandit fled with no bloodshed and no loot.

Foretelling His Future

A Sonoma, Calif., used-car dealer named Al Arnold painted "This is a steal!" across the windshield of a 1949 model. Not long after, someone took him at his word and drove it off on the quiet.

Bad Timing

Sheriff's deputies of Belknap Co., N. H., learned that what might have been a complete jailbreak was thwarted by the pangs of hunger, when Robert Dickerson, 26, and Calvin Robbins, 18, sawed their way to freedom. The other fourteen inmates reported that they had been invited to join in the get-away, but hadn't wanted to miss breakfast.

Boy Scout

Moses Coats, 26, believes firmly in preparedness. Last August when the Detroit thermometer read 93, he got 30 days in jail for swiping a snowsuit from a midtown store. "I have five kids, Your Honor. I wanted to be ready for winter," he explained.

World Weary

An Emery, Calif., policeman, Leo Neuberger, 15 years on the force, lost his job when found 20 blocks

from his beat. "I just get bored driving around the same streets all the time," he told Chief Frank Farina.

Righteous Wrath

An angry GI, reporting to New York police that the army was cheating his two wives out of their dependency checks, was amazed at his arrest for bigamy.

Conscientious Crook

Police in Dallas, Tex., perplexed on finding a meat market door padlocked after a safe-cracking job, received this explanation from the robber: "I just was doing a good turn. Didn't want some thief to come along and steal all the man's meat."

Pig's Revenge

Louisville, Ky., police reported a bizarre bit of gunplay in a local slaughter house, when butcher Paul Blum was shot by a pig he had just killed. As he stooped down to make sure the animal was dead, one of its legs twitched and threw Blum off balance. He lurched against his gun, which went off, sending a bullet through his own thigh.

BY ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Protection

George had gone straight. He was proud of his reform — until the man came into his restaurant.

THE roadside restaurant oozed an atmosphere of peaceful prosperity. It was a green painted building set in a white graveled circle in the triangle where the two main highways joined.

Five miles beyond, a pall of hazy smog marked the location of the city, but out here at the restaurant the air was pure and crystal clear.

George Ollie slid down from the stool behind the cash register and walked over to look out of the window. His face held an expression which indicated physical well-being and mental contentment. In the seven short years since he had started working as a cook over the big range in the rear he

had done pretty well for himself — exceptionally well for a two-time loser — although no one here knew that, of course. Nor did *anyone* know of that last job where a confederate had lost his head and pulled the trigger . . . but all that was in the past. George Ollie, president of a luncheon club, member of the Chamber of Commerce, had no connection with that George Ollie who had been prisoner number 56289.

In a way, however, George owed something of his present prosperity to his criminal record. When he had started work in the restaurant that bank job which had been "ranked" preyed on his mind. For three years he had been intent on keeping out of circulation. He had stayed in his room nights and had perforce saved all the money he had made.

So, when the owner's heart had given out and it became necessary for him to sell almost on a moment's notice, George was able to make a down payment in cash. From then on hard work, careful management and the chance relocation of a main highway had spelled prosperity for the ex-con.

George turned away from the window, looked over the tables at the symmetrical figure of Stella, the head waitress, as she bent over the table taking the orders of the family that had just entered.

Just as the thrill of pride swept through George whenever he looked at the well-kept restaurant, the graveled parking place and the constantly accelerating stream of traffic which poured by on the main highways, a traffic which furnished him with a constantly increasing number of customers, so did George thrill with a sense of possessive pride whenever he looked at Stella's smoothly-curved figure.

There was no question but what Stella knew how to wear her clothes. Somewhere, George thought, there must in Stella's past have been a period of prosperity, a period when she had worn the latest Parisian models with distinction. Now she wore the light blue uniform, with the wide white starched cuffs above the elbow and the white collar, with that same air of distinction. She not only classed up the uniforms but she classed up the place.

When Stella walked, the lines of her figure rippled smoothly beneath the clothes. Customers looking at her invariably looked again. Yet Stella was always demure, never forward. She smiled at the right time and in the right manner. If the customer tried to get intimate Stella always managed to create an atmosphere of urgency so that she gave the impression of an amiable, potentially willing young woman too busy for intimacies.

George could tell from the manner in which she put food down at a table and smilingly hurried back to the kitchen, as though on a matter of the greatest importance, just what was being said by the people at the table — whether it was an apprecia-

tive acknowledgment of skillful service, good-natured banter, or the attempt on the part of predatory males to make a date.

But George had never inquired into Stella's past. Because of his own history, he had a horror of anything that even hinted of an attempt to inquire into one's past. The present was all that counted.

Stella herself avoided going to the city. She went on a shopping trip once or twice a month, attended an occasional movie, but for the rest stayed quietly at home in the little motel a couple of hundred yards down the roadway.

George was aroused from his reverie by a tapping sound. The man at the counter was tapping a coin on the mahogany. He had entered from the east door and George, contemplating the restaurant, hadn't noticed him in particular.

During this period of slack time in the afternoon Stella was the only waitress on duty. Unexpectedly half a dozen tables had filled up and Stella was busy.

George departed from his customary post at the cash register to approach the man. He handed over a menu, filled a glass with water, arranged a napkin, spoon, knife and fork, and stood waiting.

The man, his hat pulled well down on his forehead, tossed the menu to one side with a gesture almost of contempt.

"Curried shrimp."

"Sorry," George explained affably, "that's not on the menu today."

"Curried shrimp," the man repeated.

George raised his voice. Probably the other was hard of hearing. "We don't have them today, sir. We have . . ."

"You heard me," the man said. "Curried shrimp. Go get 'em."

There was something about the dominant voice, the set of the man's shoulders, the arrogance of manner that tugged at George's memory. Now that he thought back on it, even the contemptuous gesture with which the man had tossed the menu to one side without reading it meant something.

George leaned a little closer.

"Larry!" he exclaimed in horror.

Larry Giffen looked up and grinned. "Georgie!" The way he said the name was contemptuously sarcastic.

"When . . . when did you . . . how did you get out?"

"It's okay, Georgie," Larry said. "*I* went out through the front door. Now go get me the curried shrimp."

"Look, Larry," George said, making a pretense of fighting the feeling of futility this man always inspired, "the cook is cranky. I'm having plenty of trouble with the help and . . ."

"You heard me," Larry interrupted. "Curried shrimp!"

George met Larry's eyes, hesitated, turned away toward the kitchen.

Stella paused beside the range as

he was working over the special curry sauce.

"What's the idea?" she asked.

"A special."

Her eyes studied his face. "How special?"

"*Very* special."

She walked out.

Larry Giffen ate the curried shrimp. He looked around the place with an air of proprietorship.

"Think maybe I'll go in business with you, Georgie."

George Ollie knew from the dryness in his mouth, the feeling of his knees that that was what he had been expecting.

Larry jerked his head toward Stella. "She goes with the joint."

Ollie, suddenly angry and belligerent, took a step forward. "She doesn't go with anything."

Giffen laughed, turned on his heel, started toward the door, swung back, said, "I'll see you after closing tonight," and walked out.

It wasn't until the period of dead slack when there was for the moment nothing to do that Stella moved close to George.

"Want to tell me?" she asked.

He tried to look surprised. "What?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sorry, Stella. I can't."

"Why not?"

"He's dangerous."

"To whom?"

"To you — to both of us."

She made a gesture with her shoulder. "You don't gain anything by running."

He pleaded with her. "Don't get tangled in it, Stella. You remember last night the police were out here for coffee and doughnuts after running around like mad — those two big jobs, the one on the safe in the bank, the other on the theater safe?"

She nodded.

"I should have known then," he told her. "That's Larry's technique. He never leaves them anything to work on. Rubber gloves so there are no fingerprints. Burglar alarms disconnected. Everything like clockwork. No clues. No wonder the police were nuts. Larry Giffen never leaves them a clue."

She studied him. "What's he got on *you*?"

George turned away, then faced her, tried to speak and couldn't.

"Okay," she said, "I withdraw the question."

Two customers came in. Stella escorted them to a table and went on with the regular routine. She seemed calmly competent, completely unworried. George Ollie, on the other hand, couldn't get his thoughts together. His world had collapsed. Rubber-glove Giffen must have found out about that bank job with the green accomplice, otherwise he wouldn't have dropped in.

News travels fast in the underworld. Despite carefully cultivated changes in his personal appearance, some smart ex-con while eating at the restaurant must have "made" George Ollie. He had said nothing to George, but had reserved the news as an ex-

clusive for the ears of Larry Giffen. The prison underworld knew Big Larry might have use for George — as a farmer might have use for a horse.

And now Larry had "dropped in."

Other customers came in. The restaurant filled up. The rush-hour waitresses came on. For two and a half hours there was so much business that George had no chance to think. Then business began to slacken. By eleven o'clock it was down to a trickle. At midnight George closed up.

"Coming over?" Stella asked.

"Not tonight," George said. "I want to do a little figuring on a purchase list."

She said nothing and went out.

George locked the doors, put on the heavy double bolts, and yet, even as he turned out the lights and put the bars in place, he knew that bolts wouldn't protect him from what was coming.

Larry Giffen kicked on the door at twelve-thirty.

George, in the shadows, pretended not to hear. He wondered what Larry would do if he found that George had ignored his threat, had gone away and left the place protected by locks and the law.

Larry Giffen knew better. He kicked violently on the door, then turned and banged it with his heel, banged it so hard that the glass rattled and threatened to break.

George hurried out of the shadows and opened the door.

"What's the idea of keeping me waiting, Georgie?" Larry asked with a solicitude that was overdone to the point of sarcasm. "Don't you want to be chummy with your old friend?"

George said, "Larry, I'm on the square. I'm on the legit. I'm staying that way."

Larry threw back his head and laughed. "You know what happens to rats, Georgie."

"I'm no rat, Larry. I'm going straight, that's all. I've paid my debts to the law and to you."

Larry showed big yellowed teeth as he grinned. "Ain't that nice, Georgie. *All* your debts paid! Now how about that National Bank job where Skinny got in a panic because the cashier didn't get 'em up fast enough?"

"I wasn't in on that, Larry."

Larry's grin was triumphantly mean. "Says you! You were handling the getaway car. The cops got one fingerprint from the rearview mirror. The FBI couldn't classify that one print, but if anyone ever started 'em checking it with *your* file, Georgie, your fanny would be jerked off that cushioned stool by the cash register and transferred to the electric chair — the hot seat, Georgie.

"You never did like the hot seat, Georgie."

George Ollie licked dry lips. His forehead moistened with sweat. He wanted to say something but there was nothing he could say.

Larry went on talking. "I pulled a couple of jobs here. I'm going to pull just one more. Then I'm moving in with you, Georgie. I'm your new partner. You need a little protection. I'm giving it to you."

Larry swaggered over to the cash register, rang up "No sale," pulled the drawer open, raised the hood over the roll of paper to look at the day's receipts.

"Now, Georgie," he said, regarding the empty cash drawer, "you shouldn't have put away all that dough. Where is it?"

George Ollie gathered all the reserves of his self-respect. "Go to hell," he said. "I've been on the square and I'm going to stay on the square."

Larry strode across toward him. His open left hand slammed against the side of George's face with staggering impact.

"You're hot," Larry said, and his right hand swung up to the other side of George's face. "You're hot, Georgie," and his left hand came up from his hip.

George made a pretense at defending himself but Larry Giffen, quick as a cat, strong as a bear, came after him. "You're hot." . . . Wham . . . "You're hot." . . . Wham . . . "You're hot, Georgie."

At length Larry stepped back. "I'm taking a half interest. You'll run it for me when I'm not here, Georgie. You'll keep accurate books. You'll do all the work. Half of the profits are mine. I'll come in once in a while to look things over. Be damn certain that you don't try any cheating, Georgie.

"You wouldn't like the hot squat, Georgie. You're fat, Georgie. You're well fed. You've teamed up with that swivel-hipped babe, Georgie. I could see it in your eye. She's class, and she goes with the place, Georgie. Remember, I'm cutting myself in for a half interest. I'm leaving it to you to see there isn't any trouble."

George Ollie's head was in a whirl. His cheeks were stinging from the heavy-handed slaps of the big man. His soul felt crushed under a weight. Larry Giffen knew no law but the law of power, and Larry Giffen, his little malevolent eyes glittering with sadistic gloating, was on the move, coming toward him again, hoping for an opportunity to beat up on him.

George hadn't known when Stella had let herself in. Her key had opened the door smoothly.

"What's he got on you, George?" she asked.

Larry Giffen swung to the sound of her voice. "Well, well, little Miss Swivel-hips," he said. "Come here, Swivel-hips. I'm half-owner in the place now. Meet your new boss."

She stood still, looking from him to George Ollie.

Larry turned to George.

"All right, Georgie, where's the safe? Give me the combination to the safe, Georgie. As your new partner I'll need to have it. I'll handle the day's take. Later on you can

keep books, but right now I need money. I have a heavy date tonight."

George Ollie hesitated a moment, then moved back toward the kitchen.

"I said give *me* the combination to the safe," Larry Giffen said, his voice cracking like a whip.

Stella was looking at him. George had to make it a showdown. "The dough's back here," he said. He moved toward the rack where the big butcher knives were hanging.

Larry Giffen read his mind. Larry had always been able to read him like a book.

Larry's hand moved swiftly. A snub-nosed gun nestled in Larry's big hand.

There was murder in the man's eye but his voice was silky and taunting.

"Now, Georgie, you must be a good boy. Don't act rough. Remember, Georgie, I've done my last time. No one takes Big Larry alive. Give me the combination to the safe, Georgie. And I don't want any fooling!"

George Ollie reached a decision. It was better to die fighting than to be strapped into an electric chair. He ignored the gun, kept moving back toward the knife rack.

Big Larry Giffen was puzzled for a moment. George had always collapsed like a flat tire when Larry had given an order. This was a new George Ollie. Larry couldn't afford to shoot. He didn't want noise and he didn't want to kill.

"Hold it, Georgie! You don't need to get rough." Larry put away his gun. "You're hot on that bank job, Georgie. Remember I can send you to the hot squat. That's all the argument I'm going to use, Georgie. You don't need to go for a shiv. Just tell me to walk out, Georgie, and I'll leave. Big Larry doesn't stay where he isn't welcome.

"But you'd better welcome me, Georgie boy. You'd better give me the combination to the safe. You'd better take me in as your new partner.

"Which is it going to be, Georgie?"

It was Stella who answered the question. Her voice was calm and clear. "Don't hurt him. You'll get the money."

Big Larry looked at her. His eyes changed expression. "Now that's the sort of a broad *I* like. Tell your new boss where the safe is. Start talking, babe, and remember you go with the place."

"There isn't any safe," George said hurriedly. "I banked the money."

Big Larry grinned. "You're a liar. You haven't left the place. I've been casing the joint. Go on, babe, tell me where the hell that safe is. Then Georgie here will give his new partner the combination."

"Concealed back of the sliding partition in the pie counter," Stella said.

"Well, well, well," Larry Giffen observed, "isn't *that* interesting?"

"Please don't hurt him," Stella pleaded. "The shelves lift out . . ."

"Stella!" George Ollie said sharply. "Shut up!"

"The damage has been done now, Georgie boy," Giffen said.

He slid back the glass doors of the pie compartment, lifted out the shelves, put them on the top of the counter, then slid back the partition disclosing the door of the safe.

"Clever, Georgie boy, clever! You called on your experience, didn't you? — That's clever. And now the combination, Georgie."

Ollie said, "You can't get away with it, Larry. I won't . . ."

