
MANHUNT
MANHUNT
DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY
NOVEMBER
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"He tried to make advances. I — I hit him." (See "Man from Yesterday").
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A Complete Novel by HAMPTON STONE
MANHUNT
NOVEMBER

VOL. 2, NO. 9

MANHUNT

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MOMS was in a bad mood because the old man didn't show again with the paycheck. He was out hitting up like a real wino and maybe carrying on with that she-hag that hangs in the bar around the corner. Maybe he thinks I don't know, and maybe that's his business but what does

If you don't belong to a gang, you're nowhere. You're not safe. That's why Dusty had to get himself a

Pistol

A Novelette

BY HAL ELLSON

Moms have to take it out on me for?

Yeah, she tried to keep me in for giving her back-lip but I cut out soon as she ain't looking. Had to hit down the fire-escape, but that's not new in my life. Half the time

I cut out that way, and nine out of ten that's the route back at night.

Soon as I hit the street I ran into Blubber. He's a big easy-moving guy, darker-skinned than me. I come up out of the cellar like a rocket and start licking for the corner when he calls me and I turn and see him leaning in the doorway.

"Hi, boy, where's the raid?" he says.

I'm standing still by then and I don't want him to know nothing so I say, "What's doing?"

"Things is quiet."

"Maybe too quiet."

"Yeah, Dusty." He stretched and yawned. "It's like things are creeping underneath — if you know what I mean."

"I can guess."

"Next thing you know, fireworks'll be busting out all over the neighborhood."

"Somebody's like to be killed."

Blubber opens his sleepy-looking eyes and stares at me funny-like when I say that. "You sound like a real bad cat," he says.

"Maybe I am," I say.

He laughs then. "Real bad cats don't talk about it," he says. "They do it."

"Do what?"

"Do anything."

We was staring at each other now and I'm angry, but then I know he doesn't mean nothing. Only he don't like talk. Maybe he's easy-going and all that but he's got a strong arm and he carries a switch-blade. I ought to know. I mugged with him one night and if it hadn't been for him . . . Anyway, I wasn't mad at him. I didn't know what I was mad at.

"You coming to the meeting?" he finally says.

Then I know why he was waiting and I nod my head. "The way I was heading," I tell him.

"You sure?" he says.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"It's good you are, cause we wasn't so sure." He meant the Golden Warriors — the club we're both in, only I'm new.

"Because you wasn't around last night," he says. "That's why we wasn't sure."

I know what he meant and what's in his head and didn't feel like answering, but I got no other excuse so I tell him, "I was shining last night." I didn't tell him there was nothing to eat in the house, so he just laughs and says, "That's Little Boy Blue stuff, strictly for the midgets."

"Maybe it is but I needed the money."

"Me, that's the last thing I'd do, shine shoes."

It was the last thing I wanted to do, too, but when there's a knife in your back you crawl on your belly like a snake. I told him that and he only laughed and said, "You coming? It's getting late."

2.

A few minutes later we hit the

meeting place. It's down a cellar, a big room that stinks like a rathole. A cat named Skunky rents it. He's a real gone wino; we throw him a bottle and he lets us in. Most everybody's there when we walk in. Clouds of smoke and that special-sweet marijuana smell; somebody coming in in back of us like the flatfoots is chasing him and a carton in his arms, sweat rolling off him. He dumps the loot on the table and there's a scramble till Jess starts. Jess is President of the Golden Warriors, a real nasty type but he can straighten things.

He did, and fast. Then he tossed the cans around, first to the bigshots. I'm new, I'm like nothing at all, so I don't get nothing cause there's not enough to go around. Anyhow, the beer is warm. It just came off a truck. I'm for marijuana but nobody's offering. In fact, I got an uneasy feeling that my company ain't too welcome. Nobody sort of knows me now.

Finally Jess says, "All right, let's get down to business," and I see him glance at me with red in his eye.

Everything gets quiet real fast. I'm watching Jess and I see him grin. He likes to play bigshot. Suddenly he looks at me and says, "We had a meeting last night. Not everybody was here."

My eyes ain't leaving his and he goes on, saying, "This ain't no Crumb A. C. where any old cat can come and go like the King of Egypt."

He's meaning me now, I know he is and everybody else knows. A bigmouth flunky laughed and I felt myself getting hot. Finally Jess comes out with it and says, "Maybe you don't know who I'm talking about," and he nods at me.

"Yeah, I wasn't here last night," I say.

"Yeah, why not?"

"I was shining."

"That's kid stuff, it ain't no excuse."

"I needed the money," I said, hearing someone laugh in back of me. Then someone else said, "Only a punk would dust shoes."

"Yeah, let anybody try taking this punk's spot," I say. "Anybody."

Somebody's moving behind me then and I turn fast and this guy Axe is about to jump me but that old Blubber got him, got a fistful of his jacket and busted it up.

"We got plenty of Cobras to fight," Blubber says. "Ain't no sense fighting among ourselves."

That was sensible-like but I didn't care who messed with me then, didn't care if it was Jess or Blubber or the whole mob. But things quieted down and finally Jess says, "We got more important stuff to discuss. Like I say, it's been too quiet too long. Things is set to bust and what are we doing?"

"Sitting tight," someone said from the crowd.

"Yeah, with nothing to fight with. Nobody's hustling. We got three pistols and then we ain't got noth-

ing. We ain't nowhere now cause three stupid flunkies got picked up by the cops."

"What about your pistol?" Blubber asked. "That ain't available?"

"Any time I want it. Big Brother don't carry it around. But that's only one piece of pistol."

"It's going to be a piece of your brain if he ever catches you borrowing it at the wrong time."

"Yeah, Big Brother don't bother me. It's some of these new cats, and somebody named Axe."

"What are you getting on my back for?" Axe says.

"You know why."

"I told you what happened. I traded my pistol for another and five bucks. The guy gave me the money, clipped my pistol, and never showed with the other."

"That's not the way I heard it," Jess says.

"Yeah, how did you hear it?"

"You been smoking too much marijuana and playing around. That's how your pistol went down the river. Anyhow," Jess says, looking right at me now, "we need artillery. What about you?"

"I got a zip-gun and a switchblade."

"A zip ain't from nothing."

"No?"

"That's right, man, my baby brother got one of them. We're talking about real stuff, bad stuff."

"Talking is all I hear tonight," I say to Jess. "I don't see nobody else with anything."

Naturally, Jess didn't take to that. Nobody did. They're all looking at me funny-like now, like they're going to stomp me. It got real quiet.

Then Jess says, "Yeah, you a real bad cat."

"Bad enough."

"You sounding on me, boy?"

"I'm not saying."

"Yeah, you sound like you're sounding. Maybe you want to have it out?"

It was like he's grandstanding for the boys, but I guess he has to cause he's the President and I'm new and he's got to show it. Not that I'm scared of him but I got nothing real against him, either, so I say, "What's the issue? We got no argument, we was talking about guns."

"Okay, man, so we was talking. Just talking, you say, but what are you going to do, being as everybody else is just words?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"You could get a pistol."

"What for?"

"So you won't be just talking. You say so big but that's all. You ain't nothing."

"You got your pistol?" I say to him.

"Anytime I need it I got it to match yours, punk."

Them other cats laughed. I guess it was that more than him. Anyway, I'm mad. Maybe they planned it that way so I say, "You're going to eat them words."

"That's fabulous."

"That's a promise," I say, crazy-

like, because it is crazy. Because I got no gun and no way of getting one, no money, no connections.

Jess is grinning now. "Break that promise," he says, "and you and us part company. Which'll make you a sad cat around this neighborhood. You can go jump off a cliff then."

I seen them other cats grinning when he says that, cause he's right. You got to be in or you're a dead kitty around here. It ain't safe to walk without friends. I got to get me a pistol. Yeah, how?

The meeting broke up then. Anyway, the business stuff, and Jess says, "I feel like some more beer."

Me, I don't want nothing so I get up and move toward the door. Things are on my mind. Fuzz in my brain. I'm mad coming out of the house tonight and worse now.

"You leaving our company?" Jess says, and before I can answer I hear Axe. He says out loud, "Let that boy go along. He's got shoes to shine."

3.

I went out, hearing them all laughing. It was good to hit that air. That place naturally stinks. It was real dark outside. Nice. Nice sky. People on the stoops. I hear laughing. Radios. Everybody happy. I'm all mixed up inside. Can't go home. Don't want to see my girl. Don't want to talk to nobody. I got to get that pistol. Show Jess, show them all. Yeah.

I hit the corner, mad as a motherlover, and then I hear footsteps behind. I naturally jump. It's only Blubber.

"Man, you're flying. Slow down, it's a hot night. Keep it cool," he says. He puts his hand on my shoulder, I knock it off.

"You're hot," he says. "Let it pass. You just naturally let that Jess fix you."

Which was what I wouldn't admit. "I'm going to get that pistol and shove it down his throat," I say.

"You know where to get one?"

"No."

Blubber lit a butt; he offered me one first but I didn't want it, then he says, "I got a party that wants to sell one."

"For how much?"

"Forty dollars."

"Why don't you say forty million?" I say, and I start walking again. I don't know where I'm going. Blubber wants to know. I say, "No place," and he tags along. We don't talk now. We pass a bar. Maybe my old man is in there. I don't look, don't want to. The hell with him and everything else. I wish I had that pistol.

"Hey, man, where we going?" Blubber finally says.

"No place," I tell him. "You better go back."

"Maybe you don't want company."

"I don't want nothing," I say, figuring he'll walk. But he don't.

He stays close. Got something on his mind.

Finally he says, "How about inhaling some weed?"

"You got some?"

"Not much. One for you, one for me. Good stuff."

"I'll take it."

It was good stuff. We moved over to the park and smoked it. It put a head on me, made me feel real light, like I got no body at all.

Then Blubber says, "I'm feeling fine for a job. There's pickings around here tonight."

Me, I'm ready for anything now and I nod my head. Got a crazy feeling in my hands, like I can do anything, beat anybody.

4.

Blubber spots this guy. He's coming along the path, walking alone. A real character. We let him pass and say nothing. Then Blubber gets up. Me too. It's routine. We follow the guy. I'm thinking crazy now, about the gun and my old man and Moms and Jess. Maybe this guy has a real bankroll. If he has, I got that pistol in my pocket already.

We're up on the guy's back now, in a dark spot under trees. Nobody around. Blubber moves fast. Real fast, but this guy must have known. Anyway, he got his arm up when Blubber clamped for his neck. Then he hollered. Jesus, I didn't think a man could holler like that. It made my hair stand. Blubber's still holding but can't shut him. I come around front and bust him in the gut. No good. He still hollers. I give him the knee where it does the most good.

That does it. He's shut. Blubber drops him and he goes down like a hunk of lead. There ain't no noise now but that guy hollered real loud. Next thing, I hear steps. Somebody coming. Maybe a flatfoot. We bust away fast. Got to. We split. I hit for some big bushes. Bam, I go through, my shirt gets torn, my face scratched.

I hear that guy holler again. That's all. I'm through the bushes, running across the dark. Blubber's gone. Maybe they got him. I hit bushes again. Bam, I go through and hit the deck. It's like nothing ain't there. Just twigs and stones, the lousy smell of rotten old leaves. I want to stay because I hit my knee going down and I got no wind. I can't run no more.

Yeah, not much. I hear somebody hit them bushes like a wild horse and I'm running again. I got me a new knee and new wind. Got to get out of here. Patrol cars be cruising around soon. I ain't thinking of Blubber now and nobody else. Can't. I got to get me over that fence.

I made it okay. Hell, I could have made the Empire State building the way I was going. It was safe enough to walk then. Nobody sees me come over the fence. Hell, I'm all in now. My legs are shaking and my heart's like a fist punching in my chest. All

of a sudden I'm tired. My knee hurts. Didn't feel it much before but now I got to pull up my pants. Blood's running down my leg. I got a good gash.

But that's better than being caught. I wondered what happened to Blubber. Anyway, I know he won't talk if they got him. They couldn't beat it out of him with lead pipes.

There was no place to go so I headed back to the house. My knee was stiff by the time I got there. Little kids running around the street. A fire hydrant open. I don't feature that any more but I'm hot, greasy with sweat. I felt like laying down in the gutter under that water. I went on to the house.

There's Blubber sitting on the step and smoking a cigarette.

"Man, I thought they had you in the precinct by now, beating you with a hose," he said.

"Not me, I flew."

"You fall? You're limping, boy."

"I near to busted my neck running through bushes."

Blubber shook his head and said, "Man, we messed that one bad. I thought I had him and I didn't. He hollered like a hyena."

"Anyway, he's got a sore belly. I got him good below the belt. He went down."

"Yeah, but we got nothing for our trouble."

"Don't talk about that."

"Anyway, the night is young yet. There's much picking," Blubber said.

I shook my head.

"What's wrong, man?" he said. "You miss the meat and catch the gravy, that's all."

"Not tonight," I said, and he's got an ugly look in his eye now. I know what he's thinking, that I'm punking out. He don't say nothing though, and that's worse, so I show him my knee.

"That's a bad cut," he says. "And there's always another night."

We didn't seem to have no more to say then. I didn't feel like talking. It was like I wanted to throw up after all that running. Got a funny weakness in my body. After a while I told him I had to blow upstairs.

"Yeah, I'll see you," he said, and he walked away.

5.

I watched him shuffle off down the block. Then I went in the house, but I was lying about going upstairs. That was the last place in the world I wanted to be. If Moms was alone, she'd only jump all over me. If Pops was home, they'd be fighting like wildcats.

I hiked up to the roof but first I stopped by my door. No sound there. Too early for Pops to be in. He's still belting that pay-check. I went up to the roof thinking of that and I'm mad again. I hate his guts when he's drinking. He's not the same. It's like some evil inside him and he don't even know you. Look at him wrong and he'll knock your

head off. When he's not drinking, he's different, but it seems like he's always drinking.

The hell with him. I don't like to think of none of it. Thinking only makes it worse. It don't fix nothing. I lit a cigarette on the roof. It was nice there, almost cool. A little wind blowing. Nobody around. That was the best part of it. I stretched out and looked up at the sky. It was good but it scared me — all them stars up there and all that dark. I closed my eyes. I could hear traffic licking up the avenue, the little kids down in the street, and that water pushing out of the hydrant. That seemed to get louder and louder, like it's roaring in my head, then soft. Soon I don't hear nothing.

It seemed like maybe a minute later when I opened my eyes and I get a funny feeling. Everything's quiet as hell, weird up there. A cool wind on my face. I went to the edge of the roof and looked down and nobody's there, the little kids gone, the stoops empty. Real quiet, like a crazy street in a dream. Nobody there. Just a light on each corner and one in the middle of the block. Nothing else. That don't scare me, it's something else, like it's pushing me, telling me to jump. I shut my eyes, step back, cross the roof fast and go down the back fire-escape.