"Now, Georgie boy, don't talk that way. I'm your partner. I'm in here fifty-fifty with you. You do the work and run the place and I'll take my half from time to time. — But you've been holding out on me for a while, Georgie boy, so everything that's in the safe is part of my half. Come on with the combination. — Of course, I could make a spindle job on it, but since I'm a half owner in the joint I hate to louse up any of the property. Then you'd have to buy a new safe. The cost of that would have to come out of your half. You couldn't expect *me* to pay for a new safe."

Rubber-glove Giffen laughed at that joke.

"I said to hell with you," George Ollie said.

Larry Giffen's fist clenched. "I guess you need a damn good working over, Georgie boy. You shouldn't be disrespectful. . . ."

Stella's voice cut in. "Leave him alone. I said you'd get the money. George doesn't want any electric chair."

Larry turned back to her. "I like 'em sensible, sweetheart. Later on, I'll tell you about it. Right now it's all business. Business before pleasure. Let's go."

"Ninety-seven four times to the right," Stella said.

"Well, well, well," Giffen observed. "She knows the combination. We both know what that means, Georgie boy, don't we?"

George, his face red and swollen from the impact of the slaps, stood helpless.

"It means she really is part of the place," Giffen said. "I've got a half interest in you, girlie. I'm looking forward to collecting on that too. Now what's the rest of the combination?"

Giffen bent over the safe, then, suddenly thinking better of it, straightened, slipped the snub-nosed revolver into his left hand, said, "Just so you don't get ideas, Georgie boy — but you wouldn't, you know. You don't like the idea of the hot squat."

Stella, white-faced and tense, called out the numbers. Larry Giffen spun the dials on the safe, swung the door open, opened the cash box.

"Well, well, well," he said, sweeping the bills and money into his pocket. "It *was* a good day, wasn't it?"

Stella said, "There's a hundred-dollar bill in the ledger."

Big Larry pulled out the ledger. "So there is, so there is," he said, surveying the hundred-dollar bill with the slightly torn corner. "Girlie, you're a big help. I'm glad you go with the place. I think we're going to get along swell."

Larry straightened, backed away from the safe, stood looking at George Ollie.

"Don't look like that Georgie boy. It isn't so bad. I'll leave you enough profit to keep you in business and keep you interested in the work. I'll just take off most of the cream. I'll drop in to see you from time to time, and, of course, Georgie boy, you won't tell anybody that you've seen me. Even if you did it wouldn't do any good because I came out the front door, Georgie boy. I'm smart. I'm not like you. I don't have something hanging over me where someone can jerk the rug out from under me at any time.

"Well, Georgie boy, I've got to be toddling along. I've got a little job at the supermarket up the street. They put altogether too much confidence in that safe they have. But I'll be back in a couple of hours, Georgie Boy. I've collected on part of my investment and now I want to collect on the rest of it. You wait up for me, girlie. You can go get some shut-eye, Georgie."

Big Larry looked at Stella, walked to the door, stood for a moment searching the shadows, then melted away into the darkness.

"You," Ollie said to Stella, his voice showing his heartsickness at her betrayal.

"What?" she asked.

"Telling him about the safe — about that hundred dollars, giving him the combination . . ."

She said, "I couldn't stand to have him hurt you."

"You and the things you can't stand," Ollie said. "You don't know Rubber-glove Giffen. You don't know what you're in for now. You don't . . ."

"Shut up," she interrupted. "If you're going to insist on letting other people do your thinking for you, I'm taking on the job."

He looked at her in surprise.

She walked over to the closet, came out with a wrecking bar. Before he had the faintest idea of what she had in mind she walked over to the cash register, swung the bar over her head and brought it down with crashing impact on the front of the register. Then she inserted the point of the bar, pried back the chrome steel, jerked the drawer open. She went to the back door, unlocked it, stood on the outside, inserted the end of the wrecking bar, pried at the door until she had crunched the wood of the door jamb.

George Ollie was watching her in motionless stupefaction. "What the devil are you doing?" he asked. "Don't you realize . . .?"

"Shut up," she said. "What's this you once told me about a spindle job? Oh yes, you knock off the knob and punch out the spindle — "

She walked over to the safe and swung the wrecking bar down on the knob of the combination, knocking it out of its socket, letting it roll crazily along the floor. Then she went to the kitchen, picked out a towel, polished the wrecking bar clean of fingerprints.

"Let's go," she said to George Ollie.

"Where?" he asked.

"To Yuma," she said. "We eloped an hour and a half ago — or hadn't you heard? We're getting married. There's no delay or red tape in Arizona. As soon as we cross the border we're free to get spliced. You need someone to do your thinking for you. I'm taking the job.

"And," she went on, as George Ollie stood there, stupefied, "in this state a husband can't testify against his wife, and a wife can't testify against her husband. In view of what I know now it might be just as well."

George stood looking at her, seeing something he had never seen before, a fierce, possessive something that frightened him at the same time it reassured him. She was like a panther protecting her young.

"But I don't get it," George said. "What's the idea of wrecking the place, Stella?"

"Wait until you see the papers," she told him.

"I still don't get it," he told her.

"You will," she said.

George stood for a motionless moment. Then he walked toward her. Strangely enough he wasn't thinking of the trap but of the smooth contours under her pale blue uniform. He thought of Yuma, of marriage and of security, of a home.

It wasn't until two days later that the local newspapers were available in Yuma. There were headlines on an inside page:

RESTAURANT BURGLARIZED WHILE PROPRIETOR ON HONEYMOON

BIG LARRY GIFFEN KILLED IN GUN BATTLE WITH OFFICERS

The newspaper account went on to state that Mrs. George Ollie had telephoned the society editor from Yuma stating that George Ollie and she had left the night before and had been married in the Gretna Green across the state line. The society editor had asked her to hold the phone and had the call switched to the police.

Police asked to have George Ollie put on the line. They had a surprise for him. It seemed that when the merchant patrol had made his regular nightly check of Ollie's restaurant at one A.M. he found it had been broken into. Police had found a perfect set of fingerprints on the cash register and on the safe. Fast work had served to identify the fingerprints as those of Big Larry Giffen, known in the underworld as Rubber-glove Giffen because of his

skill in wearing rubber gloves and never leaving fingerprints. This was one job that Big Larry had loused up. Evidently he had forgotten his gloves.

Police had mug shots of Big Larry and in no time at all they had out a general alarm.

Only that afternoon George Ollie's head waitress and parttime cashier had gone to the head of the police burglary detail. "In case we should ever be robbed," she had said, "I'd like to have it so you could get a conviction when you get the man who did the job.

"I've left a hundred-dollar bill in the safe. I've torn off a corner. Here's the torn corner. You keep it. That will enable you to get a conviction if you get the thief."

Police thought it was a fine idea. It was such a clever idea they were sorry they couldn't have used it to pin a conviction on Larry Giffen.

But Larry had elected to shoot it out with the arresting officers. Knowing his record, officers had been prepared for this. After the sawed-off shotguns had blasted the life out of Big Larry the police had found the bloodstained hundred-dollar bill in his pocket when his body was stripped at the morgue.

Police also found the loot from three other local jobs on him, cash amounting to some seven thousand dollars.

Police were still puzzled as to how it happened Giffen, known to the underworld as the most artistic box man in the business, had made such an amateurish job at the restaurant. Giffen's reputation was that he had never left a fingerprint or a clue.

Upon being advised that his place had been broken into, George Ollie, popular restaurant owner, had responded in a way which was perfectly typical of honeymooners the world over.

"The hell with business," he had told the police. "I'm on my honeymoon."

Hold Out

BY JACK RITCHIE

The guy they kidnapped didn't have any money, but that didn't matter. The kidnappers weren't after his *money . . .*

FRED DROVE the car and I sat in the back with Pete Harder. "Nice stretch of country here," I said to him. "Looks pretty in the moonlight."

"You two must be strangers here if you think you can get away with this," he said.

"Fred and me are doing fine so far."

"Why pick on me?" Harder asked.

"We stuck a pin in the phone book

and there you were." I crossed my legs and idly tapped the heel of my shoe with the barrel of the automatic.

"I got five G's in the bank. That's all I got," Harder said.

I raised an eyebrow. "That all? You must be a spender. I figured you to have more than that, considering the size of your apartment."

"Not a cent more than five thousand," Harder said again.

"We picked on a poor man, Fred," I said. We passed a big nightclub at a highway intersection. "That's another one of Mike Corrigan's places, isn't it? How many has he got altogether?"

"Enough to make him a big man in this part of the country. He'll get hot about this." Harder was about medium-sized and he had black hair and a thin mustache.

"Think you're worth fifty G's to Corrigan?" I asked.

Harder glanced at me but didn't say anything.

"Anyway I hope so," I said. "That's what we're asking."

Fred cut the speed of the car and turned into a gravel side road.

"He's got until noon tomorrow to get it together. It's rushing things, I admit, but Fred and I like to operate fast."

Fred turned into the driveway to the small two room cabin and parked the car in front of it.

I turned on the flashlight and got out. "Be careful where you step, Harder. It's muddy right here."

We went into the cabin and I kept the flash on until Fred lit the kerosene lantern. I indicated a chair with the gun. "Take a seat, Harder."

"Suppose Corrigan doesn't raise the money by noon?" Harder asked.

"You wouldn't like to think about it," I said.

"If you two got any brains you'll let me go right now."

"Sure," I said. "We shake hands and forget this ever happened. That's right, isn't it?"

Fred rummaged through the cupboard. "Pork and beans okay?"

"Fine," I said. "You hungry, Harder?"

He shook his head. I went to the corner and picked up the rope.

"You don't have to tie me," Harder said.

"We don't have to, but we want to. Put your hands behind your back." I tied his hands and wrapped another coil around his legs. "Can't have you walking away," I said.

"How do you know I'm worth fifty grand to Corrigan?"

"It's a risk we'll take. You're his right hand man. We heard talk about how buddy-like you two are."

Fred heated the pork and beans and poured them on two plates.

"At first Fred and I figured on sending the note to Elsie Thomas working on the idea that you mean more to her than you do to Corrigan. But then we weren't sure she could raise the money. Probably have to go to Corrigan anyway. So we just cut out the middleman, so to speak."

"I don't care much for blondes myself," Fred said. "Pass the bread, will you, Ed?"

"Why not settle for the five thousand," Harder said. "If you get Mike mad he'll come for you."

I nodded. "That thought sends shivers down our backs. I understand Corrigan's a shiv man when he's irritated. Got a silver switch knife with a blade that gleams like all get out."

"Elsie could pawn her jewels," Harder said. "You'd get maybe five grand more."

"Take too long," Fred said. "We get fidgety."

Harder was quiet while we finished eating, but he was thinking. He didn't like to bring up what was on his mind, but still he wanted to be reassured.

He licked his lips. "When you get the fifty grand, you let me go?"

"Fred and I are thinking about it," I said. "Be happy you're alive now."

Harder didn't have much to say after that and around eleven Fred and I carried him into the bedroom and put him on the cot so that he could get some sleep if he wanted it.

Fred and I took turns sitting up with him during the night and at eight in the morning Fred made breakfast. Harder didn't want anything to eat, but I untied him so that he could have a cup of coffee.

I lit a cigarette after we were through and went to the window. "Looks like rain," I said.

"Hope not," Fred said. "The windshield wiper's giving me trouble."

"What time is it?" Harder asked.

"About eight-thirty," I said. I took Harder back into the bedroom and retied him.

He sat on the edge of the cot. "How are you going to get the money?"

"Fred and I find that the simple ways are the best. At twelve noon, Corrigan or somebody he knows tosses the satchel of dough out of his car right where that sign marks the county line. Fred will drive by and if everything looks okay, he'll pick it up."

Harder's forehead was damp. "What if nobody shows up?"

"Don't think about it," I said. "Try to relax."

Fred read comic books and I played solitaire until about eleven-thirty. "It's time to go now, Fred," I said.

He got into his coat. "It's beginning to drizzle."

While he was gone, I took my gun apart and went over it with a rag. I smiled to myself. "You know," I said. "I've just been thinking. If you and Corrigan aren't good friends like it looks, this would be a nice time for him to get rid of you."

"He wouldn't do that," Harder said.

"You know him better than I do."

"We've been together for ten years."

"That right? Partners?"

"No," Harder said. "He's the boss."

"Must be an interesting life." I began putting the automatic back together. "This Elsie is quite a looker. Caught her act a couple of nights back. Not much voice, but that's not what she's selling."

Every ten minutes or so, Harder asked for the time. About twelve-thirty we heard the car pulling up in front of the cabin and Harder turned his head toward the door to the kitchen and waited.

Fred came in and shook some of the mist from his hat. Harder's eyes searched his face.

"Did you get the satchel, Fred?" I asked.

"Nobody showed up."

"You must have missed it," Harder said. "It's probably in the ditch."

Fred sat down. "Nope. I checked."

I looked at Harder. "I guess Corrigan doesn't miss you like you thought."

"He needs more time to raise the money," Harder said.

"Fred and I think he just doesn't want to."

Sweat trickled down Harder's face as Fred and I stood looking down at him. His eyes went from my face to Fred's and back again and the terror shine was coming into them.

I picked my automatic off the table and pressed off the safety.

Harder almost screamed. "Wait! You'll get the money."

"No," I said. "If Corrigan wanted to pay, he would have."

Harder's voice was high. "I've got the dough. There's almost a hundred grand. You can have it all."

Fred and I looked at each other. "I don't know," Fred said. "I'd say he's stalling."

"I'm not stalling," he said desperately. "Elsie's got the money in the safe at her apartment. It's mine. I've been getting it together for the last couple of years."

Fred eyed me. "That's it," he said.

I put the automatic in my pocket and went into the kitchen. Corrigan was standing behind the open door.

"You heard?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I guess you were right at that. He's been getting away with two or three grand a week. Do you want Fred and me to finish it?"

"No," Corrigan said. "I'll take it from here." His hand came out of his coat pocket with the switch knife.

Corrigan went into the bedroom and he made it last ten minutes.

Double Trouble

John Perryman was an ex-con, but he'd gone straight. He was a solid, ordinary businessman when he disappeared . . .

BY EDWARD D. RADIN

IN MANY ways Bellevue, Ohio, is a typical American town and it holds to such solid American traditions that an ordinary working stiff is good enough to marry the boss's daughter, that a man is accepted for what he shows himself to be rather than for his background.

John Perryman fit naturally into such a setting. He didn't marry the boss's daughter, it was a sister. A handsome six-footer, Perryman breezed into Bellevue and landed a job at a factory owned by the

Moore brothers, members of one of Bellevue's wealthiest families.

An easy-going extrovert, he quickly made friends, and although happy and willing to talk to anybody, his conversation never included any information about himself beyond a brief mention that he came from the West. But his reticence proved no handicap since everybody liked him for what he was and they accepted him at face value.

Within a short time the lowly millhand had snared the town's best catch; he began courting his boss's sister, attractive Margaret Moore, and they were married before the year was up. Instead of depending upon family connections to rise in the mill, Perryman struck out on his own and opened a real estate office. It was a shrewd move. The people of Bellevue applauded his desire to be independent, favored him with their business and he prospered. Some of Margaret's disgruntled suitors pointed out that he was being financed by Moore money but this talk died down when he promptly repaid all his debts.

Perryman showed himself to be more than just a good business man. He became an active Bellevue booster, associated himself with local fraternal and civic organizations and within a few years had become one of the town's leading and best liked citizens.

The story opens several years after their marriage, early on the afternoon of July 14th, when the Perrymans left Bellevue to drive to nearby West Lodi where the real estate broker wanted to inspect some farm acreage. It was a beautiful summer day and Margaret was looking forward to the ride through the countryside.