Soon as I climb in my window I know everybody's asleep. That feeling is in the house. Pops is home. Moms is asleep. I hit the bed without taking my clothes off, but now I can't sleep. I'm wide awake in the dark, thinking crazy things, itchy, hot now. The whole world is goofed up, that's all I know. I kept rolling around till the sky started getting light. Bam, I hear the big trucks starting to roll, moving down the avenue. Then there's nothing again.

6.

When I wake up the room is full of sunlight, it's hot and I'm sweating like a pig. Nobody's home. Pops is gone. Moms is out. I lam out of the house quick with my shine box and hit for my special spot.

There's a guy there ahead of me. But he don't know no better. One, two and I kicked him out of there.

A lot good that done. Business is bad. It's like nobody's wearing shoes no more. Everything is bugged up. Man, I know I ain't going to be a billionaire. Ain't even collecting enough to buy a cap pistol, much less the real thing.

Talk about the heat. The asphalt is melting by eleven. Must be everybody is sitting in the bathtub. A raggity wino came up and buzzed me for a quarter. I felt like kicking him in the face. It was too hot. I told him to breeze. He did. He crossed the street, tripped on the curb and laid out.

There's no business at all now, my tongue is out like a rag so I walked into the place on the corner and bought an orange drink and a

frank. My shine box is outside. I don't have to worry cause no punk will touch it while I'm around.

Another orange drink and I think of my girl. Maybe she's home. I leg it to her house, tap on the door. She opens and gives me a big hello, then a funny look cause I'm dripping like a horse.

"It's not that hot, is it?" she says.

"Hotter," I say and I walk in. Nobody's ever home in the day so I'm King. My shine box is under the stairway where she won't see it. I take a drink in the kitchen and flop on the couch, my club jacket on and my zip-gun in my pocket.

May comes in. She went to the bathroom to fix her face. "If you're so hot, why are you wearing that jacket?" she asks.

"Because it looks good on me."

"It does, but it's hot. You weren't around last night."

"Club meeting," I say, and she gives me a funny look. Maybe she knows which way the wind's blowing but she don't say nothing.

"You know, I'm hungry," I say. That's all, and she gives me a big smile and moves toward the kitchen.

"What would you like to have?" she says from there.

"You got ham and eggs?"

"Yeah, Dusty."

"Then beat it out." Sweet Gal, I say to myself, feeling good now. Damn, all of a sudden I got everything, like I'm married and all. May's in the kitchen, making me stuff and singing to herself. I get up and put some records on the player, light me a cigarette, hang my jacket on a knob and move to the bathroom to wash up.

Coming out, I'm whistling and when I get back to the living room I see May. She's holding my zip-gun like it's going to bite and she says, "What's this?"

I seen red and couldn't stop myself. I took the zip with one hand and whipped her silly with the other till she was laying on the couch crying.

"Next time you'll know better than go in my pockets," I tell her. I would have left but I can smell that ham and eggs, so I snatch a plate in the kitchen and have me some.

May followed me in. She can't look at me, her eyes is wet. I give her a pat and that does it. She smiles. Beat 'em first and they like it. She was all over me then, got me beer from the icebox and wanted to make more ham and eggs. I had to stop her.

The last record went off the player and she went in to change the discs. I followed and caught her hand, pulled her around. That's all there was to it. She didn't say nothing, like she's shy, but she ain't.

7.

Later, I put my jacket on, ready to go. May slips her arms around me and feels the zip-gun.

"That bothering you?" I say.

"Not really, Dusty, but that's a bad thing."

"That ain't nothing. Wait till you see the real pistol I'm getting."

"Yeah?" She gives me a funny look and says, "That's nothing. I already got one."

"Sure. Yeah."

"Have it your way."

"You mean you got a little old pistol? Where is it?"

"Oh, I got it."

She gives me that same funny look and then she gets it and brings it to me. Damn, it's the real thing, a cool cannon. I look it over, put it in my pocket and say, "Thanks, I'll take care of this because you're liable to get hurt with it."

That's when she blows her lid and starts blubbering. It ain't hers but her old man's.

"Too bad," I say, "because he shouldn't have it, if it is his. Anyway, you ain't getting it."

But that don't go down. She has to get nasty, so I belt her, knock her down and tell her she'd get worse if she didn't shut.

"What'll I tell my father?" she says.

"Tell him nothing," I say, and I walk out.

I go down the stairs, behind the cellar door. I got to look at that pistol again. Can't resist. I yank it out, look at it and the cellar door busts open and here's this character, his eyes popping, a nasty-looking guy with yellow in his eyes. I shove the pistol in my shine box but he seen it. He don't say nothing, though. He just looks at me funny-like, and I take out for the sidewalk.

With the pistol in the shine box it feels like it's full of bricks and I got the shakes now. I cut straight for home. Man, that seemed far. I feel like I'm walking across Siberia and my house ain't but two blocks away. It's the longest walk in the world and that box is like a ton of bricks.

I'm thinking of that guy that popped out of the cellar and the second block I'm almost running. Got the jitters. When I hit the stoop I race up the steps. Inside the hall it's like dark after the sunlight, cool, and a naturally nasty smell but that's most welcome now. Nobody in the hall. I could hear a radio upstairs. Nothing else. Then I know something's wrong. Soon as I put my foot on the first step I hear the door open behind me and I know it's got to do with the pistol. I can't even turn. A hand grabs me and this guy's got me by the collar. He yanked me around.

I'm looking into a real nasty face now. It's the guy from the cellar.

"Let's have it, cute-boy," he says.

I know what he means but I say, "Have what? Take your punky paw off me."

"When I have what's in the box," he says, and he ain't letting go.

"There ain't nothing but polish and rags," I say but I know he's got me. There ain't no way out so

I swing the box up fast. He ain't expecting nothing like that. Bam, I bust him in the face with it and he lets go. Then I'm hitting the steps, flying. I'm on the second flight when I hear him coming up.

I hit the roof and fly down the fire-escape. There ain't no fence in the back. I lick it across the yard to the house across the way. I'm in and out of that basement like a rabbit. But there ain't no stopping now. A truck is coming by. I hop the back of it and ride three blocks before I jump off.

It still ain't safe, but I got that pistol. Can't go home, though. That guy is like to be waiting around for a long time.

Can't hang around here, either. That guy wants my head. I dumped my shine box and hit for a movie.

8.

Didn't get home till late and then I sneaked in from the back street, hid the pistol down the cellar and went upstairs. Moms is home, Pops ain't. Cooling his tongue again. There's a bad air in the house like the walls is going to start busting down. Nothing on the table. I don't say nothing, don't look at Moms.

Finally I mouse into my room. It's dark outside. I go down the fire-escape, pick up the pistol, and everything is nuts again. I'm mad inside, like I hate everybody, the whole world.

When I hit the meeting place the mob is there. Beer cans is all over the place, clouds of smoke. I see Jess. He takes the butt out of his mouth and grins, wise-like.

"Cool it, men," he says, "here's that big bad cat again."

"Yeah, without his shine box."

That's all I had to hear. In the next second I got that pistol on them and they all start flipping and diving. "Cool this," I say.

Then I hear Blubber laugh. "Yeah, he done it. I told you that kitty was real stuff."

The others relax. Jess comes over and hands me a can of beer. "That's a sweet-looking iron," he says. "Where'd you snatch it?"

"From Little Red Riding Hood."

"Cool. Real cool. We'll be using that against the Cobras."

"When is that?"

"Any night now. Maybe Saturday. I hear them boys is running a dance."

"Let's bust into that dance. I feel like practicing targets on hide," I say.

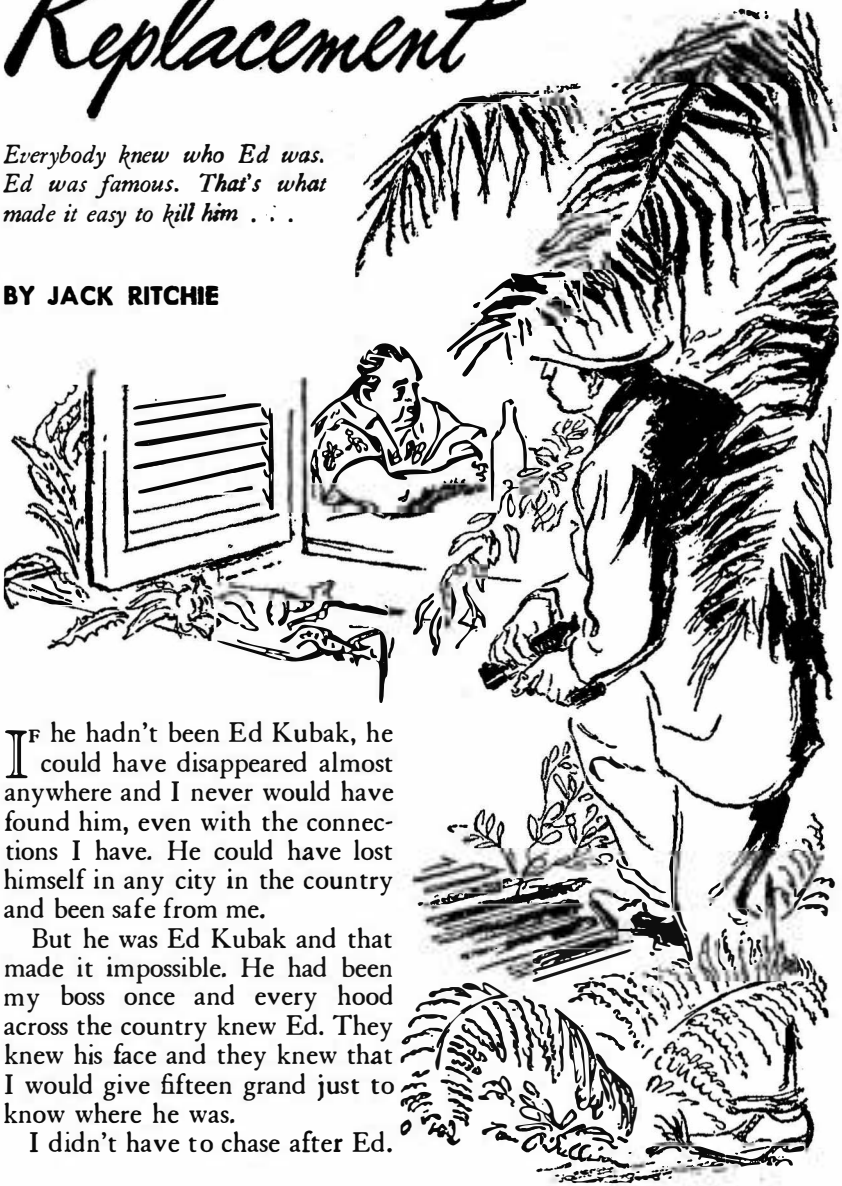
Everybody was for it. Everybody starts talking at once, how we going to hit that other club, what we going to do to them. Yeah, somebody's like to be killed but who cares?

It'll hit the papers next day and everybody'll read about it.

Replacement

Everybody knew who Ed was. Ed was famous. That's what made it easy to kill him . . .

BY JACK RITCHIE



IF he hadn't been Ed Kubak, he could have disappeared almost anywhere and I never would have found him, even with the connections I have. He could have lost himself in any city in the country and been safe from me.

But he was Ed Kubak and that made it impossible. He had been my boss once and every hood across the country knew Ed. They knew his face and they knew that I would give fifteen grand just to know where he was.

I didn't have to chase after Ed.

I stayed where I was and let other eyes do the finding for me. I waited and thought about Helen and about the organization that was mine now. I thought about the city that was mine now.

Ed had been alone on top when I was still a collector making the rounds from bookie joint to bookie joint. He'd been a king while my feet were still walking the dirt. But my eyes were looking up, ready for the break when it came and even ready to make the break myself.

And the break came when Stacey Hanlon made the mistake of getting drunk and running out of money the same night. Stacey was one of Kubak's top muscle boys and not too bright even when he was sober. And with nearly a quart under his belt, Stacey went back to the old days and walked into a grocery store to pick up a little change.

He picked a little store run by an old man who should have been silly scared and begged Stacey to take every cent in the cash register. But the brittle old man wasn't scared and he kept a .38 under the counter.

When Stacey finished trying to cough the slugs out of his lungs and coughed out his life instead, there was a job vacant close to Ed Kubak, and I decided it was going to be mine.

It was easy to get to Ed's door. I simply took the elevator as high as it would go and then walked up a flight of iron stairs and I was right there. But from then on it got hard.

Two big men with cautious eyes opened it slow and not too far. Neither one of them was quite as big as I was, but still there were two of them and so I smiled politely.

"Yeah?" one of them said, squinting against the smoke from his cigarette.

"I'm here with the week's take," I said, holding up the briefcase.

He frowned at me.

"I'm a collector," I said. "Horse parlors."

"Sonny," he said, taking the butt from his lips. "You must be shiny new or you'd know better than to bring it up here. Take it to Sullivan, he has charge of the collections."

"I know," I said. "But Sullivan's in there, isn't he?"

"So?" the one who didn't smoke and had red hair said. "Sullivan's got an office with maybe twenty clerks. Why the personal delivery?"

"It's a secret between him and me," I said. "He'll get peeved if I don't see him."

Their hard eyes kept sizing me up while they tried to make up their minds. I raised my arms above my head. "I'm clean," I said. "And I don't bite very hard."

The man who probably everybody called Red went over me with his hands and through the briefcase. He eyed the other one and shrugged. "We can ask."

They let me inside and I was in a small carpeted hall with a very solid door at the other end. Red went to that door and pressed a buzzer.

A wide man with no hair let us see his face. Red spoke. "Ask Sullivan if he wants to see . . ." he thumbed at me.

"Warren," I said. "Max Warren."

Baldy closed the door and there were just the three of us to stare at each other.

I smiled gently and let the briefcase slip out of my fingers. Their eyes instinctively followed it as it thudded to the floor and I took that second to drive a shoulder-powered right to Red's lean jaw. He had just time to look surprised before he dropped and that left me and the cigarette smoker. His hand went for his side pocket and he almost got out the automatic before I got to him.

I made sure they were sleeping, stepped on the cigarette smoldering on the rug and went to the second door and waited.

In a few minutes, Baldy opened it. "Sullivan says to throw the . . ."

My hand on his face stopped the conversation and I shoved hard. He teetered on his heels and then sat down hard. I stepped over him and into the room.

About a dozen people's eyes were on me and whatever they had been talking about died in quiet. Hands went for shoulder holsters and I was facing five steady guns.

Sullivan got the brunette off his lap and rose, his face flushed. "Damn it, Max," he said. "When I say I don't want to see you, then you don't get seen."

I turned toward Kubak. He was a heavy paunched man with dark brown eyes. His face was sallow and jowled and he breathed in a deep tired wheeze.

"I came to see you, Mr. Kubak," I said. "Not Sullivan."

A small flicker of interest came into his eyes. "Then why ask for Sullivan?"

"Would you have seen me?"

"No," he said.

"So I asked for Sullivan. That got me half way in and I took it from there." I met his eyes. "You'll need somebody to replace Stacey Hanlon."

His eyes traveled over me and the sound of his heavy breathing was the only noise in the room. Finally he said, "Stacey was tough."

I gave him time to hear Red groaning his way to consciousness behind me. "Do I look like I carry daisies?"

Kubak smiled slightly and looked at the others. He took the cigar out of his mouth. "Sullivan," he said. "Fix the man a drink."

Stacey's job didn't have much work connected with it and the pay was good. Mostly I'd just stick close to Kubak, mix his drinks, light his cigars, and give him a feeling of security. But once in a while I'd get a word from Kubak and leave for a couple of hours. Occasionally I'd have to clean my gun before reporting back to Kubak, but not as often as I'd expected. All some people need is a friendly word or maybe

just a little rough stuff to make them realize it was bad to irritate Kubak.

I rode beside Kubak in the big limousine, always stepped out first, just in case, and got to all the drinking parties that Kubak did. That was why I was there when Sullivan brought Helen Wesley along.

I always thought that was stupid of Sullivan, but then I never thought much of his brain power in the first place. If I owned her, I'd make sure to keep her away from anybody who had more money than I did. But I suppose Sullivan thought that Kubak was too old and tired to be interested, and Sullivan couldn't have been more wrong.

We were celebrating our expansion over the county line when Helen came in on Sullivan's arm. And the second she walked in you saw that the rest of the women in the room were just dames who talked too loud and went heavy on the make-up.

Helen was a honey blonde with brown eyes and your first look was enough to tell you that money was the only thing that could make her melt. Not that she looked hard, but it was there just the same.

I was sitting next to Kubak when Sullivan brought her over and that was the first time I'd ever seen him struggle to his feet when he was introduced to a woman.

She looked at him with open calculation and then met my eyes. I grinned until she looked away.

Kubak hovered around her all evening and I noticed that she was more to him than a sparkle in the eye. It went a lot deeper than that.

And Sullivan knew it too, because he hit the bottle hard and by the time the party broke up, he had to be carried out. I had Red toss him over his shoulder and take him to his car. Red drove Sullivan to his place and I took Helen to her apartment in my car.

She didn't complain when I followed her upstairs and into her apartment. Silently she made drinks and handed one to me.

"Hello," I said.

She lit a cigarette and went to the other side of the room.

I smiled at her. "All you want from me is information. Isn't that right?"

She stared out of the window, frowning slightly in thought, and then turned. "Sullivan told me he was the boss," she said.

"Once in a while he thinks so." I put my feet on the hassock and relaxed. "And now you're dissatisfied."

Her eyes flickered over me. "Are you anybody important? I'd like to know if I have to be polite."

"No," I said. "You'll have to love me for my personality alone."

Helen drew slowly on her cigarette. "Kubak fell hard. Do you think there'll be any trouble if I say goodbye to Sullivan?"

"That depends," I said. "Whether he thinks you're worth trouble."

She smiled. "I'll keep out of the way until it's over."

I set my drink down, got up, and walked over to her.

She stood stiff and still. "It'll be cold. Ice cold."

I took her in my arms and it was cold. Her lips were firm, unyielding. And then as I held her tighter I could feel the beginnings of a thaw.

She pushed me away quickly.

"I understand," I said, grinning. "Raised on the wrong side of the tracks. Old man drunk all the time and beat you. Left home at fourteen. Had crummy jobs. Waiting on tables? Or was it burlesque? Finally decided that all work and no money was not for Helen. Tell me about it. I like those kind of stories. They make me want to cry."

She flushed slightly. "Don't forget your hat."

I picked it up and walked toward the door. "Kubak usually starts off with flowers, but don't be disappointed. The big stuff will come after a week or so."

The next day Kubak sent me out twice. Once in the morning and once in the afternoon. In the afternoon I brought the paper he wanted, opened it, and laid it on his lap.

He read the headlines and the lead story. "It says that Sullivan and a small-time bookie had a shooting disagreement somewhere way out in the country. No survivors."

"That's what it says."

He glanced back at the paper. "No witnesses either and nobody heard the shots. But the cops think it happened about ten. That right?"

"Closer to ten-thirty," I said.

He folded the newspaper and sat back. "See that he gets a pretty funeral. The bookie too."

I handed him a cigar from the humidor and lit it.

"And so?" he asked. "I think you got something on your mind."

"And so you'll have to replace Sullivan," I said. "I thought you ought to know that I can read, write, and add."

"That's nice," he said. He closed his eyes for almost a minute. "All right. You got his job. I don't care what you read or write, but don't make any mistakes when it comes to adding." His eyes opened. "And don't get too ambitious. I'll be watching you."

But he didn't watch me and that was what I was counting on. His eyes and his brain were busy with Helen.

I was grateful to her for what she was doing to Kubak. Sure, she was doing it for her own reasons, but it helped me too.

I had my shoulder in the door now and I eased in. Helen was good at making Kubak forget business, and it wasn't long before the boys came to me when a decision had to be made. Kubak couldn't be bothered.

I worked slow and careful at first,

not taking too much on my shoulders, but the boys soon got the idea I was trying to put across. Kubak was slipping, he was getting old.

I even let drop a word or two that I thought Kubak's take was too big. I let it be known that the fact saddened me and that I thought there ought to be some adjustment.

It took about six months before I was sure enough of where I stood to call a meeting of the big boys and not let Kubak know about it. I brought the whole thing into the open and in fifteen minutes we all agreed that Kubak needed a vacation. It took a little longer for them to see that I was big enough to take his place. They tried to put up some argument, but I talked bigger than I had and they decided to go along with me.

At Kubak's next party we sat there smiling at him until finally he noticed that the smiles were a lot different from the ones he was used to getting.

I got up, rapped on a glass with my cigarette lighter for silence, and looked at him in a kindly fashion.

Kubak sat up straighter, a frown forming on his forehead.

"Kubak," I said. "We've noticed that you've seemed tired lately."

"The hell I am," he snapped.

I smiled at Helen and looked back at him. "In fact we've decided unanimously that you need a vacation."

His brown eyes were hard. "You're not shoving me out."

"You could argue about it," I said. "But I don't think you'll have much help."

His eyes went from face to face and he lost some of his color.

"But we don't like arguments," I said gently. "You know how tempers will flare and how messy things get for the loser." I paused. "And so if you take this real quiet, I think you'll have a nice happy old age to look forward to in some warm climate."

Kubak's head turned from face to face again and suddenly he became old. He sighed tiredly and I could feel some of the tension leave my body. We had won and the boys got up and headed for the door.

I lingered behind until they were gone. I picked up Helen's ermine and draped it over my arm. "Ready?" I asked.

Kubak turned sharply toward Helen. She was considering him dispassionately, weighing the pros and cons.

His eyes were bewildered. "Helen! Don't even think about leaving me!"

"I'm the boss now," I said softly. "The head man."

She glanced at Kubak once more and then came toward me.

Kubak rose from his chair, his voice desperate. "Helen! You know I love you."

I put the ermine around her shoulders.

Kubak tried once more. I could tell that now he realized what Helen

was, but he wanted her anyway. "I have money, Helen," he said quietly. "A lot of money."

Helen hesitated and I smiled at her. "Well, baby?"

Our eyes met and I knew what she was deciding. *Kubak has money, but I think you'll have a lot more some day.*

I held open the door and she walked out.

"Max," Kubak said, tightness in his voice. "I love her and nobody is going to have her if I can't."

I stepped into the hall and shut the door behind me.

Kubak left town at the end of the week, but he stopped to do something before he did.

It was the afternoon I got the new Jaguar that I found out Kubak's last words to me weren't just hot air. I went up to Helen's apartment and when I used the key I walked into a room full of cops.

They showed me Helen where she was lying on the bedroom floor. There was no bleeding now from the brown-stained front of her dress and she was icy cold when I touched her.

There might have been trouble for me, except that I'd spent the time the cops pin-pointed for the killing at the auto show room and three salesmen could verify that fact.

They questioned me for a couple of hours, but I had nothing to tell them. I knew that eventually they would get the connection between Kubak and Helen and they would begin looking for him. But that would take time, and I wanted Kubak to get away. At least from the cops.

When they were through with me, I went to my apartment and began phoning. I let it get around that I wanted to find Kubak and that it was worth fifteen thousand to me. I just wanted to know where he was. I didn't want a hair of his head touched and I didn't want the police in on it.

It was two months before I got the telegram from Palm Beach. "A friend of yours is here," it said. "Be sure to bring the fifteen grand." It was signed Rieber.

It was near nightfall when the plane brought me in and I was met by a short wiry man wearing a yellow sport shirt. "The name's Rieber," he said.

We got in his car and drove out of the airport.

"You sure about this?" I asked.

He had a permanent tight smile on his face as his eyes watched the road. "You'll spend the dough tonight."

He switched on his headlights. "He's in a small motor court outside the city. It's pretty run down so there aren't many customers to bother you. I got a boy watching so he don't decide to move."

We drove half an hour and then Rieber braked the car and turned smoothly into a motor court. He stopped the car and pointed. "Over

there," he said. "The one with the light in the window. No. 24."

I walked toward the cabin with my .45 in my hand. I took it carefully and on tiptoe and went around to a side window.

Kubak sat at a small table, a quart of bourbon in front of him and next to it a glass tumbler more than half filled with the stuff.

I went around to the front and turned the knob slowly. The door was unlocked and I pushed it open.

Kubak looked up at me without surprise. He seemed a lot older now. The skin on his face hung in tired flaps and his eyes were deep sunk and weary.

He fingered the glass of bourbon for a moment and then sighed. He put it on the window sill. "You found me because I stopped running, Max," he said.

"Drink the whiskey," I said. "It might make it easier."

His eyes went to the glass and then away. "I'm a dying man, Max," he said. "You could wait another month and you wouldn't have to bother." He looked up. "Liver, kidneys, everything inside worn out and gone bad. But mostly the heart."

"A month is too long, Kubak. Your troubles are over right now."

Kubak looked at me curiously. "You didn't love her, Max. Not enough so that you'd take care of this personally. What makes you mad is that somebody took away something you thought was yours."

"She *was* mine, Kubak. Sure I loved her."

Kubak rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I'm the one who really loved her. I loved her so much I was blind to what she was. But even when I knew, I still loved her."

I was getting impatient. "No prayers and no drink?" My finger tightened on the trigger.

It was a clean shot and he died easy. There was just that shock in the eyes of a man when he realizes that death is not quite what he expected and then he dropped.

I picked up the glass of bourbon from the window sill and downed it in a few gulps. "I loved her as much as you did," I said.

The drink burned in my stomach. I went to the water tap and swallowed a glass of water and waited for the burning to stop.

But it didn't stop. It got worse and worse until I doubled over, holding my stomach. I looked at Kubak lying there and suddenly I knew about the whiskey. I knew why Kubak had stopped running. That drink was supposed to be his last one on earth. But he had left it for me. For my victory drink. For my death drink.

I began cursing then. I cursed because of the white hot pain and because I was afraid to die and because I wished I had never seen Helen.

I hoped she was in hell.

What's Your Verdict?

No. 4—The Anxious Friend

BY SAM ROSS

EVERYBODY in town knew that Arthur's wife was spending a lot of her time with Bob Stevens. And everybody knew that during those long evenings when Arthur was away on selling trips his wife and Bob Stevens weren't precisely playing canasta.

That is, everybody knew except Arthur. He was a gentle, trusting guy whom everybody liked and, as he said later, "I never even thought that Marian would ever even look at another fellow." Sure, Arthur had to spend a lot of time away from home, selling linoleum to dealers throughout the state. But he figured that his pretty wife was spending her time making their little house spic and span for his return.

Any of Arthur's inquisitive neighbors could have told him all about his wife and Bob Stevens. But nobody wanted to do that. So things dragged on until one cool night in early September.

Arthur had been out of town for a little over a week, and he wasn't expected back until another week had passed. So Bob Stevens felt perfectly safe as he knocked on the door of Arthur's house and waited, tapping his foot impatiently, until Marian let him in.

Stevens didn't know that, from the house next door, old Mrs. Freed was watching every move he made from behind her lace curtains. And he didn't know that, within five minutes after he'd gone inside the house, Mrs. Freed had made up her mind once and for all.

Mrs. Freed's son-in-law was elected to call Arthur, who was staying at a hotel a hundred miles away. The son-in-law didn't much like the job, but Mrs. Freed had a will of iron, and she'd taken just about enough from Stevens, who'd never liked her and made no bones about it. Now, she told her son-in-law, was the time. And so he got on the phone and got in touch with Arthur.

Arthur didn't believe it at first. Bob Stevens was an old friend of his. First he thought his informant was lying to him. Then he tried to make out a case in favor of Stevens — after all, he was a friend of the family, and there isn't any law against friendly visits, is there?

Mrs. Freed's son-in-law tried to

convince Arthur that there was a little more than friendship between Bob Stevens and Marian, but Arthur wasn't having any. "I trust Marian implicitly," he said over the phone.

Then Mrs. Freed herself got on the telephone, and she managed to convince Arthur that he ought to come home and see for himself. It would only be a three-hour drive, and he couldn't lose anything except a little time. She even convinced Arthur to get himself a gun before he came home.

The night desk clerk at the hotel was a friend of Arthur's, and he agreed to lend Arthur a gun. He made a little offhand joke about unfaithful wives, and Arthur laughed with him. After all — Marian and Bob Stevens! It was ridiculous.

He got into his car and started home.

Meanwhile, Bob had decided to stay the night. It didn't matter what the neighbors thought — he was quite aware that they knew what was going on, and he figured that if they hadn't said anything so far, they never would. Besides, if anything happened, Bob had a gun stashed away — a gun even Marian didn't know about. He slipped it under the bed, in easy reach, and settled down for a pleasant night with his friend's wife.

That was how Arthur found them when he came home. He opened the door and tiptoed around, not wanting to wake Marian. But when he saw two figures in the dark bedroom he knew that Mrs. Freed had been right. He turned on the light and quickly started to reach for the gun he'd borrowed.

He'd stuck it in his pocket, though, not really thinking he'd need it. He'd only just got it out and into his hand when Bob Stevens pulled the trigger on his own gun and shot Arthur dead.

Next door, Mrs. Freed told her nervous son-in-law to call the local police.

By the time Stevens and Marian were halfway to the jailhouse Stevens' quick mind had figured out his next step. In court, he admitted he'd shot Arthur. His lawyer proved, without difficulty, that Arthur had drawn a gun on Stevens. So, Stevens said, it was self-defense. The most he could get, he told the court respectfully, was a prison term.