They were delayed slightly in getting away because so many people stopped to talk to the popular couple. The Perrymans were in exceptionally good humor, particularly John, laughing and joking with their friends. They explained they planned to be back fairly early since they were to have dinner with Margaret's sister and had promised her to bring back several fresh-killed farm chickens.

Two days later the local Bellevue paper, the *Gazette*, broke the news that the Perrymans had disappeared, that no one had heard from them since they left on their short ride to West Lodi. Later that day copies of the paper arrived at Fremont, the county seat, and Sheriff Tom Pask read the story. He was troubled by the account since no one had reported them missing to his office.

Pask telephoned the *Gazette* and spoke to the editor.

"I don't think it's anything to worry about," the newsman informed him. "I guess they changed their plans and went off on a trip instead of coming right back. They have no children so they probably

didn't think it was necessary to notify anybody."

"Then why are you running the story?" the sheriff asked.

The editor explained that Margaret's brothers were worried and had asked him to print the story, evidently hoping that the couple might see it and get in touch with the family.

Pask was puzzled. Ordinarily, when members of a family are worried about a missing person, they turn to police knowing that its efficient connecting teletype network can start an instant search over a wide area. Yet the family here had asked only for publication of a story in a small local paper that circulated in a limited territory. If the Perrymans were off on a trip to a distant city, the chances were that they would not see the local paper at all.

The sheriff decided to drive over to Bellevue to see what information he could pick up. He learned that the news story had created little excitement among the friends of the missing couple. Most of them pointed out that Perryman frequently went off alone on business trips and they reasoned that this time he had taken Margaret along with him. Some thought he had been somewhat nervous recently, possibly overworked, and probably was taking a needed vacation.

Pask soon confirmed what he had learned from the newspaper editor, that Perryman was one of the most popular business men in town and had an excellent reputation for straightforward dealings. He was considered well-to-do and the couple lived simply but well. Friends assured the official that John and Margaret were devoted to each other. They had no reason to run away and it was unthinkable that Perryman would abandon a thriving business.

The only off-beat note was provided by B. D. Wynant, owner of a Bellevue hardware store, who said Perryman had bought a gun the week before the couple disappeared. Perryman had remarked that he thought the revolver was a good thing to have around in case of trouble. The storkeeper saw nothing suspicious in the incident; he assumed the realtor wanted the weapon because many of his deals were signed after the bank had closed and Perryman frequently had to take home large sums of cash.

To help relieve the worried Moore family, Pask sent out a routine alarm asking police throughout the state to be on the lookout for the missing couple and broadcast a description of their sedan and the license plate number.

When several additional days passed with no further news of the missing pair, other Ohio papers picked up the story and reports were received that Perryman had been seen in Lorrain and in Sandusky but these were dismissed as the usual false alarms when no trace of the

couple could be found in either city.

About a week later two pieces of disquieting information came in hard on the heels of each other. State troopers, who had received the alarm sent out by Pask, made a routine check of business places on the highways. An attendant at a gas station about fifty miles south of Bellevue reported that a car bearing the realty broker's license plates had been brought in for an oil change on July 19, five days after the couple had disappeared. A tall, dark-haired man had been driving the car and he had been alone. Perryman was sandy-haired. The attendant had noticed a dark stain on the front seat and floorboard of the sedan. He thought the man had transported some fresh killed game in the car.

While Pask was mulling over this information, he received a report from a farmer near West Lodi that on July 14th he had heard some shots and screams from a wooded area near his land. At the time he thought some children were playing in the woods and had not investigated, but after reading about the search for the Perrymans and knowing they were supposed to be in that vicinity that day, the farmer now realized that it might have been a woman screaming.

Accompanied by several deputies, Pask left at once for West Lodi where the farmer directed him to the wooded area. A one-car width rutted lane cut through the wood lot and the official decided to make the search on foot with his men. As they walked along this road, one of them spotted the impression of a tire tread and a moulage cast was made of it.

The tire tracks ended in the middle of the wooded section. Spreading out from that point the officers managed to pick up several faint footprints in the soft earth. These led to some tangled underbrush where one of the men found a small piece of cloth apparently torn from a woman's dress. It was stained dark brown. Nearby, a large patch of grass was covered with the same kind of stain and as Sheriff Pask examined it, he was certain that it was dried blood.

The final discovery was made some distance away. It was a man's hat with a bullet hole in the crown, and that same ominous dark brown stain. The initials, "J. P." were stamped on the inside band.

Fearing the worst, Pask drove to Bellevue where he exhibited the finds to members of the Moore family. Mrs. Perryman's aged mother recognized the scrap of material as belonging to a dress Margaret had worn on the day she disappeared. The hat was identified as belonging to Perryman.

A volunteer posse was organized and the searching party returned to the woods to comb through the thick underbrush, but despite the intensive search no further clues

turned up nor were the men able to find any trace of the bodies.

It was obvious by now that the Perrymans had met with foul play at the hands of the dark-haired stranger seen driving their sedan. Officials reasoned that Perryman had stopped to give the man a lift and later had been forced to drive into the secluded area where the double murder took place.

Since the gas station attendant had noticed bloodstains in the car, the killer must have placed his victims in the machine after the murders and disposed of the bodies while heading southward.

While trying to gather information about Perryman, Sheriff Pask realized how closemouthed the realtor had been. No one seemed to know where he came from or what he did before arriving in Bellevue. As far as could be learned he never had discussed his family or his past.

The sheriff also was disturbed by some information he had gathered from Perryman's bank. No one seemed to know the reason why the realtor had gone off on so many trips, particularly since a check of records showed no sales made during those periods. It was on several of these trips that Perryman issued checks which called for larger sums than he actually had on deposit in his fairly substantial account. On each occasion the bank notified his wife and she promptly made a deposit to his account so the checks would clear. A bank official said the checks had been cashed in different cities and were made out to cash.

To the veteran officer, the periodic drains on Perryman's finances, his unexplained trips, his silence about his background, and his increasing signs of apprehension which led him to buy a gun, all spelled out the possibility of blackmail. It would also explain why the Moore family had been worried and yet had not appealed to authorities for aid.

The sheriff's suspicions soon were confirmed when he sought out the attorney who represented both the Moore family and the missing realtor.

"You've guessed correctly," the lawyer admitted. "I was under instructions from Perryman not to talk, but now that it looks like both he and Margaret are dead, I'll help all I can to see that the man responsible is brought to justice."

The attorney revealed that the missing realtor was a former convict and had served a term in the Arizona state penitentiary. Margaret not only knew about his past but even had helped obtain his release from prison. Her family also knew about it.

The strange story began about fifteen years earlier when Margaret Moore received a post card addressed to her sent by Perryman from prison. Thinking that it had been a mistake and addressed to her in

error, she returned the card. Some months later, while she was vacationing in Florida, a second post card arrived, and she also sent this one back.

But when a third card arrived from Perryman, she realized that the prisoner was writing to her, and although her family was against it, she did answer the letter. The kind-hearted girl reasoned that the man was lonely and looking for correspondence. After that the couple began to correspond regularly with each other.

Margaret was impressed with the letters she received. Perryman said that he had been imprisoned for forgery and instead of claiming that he was innocent, he admitted the crime but explained the circumstances that had led him to his act.

As time passed she finally prevailed upon her family to agree to offer Perryman a job in one of their factories and then wrote to the Arizona parole board pleading for his release. Prison authorities finally granted Perryman a parole on condition that he accept the job in Bellevue.

Perryman called at the Moore home to express his thanks to the girl who had won his release and from their first date it was soon apparent that they were in love. The former convict had impressed the Moore family with his sincerity to make good and had shown himself to be a capable worker. They did not fight the inevitable when Margaret announced to them that she was going to marry Perryman.

His prison background had been kept a secret from everybody in town. Without that stigma hanging over him, he was accepted at face value, and had made good. But his closely guarded secret became known to somebody who began to blackmail him. The broker took members of his wife's family into his confidence when he received the first call directing him to make payment or else face exposure. Although Margaret at first opposed making any payment, she finally agreed when Perryman pleaded to buy the other off. He made his first trip out of town and was happy when he returned because the blackmailer promised him that there would be no further calls.

His happiness was short-lived. As most victims of blackmail discover, such vultures never give up once they find a good thing, and some months later a second demand was received. Once again Perryman paid. After that the demands for money came more frequently, the last one only two weeks before the couple had disappeared.

By now the insatiable demands had wiped out all of Perryman's savings and Margaret was digging deep into her own reserves in order to pay the hush money. The realtor was becoming frantic.

When both failed to return from West Lodi, members of Margaret's

family were afraid that the blackmailer had made another request and Perryman had decided to have it out with him. That would explain his purchase of a gun. Margaret might have insisted upon going along. The bloodstained scrap of her dress and Perryman's bullet-riddled hat indicated that the blackmailer had not been caught by surprise.

Pask was grim as he heard the story. The hounding of a man who had made good was even more despicable than the usual run of blackmail cases.

Although Perryman had kept Margaret's family informed on the shakedown, they could offer little help toward identifying the blackmailer. He always communicated directly with the realtor and usually met Perryman in a different city each time, ranging from Toledo to St. Louis to Kansas City. Perryman would be instructed to go to a certain hotel, and several days might pass before the blackmailer contacted him and then sent him to another hotel, and sometimes even to a third in another city. It was evident that the wily blackmailer was making certain that his victim wasn't trying to trap him.

With all these precautions, the man had been bold enough to accept checks, since it was hardly likely that Perryman would stop payment and risk having the secret of his past come out. The only clue to his identity was the signature on the back of the checks. Margaret had told her brothers that all of the blackmail checks were endorsed, "Joe North." Perryman always destroyed them after they came back from the bank for fear that somebody else might get hold of them and add to his difficulties.

Pask realized that the name North was probably a fake and not worth much as a clue, but at the same time, the fact that the blackmailer was able to cash the checks in different cities indicated that he carried identification papers bearing that name.

The sheriff returned to his office to confer with his men. "Perryman told his wife that the blackmailer was somebody he didn't know, so it probably isn't anybody in Bellevue," he commented. "More than likely it's some ex-con who was in prison at the same time in Arizona and knew of his correspondence with Miss Moore. He may have drifted into town to see what was cooking, learned how Perryman was keeping quiet about his past, and moved in on the setup. Maybe the warden at the pen can give me some kind of lead."

Pask sent a wire to Arizona asking for information and then went to the realtor's office where he checked through his papers. None of the blackmail checks were found. A similar search at the house turned up no leads.

State troopers were keeping a close watch on all automobiles on the highway, but Perryman's car was not observed.

That night the sheriff telephoned the warden in Arizona who had gone through his records and was able to answer some of Pask's questions. The warden revealed that Perryman had been much of a loner in prison, considering himself superior to the convicts serving time with him. As a result he was left strictly alone by the others and this loneliness may have accounted for his letter writing, which in turn led him to freedom, marriage, and a respectable life. The warden also supplied what information he had on the prisoner's background.

One surprising fact emerged. Perryman's name originally had been Joe North but he had changed it legally while still in prison. The blackmailer had not pulled the name out of thin air but was using it ironically on the checks as a reminder to Perryman.

The sheriff sat silently at his desk for some time after the long distance call. He studied the notes he had made and then examined the clues picked up at the scene. He spent some time inspecting the bullet hole in the hat under a magnifying glass. The following morning he returned to the wooded area where the clues had been found and reexamined the ground. His next appearance was at Perryman's office, where he once again went through papers in the missing man's files and desk.

Perryman's lawyer had accompanied the sheriff to the real estate office.

"Just what are you looking for, Sheriff?" he asked.

"The key to this case. The identity of Joe North."

The attorney was startled. "You don't think the blackmailer put his demands in writing with a return address on it?" he demanded.

Pask smiled slightly at the irony in the other's voice. "You forget that the blackmailer made his last known demand only two weeks ago," he pointed out. "That's pretty soon for him to come back for more. Maybe Perryman had a lead and was going out after him. There may be something in his papers that will tell me why he went off again so soon."

The sheriff did find a letter that interested him. It was from a woman in Sandusky and had been mailed in an envelope from a real estate office there. A short time later Pask left for Cleveland where he deposited the clues found in the woods at the police laboratory and asked the scientific experts to make certain tests for him.

Several hours later the tests were completed and the sheriff headed back on Highway 20 toward Bellevue. He stopped off on the way in the town of Elyria, some seventeen miles from Cleveland.

For the rest of the day his actions would have puzzled his men. Pask no longer appeared to be working on a murder investigation but seemed to be a man with plenty of time on his hands. He walked about the

streets of the town dropping in at different lunchrooms and taverns, and started idle conversations with anybody willing to talk to him.

Only once did his face register any emotion — when he entered a restaurant and after talking to a waitress left abruptly. He drove out of town, but turned off the highway shortly before Bellevue and headed for Sandusky. He glanced in at the window of a real estate office there and next visited a house where an attractive woman answered his ring.

"I'm looking for Joe," he said. "Is he here?"

The woman shook her head. "Most likely he is over at his club in Tiffin," she replied, naming another town southwest of Bellevue.

There was nothing slow about the sheriff's actions now as he sped back to Bellevue and summoned the attorney for the Moore family.

"I think I have located Joe North," he told the other.

"Who is he? Somebody from around here?" the lawyer asked.

"I think you'll recognize him," Pask replied. Before leaving, he telephoned Sheriff Deates in Tiffin and asked him to search the clubs in town for a man named Joe North, but not to indicate to North that he was being sought.

When Pask and the attorney arrived in Tiffin, they found Deates already had spotted North. He was playing cards at a club where he was a member.

The group entered the club quietly and attracted no attention from a small party of men seated around a table playing stud poker. One of the men studying his cards had his back to the door, his jet black hair glistening under the electric light.

Sheriff Deates walked up behind this man, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "There's somebody here to see you."

The man swung around and, as he did, the attorney with Pask gasped. "Why he looks something like Perryman, except that his hair is so dark."

"It is Perryman," Sheriff Pask revealed to his companions.

For several seconds the card player sat there looking at the others. Finally he smiled.

"That's right," he admitted, "back in Bellevue, I'm John Perryman, but in this part of Ohio, I'm Joe North, traveling salesman. Every once in a while I have to get away from the refined atmosphere of my wife and her family or go bust. So I make believe I have to go away on a business trip and come here and relax."

"Then how about the blackmailer?" the attorney asked.

North grinned. "Just my own sweet system to get some more money from my wife," he boasted.

Sheriff Pask broke in. "Now, tell us what you did with your wife."

The realtor stared at him as if in surprise. "Why, Margaret's home, of course. I brought her home after

looking over the farm at Lodi, and then told her I had another payment to make to the blackmailer. She was ready to go into the house when I left."

Sheriff Pask smiled grimly at the prisoner. "I've got a few things to tell you," he remarked.

The officers escorted the realty broker to the Tiffin sheriff's office where he was searched. A loaded gun was found in his pocket.

Once they were seated, Pask accused Perryman of murdering his wife. "You're crazy," the realty broker shouted at the officer. The sheriff shook his head.

"You're the one who was crazy for thinking you could get away with it," was his calm reply.

"You made three mistakes," the sheriff continued. "The first was when you used the North name to endorse those checks. You should have realized that when you staged that fake death scene in the woods, we would investigate your background. That's how I learned that Joe North once was your name. Of course, it still could have been somebody from your past blackmailing you and signing North to the checks just as a reminder to you not to double cross him, but that name started me thinking.

"I realized that there had been no real signs of a struggle in the woods and the bullet hole in the hat bothered me. You probably thought it was your master stroke, but actually it was your worst mistake. I had the hat tested at the police lab in Cleveland and the powder marks from the gun were inside the hat showing that you had taken it off and held the pistol on the inside when you fired. Later you smeared your wife's blood on the outside. If somebody had shot you while you were wearing the hat, the powder marks never would have been where they were found."

The sheriff paused. "Mistake number three was that piece torn from your wife's dress. You didn't quite tear all of it. I guess it didn't tear too easily so you cut the dress first with a knife to get it started and then ripped off the rest by hand, making believe a struggle had taken place. Under the microscope the lab men could tell just where you cut the cloth and where you started ripping it."

The sheriff's recital of the evidence he had amassed against him, seemed to have stunned Perryman. He stared at the floor for a long minute after Pask finished and then said, "I guess I wasn't as clever as I thought."

He admitted luring his wife into the wooded area with a story about purchasing the acreage for a building development. He shot her after she stepped out of the car and later took the body to a drainage ditch, tying heavy weights to it so it would sink down out of sight. He said Margaret had become suspicious of his many trips away from home and he decided to kill her and disappear

from Bellevue. He already had set up the Joe North dual personality, and for a disguise dyed his hair black and changed a few lines on his face. He had been an actor during his youth and was skillful with makeup.

He had one question to ask Sheriff Pask. "How did you get on my trail as North?"

"That's another mistake you made," the sheriff replied. "I found a letter in your desk that seemed out of place in an envelope from a real estate man in Sandusky. The letter was handwritten, but the envelope was typed. That made me suspect you were trying to hide that letter as business correspondence. The letter mentioned something about serving you food in Elyria, and so I checked there until I found a place where you were friendly with a waitress. She was off, so I called at her home in Sandusky. I just asked her where Joe North was and she told me."

Perryman was placed on trial for the murder of his wife in October, 1936, and after being convicted was sentenced to life imprisonment.

He had taken a device that fiction writers have long discarded as too cumbersome and by creating a dual personality had almost gotten away with his fantastic plot.

The Lady in Question

A Police File Novelette

by JONATHAN CRAIG

THE ADDRESS on West Seventy-fourth Street turned out to be a two-story brick building with a candy store below and curtained windows above. Walt Logan and I got out of the unmarked police sedan and walked around to the side entrance. The patrolman who had called in the squeal was standing in the doorway. He stepped back, held the door open for us, and glanced behind him.

"She's back there," he said. "Under the stairs."

There was a man sitting on the bottom step of a cement stairway.

"This is Mr. Connell," the patrolman said. "He's the gentleman who found the body."

Connell was somewhere in his early fifties, a slope-shouldered, muscular guy in a skivvy shirt and dungarees. He started to rise, then sank back down on the step, frowning worriedly.

"You're detectives?" he asked.

I nodded. "My name's Manning. This is my partner, Detective Logan."

Connell stared at each of us in turn, then looked away, shaking his head slowly, "Of all the lousy luck," he said, more to himself than to Walt and me. "God, what a thing to happen."

I glanced at Walt, then turned toward the space between the stairway and the rear wall of the building. "Let's take a look," I said.

The girl lay on her left side, facing us, with her head wedged into the angle between the floor and the foot of the stairway. She had dark brown hair and a lot of it, and a face that might have been pretty, before someone worked it over. There was blood on her face and throat and a fair-sized pool of it beneath her head. You could tell from the awkward position of her arms and legs that she'd been thrown or dragged there. Her thin summer skirt and petticoat were twisted up around her hips, but not in a manner to suggest a sexual assault.

I knelt down and touched the blood on the floor with a fingertip.

"Dry?" Walt Logan asked.

At first Logan and Manning didn't see anything at all. Then they found the dead girl under the stairs . . .

Illustrated by James Sentz

"Yes.

"Well, in this hot weather it wouldn't take long. No longer than three or four hours, at the most."

I took out my pocket flash and played it the length of the girl's body, looking for knife or bullet wounds. There were none. I bent close and studied the girl's face. She had been hit often, and hard, and the characteristics of the bruises indicated the weapon had been some-

one's fists. The nose had been broken and then hammered repeatedly, and the jaw showed clearly that it had been broken in at least two places.

I stood up, played my flash on the floor, and we started back the way we had come, looking for bloodstains. We found several small ones on the walls, but none on the floor. There were also a number of long, dark smears on the wall near the foot of the stairs, which might have been bloodstains before someone attempted to wipe them away.

The patrolman looked at me questioningly.

"She took a beating," I told him. "I'd say she died from it, but we can't be sure until the M.E. has a look." I glanced at the smears on the wall again. "Somebody probably worked her over out here, and then dragged her back beneath the stairs to get her out of sight."

The middle-aged man in the skivvy shirt said, "It's the way the cards are stacked. If they're against you, there's nothing you can do. Not a damn thing." He had an unusually high-pitched voice for a man of his size and age. I had a feeling it would have exactly the same self-pitying whine under any circumstances whatever.

I walked over to him. "When did you find her, Mr. Connell?"

"Just a minute or two before I called the officer," he said.

"He called me at ten-oh-four," the patrolman said.

Connell brushed the front of his skivvy shirt with the knuckles of his left hand. "My heart's none too good, you see. When I saw her there, all bloodied up like that, it was almost too much for me. I had to lean up against the wall a couple of minutes before I could make it out to the street." He paused, frowning accusingly at the patrolman. "I saw him go by just a few seconds before I found her, but when I got out on the sidewalk he was clear down to the corner. It almost bust my lungs, yelling for him like that."

"Do you know who the girl is?" I asked.

"Well, of course I do. She's a tenant of mine, isn't she? Her name's Bonnie Nichols."

"How'd you happen to find her?"

"I was cleaning up back here, the way I do every week or so. Bonnie, she had the big apartment upstairs." He patted one of the cement steps with his hand. "This was her private entrance. Nobody ever used it but her, so it didn't take much tending."

"You live here, too, Mr. Connell?"

"Sure I do. I own the building. I run it and the candy store all by myself. No help at all."

"Any other of your tenants home now?" I asked.

"There aren't any. I got just the two apartments up there. When my wife was here, we had the whole top floor. When she took off, I put in another bathroom and sealed up a couple of doors and —"

"Let's get back to the girl, Mr.

Connell," I said. "Have you any idea who might have killed her?"

He shook his head. "No, sir, I sure-God haven't," he said in that whining voice. "But I can tell you one thing, mister. *I* sure didn't do it."

"When's the last time you saw her alive?"

He thought it over for a moment. "It was about eleven o'clock last night. I didn't actually see her, mind you, but I heard her go out." He paused. "Come to think of it, she didn't come back all night."

"Why do you say that."

"Well, I'm a pretty light sleeper, and those walls up there aren't exactly soundproof. She almost always woke me up when she came in."

I slipped my notebook into my pocket and turned to Walt Logan. "You're the lock expert," I said. "See if that one on the street door's been tampered with."

Walt's one of these tall, thin, studious-looking types with mild eyes and crew-cut hair. He's deceptive. Actually he can leave you for dead with either fist. He inspected the lock and door carefully.

"No," he said. "There's nothing to indicate a forcible entry. And this lock's probably the best make on the market, Steve. It'd be almost impossible to pick."

I nodded. "I think I'll have a look at the girl's apartment, Walt. The M.E. and the tech crew should be here any minute. You want to stay and give them a hand?"

He walked over to study the dark stains on the wall. "All right," he said. "Just don't get lost, that's all."

"You mind taking me upstairs, Mr. Connell?" I asked.

He shrugged and got to his feet. "I guess there's no way around it. I guess when the cards are stacked wrong, you just got to grin and bear it." He started up the steps. "All this fuss and bother, I mean. All this big to-do."

2.

I fell in beside him on the stairway. "How many keys are there to that door down there?" I asked.

"Just two," he said. "Bonnie's and mine." He snapped his fingers. "No. There was another one. Bonnie's roommate's."

"I got the impression she lived alone," I said.

"Well, she did. But she used to live with another girl. This other one moved out a while back. She never turned her key over to me."

The stairway ended in front of a green metal door. Connell took out a chain of keys, opened the door, and we stepped into a living room.

"Well, this is it," he said. "I sure hope you don't aim to tear things up."

I grinned at him. "Relax, Mr. Connell. I just wanted to see whether there were any signs of a fight up here."

"I can tell you right now there wasn't anything like that," he said.

"If there was, I'd of heard it. I'm a pretty light sleeper and —"

"Yes, I know," I said. "Just sit down, Mr. Connell. I'll be back with you in a minute."

There were three rooms and a bathroom, a typical furnished apartment with the usual mixture of old and new furniture, unmatched rugs, and pictures scattered about the walls for no purpose other than to make the walls look less blank. There were no bloodstains, overturned or broken furniture, or any other signs of violence. The bed had been made and an old-fashioned French doll propped up against the pillow. I stood staring at it for a moment, and then I went back to the living room. Mr. Connell was sitting on the sofa. I pulled an easy chair close to him and sat down.

"How long had Miss Nichols lived here?" I asked.

"About a year. She was the first tenant I had. This other girl moved in later."

"What can you tell me about her? I mean, what'd she do for a living — things like that."

"She was a right nice girl. And pretty? Lord, she was one of the prettiest girls you ever laid eyes on. She always paid her rent regular, too. Every Saturday morning, right on the button."

"Where'd she work?" I asked.

"Well, she didn't work any place in particular. She was a singer, you know. Worked around here and there. She was on TV now and then, and I heard her say she made a record once in a while. These singing commercial things, like you hear on the radio all the time."

"You know any of her friends or acquaintances?"

"Just that girl she used to live with. She's a singer, too. A real famous one. Lori Mason. You ever hear of her?"

I nodded. "When did Miss Mason move out?"

"About two months ago. Just about the time you started hearing so much about her. One of her records went over big, you know, and all at once she was too good for a place like this. Me, I was damn glad to see her go. She was just as pretty as Bonnie, but she had more temper than any other female I ever met. Why, one night she got to arguing with a guy down there on the sidewalk. The first thing you know, she lit right into him with her fists, just like she was a man. She wasn't slapping him or scratching him, mind you — she was going after him just like one of these little featherweights you see on TV. That fella knew he'd been in a fight, you can bet. Took me and another man to get them apart." He gestured toward his heart again. "Damn near did me in, too. Had to come upstairs and lie down for a couple hours."

"You know where Lori Mason lives now?"

"No, and I don't want to. That's one female I can live without, be-

lieve me. She reminds me too much of my wife. Too much temper. My wife used to clobber hell out of me every so often, just for speaking pleasant to some other woman. There wasn't much I could do about it, what with my heart and all, and —"

"About Miss Nichols, now," I said. "Did she have friends in often?"

"Men friends, you mean? Yes, sir, she sure did. Every night, almost. I'm not one to eavesdrop, mind you, but with those walls the way they are, a man just naturally hears what's going on. There was never any trouble over there, though. No noise at all, hardly. Me, my motto's live and let live, and if I happened to know some of those fellows stayed all night, it wasn't any skin off mine."

"How'd your wife feel about your living here on the same floor with young girls, Mr. Connell?"

He shrugged. "She didn't have anything to say about it. And besides, I haven't seen her since she took off, more than a year ago."

"Where is she now?"

"Living with her folks, so far as I know. Out in Jersey."

I got to my feet. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"I guess not."

"You mind letting me see your apartment, then?"

He got up quickly, eyes narrowing a little. "Why?"

"Routine," I said.

"It isn't. You think I killed her."

"I'll have to look at it," I said.

He studied me for a long moment, then moved into the corridor and along it to another door. He opened it and stood aside. "I knew what you were thinking," he said. "I knew it all along."

I didn't say anything, and I made my search of his apartment as brief as I could. I didn't find anything.

When I got back to Mr. Connell, I said, "I'll have to ask you to stick around here for a while."

"Here in the apartment, you mean?"

"Yes."

"What about my business? I run that candy store all by myself, you know."

"I'm sorry," I said. "We have to do things a certain way, Mr. Connell.

"You got no right to keep a man from making a living, though," he said bitterly. "Just because I was in a little trouble once, doesn't mean that you can come in here and . . ." He broke off suddenly.

"What kind of trouble, Mr. Connell?" I asked.

"Don't make out you don't know what I'm talking about. You don't fool me one bit." He straightened up to his full height, put his hands on his hips, and stared at me defiantly. "I wasn't guilty then and I'm not guilty now."

"I missed your first name downstairs, Mr. Connell," I said.

He glowered at me. "You know it, all right. It's William. William G. Connell."

I nodded and crossed to the door. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Connell."

"Never mind the thanks," he said. "Just do your job, so I can get back to mine."

I closed the door behind me and walked back the way we had come, keeping an eye out for bloodstains in the corridor. There were none.

3.

Downstairs again, I found the M.E. and the techs had arrived and were hard at work. A policewoman, sent by Headquarters to search the body, was on her way out the door. I asked her if she'd found anything of interest. She said no, unless you counted a five-dollar bill in the girl's brassiere.

I walked over to Walt Logan and led him aside. "What's the doc say?" I asked.

"She was choked to death."

"What?"

"By her own blood."

"Oh."

"The doc says he doubts whether the beating itself would have been fatal."

"How about time of death?"

"He puts it anywhere between eleven o'clock last night and one o'clock this morning."

"The techs come up with anything yet?"

"Not yet. They're shooting all the angles, though." He glanced toward the stairway. "How'd you make out with our friend Connell?"

I filled him in. "Connell seems to have been in trouble at some time," I went on. "I didn't press him on it because I figured I'd get it faster and straighter from the records."

Walt nodded thoughtfully. "I could tell there was something bugging him. He's a strange bird, Steve. I wouldn't fall down with surprise if it turned out that he—" He stopped, peering toward the door. I turned. A young guy was standing in the doorway, looking as if he couldn't decide whether to come all the way in or go back out again. He was dressed in some kind of dark green uniform and cap, and now he took the cap off and fumbled with it, looking first at Walt and then at me.

I stepped over to him. "Anything we can do for you?" I asked.

He was about twenty, a thin, slightly stooped boy with a lot of bone in his face and a hairline that had already started to recede. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Police business," I said. "Did you want to see someone?"

He nodded. "Miss Nichols."

"Why?"

"It's time for her driving lesson." He shifted his weight uneasily, frowning a little. "You mind telling a guy what's wrong?"

"Miss Nichols won't be taking her lesson today," I said. "What's your name, son?"

"Ralph Bolen."

"How'd you get in, Ralph?"

"Why, I just opened the door and walked in." His frown deepened. "Hey, what is all this, anyhow?"

Walt Logan stepped up beside me. "I left the door unlocked, Steve," he said. "There was too much traffic in and out to keep it locked."

"Has something happened to Miss Nichols?" Ralph asked.

"Better let us ask the questions," I said. "You're a driving instructor, are you?"

He nodded.

"How often do you give Miss Nichols a lesson?"

"Three times a week. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays."

"She been taking them long?"

"Well, longer than most, I guess. About six weeks now."

"Walt," I said, "I want to talk to Ralph here for a minute or two, and then I'm going over to the station house and check out a couple of things. I'll probably be back before you're ready to leave. If I'm not, leave a patrolman staked out here and meet me at the squad room."

"Right. Any special instructions?"

"No."

"Good enough. I'll see you later."

I nodded to Ralph Bolen and held the door open for him. "It's pretty hot and crowded in here," I said. "We can talk better outside." I followed him through the door, past the small group of people that had gathered about it, as people always do when they see police cars and tech trucks at a scene, and down the sidewalk to a dual-control car with *Manhattan Auto Driving School* lettered on the door. We got in and I leaned back against the cushion and said, "Give me your impression of Miss Nichols, Ralph."