Could Stevens plead self-defense? What's *your* verdict?

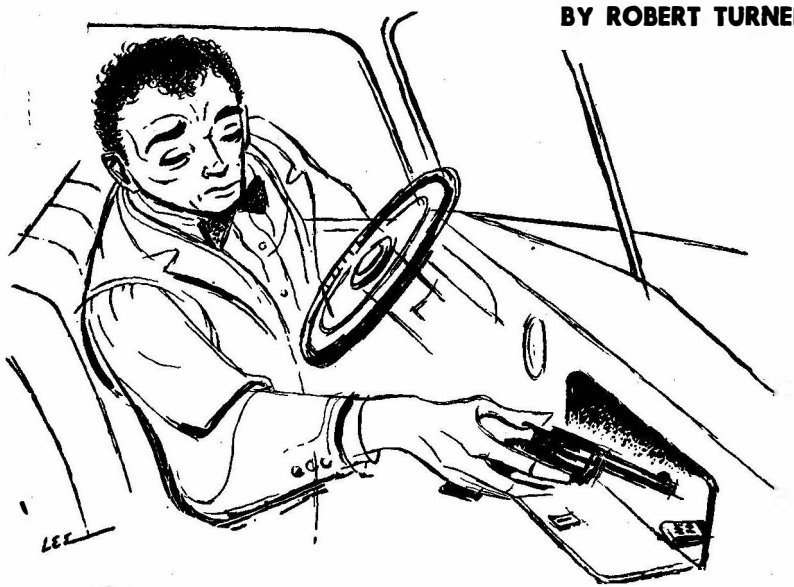
ANSWER

No, Stevens couldn't plead self-defense. The law states that if a man voluntarily puts himself in a position where he could normally expect to be threatened with murder, he can't plead self-defense if the threat materializes and he has to shoot his way out. Stevens was convicted of murder in the first degree.

Shy Guy

This is the way it happened. I'm not going to hold anything back, anything at all . . .

BY ROBERT TURNER



THIS is exactly the way he told it to us; I mean, in my own words, of course, but I haven't added anything or left out anything. It was just like this.

First off, it wasn't really his fault, he said, he hadn't wanted to go to the party, anyhow. He did everything to keep from going. He had a funny feeling about it and when he got these funny feelings about things they usually worked out. Like the other time when he didn't want to go to a party and his wife

made him, though he had this hunch that they shouldn't. That was when they lost their little girl. That is, the little girl they would have had a month later only this guy who drove them home from the party was pretty drunk and there was a bad wreck. So maybe there was something to this business of him having premonitions or second sight or whatever you want to call it. Some people do.

But first of all, he said, we had to understand what the setup was, what kind of a guy he was and what kind of a dame his wife was and all like that.

He's an artist, you know. He's had a lot of cartoons in magazines, some of them in the big magazines, too, but that was just bread and butter stuff; what he really wanted to do was serious illustrating, covers and the inside pictures for stories and like that. Meanwhile, he made an average living doing these cartoons. That bothered him, though, because people were always expecting him to be funny, to be a card at parties and all and he said that was rough because he was really a shy kind of guy and he didn't have much sense of humor at all. He didn't think up the jokes at all, I understand. He had some gag man doing that for him and he just drew them up and they split. But a lot of people didn't know that. They thought the ideas for these cartoons, and everything, were his.

Anyhow, you know how nervous and neurotic and kind of strange some of these artist people are. Well, he was like that, only bad. When he wasn't working he liked to putter around the house or read a lot or take walks in the woods. I guess maybe he really didn't like people too much although he said he did; that he didn't really mind people if they'd just let him alone.

The crazy part of this was his wife, Della, was just the opposite. She was quite pretty, with a nice little shape, and she was very vivacious, I guess you'd call it, and always at ease with everybody. Everybody was always crazy about Della. He said he knew lots of people wondered why she ever married him, what she saw in him, but Della was all right, he said, and they got along fine and she was very fond of him, he knew, and there was never any trouble except when people didn't leave them alone.

Della got over things quick, too. Like with that wreck when they lost the baby and they found out that Della would never have any more, about a week or so and she was completely over it, though it took him, Artie, her husband, a lot longer. In fact she became even more vivacious after that and wanted to be on the go all the more and never could stand hanging around the house and stuff like that. It drove her a little nuts.

And that was when she started to work. She got this job down in a department store in town. They

didn't really need the money, even though Della claimed that was part of the reason she took the job, because there were times between the cartoon checks when things got a little tight and they got behind on bills. But over a year, averaged, Artie made enough for them to get along. Not for any luxuries but to live comfortable. Anyhow, Della didn't see where it could hurt and if they didn't need the money for living expenses, she said, Lord knows she could do with some extra clothes. She couldn't understand Artie's attitude on this working business.

He didn't like it, he said, because it made people think that he didn't make enough for them and that everybody thought because he didn't go out to an office from nine to five that he didn't work, anyhow, and was some kind of a bum and that maybe people would think what a shame that poor Della had to go out to work to support that bum of a husband of hers. Stuff like that. And Artie didn't like it because it left him home there alone all day. Although he didn't like people, he couldn't stand being alone, either; he wanted Della there. Just wanted her there. She used to laugh at that. She'd say:

"I never heard of anything so ridiculous. Why, sometimes you go all day and never even speak to me. I don't even see you sometimes. You stay cooped up in that little room at your drawing board or looking through stacks of magazines or just lying on the couch staring at the ceiling. I don't see what earthly good *I* do you, being here."

But she did do him a lot of good, Artie said. Just having her there, knowing she was around, made him feel secure or something. He didn't know exactly what it was; it was hard to understand.

And he didn't like this working business because it was suddenly as though Della had found a great big new world of her own and it was all she talked about or thought about. She loved it. Seeing and talking to new people everyday, with the customers getting to know her and liking her and asking for her, with the people in the store crazy about her because she was always so cheerful and was such a good sales person. She'd found a home, so to speak.

Sometimes Della wouldn't get home when she should. Artie would go crazy, those times, thinking, wondering all kinds of things. He didn't think Della would cheat on him; he was sure of that, even though she did tease him a lot about how some of the men in the store were always trying to date her and all. At the same time, of course, he knew there were other guys who thought the same thing about their wives, and *their* wives were making time around town like everything with every Tom, Dick and Henry. What Artie meant was, he'd never caught her at it, or had any real proof or anything and it was kind

of like with him she was innocent until proven guilty.

Of course it would always turn out that she'd stopped off at the house of one of the girls who worked with her in the store and they'd had a few drinks and got to talking and the time had simply flown by; she didn't mean to be so late; she wouldn't want to worry him for the world and it was real sweet of Artie to worry about her like that but he shouldn't do it because she could take care of herself.

A couple of times there were parties. Somebody in Della's store was always giving a party about something or other. Artie went with her once and had a miserable time. Everybody got drunk. Everybody danced with everybody else's wife and sometimes they'd even kind of disappear for a time, the different wives and husbands. It seemed from what Della said that most of the husbands of the women who worked at the store with her weren't much good. They all had jobs that paid enough to support their families but if any little extras were wanted like a new TV set or a new car every year or dancing lessons for the kids, why the wives had to work to make that possible. But these guys all seemed to stay drunk after work all the time and most of them were mean to their wives and sometimes they took their money from them. When Della was always telling Artie about this, he asked her once if it wasn't quite a coincidence that all these working wives seemed to be pretty good gals and all their husbands pretty big rats. But Della didn't seem to know what he was talking about, what coincidence?

So Artie didn't go to any of the parties after the first one. Della went to a couple of them alone. He pretended that he didn't care but Della knew that he really did; it bothered him and she wished he wouldn't be like that. One time she came home and she found him sawing off the legs on the dining room table. He'd already sawn the legs off of several of their good chairs. Della was horrified and asked him why he'd done it. Artie said he didn't know. And he looked so innocent and puzzled, she had to laugh. They both got to laughing about it so hard after that they liked to choke.

It was a funny thing, Artie said, but after Della started working, it got so that he couldn't work so good. He began to get a lot of his cartoon roughs rejected from regular markets. He knew that his work wasn't right but he couldn't figure out exactly why. It was silly to think that this business of Della working had anything to do with it. It got so that after a few weeks he'd stop trying to work, altogether. He tore up a lot of the cover painting samples and sample story illustrations he'd worked on to show to the big magazines. He didn't do anything much but lie on the studio couch in his room all day. Of course

Della didn't know about this. He didn't tell her. She thought he was working the same as ever and was just going through one of the usual bad periods with his cartoon markets.

And Della began to get home from work late more and more. She had to get up early in the morning, so he didn't see too much of her. He knew this had to be stopped soon; it wasn't the right way for a man and his wife to live but he didn't know quite how to go about it. He approached Della on it tentatively several times. She just kind of laughed it off, though, and told him he was a silly goose and just as soon as he got his first illustration assignment from one of the big magazines she'd be glad to quit her job. Then she switched right over to telling him about one of her customers down at the store. He didn't hardly listen, he said, because he didn't really give a damn about it and he was, to tell the truth, a little sick of this store of hers.

Anyhow, another party came up and this one was a double birthday affair for one of the buyers and one of the store girls and it was going to be at the buyer's perfectly darling house, out in that expensive Dark Forest section. The house had been built and decorated by the buyer's third husband that she'd just divorced. It wasn't often that the sales people were invited out there. And since this buyer was the head of Della's department they both just *had* to go.

Artie didn't want to. He wasn't going to do it. He didn't see why he should spend another miserable evening like that just to please some people he didn't care anything about. Then one night, Della brought home some girls from the store and they went to work on Artie. They were real cute about it. They said that *all* the girls at the store thought it was perfectly fascinating, him being an artist and all and he shouldn't be an old meanie; they'd all see he had a real good time. One of the girls, who was kind of young and cute and not married, sort of snuggled up to him and mussed his hair when she pleaded with him and this embarrassed him so that he said all right, he'd go, just to get rid of them all.

But the morning Della went to work the night of this big party, Artie told her he had a bad headache and he wouldn't be able to go, after all. Della got a little huffy about it, then and said okay if that was the way he felt about it, he could stay at home and be an old stick-in-the-mud.

I know this probably all sounds boring and like a lot of silly details and all, kind of petty things to lead up to what happened, but this was just the way it happened, he said, this was what led up to it; there wasn't anything else. So this is it, for what it's worth.

All that day Artie didn't do much. He tried to work but couldn't. He didn't really have a headache. He

felt fine, in fact, except for every once in a while a kind of sharp, sudden depression, he said, that would go away as quick as it came. Sort of a sudden feeling of hopelessness about everything and what was it all about and what was the use; that kind of feeling.

He made himself some cold bologna sandwiches, that night, and he tried not to but he kept thinking about how it would be at the party, the way it had been that one time he went. How some of the guys would hold Della too close while they were dancing. How he had stood there at that party in the middle of a dozen people, all having a big time and he felt all alone there as though there was a glass wall around him or something and wondering why he wasn't like the rest of them; what was the matter with him? And when someone would kid him about being shy he'd get all flustered and act like twice the damn fool he was. He kept thinking about all that.

Then suddenly he found himself with the kitchen carving knife in his hand and he was sharpening a pencil. Only he'd sharpened the pencil down until it was almost nothing, just a nub, already, when he realized what he was doing. Then he sat there, looking at the sharp point and razor edge of the blade. He wondered if a knife wound really hurt very much and he wondered what Della would say or do when she came in and found him lying there on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood. And he wondered which would be best, to do it across the throat or the wrists or push it into his heart. He was afraid though of hitting a rib, of one of them getting in the way. It made him all panicky, he said, to think of that knife half way in and he couldn't push it any further because it was hitting a rib. He had just about decided the throat was best because he wouldn't be able to look at it while he was doing it and he was actually hearing Della scream when she found him and seeing the way she would look, when the car drew up outside.

He put the knife down on the kitchen table just as they all came busting in. There were four of them besides Della. There was this buyer, who was throwing the brawl, a big-boned pompous clothes horse, Artie called her, a couple of other women from the store and somebody's husband; he never did find out whose. They were all wearing little party hats. They were blowing little party horns. They were about two-thirds high already. They clasped hands and danced all around Artie and sang *For He's A Jolly Good Fellow* and told him how the party was going all to pieces without him. They grabbed him by the arms and started to hustle him bodily toward the door.

Artie said he suddenly got terribly scared. He started to shake and sweat all over. He said he didn't

know exactly what it was but he knew he shouldn't go to that party. He tried every protest he knew. Finally he told Della that he had a feeling, this feeling that he shouldn't go and begged her not to make him. But she wouldn't listen. She made him go. They all did. He just kind of gave up and went along with them out to the car and on to the big party. He felt funny. He felt nervous and unhappy and some way he couldn't even explain, he said.

The funny thing was as soon as they got him out there to the party everybody seemed to forget about it. It was like it had been some game they were all playing and now it was over and they were through with it and they'd found something else to amuse them. They stuck a drink in his hand, which he didn't even taste and a wedge of soggy sandwich he didn't eat and left him like that. He stood there for a long while, holding the drink and the sandwich and watching everybody have a big time which consisted mostly of a lot of loud laughing over nothing that seemed very funny, a lot of loud talking that was about nothing in particular. And, of course, the dancing, which seemed to be a fine chance for the men to do a lot of hugging of other men's wives.

He stood there and watched a big young guy, with a kind of meaty handsome face, dancing with Della and Della laughing up at him and seeming to get a big kick out of it. Suddenly this big guy saw Artie watching them. He said something to Della and she giggled. Then he shouted:

"Hey, Artie, this little gal of yours is a perfect doll, man! I've been dyin' to kiss her for years. You don't mind if I steal a little ol' kiss right now, do you, right here in front of everybody where it's perfectly safe and respectable and everything? You want to get even, *you* can kiss *my* wife! That is, if you ain't too bashful! . . . Hey, how *about* that everybody? Can you imagine Artie kissin' my wife?"

Nobody could, and they thought it was very funny. Everybody had a convulsion, Artie said, and he just stood there, feeling as though he was going to choke and his head would swell and burst with all the blood beating through it.

Then this big guy from the shoe department at the store, Artie thought he was, went ahead and kissed Della right there in front of everybody and everybody shouted encouragement and the guy held Della too tight and too long and when he let go, she made a big deal out of pretending she was going to faint or something.

All the time Artie didn't do anything, he said, but stand there with the drink and the soggy sandwich in his hand.

When it was all over, he finally set the drink and the sandwich down and he went upstairs to the bathroom. He'd thought he was going to be sick but he wasn't. He just

stood there, he said, for he didn't know how long, just looking at himself in the bathroom mirror. Then he left the bathroom and started looking for a bedroom where there wasn't a lot of clothes on the bed so he could lay down for awhile. He felt kind of weak, he said. That was when he opened a door and saw that instead of a room it was a closet and that was when he saw the vacuum cleaner there, with this long hose on it, and it didn't come to him suddenly or anything, but very naturally like it was the perfectly normal thing to do, he said.

He took the vacuum cleaner hose after detaching it and rolled it up and hid it under his coat. He went downstairs and outside and nobody paid any attention to him or tried to stop him. He got into the first car in the parking lot he came to. It had a key in it. He put the long hose on the seat beside him. He started the motor. He rolled up all the windows in the car. He started to get out to attach the long hose to the exhaust pipe, he said, when he saw the County Sheriff's office sticker on the windshield. He knew whose car it was, then.

The husband of one of the women at the store Della rode home with sometimes, was a deputy sheriff, Della had told him. She'd told him that this guy always carried a loaded gun in the glove compartment of the car. Della had thought that was a big deal, very exciting or something.

Artie said he'd never seen a real gun up close, nor held one. He got curious about it. He reached out and opened the glove compartment. It was in there all right, he said. He could see the dull gleam of it. He reached in gingerly and took it out. He held it for a long while and he was surprised at how very heavy it was and how unbelievably powerful and coldly capable of spewing death it felt to his hand. He'd always thought that some of the kids' cap pistols were very realistic looking, with the chambers that really revolved and all and he'd always thought a real gun would look and feel just like them. But there wasn't a bit of resemblance, now. There was no question about this; the cold, heavy solid efficiency of its feel. It scared Artie a little. It gave him icy shivers. At the same time it gave him a feeling like he'd never had before, he said. He couldn't describe it. When he tried to describe it later to us, you could see his eyes dilate and the spit got so thick in his mouth he could hardly talk. He said it made him feel very big, although he wasn't any smaller than average and had never been particularly self-conscious about his size. But holding the gun made him feel like a giant or a god or something, he said.

After a few moments, he guessed it was, he got a little more confident and he examined the gun closely, saw how the safety worked and all.

Then, holding the gun in his

hand, he stretched up and looked at himself in the rear view mirror. He told himself: "I'm going in there and get Della and take her home. Nobody's going to try to stop me or say one word. I'm going to make her stay at home with me where she belongs from now on, too."

And he did that. And nobody tried to stop him, he said, nor said one word to him. But when they saw him, pointing this big .45 Army Colt and telling Della to get her coat to hell on damn quick, that they were going home, they just stood there and looked. Then Della started to laugh. Then one by one they all started to laugh.

Artie didn't tell us any more about what happened after that point. He couldn't, I guess. He would come to that part every time and then he would stop and his right hand would start working and he'd sweat and that was when — and it was the only time and it was gone a few moments later — when you saw that he was gone, that he'd never be all right again and they wouldn't ever even get him to trial.

And that's the way it was, he said. It was a mess, too. A hell of a mess. Two out of the six he got, lived, but his wife wasn't one of them. Maybe it was just as well. Anyhow it was a damn big shame, somehow, as well as a hell of a mess.

BY JONATHAN CRAIG

A Novelette

Nobody knew who the man was. The only thing everybody could agree on was that he was dead.

Man from Yesterday

BURT OGDEN, my partner, and I had just got back into the RMP car after our nightly break for supper, or breakfast, or whatever you want to call a meal you have at two a.m., when the speaker on the dash sputtered metallically and the lady dispatcher's voice gave our code number. I lifted the hand phone off its prongs and told her to go ahead.

It seemed a citizen had found a dead man in a car parked just off Riverside Drive. The citizen had told a patrolman, and the patrolman had called the station house from a pull box. I got the address, Burt kicked on the siren, and we started

over there. It was a Monday night, and the traffic was very light.

I glanced over at Burt, who was driving. "What in hell are you looking so smug about?" I asked.

He fed the Ford a little more gas. "It's your squeal, Lew," he said. "All yours."

He meant I'd have to do all the paper work. Our night watch out of the Eighteenth starts at five-thirty P.M. and ends at eight A.M. the next morning, and like most other detective teams, Burt and I always split the watch so that one of us catches all the squeals from eight-thirty till two, and the other catches them from two till eight. During the first part of the night, Burt had been acting as the detective in charge, and I had acted as his assistant. Now, on the last half of the watch, we had changed roles. I was now the detective in charge of all investigations we might make during the rest of the night, and Burt would assist me.

There wasn't much of a crowd around the car, and the patrolman standing near it seemed to have things under control. We parked the RMP on the far side of the street and crossed over to him.

The patrolman touched the brim of his cap. "Hello, Sergeant."

"Hello, Sam," I said. "What've you got here?"

"Looks like a homicide, sir. Somebody clobbered hell out of him with a bottle." He opened the door for us and put his flashlight on the man behind the wheel.

The body had slumped over against the door and the head rested against the window. He had been about thirty, I guessed, a very thin man with a pinched, small-featured face and cropped blond hair. There was a bad bruise that spread from his left temple down across his cheek bone. The skin had been broken at two points in the bruise and there had been considerable bleeding. On the seat beside the body there was the neck and upper part of a square gin bottle, and scattered over the seat and on the floorboard were several fair-sized shards of glass.

"Well, at least we're sure of one thing," Burt said. "He didn't slam off instantly. There's too much blood for that."

I nodded, took the flashlight from Sam, and leaned into the car. Sam would have already made sure of death, I knew, but I had long since made it a personal rule to double-check the beat cop, or anyone else.

There is no tissue in the human body more sensitive than that in the eyes, and if you can touch one of them without causing the slightest movement of the eye or eyelids, the person is either in a very deep coma or he is dead. If, in addition, the eyelids are flabby and will stay open and hold their position, you have just that much more evidence. After death, eyes lose their luster as a result of the evaporation of moisture, and the muscles which control the pupils relax, so that the pupils are no longer perfectly round nor

are they of the same size. I made a quick but thorough examination.

All the signs were there, positive proof that the man was dead.

2.

There was a new wallet in the man's inner jacket pocket, but it contained no money and nothing that would give us a make on him. There was an identification card in one of the plastic inserts, but it had not been filled out.

I twisted the registration certificate on the steering post around so that I could read it. It was made out in the name of a Miss Theresa Campbell, 831 West Sixty-First Street, Manhattan. I entered the name and address in my note book, and then went through the rest of the man's pockets. I found just the usual things, a comb, handkerchief, keys, loose change — nothing to help us. The glove compartment contained another bottle of gin, a small flashlight, a couple of road maps, and half a carton of cigarettes.

"Who is he?" Burt asked.

"No identification," I said. I turned to Sam. "Where's the guy that found him?"

Sam nodded toward an elderly man sitting on a rear bumper of the car in front of the murder car. I walked over to him.

"I'm Sergeant Keller," I told him. "I understand you reported this to Patrolman Clary over there."

"That's right," he said. He didn't get to his feet. His face was drawn and he looked as if he might be sick. "I saw him, and then I started up to the corner — to that bar up there — to call the police. But just before I got there, I saw that cop — that officer — over there. He was just turning the corner. I yelled at him."

"What's your name and address?"

"My name's Edward Lohr. I live at the Colmar Hotel. That's at Fifty-Sixth and Amsterdam."

I wrote it down. "Did you touch the body, Mr. Lohr?"

"Me? No, sir!"

"Did you see anybody around the car?"

"Not a soul."

"What'd you say to the officer when you called to him?"

"Why, I just said, 'Hey!' I guess. I don't exactly remember."

"Did you tell him there was a dead man in the car?"

"Of course I told him."

"How'd you know he was dead, Mr. Lohr? You said you didn't touch the body, so how'd you know?"

"Listen here. I was in the First World War. I was at St. Mihiel and I was right in the middle of the fighting at the Meuse-Argonne. I seen a lot of dead men then, and I've seen a lot since. I don't need no complicated machinery to tell me when a man's dead, mister, and that's for damn sure."

"I need this for my report," I said. "You know how it is."

"All right. But don't go making

out *I* can't tell when a man's dead or not. I —"

"How'd you happen to be along here at this time of the morning?" I asked.

"I couldn't sleep. I got asthma. I ain't slept in a bed in the last nine years. Most times I sleep sitting up in a chair. Sometimes, when it gets real bad, I just plain have to get up and walk around, no matter what time it is."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"It ain't no picnic — not when you're pushing seventy, like me."

"You know who the dead man is?"

"I sure don't. I never saw him before in my life." He started to get to his feet, and I helped him.

"You going to take me down to the station house, I suppose," he said. "Just for doing what I figured was my duty, you're going —"

"No, sir," I said. "But if you'll wait around a few minutes, I'll see that you get a ride home."

"Thanks." Then, suddenly, he sank back down on the bumper. "Maybe I'd better rest a bit first, though. This thing's sort of taken the starch out of me."

3.

I walked back to Burt Ogden.

"Funny thing," Burt said. "Everything this guy's got on is brand new. His shoes and every stitch of clothes, and even that billfold. All right out of the shop. Hell, even that show handkerchief in his pocket still has a manufacturer's sticker on it."

"Looks like he came into some money."

"Sure. You ever know a guy to go out and buy *everything* new, even a billfold, unless he made a hit somehow? You take a guy catches a long shot at the track, or makes a few straight passes with the dice — why then he might feel like splurging. But usually a guy buys what he needs as he goes along."

I nodded. "They're pretty good duds, too."

"Yeah. They set him back plenty."

A police car drew up, double-parked, and an assistant M.E. and the lab crew came over. The crowd was a little larger now and beginning to push in too close. Burt and Sam turned and started getting the crowd back where it belonged.

The assistant M.E. nodded at me. "How's it going, Lew?"

"Not bad. I hear you're leaving, Ted."

He grinned. "Uh-huh. Sue and I are moving upstate. I'm going back to general practice."

"We'll miss you."

"Same here." He turned toward the murder car, where the lab boys were already making photographs and measurements and dusting the metalwork and the shards of glass for prints. "You get a make on him?"

"Not yet."

"We've got a new arrangement at Bellevue, Lew. I can do the autopsy tonight, if you like."

"I'd appreciate it."

"All right. Call me there in a couple of hours and I'll let you know what I find."

"Thanks. I'll see you again before you leave, Doc."

"Sure, Lew. We'll have a stirrup cup." He wasn't pleased about leaving, I knew. No matter what part of police work you get into, there's something about it that gets into your blood and stays there.

Burt came back and we stood watching one of the lab boys putting the parts of the broken gin bottle into a large manila envelope. He handed the envelope to me, and I sealed it and coded it and signed my name across the flap. Later, it would be taken downtown and booked as evidence. I asked if there had been any clear prints. There had been only one, I was told, and that on the bottom of the bottle. All the rest had been blurred beyond use. The bottle from the glove compartment, the flashlight, and other items, might prove more helpful.

I went over the RMP car and called Headquarters. When I had been routed to Lost Property, I asked for a reading on the murder car. I gave the description, license number and so on, and then lighted a cigarette and sat back to wait for the check to go through. It didn't take long. Neither the car nor the plates had been reported stolen.

I got back to the murder car just as the Bellevue wagon rolled up. The attendants got their stretcher out of the back and came over to Burt and me.

"How about it, Sarge?" one of them asked. "You got a little package for us?"

I glanced at the assistant M.E. "You finished, Doc?"

He shrugged. "For now, I am."

I scrawled a receipt, the attendant signed it, and then he and his partner took the corpse to the wagon and drove away.

"How long would you say he'd been dead, Doc?" I asked.

"Not long. No more than an hour, certainly."

"That's for sure?"

"Yes."

"Not much question about the cause of death, I guess," Burt said.

"Well, I don't know," Doc said. "I've seen much worse injuries to the front part of the head, without the victim ever even losing consciousness. I've seen terrific fractures of the skull, with considerable damage to the brain, and still consciousness never left for a moment. On the other hand, the same kind of damage to the back part of the head usually causes death."

"Well, we'll call you a little later and get the full story," I said. "And listen, Doc. Before you go back, I wish you'd take a look at that old guy sitting on that bumper over there. He looks pretty sick to me."

"Sure. You know what's wrong with him?"

"Asthma, he says. And he found

the body, which didn't do him a hell of a lot of good."

"All right, Lew. I'll give a look."

"And make sure he gets home okay, Doc."

"All right." He walked over toward Edward Lohr.

"It looks like you pulled a honey," Burt said. "I don't envy you this case one bit."

"And the worst is yet to come."

"That it is. That and the paper work." He grinned. "What now?"

"We haven't got much choice," I said. "The car's registered to a Theresa Campbell, over on West Sixty-First. That's the first stop."

I left instructions with the chief of the lab crew to have the murder car towed to the police garage when his boys had finished with it, and then Burt and I got in the RMP, made a U-turn, and headed for Sixty-First Street.

4.

Somehow I had expected Miss Theresa Campbell to be rather young. She was not. She was somewhere between forty-five and fifty, and nearly as tall as I was, although she couldn't have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. It had been a long time since I'd seen anyone quite so thin. She'd registered the usual surprise and alarm when Burt and I identified ourselves, and now, as she asked us into her apartment, I could see she was trying desperately to be calm.

She closed the door carefully, moistened her thin lips, and stared at me.

"What —" she began, and then stopped and started over again. "What did you want to see me about?"

"We'll have to ask you a few questions, Miss Campbell," I said.

"Of course. But what's this all about?"

"First, we'd like to know where you've been the last couple of hours. Say, since one o'clock."

"Why, I've been right here. Right here in the apartment. What —"

"You have anyone who'll corroborate that?"

"I — don't think I understand."

"I'm sorry. I mean, was there anyone here with you? Did you make any phone calls? In short, can you prove you were here?"

"I just said I was, didn't I?" Her lips compressed into a hard, bloodless line. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"I demand to know just what you think you're —"

"This is just routine, Miss Campbell. It isn't much more pleasant for us than it is for you. These questions have to be asked, and it's our job to ask them."

She glared at me, and then at Burt. "Honestly!"

"Did you see or talk to anyone in the last two hours?"

"No, I did not!"

"And you didn't leave at all?"

"No."

Burt had walked over to a cocktail table, and now he lifted a gin bottle, the same brand we'd found in the murder car, and glanced at me significantly.

"Put that down!" Miss Campbell said. "I'll not have policemen coming in here and acting like they own me and everything in my apartment, drinking my liquor and —"

"You own a new maroon Pontiac, don't you, Miss Campbell?" I asked.

Her eyes whipped back to me. "That automobile is properly parked, officer."

"Where?"

"Where is it parked? Why, down in the street, of course. You should know, if you know it's mine."

"You loan it to anyone tonight?"

"No, I did not. I'd like to know what in the world you're getting at." She paused. "You mean you found it somewhere else? You mean it was stolen?"