"Impression?"

"That's right. Tell me everything you know about her."

He took a cigarette from his pocket, started to light it, then tossed it out the window. "I forgot," he said. "We aren't supposed to smoke while we're on duty."

I waited.

"Well," he said, "I sure wish you'd tell me the score. But if you won't you won't, and that's that." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel for several seconds, staring straight ahead through the windshield. "I don't care a hell of a lot for her, if you want to know the truth."

"Why not?"

"Well, she can get pretty snooty. She's a singer, and I guess she figures she's got to show what a lot of temperament she has. Take when she makes a mistake, now. She doesn't just laugh it off, like anybody else would. She makes a real big thing out of it. A real production. And no matter what she does wrong, it always turns out it's my fault for being such a lousy instructor." He laughed softly, without any humor at all. "I wouldn't talk this plain if you weren't a cop. I don't believe in knocking anybody, and when it comes to knocking women — "

"I understand," I said. "None of this will go any farther."

"I hope not. The boss gives us hell for talking out of school." He paused. "We never did hit it off. We got started wrong, and it stayed that way. The first time I took her out for a lesson, I thought she was a checker."

"What do you mean?"

"One of these people the company hires to check up on the instructors. You know. To see whether we treat the people right. They make out they're students, just to see how we act. If we get out of line, or get impatient, or anything like that, we don't work there any more."

"Why'd you think Miss Nichols was one of those?"

"Because of the way she did when she got in the car. It was hot weather then, just like it is now, and the first thing she did when she got in the car was hike her skirt up. You know how women do when they're driving in hot weather. I didn't know whether she was pitching, or checking, or what the hell. And I didn't mean to find out. Especially when she started bawling me out for nothing. I was almost sure then that she was a checker."

"I see."

"But it was her being such a phony that really got me. From the way she acted the first few lessons, I thought she was big time. And then I find out all she does is sing in some of those dives on the upper west side and make some of those crazy commercials you hear all the time."

"She ever mention any of her friends to you?"

"She's a real name-dropper. You'd think she knew everybody in New York."

"She ever indicate she was in trouble of any kind?"

"No. She yaks all the time, but she never said anything like that. Oh, she told me she had a little trouble fighting off a guy now and then. I wasn't buying any of that, though. I know the round-heeled ones when I see them. It's funny as hell, the way she'll sit there with her skirt hiked up, telling you about some guy trying to make advances. I remember one night when she outdid herself. She —"

"One night?"

"Yeah. We try to mix in a night lesson with the others now and then, especially when the student is getting pretty far along. Anyhow, I brought her home and there was this guy standing beside the door. She sees him and lets out a yip and says I've got to get her out of there, and fast. I couldn't see the guy too good, it being so dark and all, but he didn't look any bigger or meaner than anybody else. When we got around the corner I asked her what the hell. She said this guy was after her. I told her she should get a cop, and then you should have seen her. Real coy, you know. Real little-girlish. Seems the guy had *designs* on her. Designs, for God's sake. And her a girl that sings in dives."

"Would you recognize this man if you saw him again?"

"Not a chance. Like I say, it was pretty dark. I did notice he was a blond-headed guy, though. You know how yellow hair always shows up in the dark."

"You notice anything else about him?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Not that I remember."

"Can you give me any idea of his age?"

"Well, I'd say he was pretty young. About my age, maybe. Maybe a little older." He shrugged. "I wouldn't swear to it, though. I didn't get that good a look at him."

"What night was this?"

"Last Fri- No. Last Wednesday." He turned in the seat slightly, looking at me questioningly. "Listen," he said. "I'm no big brain, but I can tell something pretty bad's happened to her. You mind telling me what?"

I pushed the door handle down and got out of the car. "Sorry, Ralph," I said. "I appreciate your help, but police business is police business."

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and nodded slowly. "You're the boss."

I said so-long to him and walked along the street to the police sedan. When I drove past the dual-control car on my way to the station house, Ralph Bolen was still sitting there, frowning straight ahead through the windshield, staring at nothing.

4

I got back to the squad room at twenty minutes past twelve. Inasmuch as neither Walt nor I had attended the nine o'clock lineup at Headquarters, I called the officer in charge of the line-up and asked if any of the suspects brought in during the night had been blond-haired. He told me there had been two blonde women but no men. Next I called the Bureau of Criminal Identification and asked for run-throughs on Bonnie Nichols, William Connell, and Lori Mason. Although Miss Mason's first name was probably a professional one, BCI would have her cross-indexed under it as well as her real one. I asked for William Connell's run-through to be expedited, and that I be called as soon as they came up with it.

I didn't have long to wait. I had just begun adding additional data to the Complaint Report in connection with the case when BCI called me back. William Connell had been arrested fourteen months ago, charged with taking a nine-year-old girl to his apartment over the candy store. After the child's mother had cooled off a bit, and realized the notoriety she and the child could expect as a result of the charge, she had withdrawn it. The D.A. had found the girl confused when he asked her to describe certain things in Connell's apartment. With no assurance at all of getting an indictment, he had gone along with the

girl's mother, and Connell had been released.

I recalled that Connell's wife had left him a little over a year ago, and drew the obvious connection between this and the morals charge. I asked BCI for the address of Mrs. Connell's parents in New Jersey, which would appear in Connell's case file, and then called the chief of police in the Jersey town and asked him to establish Mrs. Connell's whereabouts between eleven and one o'clock the night before.

I hung up and went through the arrest records for the previous night, because not all suspects and perpetrators are brought to the morning line-ups and I wanted to be sure none had been picked up in the vicinity of the crime. There had been few arrests in the precinct during the night, and none seemed a likely suspect for the murder.

BCI called again a few minutes later to say they had nothing on Bonnie Nichols or Lori Mason but that they had located Miss Mason through her telephone answering service.

Miss Mason left word that she could be reached at the Lambert Studios on lower Broadway. Lambert, I knew, was owned by one of the largest recording companies in the business.

I stepped into the squad commander's office to tell him where I'd be, and then went downstairs to round up a car.

I was on my way quickly.

5.

The four-story building which housed the Lambert Studios was one of the oldest in the neighborhood, so ugly and smoke-grimed that it was hard to believe that some of the most famous entertainers in the world recorded there.

There was an elderly woman at a small desk just inside the front entrance. She had sharp eyes embedded in wrinkles and blue-tinted hair with a pencil pushed through one of the buns over her ears. Elderly, but alert, and all business.

I showed her my badge. "I'd like to talk to Miss Mason," I said.

She glanced at the badge, shrugged, and pointed to a door marked Fire Stairs, "You'll find her in there," she said crisply. "She's making a record, but the light isn't on over the door, so it should be okay."

I looked at the door, then back at the woman. "Which floor?"

She smiled. "Right behind the door. We call it the Snipe Pit."

I walked to the door, hesitated for a moment, then opened it.

A very young and very pretty brunette girl was leaning up against the wall. She had a cigarette in one hand and a lead sheet in the other, humming to herself while smoke trickled from her nose and she beat time with the hand that held the cigarette. She was dressed in a bra and a worn pair of levis. A plaid shirt hung on the iron railing at the

foot of the fire stairs and a huge alligator bag was draped from the newel post.

The girl stopped humming, her hand still raised for the next beat, and looked at me over the lead sheet. "Who the hell are you?" she asked.

I went through the routine with my badge. "I'm Detective Manning. Are you Miss Mason?"

She nodded absently, put the lead sheet and cigarette down on a step, and reached for the plaid shirt. "Gets hot down here," she said conversationally. "Sometimes you're down here for hours before you get a good master." She slipped into the shirt, leaving the tails out of her levis, and buttoned a few of the buttons down the middle.

I glanced about me. There was a pair of headphones hanging on a hook in the wall and a microphone suspended from a long cord that disappeared over the top-floor banister. The microphone was a full twenty feet above our heads.

"You mean you record down here, Miss Mason?"

She picked up the cigarette and lead sheet again and nodded. "Sure. This stairwell makes the best echo chamber in New York. By the time my voice reaches that mike up there, you'd swear I was off somewhere in the Alps. We're cutting a song about a girl who's dead. It's the girl herself that's singing, you see, so we have to have the echo effect." She raked the toe of one shoe through the litter of cigarette butts on the cement floor. "We call this the Snipe Pit. Everybody ducks down here to smoke, but nobody ever cleans it up."

"I see."

"What'd you want to talk to me about?" She reached for the headphones and put them on in such a way that they only partially covered her ears. "But listen. If you see that red light on the wall there go on, it means the boys upstairs are ready to cut. That's where the band and the recording equipment is, up on the top floor. I can hear the band over the cans, but you won't hear a thing. If the light goes on, you stop talking and I start singing. When it goes off again, we can take up where we left off. Okay?"

I nodded. "Fair enough. I wanted to talk about Bonnie Nichols. You used to live with her, I hear."

"That's right."

"You see her often?"

"Once in a while. Why?"

"Maybe it'll be a little better if you let me ask the questions, Miss Mason. When's the last time you saw her?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I ran into her in a bar up on Lexington. We had a couple of drinks together."

"Did she do or say anything that struck you as strange?"

"Why, no. Is she missing or something? If she is, I —"

The red light flashed on. Lori Mason shoved the headphones firmly on her ears, frowned a warning at

me, and began to sing. She stood with her feet tight together, knees slightly bent, eyes shut, still clasping the lead sheet in one hand and the cigarette in the other. She had it, all right. A real pro, going after another million-copy record and more money than I'd make in the next five years. I watched her work and thought about how it would seem to sit in a bar a few weeks from now and listen to this same record. It was going to be hard to believe that it had been made by a girl in worn-out denim pants, standing in a litter of cigarette butts at the bottom of a hot stairwell.

When she finished she hung the headphones back on their hook, dropped her cigarette among the others, and leaned up against the wall again.

"I think somebody in the brass section hit a clinker," she said. "That means another time through."

"About Miss Nichols," I said. "Does she have any enemies that you know of?"

"Well . . . not enemies, actually. A lot of people don't especially like her. But I wouldn't go so far as to call them enemies."

"How about you?"

She shrugged. "I can take her or leave her. We used to be pretty good friends, but then she started to get a little too greedy. As soon as I hit it lucky with that first record, she started borrowing money. And wearing my new clothes without asking me. Things like that. She wanted me to pull some wires and get her in with a record outfit. And then, when I tried, and nobody would take her on, she accused me of queering things for her." She paused, smiling a little. "If that sounds a little bitter, it is. She's pretty hard to take."

"Was there any one thing in particular that caused you to move out?"

"Sure. Money. All at once I had a lot of it. I could afford to have a better place, and so I moved. Bonnie wanted to come with me. I nixed that idea fast. I'd had enough." She reached into the alligator bag for a cigarette, lighted it, and squinted at me through the smoke. "I'm assuming that Bonnie's in some kind of a jam and that she thinks maybe I'll help her. If that's the way it is, she'll have to think up something else. I've helped her all I'm going to."

"It isn't like that," I said. "Do you know any of her men friends?"

"That's like asking me if I know any men. She's had too many to keep track of."

"Any of them blond?"

She gazed at the tip of her cigarette thoughtfully for a moment, then shook her head. "Not that I remember."

"When you saw her yesterday, did she mention any man in particular?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. She had a real sucker on the string, she said. He was going to buy her

a car. An. MG She was laughing about it. She said the guy had all kinds of money, and that he'd set the deal for the car and was going to pay cash for it this morning."

"She was laughing about it?"

"Sure. That's the kind of girl she is. She kept talking about how funny this rich guy's face would look when he found out she'd turned right around and given the car to Mel."

"Who's Mel?"

"Mel Davis. That's her boy friend. The one that counts, I mean. All the others are strictly for bucks and presents."

"Did she mention her plans for the evening?"

"She had a date with Mel. At eleven, I think she said. But she must have had something in mind before then, because she told me she hoped she could stay sober till she met him."

"How's this Mel Davis feel about her going around with these other men?"

"He's all for it. They turn out some fabulous heels in this town, but Mel doesn't have to bow to any of them. Bonnie wouldn't have to worry about money at all if she didn't give so much to him. If you gave her a ring tonight, she'd hock it tomorrow morning. By tomorrow afternoon Mel would be over on Fifth Avenue, buying a couple of new suits."

"The wholesome type?"

"Wholesome is right. I went around with him myself for a while, but when he started promoting me I gave him a fast good-by. And then I found out Bonnie had been dating him on the sly." She smiled grimly. "I've had some wonderful friends in my time, believe me."

"When was this?"

"Just before I moved out."

"Did it have anything to do with your moving out?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"No jealousy at all, Miss Mason?"

"Not a bit. Any girl who'd be jealous of a character like Mel Davis — well, she'd be lacking a few of those wheels they talk about." She took another drag on her cigarette and let the smoke out very slowly, studying me. "Have I been cooperative?"

"Yes, and I appreciate —"

"And frank?"

"Yes."

"I think so, too. And now, how about telling me what the hell this is all about?"

"I'll do that as soon as I can," I said. "Do you know Mel Davis' address?"

She shrugged and picked up the headphones again. "Have it your own way. Cops always do, don't they? . . . Mel lives in an apartment house at Twenty-three West Seventy-second. I forget the name of the place. I was there a few times, but all I remember is the address."

I got out my notebook and wrote it down. "Were you working last night, Miss Mason?"

"No. The place where I sing was

closed last night. I spent the evening with a stack of records, listening to the competition."

"Anyone there with you?"

"No. Listen —"

"You make or receive any telephone calls?"

"No." She took a slow step toward me. "Just what is it you suspect me of?"

"I didn't say I suspected you of anything, Miss Mason. It's just rou —"

"Don't give me that business about routine. I've gone along with you all the way. The least you can do is —" The red light flashed on. "Damn!"

As she reached up to place the headphones over her ears I nodded a good-by, opened the fire door, and stepped outside. There was a phone booth at one side of the entrance. I walked over to it and called the squad room.

The lieutenant answered. He told me Walt Logan had not come in. There'd been a phone call from the chief of police in the New Jersey town where William Connell had told me his wife was staying with her parents. Mrs. Connell, it seemed, had moved out about three weeks ago, and her parents said they'd had no word from her since. She'd left abruptly after a family quarrel, during which she had struck her father, a man nearly eighty years old.

I recalled that Mr. Connell had told me of his wife's jealousy and similar acts of violence, reasoned it was probable she had returned to New York, and asked the lieutenant to have Communications broadcast a pickup for her.

Then I hung up, went out to my car, and headed uptown to talk to Mel Davis.

6.

Davis glanced casually at my badge, smiled as if he'd been expecting me, and invited me into his apartment. He was about thirty-one or -two, a sturdily built man with straight black hair, small, almost effeminate features, and cynical blue eyes with tiny hoods at their outer corners.

It was a one-room apartment, and a very small one. Stacks of phonograph albums and sheet music were scattered about, and one entire wall was filled with hi-fi equipment. A trumpet lay on the floor beside a half-empty bottle of whiskey.

Davis motioned me to a seat on the studio couch and sat down on a hassock across from me. "I just heard about it," he said. "On the radio." He'd been working on the bottle, but not enough to matter.

A fairly direct approach seemed to be in order. "I understand you and Miss Nichols were very good friends," I said.

He nodded. "I've known her quite a while. She worked with my band for a couple nights, filling in for the regular girl. She's been hanging around ever since."

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"Night before last. She was over here for an hour or so, before I went to work." He glanced toward the whiskey bottle, started to reach for it, then apparently changed his mind. "She was supposed to come over last night," he said, "but she didn't show."

"What time was your date?"