"We'll get along a little faster if you let me ask the questions," I said. "Do you know a man, about thirty years old, blond, a man with a very slight build and sort of a pinched face?"

All the hostility drained from her face and her eyes grew wide. "Del!" she whispered.

"Del who, Miss Campbell?"

She stepped close to me, her eyes searching mine. "What have you done to him?"

"We haven't done anything to him," I said.

"What's happened to him?"

I glanced at Burt, and then back at Miss Campbell. There's no easy way to do it. When it comes to telling someone that someone else is dead, just about all you can do is say it. I told her we'd found the man dead in her automobile, and that he'd been murdered.

It was a full ten minutes before we were able to quiet her down enough to ask any more questions. Then I said, "You're our only source of information, Miss Campbell. The more you can tell us about the victim, the sooner we'll be able to find his murderer."

She shook her head slowly. "There's so little to tell. I — I met him in the Automat. He sat down at the same table, and we got to talking. He seemed like such a nice young man, so clean-cut and all . . ."

"What was his full name?"

"Delbert Ferris."

"Local?"

"What?"

"I mean, was he from New York City?"

"Oh, no. He was from the South. He had this lovely accent, and at first I thought he was just putting it on. But he wasn't. I could just sit and listen to him talk by the hour." She spoke in a strained, soft voice, as if it didn't matter whether Burt and I heard her or not.

"You know just where in the South he was from?"

She shook her head. "I never did find out. He'd always tease me about

it. One time he'd say one place, and the next time he'd say another."

"What kind of work do you do, Miss Campbell?" She apparently didn't hear me, so I asked her again.

"Oh, my work. Why, I'm a nurse."

"An R.N.?"

"No. A practical nurse. I take care of older people, you know."

"That pays pretty well, does it?"

"It all depends. I've been very fortunate." She was answering almost mechanically, like an automaton. If she was putting on an act for Burt and me, she was giving us our time's worth.

We spent another twenty minutes with her, and it bought us exactly nothing. She'd known Delbert Ferris about six weeks, and all she really knew about him was that she was in love with him.

It's a pattern you run into often in police work. A middle-aged, unattractive woman, without friends or family, meets a good-looking younger guy on the make. All the guy has is brass, but he has plenty of that, and pretty soon the woman, who has probably gone for years with no male attention of any kind, falls so hard she loses all perspective. She spends every dime she makes on the guy, and throws away her savings on him, trying to hang on to an illusion. Theresa Campbell had staked Delbert Ferris to a new wardrobe, given him nearly three hundred dollars in cash, and bought the new Pontiac just to please him.

But, she told us, she'd known none of his other acquaintances, had never inquired about where he lived, and had no idea of what he did with his time when he wasn't with her. He'd never spoken of having trouble with anyone, and she could think of no reason at all why anyone should want to kill him. She did recall, however, that once when she'd asked Del what line of work he was in, he'd told her he'd come to New York to try to break into radio or television as a hillbilly singer. He had not, so far as she knew, been successful She told us she didn't know Del had planned to use the car after he'd brought her home, around seven o'clock, and that he must have had an extra set of keys made for himself without telling her about it.

In short, she knew — or said she knew — next to nothing. We'd learned the dead man's name — if even that wasn't a phony — and that was about all.

Burt glanced at me questioningly.

I glanced at my watch. It was ten minutes past four.

"Miss Campbell," I said, "if we send a car over for you about six o'clock, would you mind going over to Bellevue Hospital and making an official identification for us?"

She stared at me a long moment, her eyes almost expressionless.

"We don't like to ask," I said. "But it has to be done."

"Is it — absolutely necessary?"

"I'm afraid it is."

She nodded slowly. "I'll be ready then."

"About six o'clock."

"All right."

That would give the assistant M.E. time to have completed his autopsy and make the body presentable again. I glanced about the apartment, mulling things over. I sensed we wouldn't get much further with her, at least right now. After Burt and I had checked around a bit, we might have some better talking points and, if so, we could take her down to the precinct and question her at length.

"You'll be sure to keep yourself available for us, won't you, Miss Campbell?" I asked. "It'll be to the best interest of all of us."

"Yes, of course."

5.

On our way down in the self-service elevator, Burt said, "Well, what do you think? You figure she's our girl?"

"Could be."

"If she was leveling, then she had one hell of a funny reaction, if you ask me. You notice it? She broke up, but she came out of it, and then she went into some kind of shell. Like a trance."

We drove back to the Eighteenth, signed in, and then checked the Known Resident Criminal files for both Theresa Campbell and Delbert Ferris. Neither had ever been carded. I called Headquarters, asked for Stats and Records, and requested a check-through on both of them. Then I had the operator switch me to the Bureau of Criminal Identification and asked that, rather than sending any prints that might be found to the F.B.I. in Washington by mail, they send them by wirephoto and request an expedite. Meanwhile, Burt was out in the next room, going through the Wanted cards.

I'd have to wait a few hours before I called any of the police contacts in the talent agencies and among casting directors to see if any of them knew of a hillbilly singer answering Delbert Ferris' name and/or description; but I did call a stool I knew, an entertainer who often appeared on programs with a rural flavor. He said he'd never heard of Ferris, but he did give me the name of the agency that seemed to have a monopoly on hillbilly and ballad singers.

Burt came back into the room. "Not a thing," he said. "Man, I sure hope we don't have to go through the mugg books."

"If we have to, then I'll do it," I said. "I'll do that, and you can do the paper work. Fair enough?"

He grimaced. "Nothing doing. I'll take the mugg books every time."

The phone rang. It was the assistant M.E. "I think maybe I've got something for you, Lew," he said.

"Fine. I can use it."

"Well, this one had a tattoo. Upper left shoulder. It was originally a nude girl — very detailed, I might say, about three inches high. But someone had dressed her up, so to speak. That is, they'd looped a ribbon around the more vital areas. It — the ribbon, I mean — was obviously done at a much later time. It's still quite bright, while the girl herself has faded a bit."

"Sounds like he might have been a service man at one time or another," I said. "I remember that a lot of boys in World War Two had to get their tattoos cleaned up. Seems the brass thought some of them were pretty obscene."

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "Well, I thought it might help."

"It will, Doc."

"Next point is the cause of death," he said. "That blow on the head didn't do it, Lew."

"No?"

"The damage was more apparent than real. What actually killed him was a ruptured liver. There was no external evidence at all, but when I opened him up I found he'd taken a blow to the upper part of the abdomen. That's where the liver is, you know — in the upper right side of the abdomen. It's an easily injured organ. You'd be surprised just how little it can take." He paused. "My guess is that whoever killed him hit him first on the head and then over the abdomen. That would explain the amount of blood we found resulting from the blow to the head. Excessive bleeding doesn't stop until the heart does, and his heart didn't stop until shortly after he received the blow to the abdomen."

We talked another minute or so, and then I hung up and called Stats and Records again. I told them about the tattoo on the dead man's left shoulder and asked that they check the Oddity File. This file has been the pride of the S&R for many years. It is actually a cross-reference file, with physical oddities broken down into such categories as scars, amputations, tattoos, harelips, and so on. The file has proved invaluable to the whole department, because often a physical oddity is the only thing about a person that the witness or complainant can recall.

Twenty minutes later I got the reports from both S&R and BCI. There was no make. And the single fingerprint from the bottom of the gin bottle was still the only clear print they'd found, except for Ferris' own prints, a set of which had been taken at the morgue by the detective on duty there. All other prints had been too undefined or smeared for our purposes. It was a bad break, and a very unusual one. It meant our job was going to be much tougher. The single print, I found, was now on the wire to Washington, together with the request for an expedite.

I hung up the phone and glanced

at Burt. "Looks like we'll have to hit those mugg books after all," I said.

He nodded glumly.

"Well, I guess we might as well go downtown and get started."

"I suppose so. You want to stop off for a cup of coffee first? I feel a little beat."

"Sure. Why not?"

6.

We were on our way out of the squad room when Ed Seibert came in. Ed was a long-time friend of Burt's and mine, an ex-detective lieutenant who had retired from the official force and opened his own private investigating agency. The three of us had kept in close touch, giving one another a hand now and then.

Burt and I sat back down and Ed leaned a hip against a desk and grinned at me.

"I was just downtown," he said. "I got to chinning with the boys in Stats, and they told me you were trying to get a make on a character named Delbert Ferris."

"That's right," I said. "You know him, Ed?"

"Nope. But I know somebody who does."

"Go ahead," Burt grinned. "Be mysterious, Ed. Make us sweat for it."

"Well, I've been making an investigation for a man named William Stanton."

"You mean the guy who owns the chain of restaurants?" I asked.

"That's the one. A very wealthy guy, incidentally. And a real handsome cuss, for his age, too. Well, anyhow, Stanton got the idea his wife might be running around. She's about half as old as Stanton, about twenty-five, and pretty as all hell. Stanton didn't have anything definite. He said one of the maids at his place had told him Mrs. Stanton had been leaving the house right after receiving telephone calls, and that she'd acted suspiciously. Well, to make a long story short, I tailed her a few times. She wasn't exactly running around, but she was meeting this guy — this Delbert Ferris."

"Shacking up?" Burt asked.

"Nope. They never even hit any saloons. They'd just meet on a corner somewhere, or in a coffee shop, and talk a while. I was never able to get close enough to hear what they were saying. I tailed the guy after one of these meetings, and he took me on a tour of Forty-Second Street. I don't think he missed a single shooting gallery, and every time he passed a book store he'd go in and look at the sex books. He hit maybe half a dozen places that sell those sets of nude photographs. He must have looked at more than a thousand sets of the things before he got through. He didn't buy any, though. Finally, he walked back uptown to the Avalon, on Forty-seventh Street. I had an in with the room clerk, so

I checked. He lived there, all right."

"He registered under Delbert Ferris?"

"Yeah. That's the first time I'd heard his name."

"You get anything else on him?"

"Not a thing. He'd signed the register as being from right here in New York, but he hadn't given a street address."

He paused. "Well, that's just about it, I guess. I told my client what I'd found out. He paid me off, and gave me a bonus, and told me he'd call me again if he wanted the investigation continued. I haven't heard from him since."

I nodded.

"Thanks a lot, Ed. We'll get right out there."

He wrote an address on a slip of paper and handed it to me. "I wish you luck. I hate to lose a client, but murder is for the official cops, not me."

"How about having some coffee with us, Ed?" Burt asked. "That's where we were heading when you came in."

"No, thanks. I've got to get some sleep. I've been up ever since yesterday morning, trying to put the lid on another of my cases. I'm going straight home and hit the sack."

We went downstairs with him, said good night, and then got back into the RMP once more.

"Maybe we're finally going to get some action," I said.

"Don't bet on it," Burt said. "You might queer our luck."

7.

The Stanton residence was halfway out on Long Island, and by the time we'd reached it, it was almost SIX A.M.

Mr. Stanton himself let us in. He was fully clothed, and he seemed deeply agitated, though civil enough after we'd identified ourselves. The living room was immense, and justified the Stanton home's reputation as a showplace.

We gave it to him straight. He didn't blink an eye. He listened to us without interruption until we were through, and then there was a long silence while he studied both our faces carefully, in turn, as if he were sizing us up for some reason of his own.

"I won't make an issue of this with the commissioner," he said finally. He had a firm, almost pontifical voice. "I choose to overlook this outrage to my wife and myself. I can understand how you might make such an error, and I'm certain that your mistake is the result of muddled thinking, rather than a deliberate attempt to abuse your position as police officers." He paused, and his voice grew even more firm. "But I will tell you this, and I hope you will relay it to your fellow officers. If either you, or anyone else, ever again annoys my wife or me on this matter, I'll bring the necessary influence to bear to insure —"

"Listen, Stanton," Burt said. "I

don't know who you think you're horsing, but it isn't us. If you want to play a hard guy, fine. But not with us. You got that?"

Stanton's eyes narrowed. "Leave this house at once."

"If we leave, we'll have to take you with us," I told him. "Can you account for your whereabouts since midnight?"

He started to say something, then apparently changed his mind. He stood staring at me, thinking it over.

"Yes," he said at last. "My wife will tell you I spent the night in our room. Will that be sufficient to satisfy you, or shall I —"

"May we speak to Mrs. Stanton?"

"You may not. She —"

"It's all right, Bill," a woman's voice said. I turned to look toward the archway to the rear of the house. The woman who stood there was in her middle twenties, a very beautiful woman with short dark hair and slightly tilted blue eyes. She came toward us slowly, tightening a housecoat about her waist.

"Donna!" William Stanton said sharply. "What are you doing here? Go back upstairs!"

She shook her head. "It's no use, Bill. This had to happen, sooner or later."

"No!" he almost shouted. "No, damn it! Get back upstairs!"

She walked over to him and put her arm around him, and then turned slightly to face Burt and me. "My husband had nothing to do with it," she said, and now I noticed that her voice had a faintly southern inflection and cadence.

"Donna, for God's sake!" Stanton said.

She looked straight at me and I saw her shoulders straighten beneath the thin material of her housecoat. "I'm the one you want, officer. I killed Del."

8.

Her husband grasped her arms and shook her, his mouth working strangely. He was trying to talk, but he could not. Suddenly, he released her and sank down in a chair and covered his face with his hands. His whole body shook, and for a long moment there was no sound in the room. His wife looked at him with the deepest compassion I'd ever seen on a woman's face, and then she turned back to me and took a deep breath.

"Del meant to ruin our lives for us," she said softly. "He was blackmailing me, and I knew that sooner or later he would come to Bill and start blackmailing him, too."

"Why was he blackmailing you, Mrs. Stanton?"

"Because he knew that Bill and I were not really married. We'd gone through the ceremony, of course, but it wasn't legal. You see, I was still married to Del. I married him almost ten years ago, when I was fifteen. Our families lived next to each other, down in Mississippi.

They were sharecroppers, and a girl can marry down there when she's fourteen."

There was a long pause, and then she said, "Del drank so much, and beat me so much, that I couldn't stand it. I ran away. I came here to New York, and I took any kind of jobs I could find. I finished high school at night, and then I went to business college. When I met Bill, eight years had passed and I was working as a secretary for one of Bill's friends. Mississippi, and the cotton plantations, and my marriage to Del — they all seemed like part of a horrible nightmare. When Bill asked me to marry him, I didn't have the courage to tell him about Del. I — I thought nothing would ever . . ." Her voice broke.

"I — I never heard from Del again until a few weeks ago," she went on. "He'd found out somehow that I'd married a wealthy man, and he came here and threatened to expose me if I didn't give him a thousand dollars. I did — but then he called me again and said he'd sold out too cheaply and that he wanted ten thousand. I guess I became panicky. I kept holding him off, making promises I knew I couldn't keep, but tonight he called again. My husband was out of town on business, and I told Del I'd meet him in New York. He had a new car. We drove around for hours. He kept drinking gin. We argued, and I pleaded with him, but he wouldn't listen. Finally he parked and tried — tried to become intimate with me. He said he had a right to, because I was still his wife.

"As I say, he tried to make advances, right there in the car. I fought him off, but he started to hurt me. I got hold of the gin bottle somehow, and I — I hit him. I think I hit him more than once, but I'm not sure. He fell away from me, and I jumped out of the car and ran up the street."

"Did you know you'd killed him?"

"Oh, yes. When the bottle struck his head, it made such a sickening, horrible sound that I knew I'd killed him."

I didn't say anything. There wasn't any point in telling her that if she'd kept herself from hitting him again after she knocked him out with the blow to the head, she wouldn't have a murder rap hanging over her.

"What'd you do then, Mrs. Stanton?" Burt asked.

"I took a train home. My husband came home a short time later. I — I told him everything. He said he'd known all along that I'd been seeing Del, that he understood, and that the only thing that mattered was that we were together. He —"

"We'll wait for you on the porch, Mrs. Stanton," I said.

As I followed Burt through the door, I glanced back at her. Her eyes were on me, and the look was there — the look you find when someone stares into the kind of future that was waiting for Donna Stanton.

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Home Again

In South Bend, Ind., Patrolman Glenn Zubler found Herbert Leary, 63, peacefully sleeping it off behind the judge's bench in the city courtroom. Leary, arrested countless times previously for intoxication, protested when Zubler arrested him again. "That's a fine way to act!" he objected indignantly. "I've got seniority here!"

Red Robbery

In Moscow recently, *Pravda* admitted that two bright new fire engines had been stolen from a local factory. One of the brilliant red vehicles, the newspaper revealed, had been kept in a Moscow suburb for months before the thief disposed of it for 22,000 rubles ($5,500).

Blood Prints

Although doctors normally divide human blood into only 6 or 8 groups, in police procedure upwards of 30,000 blood groups are recognized, it was revealed recently by one of Scotland Yard's experts — Dr. Keith Simpson, noted London authority on forensic medicine.

Thus there is slim chance that any two people involved in the same crime would be found in the same group.

Accurate Reporting

In Oklahoma City a woman whose car collided with a cow made out her accident report as follows:

Driver: 1947 Hereford. Age: 5 years. License plate: none. Sex: female. Remarks: refused to talk.

Trap Tales

Last April in widely separated cities traps were instrumental in criminal cases.

In Oakland, Calif., Morris Gelsand found an 8-inch mousetrap which he had set in his basement contained fragments of a trouser leg, while blood stains spattered the floor. The intruder had entered and hurriedly left through a rear window.

In Chicago, Percy George Dooley, 60, was fatally shot by a burglar trap he had rigged up and forgotten. He was found dead at the back door of his apartment after a pulley arrangement attached to the refrigerator snapped the trigger of a 22-calibre revolver aimed at the rear door. Policeman James Powell said that Dooley apparently forgot about setting the trap, and the gun fired automatically as he entered his own back door.

Well, Doggone!

In Redwood City, Calif., a woman filed suit against an airline for $4,400 damages after her pooch became

pregnant. It seems that the airline's baggage crew had let her pedigreed black poodle escape from the San Francisco airport, whereupon said dog "did submit . . . to sundry low-bred mongrels," suffering, as a result, not only pregnancy but "extreme humiliation, shock, trauma and other psychological difficulties not presently diagnosed."

Disillusioned

A caretaker at the Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, lured by prospects of better pay as a policeman, pounded a beat for one night. Twenty-four hours later he returned sadly to his former job, asserting that he'd "rather contend with the wolves in the zoo than the people on the boulevards."

Costly Beaver

County jail officials were sued by George W. K. Posvar of Caspar, Wyo. and Denver, Colo., for shaving off his beard, which he said his job as an artist's model required. The unfortunate Posvar, jailed for maintaining a fire hazard at his Denver address, was forcibly shorn of his glory while he was held pending payment of a $100 fine.

Paging Tarzan

In Cincinnati, Ohio, a burglar recently accomplished a theft that rivalled the feats of a trapeze artist. Climbing a tree outside a food warehouse, he removed roofing and metal sheeting to enter a ventilator hole, dropped to a platform, and by means of a rope tied about a rafter, then swung to the floor. He left by the same route after he had looted the place of 20 packages of cigarettes, 10 candy bars, and $110.

Boston Vampire

Back in 1867, in the staid city of Boston, a Portuguese seaman was actually proven a vampire, and imprisoned for the crime. The man, listed in court records as "James Brown," was considered in the fishing fleet to be a quiet and trustworthy deckhand, when he shipped for the Labrador fishing grounds on a Boston trawler.

A few days later a sailor disappeared and was assumed to have been washed overboard. Then the absence of a second man caused a search which chilled the hardboiled crew to their marrows. Deep in the hold the frenzied Portuguese was found sucking the veins of the second man, with the drained, bloodless body of the first victim beside him.

Taken in irons to Boston, Brown was convicted of murder and vampirism, but no less a person than the President of the U. S., Andrew Johnson, intervened and commuted the sentence to life imprisonment.

Twice thereafter, serving in Mass. and Ohio jails, the Portuguese vampire struck again, killing two others to obtain fresh blood. The last murder sufficed to transfer him for life to a padded cell in the National Asylum in Washington, D. C.

Yank was shaky, and he'd lost his nerve. And now Yank had the toughest job of all — he had

A Bull to Kill

BY RICHARD MARSTEN

FOUR o'clock. I stood in the shade of the tunnel beneath the stands, looking out over the sun-drenched arena. From across the sandy oval, the drums started, and the trumpets picked up the beat, blaring loudly. The crowd was noisy, the way they always were before a corrida. I thought of the States, and I thought of music back home, and I wondered for the hundreth time just what the hell I was doing in Mexico. And then I remembered Gomez and I also remembered that I was going to spill his guts all over the arena this afternoon. I kept listening to the music, trying to summon up the old feeling. It was dead.

The way Gomez would soon be dead.

Four o'clock.

In the old days, it would have been like a sniff of coke to a hophead. Standing here, with the music in my ears, and the smell of the sand in my nostrils, I'd look

forward to meeting the bulls. My palms would itch when the crowd screamed, and I'd be ready to go out there and kill any goddamned bull in the whole world. In the old days.

"A fine day, Yank," Torquo said. He was small and wiry, and a smile lighted his plain face now as he stood beside me.

"Yeah, a fine day," I repeated. *A fine day to kill Gomez*, I thought. A fine day to stick the sword straight into his heart. A damned fine day for that.

I heard the door open behind me in the cool corridor, heard the patter of soft-soled zapatillas on the ground. The hackles on the back of my neck rose. I kept my eyes glued to the arena, not wanting to turn, my hands bunched into tight fists.

"Ai, torero!" I heard the voice call. "Yank Reardon, supreme espada! How goes the great American killer of bulls this fine afternoon?"

I turned slowly and faced Pancho Gomez. El Bando, the third toreador on the bill, was coming up behind him, his seamed face serious as always. My eyes touched El Bando briefly, and then settled on Gomez. He was a big man, Gomez, dressed immaculately in the same traditional costume I wore. He wore his montera perched jauntily on the side of his dark head, and his shoulders threatened the gold-embroidered jacket he wore. A razor-line moustache followed the curve of his upper lip, curled now over the glistening smile he flashed at me.

You're going to die, I thought. *First the bull, and then you.* It had taken me a long time to get to where I was, but I was there now, and I was ready, and Gomez would pay through the nose.

"Tell me, torero," Gomez said, "are you ready to face the horns again? Eh, torero?"

"Gomez . . ." I started.

"Are you ready to meet the *terrible*, flashing horns, amigo? Eh?" Gomez put his forefingers alongside his temples and wiggled them at me.

From across the arena, the trumpets called again, a little more insistent this time. *Come, toreros*, they said, *come spill your good red blood.*

We got into formation, Gomez in the center because he had top billing, El Bando on his left, and me on his right. The trumpets screamed at us like old maids over a back fence, and we marched out into the arena.

The sun slanted down at us, and I squinted my eyes against it, the way I'd done every afternoon since I first started dodging bulls. The three of us came first, and behind us were the banderilleros, dressed in the same costumes we wore. Following them, on horseback, were the picadores, their brilliant yellow garments flashing in the sun. The chulos marched behind them, and bringing up the rear were the three mules, the arrestes, the animals that would haul the dead from the ring.

I felt nothing but the sun. It was hot, and the heat smothered me as we circled the arena. I felt nothing else. None of the old feeling, none of the joy. It was all gone. Gone like last year's calendar.

It had left with Juanita.

And because of that, Gomez would be holding in his gut with blood-stained fingers in a little while.

He walked beside me, waving up at the crowd, and I wanted to step on him, the way you step on a spider scooting across your basement floor. There was a cold, black hatred inside me, a hatred that had been a long time brewing. The screams of the crowd pressed on my ears, and the dust whirled around me, and we kept circling, grinning up at the paying customers who'd come to see death.

The procession stopped suddenly beside the barrera, and we saluted the judges across the arena. The applause broke out like a wave of thunder, then, and the crowd noises got louder, screaming for the killing to begin. I grinned wryly and thought, *Scream, you bloodthirsty dogs. Today, you'll really see a killing.*

"Ah," Gomez said, "the American smiles. Did you draw a good one, amigo? Which one did you draw?"

"Number 23," I told him, my lips tight.

"Ah, yes," Gomez said, his smile expanding. "An old bull. An easy one for you, torero. We cannot afford any more gorings, eh?"

"The day I can't . . ." I started.

"I have number 61. Did you see that bull? That is a piece, amigo. That is a real sweet animal." He grinned slyly, and then the grin disappeared abruptly. "How does it feel to have lost it, amigo? How does it feel to be a butcher and not an artist any more?"

It feels lousy, I could have told him. It feels like you have no heart anymore. It feels like your manhood is gone, that's how it feels. I'd lost it, all right. Every damned bit of it. Most of it when I first learned about Juanita, and all the rest when I was gored. There was nothing left anymore. Gomez had made sure of that. He'd taken it all. First Juanita . . . and then the bulls.

I took a deep breath. "Want to trade bulls, brave man?" I asked. "Anytime you say, I'll swap."

Gomez smiled easily, shaking his head slowly, as if he pitied me greatly. "No," he said at last. "I think we have done enough trading already."

I was ready to slap his ears off when he turned his back to me and stood facing the toril door.

Behind that door, the bull waited. And the horns.

I thought of those horns, and a light sweat broke out on my forehead. My hands began to tremble a little, and I stuck them behind my back quickly.

From across the arena, the shrill tones of a bugle leaped into the air, and the toril door suddenly snapped open.

"You have the first one," Gomez said. He clasped his hand onto my shoulder and laughed. "Give the old bull hell, amigo." I shoved his hand away and turned to face the blackness the toril door had revealed.

A deeper blackness emerged from the yawning maw, horns first. A man's hand came down rapidly, and the pin with the ribbons sank into the bull's shoulder as he charged out onto the sand. I watched the sleek muscles moving smoothly, powerfully as the animal thundered across the arena. He stopped, snorted lifted his head and lowered it, and then began pawing the ground expectantly.

A good bull, I thought, not an old one.

I looked at his horns again, and a sickening fear lurched through me.

Little Torquo ran from behind the barrera, his cape trailing in the dust. He leaped in front of the bull, flapping the cape wildly. The bull hesitated for a moment and then charged as Torquo nimbly sidestepped the flashing horns. The animal lunged again, the horns ripping a wide path in the air. Torquo dodged back, swirled his cape. The bull whirled, and the horns came up, dancing in the sun.

I wet my lips, watching the horns as they reached for Torquo again and again. He was staying out there longer than he had to, softening the bull, tiring him out for me. I thought of a time when I scoffed at tired bulls, and I watched the horns dip and slash at Torquo, watched him sidestep them, dance back, charge in once more.

Torquo flipped the cape at the bull's wide nose and then ran for the protection of the barrera. He pulled up beside me, puffing hard. "A tough one, Yank," he said.

Carlos was out there now, holding the bull's attention with his rapidly moving cape, turning him, swinging him around as Torquo stepped from behind the barrera again. They worked on him together, then, taking turns with their capes, keeping well away from the horns that could tear flesh like paper.

The bull ran a short distance from them, wheeled and stood pawing the ground. Torquo and Carlos ran back to the barrera, and the bull watched them with hostile eyes.

"Okay, Yank," Carlos said, "he's all yours."

I took a deep breath and stepped from behind the shield, walking out to meet my bull. There was a light patter of applause from the crowd.

It used to be different when I stepped out into the ring. There used to be cheers, wild cheers that rang the plaza. All the cheers were for Gomez now.

Everything was for Gomez.

I walked out slowly, my eyes on the bull, my mind far from the plaza and the arena and the sand.

There had probably been plenty

of talk before I found out. But a guy in a strange country doesn't listen to the natives. And besides, I was busy building a career. Too busy, maybe. I was riding high, making piles of money for myself and the girl I'd married in Mexico City. And I was really good. I had the feel, the touch, and when I worked a bull, it was something to see — like watching an expert dancer or a fine boxer. Like that.

I ran home with the news that night, like a kid let out of school. The Arena Cordoza! Me, Yank Reardon, in the Arena Cordoza! They'd promised me four fine bulls, the best they could get. They'd told me this was the first time an American had been on their bill, and I should be highly honored. Honored? I was ready to blow the top of my skull. I had to tell Juanita. I had to tell her before the news burst me.

The house was dark, and I figured she was already asleep. But for this, she wouldn't mind being wakened. I thought of her dark beauty, of her eyes narrow with sleep, her full, moist mouth. I thought of her black hair waving against the oval of her face, the sharply arching brows over her deep brown eyes. I couldn't wait to tell her, I couldn't wait to see that happy sparkle pop into her eyes. I ran up the steps two at a time.

"Juanita!" I yelled. "Hey, baby, wake up."

I twisted the knob of the bedroom door and threw it open.

She was sprawled out on the bed. The silk gown was loosened at the throat, opening wide over the beginning rise of her breasts. Her hair was jet black against the pillow, and her eyes glowed with an intense inner light. Her lips were parted, her face flushed.

"Juanita . . ." I started, and then my voice died in my throat, my hand tightening around the doorknob.

Gomez was lying beside her. He was smiling, his silly goddamned moustache twisting over to one side, his pig eyes looking at me smugly.

"What the hell is all this about?" I said harshly.

Gomez laughed. "What does it look like, amigo?"

I took a step forward, my hands clenched. "It looks like I'm going to break you in two, you lousy pig!"

Juanita laughed, a high tinkling laugh that curled up the back of my neck. For a minute, I thought it was all a joke, and I stopped dead in my tracks, waiting for someone to explain it all.