"She said she'd be over about eleven. She had an early date with another guy, see, but she was going to bounce him. She did that a lot."

"Were you here all evening, Mr. Davis?"

"All evening. I take a night off now and then, and last night was one of them. When one o'clock came along, and still no Bonnie, I hit the pad. I was beat all the way down. Musicians keep lousy hours, you know."

"You didn't get worried about her?"

"No. Why should I? I figured she couldn't shake this other guy, or maybe they were just making it real good together or something. I didn't give a damn. I wanted the rest more than I did her, anyhow."

"You didn't think it was worth even a telephone call to find out if she was home?"

He smiled again. "I wouldn't kid you. I didn't care either way. She would have padded down with me all the time, if I'd been willing. But I don't go for this one-woman kick. I never have. Bonnie's roommate had the same idea, when we were making it together. I had to get her back on the right chord, too."

"Lori Mason?"

"That's right. Lori. The big name with the key to Fort Knox. I cut her off cold, after I met Bonnie. She flipped forty ways from the middle." He spoke matter-of-factly, and there was nothing whatever in his face or voice that indicated he thought he was saying anything at all unusual.

"It's my understanding that Miss Nichols gave you money from time to time," I said.

"That's right."

"Did you know that someone was going to give her an automobile, and that she was going to turn it over to you?"

"Yes, I did. Or rather, I had a pretty good idea she was up to something like that. She kept hinting around, acting real smug — you know how they do?"

"Did she tell you the man's name?"

He shook his head. "No. I said once I'd like to have an MG, and a couple of days after that she said she wouldn't be at all surprised if I didn't get my wish. The last time I saw her she as much as said she'd have it for me today."

"Was this the man she had the early date with last night?"

"He's the one." Davis shook his head wonderingly. "He must be some character, all right. Bonnie said he was one of these rich young punks that fall into their old man's

business, but that she didn't think the business would last long, with this guy as stupid as he was. She said he didn't know anything about anything, especially women. She called him Sucker One — and from her, that's a pretty high rating." He paused. "Bonnie was a beautiful kid, though. I don't think she knew her own strength."

"Did you know Mr. Connell, the man who owns the building where Bonnie lived?"

"I saw him around a few times, is all."

"Any trouble between them?"

"Not to speak of, so far as I know. Bonnie said once that he'd made some pretty broad hints about making other arrangements to take care of her rent, but that's about all. Who knows, maybe she even went along with him on it. I couldn't say."

I got up and moved toward the door. "Well, thanks very much, Mr. Davis. I guess that'll be all for now."

He stood up and opened the door for me. "I'm not kidding myself," he said slowly. "I know the kind of box I'm in. The sooner you find the guy that did it, the sooner I can stop sweating."

"We'll find him — if it was a him."

He glanced at me sharply, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Let me know as soon as you can," he said. "I've got a lot riding on this, mister."

I nodded and walked down the corridor toward the elevator.

Walt Logan had just returned to the squad room when I got there. He told me the tech crew had listed several good prints but that they'd all checked out to the dead girl and William Connell. The stains on the wall near the door had been blood, and of the same type as the girl's.

I briefed Walt on my talks with Ralph Bolen, Lori Mason, and Mel Davis. "That MG's the only lead we've got," I said. "We'd better get right on it."

We got out the phone directory and began calling MG dealers. There were not too many of them, but each call took time. It took us the better part of an hour, and when we finished we had exactly nothing. There had been sales, of course, but none for cash and none for consummation this morning. We went down to the basement, where we keep newspapers for as long as a week or so, and began going through them.

We found the ad in the fourth paper we looked through. A red MG, described as being in factory condition, for cash only. That was all, except the name Keeler and an address on Central Park West.

"It looks pretty good," I said.

"It has to," Walt said. "It's all we've got." He tore the ad from the paper and handed it to me. "I guess we'd better have a little talk with Mr. Keeler right away."

I started toward the stairs. "The sooner the better."

7.

But it wasn't *Mr.* Keeler. It was Miss Ann Keeler, a slim and lovely eighteen-year-old in a plush apartment in one of the plushiest apartment houses on Central Park West. She had a lot of poise for her age, and while she was gracious enough, I had the feeling she was a little amused at the idea of being called upon by the police.

She offered us a drink, and when we said no, she told us about the car.

"It was darling," she said. "A gift from my mother. She's in Europe just now and I suppose she bought it more or less on a whim. She has them quite often, you know — just simply cables money and instructions to a shop or whatever and has them deliver something to me." She laughed reflectively, as if thinking of her mother's whimsical nature. "Unfortunately, though, I've had my driving licence revoked. I wouldn't have been able to use the car for the next six months. And, inasmuch as I *could* use a little cash . . ." She moved one shoulder in the suggestion of a shrug.

"You've sold the car, Miss Keeler?" I asked.

"Less than an hour ago. To my cousin."

"Did any young men come to see you about it?"

"Only one. That is, only one who wanted to pay cash." She pouted prettily. "He certainly surprised me."

"How so?"

"Well, he seemed so delighted with the car and the price that I was certain he'd be back. He was to get the money from his bank the first thing this morning, you see, and pick the car up no later than nine-thirty. I just *know* he was sincere. He was very excited about it. I liked him at once. It was so cute, the way he told me how he was going to surprise his girl with it."

"But he didn't show up this morning, is that it?"

"No, he didn't. My cousin called about noon. She'd heard about the car and wanted to buy it. But I told her I wanted to be fair to this young man. I waited until just an hour ago, and then I called my cousin and told her she could have it. I was so *sure* he'd be back, you know. I just can't understand it, really."

"What was his name?"

She smiled apologetically. "I'm so sorry — I just can't remember. He mentioned it, but I didn't quite catch it, and somehow I never thought to ask him again. But I shouldn't think you'd have any difficulty locating him."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, while we were talking about the car, he mentioned that he was in business for himself. When I asked him what kind of business — just to be polite, you know — he said he owned a driving school." She seemed

quite pleased with herself. "There! I'm not a detective, of course, but — well, there simply can't be too many driving schools, can there?"

Walt Logan and I glanced at each other. "No, Miss Keeler," I said, "there can't be too many driving schools."

8.

Ralph Bolen lived in a furnished room on Fifty-second Street, just west of Eighth Avenue. He didn't look quite so tall as he had in his instructor's uniform, and he seemed even more stooped then he had when I'd talked to him that morning. His face was sweat-sheened, and the sweat gave highlights to the taut skin over the prominent facial bones. He let us in without a word and gestured to the bed. It was the only place to sit, except for a rickety straight chair near the window. Walt and I sat down on the bed and Bolen moved slowly to the chair and rested his elbow on the window sill and stared down at the street below.

A full minute went by, and then I said, "We've just come from the driving school, Ralph. We talked to the owner. To Mr. Henderson."

He nodded almost imperceptibly, his lips tightening.

"Mr. Henderson told us he was going to fire you, Ralph," I said. "It seems you've been representing yourself as the owner. He said a young lady came in late yesterday afternoon to see you. Mr. Henderson had a little trouble convincing her the company belonged to him and not to you. She became very upset, Ralph. Her name was Bonnie Nichols. I guess it would upset a girl like Bonnie, wouldn't it? I mean to think you were wealthy and important, and then discover you were nothing but a hired hand. It would lead to fireworks the next time she saw you. And of course, after the fireworks, almost anything might happen. An MG's a costly present for a fella like you to be giving a girl, Ralph. He'd have to be completely gone on her to even consider it."

Bolen turned his head slowly to look at me, but he said nothing at all.

"But if a man were desperate enough," I said, "then he'd do almost anything to hold on to a girl. Especially if he'd —"

"Don't bait me," Bolen said in a soft, dead voice. "Don't bait me, goddamn you."

"We talked to Ann Keeler, too," I said. "There's another girl you upset, Ralph. She couldn't understand why you didn't go through with your deal on the MG. . . . But we can understand it, can't we? We can understand that there's not much sense in buying a car for a dead girl. And it isn't too hard to understand how it would be smart for you to come by at your usual time for Bonnie's driving lesson. You couldn't afford not to, because you knew we'd find out about the

lessons and wonder why. And that blond man you saw lurking around her doorway — it's easy to understand why you would invent a story like that." I shook my head. "The only thing my partner and I can't understand is how you had so much nerve."

"Stop it!" Bolen said. "For God's sake, don't say any more!"

I nodded. "All right, Ralph. But if you don't want us to talk, you'll have to talk yourself. We can take you down to the station house and keep the talk going for days. Weeks. One cop right after another, in relays."

Bolen ran his tongue across his lips, staring at me unblinkingly. "I told her I was learning the business from the ground up," he said hoarsely. "I told her I'd inherited it and that I meant to know everything there was to know about it. I — I don't know what happened, but she hit me like nobody else ever hit me before. Sure, I knew what she was. But I didn't care. All I wanted was to be around her. I even paid for her driving lessons. I had six thousand bucks saved up. I was going to start my own school someday, see. But it took a lot of money to keep up the front. You'd never believe how fast it went. I took her to the Chambord and paid crazy prices for tickets to hit shows, and I knew I had to look right, so I bought some suits for a couple hundred bucks apiece. I —" He broke off for a moment, shaking his head.

I got out my cigarettes and offered them to him, but he paid no attention to them.

"I had a date with her last night," he said. "But when I called her, just before I started over there, she hung up on me. I kept calling, but she wouldn't answer the phone. I didn't know what to think. She knew I was buying her an MG, and yet she wouldn't even talk to me."

"Why the MG, Ralph?" I asked softly.

"I thought she was getting tired of me. It drove me crazy. I thought that if I bought her something really expensive, I might be able to hang on to her. It would take all the money I had, but I didn't care. I knew I couldn't keep up the front much longer, but I just couldn't think straight. All that mattered was hanging on to her a little longer."

"All right," I said. "Tell us about the date."

"I finally went over to her place. She was just coming out the door when I got there. I stopped her in the doorway and asked her what was wrong. She was a little tight, and mad as hell. She said she'd talked to Mr. Henderson and found out what a phony I was. She wouldn't even believe I meant to give her a car. She said she was on her way to see the only guy she gave a damn about, and then — well, then she told me she'd planned all along to give the car to this other guy."

I waited for a moment. "And then . . . ?" I prompted.

"I don't know. All at once I knew I was hitting her. But it was already too late. I — I dragged her back there beneath the stairs and wiped the blood off the wall with my handkerchief, and then I walked home. All the way."

"You were expecting us, weren't you, Ralph?"

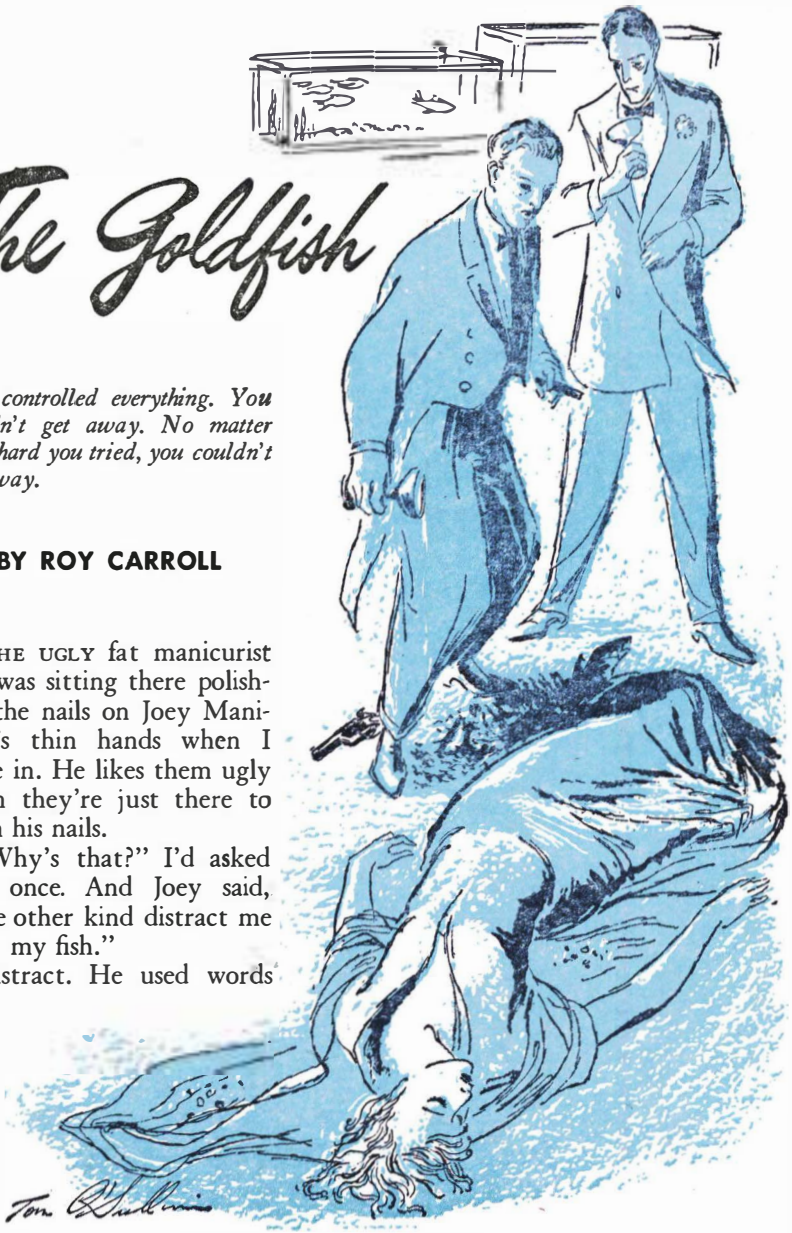
He had been staring at the floor, but now his eyes came up slowly and he nodded. "Yes. It came to me all at once tonight — that I'd never get away with it, I mean. It — it was like sobering up real fast when you've been drunk for a long, long time. . . . I was going to kill myself, but I didn't have the nerve." He looked over at the door. "All I could do was sit here and wait for someone to knock. I knew who it would be . . . and I knew what it would mean."

I looked at Walt Logan, and then both of us got up and moved toward the door. "Come along, Ralph," I said.

And from that moment until we reached the station house, neither Ralph nor Walt nor I said anything at all.

There was nothing else to say.

The Goldfish



Joey controlled everything. You couldn't get away. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't get away.

BY ROY CARROLL

THE UGLY fat manicurist was sitting there polishing the nails on Joey Manisetti's thin hands when I came in. He likes them ugly when they're just there to clean his nails.

"Why's that?" I'd asked him once. And Joey said, "The other kind distract me from my fish."

Distract. He used words

like that now, and not so long ago I knew he'd been running over dirty rooftops from the cops, screaming in no-speak-English and wondering where to hide a zip-gun he'd shot some kid in the eye with. He'd come up fast, and now lived over the lush club with his tanks of tropical fish.

The big room was dimly lighted by just the greenish light from the five fish tanks and Joey's thin dark face had a greenish look too. He kept staring into the tank at the silly looking fish. And the ugly fat little woman kept polishing away at his nails. He knew I was there.

"You hire him, Maxie?"

"Yeah, he'll do for a while. Has some funny patter."

"Sex stuff?"

"Yeah, lots of sex stuff. He drew some laughs over at Larry's Club."

"Okay, sign him up."

I started to walk toward the door. Joey had been staring into that fish tank for almost twenty-four hours. "Waiting for a guppie to drop its young," he'd said. "It's a crazy damn thing to watch. But you never know when it's going to happen and you've got to keep watching."

So I'd brought him lunch and dinner and his regular imported Scotch. And when he wanted to call someone I brought him the extension phone. And when he went into the john he had me watch that silly transparent little guppie fish and I was supposed to yell out if she started dropping her little guppies. But Joey was big-time enough now that no one would ever think of him as being nuts.

"Hold it up a minute, Maxie."

I stopped.

"Come over, sit down. Interesting natural phenomena."

I sat down on a modern posture chair that sprawled me out like a dead monkey. Without taking his face off the fish tank, Joey shoved a sawbuck at the manicurist and told her to get out.

She went out with real care as though not sure of where she was.

"Well, Maxie, how is she?"

My gut turned clear over. The sweat was running down the back of my neck all at once, soaking my collar, and I started to get this itch on my chest.

"Who?" I said.

He leaned closer to the tank and finally he said, "I thought we'd reached an understanding."

"We have."

"Don't think, don't ever think, you can cull me, Maxie. In this case, I'm overlooking it because I know what she can do to you. Damnedest body I ever saw, Maxie, and don't I know it? So tell me, is she fed up yet? Is she ready for Joey again?"

So he'd known all the time. Hell, I couldn't figure it. If he'd known all the time, how come I was still around?

"I didn't push her to go," I said. "Honest, Joey. It was her idea. I

told her she ought to stay. I told her —"

"That doesn't make any difference, Maxie. Does she want to come back yet?"

I could hear the bubbling of the tanks like something gurgling. I could see the little bubbles of oxygen moving up through the water and the green stuff shivering in the water. I saw a big goldfish with a filmy black tail three times as big as its body.

"Stop that goddamned scratching," Joey said.

I jerked my hand out of my shirt and grabbed my other hand.

"Does she want to come back yet?"

"I don't know."

"So that means she wants to come back."

"You can say that. She doesn't know what she wants. She never did know."

"She knew, Maxie. She knows what she wants all right."

He dropped some fish food into the tank, and the fish came nibbling up at it.

"Joey," I said. "If you knew about us — I mean — I figured you thought she went out of town like she said."

"I kept track."

"Well if you knew, Joey, how come you didn't —"

"Put her in the freezer?" Joey watched the fish eating. "I was going to do that. I sure wanted to, Maxie. I went over there one night to do it, but then I got to thinking. She'll come back, I thought, so that would be better. So now you'd better send her back, Maxie."

When I stood up I felt stiff. "She's sick, Joey. She just sits around nursing a bottle. She's turning into a lush."

It seemed like a long time before Joey said anything. Then he said, "That's because she's not happy. She comes back to Joey she'll be happy."

"She left," I said.

"She was dumb. Now she's learned, and she comes back I'll make her happy."

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything for me to say. There never had been. It made me sick thinking about it, but about the only thing I could feel was that I was glad I was still alive.

"So go tell her now, Maxie. Tell her how it is."

I bowed out of the sound-proofed room, and went down the carpeted hall to my two-room apartment and got my raincoat. It had been raining without a letup for two days and nights. Thirty-eight more and we would all get what we were asking for.

And then I took a cab over to Fiftieth and Lexington to tell Dolores that she could go back to Joey, that he wasn't going to kill her after all, that he would make her happy.

The rain went on as I rode in the dark cab, and after a while I was home.

It was a kind of nice little apartment we'd gotten for ourselves over there on the East side. But Dolores never had the light on, and she was still sitting over there by the window looking out. The sky out there was gray, and the room was gray.

"Hi, honey," I said.

She didn't say anything. Didn't even look up when I went over there and put my hand on her. She was watching the rain running down the glass. There was an empty bottle on the floor by her feet. She never seemed to be lushed up. Just kind of numb.

She wore this thin housecoat and it was open most of the way down. She sat there with that wonderful body all sprawled out and I looked at it as I took off my raincoat. Her breasts pointed up her wide shoulders and the smooth curve of her stomach. I could understand why Joey had wanted to kill her for leaving him. I couldn't figure out why he hadn't.

I remembered when she had smashed at the glass over the sink and opened the veins at the side of each elbow and then had fallen on the floor here by the window and hacked at her right wrist over and over. I came in time to save her, but the blood was all over the floor. I could still smell it.

I figured then that whatever she wanted I wasn't it. And now that Joey knew about everything, there wasn't even any use of my hoping any more. I'd had it. For a while I'd had it. Now I had to give it back.

I stood there looking at her body. I got down on my knees and put my head against her soft breast and ran my hands over her stomach and legs. I wanted to kiss her, but I knew that when I did I'd want to make it so good and hard it would hurt a long time. It was too late for that.

"Don't, Maxie," she said dully, and kept on looking out the window.

"Just so I'll remember in case I might forget," I said.

"You going away."

"No, honey. You are."

"Where?"

"Back to Happiness House. Back to Joey."

I felt her body tremble under my hands. I jerked them away and slid back across the floor and watched her come alive. I hated Joey then more than I had ever hated him. The louse had me hooked and sometimes I wiggled a little when the barb dug into my gut. That girl in Omaha. Something got loose. She died after I'd left, and later Joey knew all about it. He could find out things like that, my real name, everything. He fed me and kept me breathing like his damn fish. I knew why he liked his damn tropical fish. Without him they would all die.

"Joey," she said. "Joey! He knows —"

"Hell, yes, he knows. He's known all the time!"

"He'll kill me!" She was sitting up straight. The color had come back into her face. Her eyes were bright. I ripped at the housecoat

and grabbed her waist and moved her around onto my lap. She was warm all over me, God she was warm and alive all at once.

I started to laugh. "You crazy broad. Jesus, you're a crazy broad. Hiding, going nuts in here in a cage, saying you're scared he'll find us and have us buried and all the time you're wishing he *would* find us!"

"What'd he say, Maxie?"

I got up and dropped her back into the chair. I couldn't take any more of it. I felt like I was going to fall all to pieces.

"What the hell difference does it make? You're going back."

"He isn't going to kill me?"

This time I did laugh, but not because it was funny. "Why should he?"

"He *wants* me back?"

I poured a double shot of bourbon out of a fresh bottle and drank it.

"Sure he does. He's just been waiting. Hell, I should've thought of that, what a patient guy Joey is. Sitting for two days just to watch a damn guppie fish —"

But she wasn't listening. She was already in the bedroom getting dressed, getting ready to go back to Joey. She wouldn't need the shattered mirror glass any more. She wouldn't need the bottle any more either. What did she need booze for when she had Joey?

Only I knew that nobody ever had Joey. Joey had you. That was the only way it could be. But she didn't think about that, and she didn't care. Dolores was dead. She needed something to make her feel alive. I knew that. And Joey made her feel alive. She was nobody, the same as I'm nobody, same as there's more nobodies running around than somebodies. Joey made her feel like somebody. And she would give anything for that.

That's where Dolores and me were different. I'm nobody and I know it, and Joey or any one or anything else can't make me feel any different.

I don't remember much else about school, but I remember a poem I learned in the ninth grade that goes something like this: "I'm nobody, who are you? Oh, you're nobody too. Then there's a pair of us, don't tell. They'd banish us you know."

That was the year I dropped out of school.

When Dolores ran out of the apartment to go back to Joey she didn't even say so-long sucker. I went over to the window and watched her through the wet glass.

After that I sat there and nursed the bottle while the day got grayer and finally turned dark. It killed the way I was feeling about everything. But one thing I kept feeling just the same, worried.

I kept worrying about why Joey hadn't killed her, and me too. He'd said he would. Joey was like an elephant who doesn't forget. And was noted for keeping a promise.

But then remembering the way Dolores looked lying there in the

housecoat, I figured that for that even Joey might go back on his word.

I dozed off. I had a very bad dream, something about being a fish and swimming up to get fed and seeing a big face up there looking down and it was Joey. He dropped something into the water and it exploded in my face.

So Joey made her happy.

He knew how to do it. He knew Dolores. And he didn't do anything to make her unhappy, and he knew a lot of ways to do that too.

He bought her ice. Jesus, it was something to see, the ice he bought her. And the mink coat that must have cost five grand. The works. A Cadillac with black upholstering that looked and felt like black velvet.

Someone else might have thought it was too much, but Dolores thought she had gone to Heaven. She never stopped long enough to think about it, she was too happy. She'd had a tough life. I knew that, and this was it for her. You don't stop to think about a very good dream either because you're afraid to wake up.

She never touched the booze again either. Joey sent her to a voice coach. He sent her to a head-shrinker who worked on her emotions for thirty-five bucks an hour three hours a week.

She always could sing a little. She had a natural thing there. But six months later she was singing in Joey's club, and the columnists gave her rave notices.

And I was around all the time, and I'd see her once in a while through the haze of happiness. She gained a little weight, but strictly in the right places. She glowed when she smiled at me, glowed is the word, just like a light someone had turned on.

"He's treating you right now," I said.

"Oh, Maxie! It's wonderful!"

"He doesn't smack you around much any more either."

She looked hurt. "Please, Maxie, that's all changed. He's like a different person. He's a real gentleman now!"

"Sure," I said and laughed. "So when do you get married?"

It seemed like a real gag. And then she lifted her lovely chin a little and said real soft, with her eyes not even seeing me any more, "Next month."

"What?" I said.

"And then we're going to Bermuda on our honeymoon."

"The cheap louse," I whispered. "Can't even make it to Europe!"

She put her hand on my hand and kissed me. She could afford that.

"No hard feelings, Maxie," she said. "Are there, honey?"

She sounded like a little kid. She was, and I saw it all then, and I felt a little sad about the whole thing. I didn't believe what was happening to her. But she believed it. Jesus, how she believed in it.

I went on the same old way. I watched the house, and hired and fired the help from the hat-check girl to the comedians and the piano tuners. Once in a while I saw Joey and Dolores together. Every once in a while I'd hear him ask her:

"You happy, baby?"

And of course she always said yes.

After the wedding that cost five years of what my old man had gotten in wages, I heard him ask her if she was happy. But that time she was so happy she couldn't say anything.

When they came back from Bermuda she was even happier. Her skin had turned gold. Her body was all filled out and there was something slick and poised about her. It was a little hard even telling that it was her. It wasn't the Dolores I knew any more. It was Mrs. Joey Manisetti now and I guess she was about the happiest little girl in the world.

It was hard to believe, but that's how it looked and I had to admit it. Joey had really fallen for her. I could understand it thinking of her, but I couldn't understand it thinking of Joey. He had never seemed that kind of guy. But then I thought about it at nights and drank a little more and figured well what the hell, Joey was human. Everyone is human somewhere.

I've forgotten now what night it was. I was sitting in my apartment over the Club trying to get interested in a girl named Margie that I'd had sent up. I got this call from Joey over the house phone.

"Come on over," Joey said from down the hall. "Dolores and you and I can have a little celebration."

"Celebrate what?" I said.

"Celebrate happiness," Joey said.

"Sure, Joey," I said. "I'll be right over."

"I'm opening the champagne now."

"Fine, Joey, thanks," I said.

"Hey!" Margie yelled at me. "What about me?"

"This is just a private little party," I said. "For three old friends."

I went in and shut the door and the lock clicked. It always clicked when you went into Joey's apartment and shut the door. All the noise of the world shuts out. And all I heard was the bubbling of water in the fish tanks. The greenish light from the tanks was all the light there was, but it was enough to see Dolores in. Enough to see all of Dolores there was to see in that sheer, skin-tight white gown, and it was sure something to look at.

Joey was sitting over there looking into the biggest of the five fish tanks. Dolores walked toward me. She had looked better and better, month after month, and tonight she had reached the zenith, the absolute zenith. She was smiling as she walked toward me with two glasses in her hands. I could see the little dark hollows, every dimple, the curves outlined.

When I took one of the glasses, she stood against me and kissed me, like a brother. I didn't feel like a brother. Her breasts were high and firm and full of vitality, and I felt her pressing against me for just a second there and a lot of memories went by and died.

"Well," I said, "Here's to happiness."

"To —" she turned and she seemed to go all loose inside as she turned toward Joey like a grateful puppy — "to Joey, darling Joey."

Joey didn't turn. "Go ahead," he said. "Drink a toast to happiness."

"Sure," Joey said. He lifted his glass and drank. We all three drank together, only Joey kept looking into the fish tank. "You really happy tonight, baby," he asked.

She ran to him and put her arms down over his shoulders and rubbed his chest. "Oh — Joey — I couldn't even tell you."

"You don't have to," Joey said. "I know."

I walked toward them and sipped the champagne. Joey was watching the goldfish, all sizes and shapes, crazy looking goldfish, different colors, some with big heads and little tails, some with big bloated bellies, some with little bodies and big tails.

"It's a funny thing," Joey said. "These tropical fish. They're so delicate. Take them out of their natural home and everything's artificial. They depend on me completely. Let the temperature get too low, they die. Just a little too much or not enough oxygen and they die. Several things like that. Such a thin line between living and dying and I draw it every day."

He took a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and wiped at the palms of his hands. Dolores stepped back away from him and smiled at me. She was flashing and beautiful, her teeth flashing, the ice flashing, her eyes sparkling.

When Joey stood up and turned around, he brought the gun out from under his coat. He did it casually, the way he would have to do it. He was using the handkerchief to hold the gun, and I knew why.

It was my gun. I hadn't even thought about my gun when I accepted Joey's invitation to celebrate happiness. But then I hadn't thought for myself for a long time, and that night was too late to start.

He pointed the gun at Dolores, and moved closer to her. The gun was pointing right into her stomach.

She didn't say anything. For what seemed like five minutes no one said anything. I couldn't hear anything except the bubbles in the fish tanks. She started breathing hard but I couldn't hear it. All I could hear then was the sound of my own blood telling me to get the hell out.

"You always keep your word, Joey," I said.

"If I can," Joey said.

She said one word. It sounded

like a child waking up and asking it in the middle of the night.

"Why?"

"I was going to do it some time back," Joey said. "But you'd tried to do it to yourself. What kind of a payoff would that have been for me? You wanted to die then. But now you're happy, happy as hell, and now you don't want to die, do you?"

She took her head slowly. No, she didn't want to die now. Maybe for the first time in her life she really didn't want to die. Joey had seen to that.

I could have gotten at him maybe then. I could have pushed that big fish tank toward him and gotten in. I almost did, but I didn't. One thing I know. Get rid of Joey and they'll always be another Joey to take his place. There are people like Dolores and me and for people like us there's always a Joey waiting.

When he fired, Dolores put her hands over her stomach and gave a little cry. I was that close. I could see the tears running down her cheeks as she fell down on the floor. She really hated to die.

Joey dropped my gun beside her and put the handkerchief back into his coat pocket and walked out to call the cops.

Dolores had put in her time. But I had a little time left to swim around in the pretty tank.

Portrait of a Killer

No. 22—Bill Lovett

BY DAN SONTUP

BILL LOVETT was a real nice guy. He loved little children. He was kind to his wife — most of the time, anyway. He couldn't stand to see a dumb animal hurt. He was one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet — that is, if you'd ever want to meet a professional killer.

Bill's job was in the Brooklyn dockyards. He was responsible for keeping the longshoremen in line, and among the twenty-seven murders claimed for him were a lot of longshoremen who'd irritated the higher-ups, one way or another. Dinny Meehan, for instance. Bill put two bullets into Dinny's body one March night. One of them richocheted and wounded Mrs. Meehan. But Bill loved children. He'd stopped in the parlor to pat Dinny's son on the head, in a nice, fatherly manner, before he went in and killed the boy's father.

Jim Gillen, another dockworker killed a year later, was another guy who'd been causing a little trouble in the ranks. But Bill's wife insists that Bill shot Gillen for only one reason. Gillen had pulled the tail of a cat. Bill couldn't stand to see a dumb animal hurt.

He liked his job. His wife tried to wean him away from it after they were married, but it didn't do any good. She hadn't wanted to marry him, at first, but perhaps the little discussion she had with her father had changed her mind on that. He had pressed her to marry Bill from the first; but, she told him: "I don't talk to men who go around shooting people."

"Your brother shoots people, too," her father said.

"Yes," said Anna, "and he ought to be ashamed of himself."

Anna's brother was the infamous Peg-Leg Lonergan, a killer with as long a record as Bill Lovett's. Later on, she was called on to identify his body at the morgue.

But after Bill took the blame for an unlicensed .25 pistol Anna's father happened to have around, she figured there must be some good in him. She married him and they moved to Jersey, where she started to reform him.

First, she kept him around the house. Then she took away his collection of firearms, leaving him only one gun, for self-defense in case his dockworking past caught up with him. For a while Bill was

unhappy but quiescent. Then, one night about a month after they'd been married, Bill fished out his lone gun and shot Anna in the foot, just to let her know who was boss. After that things went back to normal.

Bill didn't do any more actual killing. Anna had reformed him that far. But he did do some odd things with his gun. For instance, there was the time Anna and Bill went down to the Chelsea docks in Manhattan to visit Bill's father, a stevedore there. A French chef on one of the boats docked in the harbor stuck his head out a porthole. Bill thought the chef was paying too much attention to Anna. He didn't like other men looking at her. Since Anna was around, he didn't do anything really serious. He just shot the chef's right ear off.

Then there was the time Anna and Bill went to a party. Their host put on a hat and started to do movie-star imitations. Bill didn't like them. Once again, he didn't try for anything really harmful. He took out his gun and tried to shoot the host's hat off. Unfortunately, someone jiggled Bill's arm. The bullet went into the host's shoulder and landed him in the hospital for quite a while.

Anna disapproved of all this, but there really wasn't much she could say. Her mother had been acquitted on a charge of murdering her father. Her brother, Peg-Leg Lonergan, was still rolling up his score of victims in Brooklyn. Some of her best friends were murderers.

But in spite of all this she didn't like the idea much. She kept right on trying to reform Bill.

They hadn't been married four months, though, before Bill really started to get restless and lonesome for his old pals. One night he told Anna he was going to Brooklyn.

She volunteered to go with him, but he compromised. He told her he'd meet her later at the corner of Jay and Fulton Streets. Then he left.

Anna waited a while, then went to the appointed corner. There she waited some more. She was getting irritated, and finally she called Bill's brother George (a young man studying for the priesthood at the time) and enlisted his help in a search for her errant husband.

They searched for several hours, but they didn't find Bill, and Anna went home to New Jersey. The next morning she got the news.

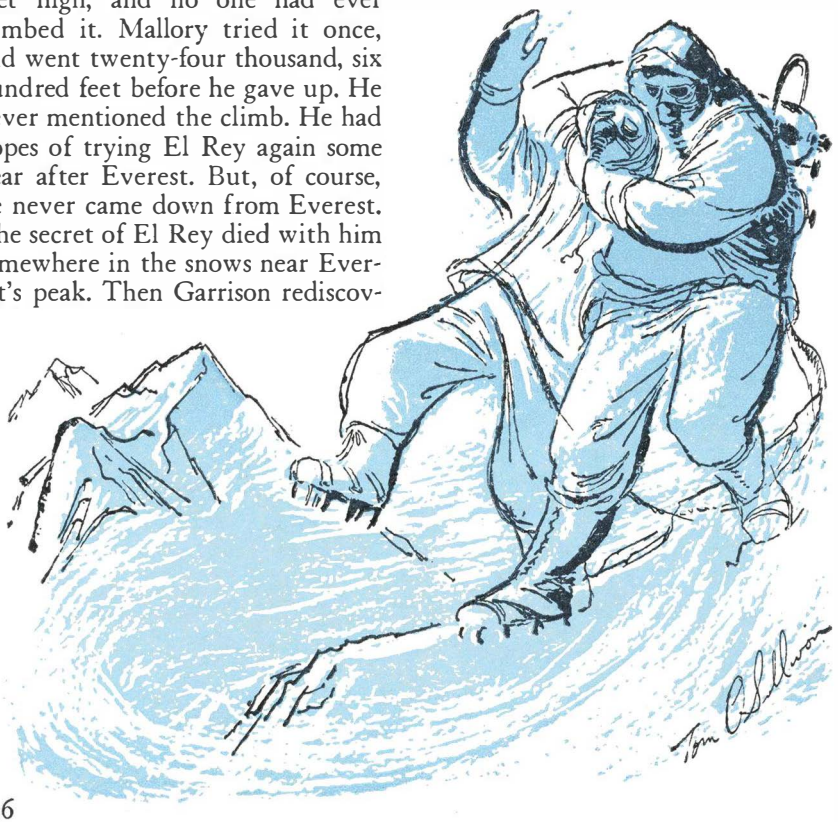
Enforced idleness had been too much for Bill. He'd started a little trouble in a Brooklyn club. But the period of reform had made his trigger finger just a little rusty. He'd come out a poor second in a shooting battle, and when the police found him he was filled with bullets. His head had also been bashed in.

Anna went down to the morgue to identify her late husband. Maybe she thought — even after all that had happened — that she still could have reformed him. But she just didn't have enough time.

El Rey

BY WILLIAM LOGAN

Only one thing mattered. They had to get to the top — and they didn't care about anything else.



It was higher than Everest, higher than K-2, higher than Godwin-Austen. It was thirty-three thousand feet high, and no one had ever climbed it. Mallory tried it once, and went twenty-four thousand, six hundred feet before he gave up. He never mentioned the climb. He had hopes of trying El Rey again some year after Everest. But, of course, he never came down from Everest. The secret of El Rey died with him somewhere in the snows near Everest's peak. Then Garrison rediscovered El Rey, and it was the chance, and the last hope, of a lifetime.

Some men need money, and scramble after it all their lives until they have more than they can spend, and then keep scrambling until they die unsatisfied. Some men need women, and life is a frantic hunt that never ends. Some men need

power, and of those a few are satisfied. The few with small, single ambitions: to go farther, deeper, higher than any man has ever gone.

Garrison needed the mountains.

He wasn't alone. He would have gone quickly insane if he had been alone. Hart had grown up in the same small town, and with the same urgent need. He and Garrison had followed Mallory's Everest expedition in the newspapers, breathlessly. They had saved pennies from their first weekly allowances, and later dollars from their small salaries. They had charted their expenses and wasted their money only on shelter and cheap clothing and food, and they had begrudged themselves all of these to buy books. Together they read of Mallory in a hundred books, of K-2 and Everest and Kibu and Godwin-Austen and Kanchanjanga in a hundred more. Their joint savings increased. Some day they would climb the highest of them all. Some day all men would recognize their power. They would be at the top, the actual, literal, impossible top of the world. There would be only the two of them: Garrison and Hart, at the top of the world.

Garrison worked for a man who dealt in rare books and manuscripts. He found El Rey in a Spanish manuscript written in 1543. He found it in 1940, when he was thirty years old. He copied the scrawled map from the manuscript and then he called Hart. Hart was thirty-one that year.

They were as excited as children. That night in Garrison's one-room apartment they started to plan the ascent.

Fifteen years later they had enough money.

The little village was cold as January that April. Hart shivered inside the new parka, screwing up his small round face in pain. "Maybe we shouldn't go through with it," he said softly.

Garrison towered over him, tall, white and balding. "You're tired. Depressed. It's the reaction setting in. You'll feel better when we start up."

"I don't want to spoil things," Hart said.

"Nobody's going to spoil things," Garrison told him. "This is our time. Ours alone. We'll be on top in a few days. Everything's packed."

"I'll be all right," Hart said after a minute. His eyes were blinking rapidly. "Do you really think we can make it?" he said.

"Of course we can make it. We've been planning this one longer than anyone ever planned an ascent before. We've had to. There was nothing else to do."

Hart looked up heavily. "It can't fail," he said; "can it?"

"It can't fail," Garrison said slowly. "We're meant to make this ascent. Remember how I found El Rey? It was pure luck. It was providential." He peered down into

Hart's face, blinking behind the square heavy glasses he wore. "Providential," he said again.

"You're right; of course you're right," Hart said. His high voice sounded cocky. "All set to go?"

"All set." Garrison shut his mouth with a snap against the cold. He led the way down the trail. El Rey towered over them both. The native Tibetans worshipped a god in the mountain.

They made First Camp at twelve thousand feet. The mountain was easy that far up, but Garrison and Hart were breathing heavily. They were not young men and it was their first mountain.

"We'll take half an hour," Garrison said. "Then we'll head right on for the top."

Hart was panting. He sat down inside the small tan tent without replying. He took off the slitted snow-goggles and wiped his eyes. Then he said: "We're going to make it. We're actually going to make it."

"I never doubted it," Garrison said.

Hart shook his head. "Neither did I. It was just the reaction. Just what you said."

They beamed at each other.

Second Camp was twenty-three thousand feet. They left most of their packs at Second. They strapped on the oxygen masks and started up, but by the time they had made a few hundred feet of the difficult ground night fell. They went back to Second and slept.

El Rey slanted sharply ahead of them in the morning. The terrain was icy and difficult, shot with crevasses and piled high with jagged outcrops of rock, too flimsy to bear a rope. It took them a day to make four thousand feet. Camp Three was pitched at an altitude of twenty-seven thousand feet. Camp Four, a day later, was pitched at an even thirty thousand.

In the tent after dark they spoke hollowly through the oxygen masks.

"We've beaten Mallory. We've beaten them all," Hart said.

"We'll reach the top. The world is going to know. It won't be long."

"Tomorrow," Hart said.

"Got to be tomorrow," Garrison told him. Speech was difficult where the air blew so thinly. The night was clear and very cold, and after a while, like children tired out waiting for Christmas morning, they slept, huddled around the Primus stove.

Three thousand feet to go in the early morning, two thousand by noon, and one thousand three hundred feet by two in the afternoon.

Neither man spoke. The going was more difficult, now. Without experience it should have been impossible. Trickier, deadlier than the final slopes of K-2, the last thousand feet of El Rey nearly baffled them.

The day was clear, without snow except for the savage flurries whipping round the top. The rope which held Garrison and Hart together was strained and taut constantly. Garrison led the way. Hart followed, breathing quickly through the oxygen mask and feeling the pulse of his heart against the thick parka. The wind cut through their clothing without effort. The men struggled through the last thousand feet straining their eyes for a glimpse of the top. Hart could see the rope that led to Garrison, but the leader was invisible, his tall figure hidden by the whirling blanket of snow.

The Hart heard the shout and gave one final effort and was standing at the top of El Rey. For a whole moment there was silence. At the top the wind had died down. It was three-forty in the afternoon. The air was clear and still.

After that long silence Garrison said: "The top."

"We're here," Hart said slowly.

"And the world will know," Garrison said.

"The world will know," Hart said.

Both stared at each other. Hart began quietly to laugh. His thick short body shook with laughter. His face, invisible behind mask and goggles, contorted with it.

"What's funny?" Garrison asked.

"We forgot something," Hart said. "We forgot the marker. Without a marker who'll ever know we were here?"

"We'll tell . . ." Garrison started and checked himself, taking deep breaths. "Nobody will believe us," he said. "We've only got what we need to get down."

Around them the wind started. It was gentle now.

"Oxygen masks," Garrison said. "We can't leave those. Clothing. No. Goggles. No."

"We need the rope to get down," Hart said.

Garrison nodded. "Nothing in our pockets," he said.

"Maybe they'll believe us," Hart said quietly.

"Never. Why should they? Two old men. Never climbed a mountain before. Take El Rey alone? Why should they believe us?"

The wind was growing stronger.

"We'll have to go down and come back up with something," Hart said.

"We'd never make it. And there isn't enough time. Provisions," Garrison said. "We don't have any extra provisions. We'd never make it down if we wasted more time here."

"Nothing we can do," Hart said, shouting over the noise of the wind.

Neither man moved. Standing at the top of El Rey they looked down at the snow-covered slopes below. A long time passed.

Then Garrison said: "I know what I can leave. A fine marker. It'll make a good marker. They'll all believe me."

"What?" Hart said loudly.

He knew, a second before Garrison's fingers tightened around his throat.

MUGGED AND PRINTED

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER, creator of Perry Mason, has written over fifty mystery books under his own name and that of the pseudonymous A. A. Fair. His books sell over five million copies a year, and he is popular in every country throughout the world. We're proud to present his newest story, written especially for *Manhunt: Protection* — a story which you'll find every bit as surprising and original as Gardner's fine novels. Gardner's now at work on a new book, as well as keeping up with his Court of Last Resort, a real-life organization devoted to helping the unjustly imprisoned.

DAVID ALEXANDER'S stories are always unusual and startling. This month's *Mama's Boy* is no exception to the rule. Alexander, a former Broadway-beat newsman, is the author of several books; the latest is his new Random House mystery, *Paint The Town Black*. He lives in New York and knows the city intimately, as the realistic atmosphere of his work proves. He's now at work on a new Random House book, on some more stories for *Manhunt*, and on some of the research which makes every detail of his exciting stories authentic. We'll be bringing you more of his fine work soon.

BRUNO FISCHER'S latest novel, *We Are All Dead*, is a hard-hitting script from the typewriter of this popular mystery writer. Author of many fine books — including three now on the stands, *The Pigskin Bag*, *The Spider Lily* and *So Wicked My Love* — he's always popular with readers and critics alike. He lives in upstate New York with his wife, his children, and a small black dog named Maxine, and when he isn't writing he's fishing in a nearby stream.

HAL ELLSON'S authentic teen-age criminals return to *Manhunt* in his latest action-filled story, *Wrong Way Home*. Ellson's work with teen-agers in hospitals and various juvenile delinquent centers has given him entry into their world, and the applause given his books, including the million-copy-selling *Duke*, by readers and critics, shows that Ellson's work has paid off. His other books include *Summer Street*, *The Golden Spike* and *Tomboy*.

JONATHAN CRAIG'S now at work on another documentary novel for *Manhunt*, and we'll be bringing it to you soon. Meanwhile, you can enjoy his latest Police File novelette, *The Lady In Question*. ◆ KENNETH FEARING returns to *Manhunt* with one of the most unusual ideas we've ever seen, in his unique short story, *Shake-Up*. Fearing's the author of many best-selling books, including his famous *The Big Clock*, *Dagger Of The Mind*, *The Hospital* and his latest, *The Generous Heart*. ◆ BRYCE WALTON, who'll be remembered for his fine *Manhunt* story, *The Rope Game*, returns in this issue with the shocking and realistic *I'll Never Tell*. Walton's the author of many, many popular detective stories. ◆ JACK RITCHIE, one of whose first stories appeared in *Manhunt*, is back this month with *Hold Out*. We've got two more Ritchies now in stock, so the readers who've been writing in about his work can be assured of more soon.

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←Continued from Back Cover

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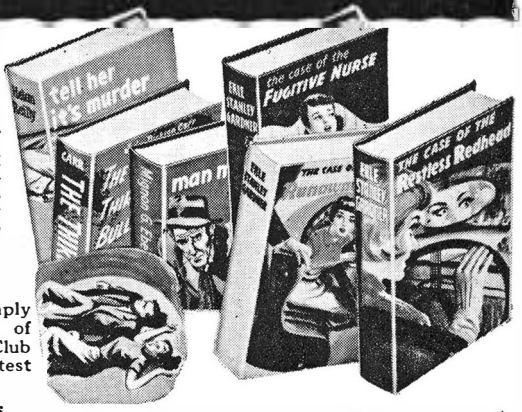

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