Juanita explained it, and I knew then that it wasn't a joke.

"Just what you see," she said, the mild accent still in her voice. "Pancho and me. Me and Pancho. Just the way you see it, Yank."

"You're kidding." My voice was tight. "Tell me you're kidding, Neet, or I'll tear you both . . ."

"I'm leaving you," she said simply.

"Why? *Why?* For this punk? This two-bit . . ."

Pancho leaped off the bed, his eyes flashing. "Watch your tongue, Reardon," he warned.

"I'll watch my tongue, you filthy slob," I yelled. "I'll break every bone in your body, that's what I'll do."

Juanita swung her legs over the side of the bed, the gown pulling back over her thighs. "Let's go, Pancho," she said. "Let's get it over with."

I stood there and watched her pack, wanting to ram my fists into Gomez's face, and then wondering what the hell for. What would it get me? She was leaving. She was walking out, just like that, leaving a hole in my life, a big, empty hole. I stood by silently while she packed, and I didn't say a word when they walked out of the room.

I was gored the next afternoon.

"*Yank!*"

I knew, then, that I'd lost it. A man loses his touch when he loses his confidence. Juanita had taken all my confidence with her when she left — and the bulls sensed it. They sensed it like . . .

"*Yank! Madre dio* . . ."

It registered finally! Torquo's voice. Torquo's voice breaking through the layers of memory, screaming at me. I lifted my head, my eyes blinded momentarily by the sun, facing the present again.

The bull was bearing down on me, and I remembered that other goring on that afternoon long ago. I stepped back a pace, drenched with sweat, waiting for the lunge of the horns. They gleamed almost metalically in the sun, almost like pointed knife tips. The bull blew froth from its nostrils, the filth dripping into the sand as it closed the distance between us.

I brought up the cape, and he lowered his head, dipping those horns, charging for my groin. The dust billowed up around us, and the cape whirled, and the horns ripped past me. There was the deep animal smell as the black hulk thundered by. I bit my lip, turned rapidly as the bull wheeled for another charge.

The body swept by again, black and immense. I could see his big eyes, red-rimmed, the dripping nostrils. And the horns.

I backed away.

I backed away and I would have run, but the bull was on me again. I stumbled to one side as the horns swiped at the cape. I trotted backward nervously, my hands wet, my clothes sticking to my back. I heard the dissatisfied murmur of the crowd. They paid for bravery. I thought of how close those horns had been. Like the time I'd got it. I winced as I remembered the pain, and then I looked at the bull again, and this time I began to tremble.

I'm taking this too hard, I thought. *I'm giving too much. This used to be easy.*

The bull was stomping at the ground now. And then the horns

lowered again, and I heard the rush of air through the dripping nostrils as he began his charge. I waited, then began to back away again. I swung around as he barreled past, black head lowered. I waited until he was clear, and then I turned and ran for the barrera.

The crowd was booing now, but I didn't care. They didn't know. They didn't know what it was like to be out there when you didn't believe in yourself any more.

Gomez was grinning. "These old bulls tire you, eh amigo?"

I didn't answer. I was still remembering the horns, and my breath was rushing into my lungs.

"Soon I will have all the bulls," Gomez said. "Then you can sit back and watch."

I lifted my head, expecting to find the infuriating smile again, finding instead a sober face with slitted eyes.

The pics were already in the ring, softening up the bull, stabbing him with their lances, drawing blood. I watched a horse rear back on its hind legs as the lance ripped into the bull's shoulder.

"You have a lot to learn, Gomez," I said.

"Ah, yes? Teach me, torero," he replied sarcastically. "Teach me everything I don't know."

"You've been getting away with murder, Gomez," I said evenly. "Some day . . ."

The bull bellowed in rage as another lance jabbed into its heavy shoulder. I flicked my eyes to the bull and then back to Gomez.

There was no smile on his face when he spoke. "Ask me," he said. "Go ahead, ask me."

"There's nothing I want to know from you."

"Ask me how long it was going on before we decided to let you know about it. Go ahead, ask."

"I'm not interested," I said.

Gomez smiled. "A long time, my friend. A long, long time. And she came to me. Of her own free will. I didn't have to lift a finger."

"You're a liar," I said tightly.

Gomez chuckled. "Hard to believe, eh? Shakes the confidence even more, doesn't it?" He paused. "How does a man fight bulls when his confidence is gone? I have often wondered, torero."

The banderilleros swarmed around the bull now, their pointed sticks ready. One by one, the sticks sank and the bull roared in pain and frustration, his horns seeking one man only to discover another with a new stick. The sticks spread out over the back of his neck like an open fan, the ribbons flowing gently in the mild afternoon breeze.

Circling the arena, spaced evenly on the wall above the ring, the red and yellow pennants caught the same breeze.

"You're not what you used to be, torero," Gomez went on. "The bulls no longer fear you."

I had my mouth open, ready to answer, when the bugle sounded

again. The banderilleros moved out of the ring, crowding behind the barrera. I stared at Gomez for a long moment, and then I stepped into the ring, muletta and sword in hand. I crossed to the judge's box, lifted my montera from my head and held it out, asking his permission to kill the bull. The judge made a slight movement with his left hand. I turned my back to him and threw the montera over my shoulder, dedicating the bull.

This would be my last bull, my last animal killed in the ring.

Then Gomez, and then it would all be over.

I'd die for it, probably, but it would be worth it. A man can be pushed only so far. Besides, there was nothing for me anymore. Nothing.

I crossed to meet the bull, my feet light in the heelless, soft-soled zapatillas.

They would really see something soon. They would see blood, all right, more blood than they'd bargained for. The blood would flow all over the front of Gomez's jacket, spill out onto the sand. They paid for blood, and they'd get it.

The bull looked around, wary now, waiting for new tormentors with pointed sticks for his shoulders. This time, the stick will be a steel one, I thought. The last stick, and then no more bull.

First the bull, and then Gomez.

The bull bellowed hoarsely, and started his charge without warning. My eyes widened when I saw the lowered head. I started to back off instinctively, felt myself falling. I struggled for balance, my hands opening wide. The sword and muletta dropped into the sand, and I fell over backwards, scrabbling to all fours instantly.

The bull was on me.

His head reared up in a blinding movement of flashing horns, his snout slapping into my thigh and sending me sprawling. I rolled over in the sand, jumped to my feet as the bull wheeled around. I grabbed the horns, staring down at them with real fear lumping into my throat. I held to the horns tightly, backing away from the churning shoulder muscles of the bull. The bull twisted his head violently, trying to shake off my hands.

Fear crackled into my skull, threatened to burst my eardrums. I felt the blood rush out of my face as the bull whirled. I hung to the horns, my body arched away from the animal. With a sudden change of tactics, he stopped, swinging his shaggy head. I swung around with the head, leaped to one side, clearing the horns and racing over to where I'd dropped the sword and muletta.

The bull turned, his eyes bloodshot, enraged at having lost me.

I ran, something bigger than the fear taking over now, something that alerted my muscles, set my reflexes working. I stopped, lifting the sword, picking up the red cloth as the bull started another charge.

I swung the muletta up, danced back quickly, my eyes on the horns. I sidestepped as the bull barrelled past, my body automatically responding to the danger. I turned to meet the bull coldly then, my feet planted solidly in the ground. This was my last one. This would be a good one. Behind the barrera, I saw the faces of El Bando, Torquo, Carlos, even Gomez drawn white, tense with expectation. A hush fell over the plaza and I listened to the sound of my own evenly spaced breathing.

Saliva dripped from the bull's jaws as he worried the ground in front of him. He snorted loudly, pawing at the sand, lifting his head spasmodically.

And then he charged.

Faster, closer, and I held my ground, waiting, watching the churning hooves, the frothing mouth and nostrils, the powerful shoulders, the horns.

The bull snorted to a halt, breathing harshly, studying me. My eyes focused on the horns, and I felt my mouth pull into a tight line across my face. I heard the crowd draw its collective breath, caught a glimpse of the streaming pennants surrounding the ring. And then, suddenly, there was nothing for me anymore but the bull.

The plaza, the crowd, the pennants, everything seemed to fade, like a movie deliberately brought out of focus. There was only the animal, and he stood out in sharp relief against the whiteness of the sand, his eyes angry, his horns sharp and menacing.

I lifted the sword and sighted along my arm.

"Come on, toro," I said.

The nostrils widened, and one of the eyes flicked.

"Come on, toro," I whispered. "Come on. Come on."

I could feel some of the old pleasure seeping back, just a little of it at first, just a small part of the pleasure I'd known before. I forgot Juanita in that moment, forgot Gomez, felt only the anticipation of the kill.

The bull's head bent slightly, and he blew froth from his nostrils. The air between us hung solidly with the threat of death. And then the head lowered, and the horns came down, and the bull charged.

I felt the sword sink deep into the back of his neck, felt the shock rumble up my arm, heard the crowd roar. The bull pushed against the steel, impaling himself further on the sword.

The blood gushed out of his neck in a bright red stream as the bull fell, head still lowered. I held onto the sword and watched the light fade out of the bull's eyes as it rolled over on the sand. There was a brief flicker in the red-rimmed eyes, and then they went blank and staring.

My body was trembling as I pulled the sword from the bull's neck. I stared down at him for a

long time, and then I started across the ring as the arrestes came out for the bull, their chains rattling. Behind the barrera, Gomez was waiting.

From across the plaza, the trumpets started again, and the crowd cheered, shouting my name loudly now, bellowing it to the skies like in the old days.

I felt good. Something had died with that bull, and I felt a lot cleaner, a lot more wholesome. The crowd kept cheering, and the cheers filled my ears, and the pennants danced on the wind, and the sky was blue and clean overhead, and the sun was warm on my shoulders.

I walked close to the barrera, my eyes on Gomez, the dripping sword still in my right hand. Torquo hopped out like a brown toad, throwing his arms around my neck.

"That was the old Yank Reardon," he cried, "that was the old torero!"

I grinned down at him, and then my eyes met Gomez's. He was staring at me strangely, his face pale. I smiled thinly, and walked behind the barrera.

"Hello, you bastard," I said.

Gomez backed away from me, and I reached out with my left hand and pulled him toward me, his jacket tight in my fist.

"You're going to die, Gomez," I said. "I'm going to rip a hole in your gut, Gomez."

"Reardon . . ." he stammered. "Reardon . . ."

I looked into his eyes, and this time I recognized what was there. Fear.

Stark, raw fear.

I recognized it, and my smile grew wider.

When I killed that bull, something had died in Gomez, too. I knew how it was to go out there when all your confidence was gone. I knew how it was, and so I began chuckling, softly at first, and then laughing loudly while Gomez got paler and paler.

I shoved him away from me at last, throwing my sword down into the sand.

From across the arena, the trumpets called, and the toril door snapped open. A massive brown bull charged into the ring, churning up sand. Torquo and Carlos got to work at once.

Gomez turned his head to look at the bull, and when he faced me again, his forehead was covered with sweat.

"Go on," I said. "There's your sweet animal. There's the 'piece' you were telling me about."

I laughed again and started walking back toward the tunnel.

Behind me, I heard the crowd cheer as Gomez stepped from behind the barrera, his fingers trembling around his cape, to meet his bull.

BY GRANT COLBY

The Stalkers

The hospital had released him, so he knew he was sane. He knew that what he was seeing was real.

His eyes were tired, and he took off his glasses and rubbed them carefully on a piece of tissue. He was aware that Bess was studying him from her chair on the other side of the living room, and he thought, She's trying so hard. She probably wants to tell me I should go to bed, but she's afraid to because she thinks I might interpret that as an unkindness.

Today's homecoming had been a lot tougher on Bess than it had on him, he knew. He'd overheard Doctor Kemper tell her that everything from now on was up to her. There must be love, the doctor had

said — love and rest and a feeling of being wanted. And there must be no conflicts of any kind, no happening that might be experienced as a threat or persecution.

It was hell for Bess, he knew, and it would keep right on being hell until she realized Doctor Kemper would never have released him from Clearbrook unless he was sure recovery had been complete.

He put his glasses back on and smiled across at her.

"It's late, dear," he said gently. "Why don't you go on up to bed now? I just want to sit here a few moments, and then I'll be along too." He saw the concern and indecision in her eyes, and he added, "I'll be all right. I just want to sit here a little longer and enjoy the feeling of being a part of this room again."

She smiled at him, a little too brightly. She had never been a very good actress, he reflected; deception was simply not in her.

"Well . . ." she said. "It is kind of late . . ." She hesitated a moment, then rose and walked toward the door. "You won't be long, Ben?"

"No, Just a few minutes."

At the door she paused and glanced about the room. "I suppose I'd better cover the birdcage before I go up."

She was reluctant to leave, Ben knew, searching for an excuse to stay with him a few moments longer. "I'll cover it," he said. "The parakeet and I are still strangers, you know. I want him to get used to me."

"And the puppy," Bess said. "He'll need some newspapers, Ben."

He grinned reassuringly. "I know. I'll take care of him."

When his wife had left the room, Ben leaned back in his chair, and slowly the smile faded from his face. For Bess's sake, he had pretended to be pleased with the parakeet and the puppy she had bought a few days before his release, but he had not been able to repress the feeling of vague resentment, the slight annoyance. It was as if they were in some way intruders in a room that had once belonged solely to Bess and himself. He knew why she had bought them, of course; they were supposed to heighten the feeling of love and affection, the sense of being depended upon by something even weaker and more helpless than himself. By contrast, they were meant to make him feel strong and capable.

He glanced up at the birdcage. The parakeet was looking at him, head cocked far to one side. It was a small bird, not much longer than Ben's hand. On the floor beneath the birdcage, the puppy made a whimpering noise and struggled to his feet. He was too young to walk more than a few steps before collapsing, and each time he tried again he started off in a new direction. In the last hour he had made a dozen attempts, and he was still no more than six feet from the point at which he had begun.

Ben got to his feet and walked to the birdcage and opened the wire door. He hated to see anything in a cage — the way he had been for so long at Clearbrook. He sat down in his chair again and watched the parakeet flutter through the gate and perch on top of the cage. He would get used to it, he knew, it and the puppy. He'd have to, for Bess's sake.

For a moment he closed his eyes, thinking of Bess, and when he opened them again he saw that the parakeet had changed somehow. It seemed larger than it had a moment ago. That was impossible, of course, and yet . . .

He leaned forward in his chair, eyes narrowing to peer at the bird more carefully.

It *was* larger; there was no question about it.

And not only had the parakeet's body grown. Its beak had lengthened incredibly and become more hooked, and the round, curious eyes were now cold and protuberant. They stared at Ben unblinkingly, twin discs of hate.

I'm just tired, Ben thought. I'm tired, and the excitement of coming home and all has . . . has . . .

He closed his eyes again and rubbed the lids with thumb and forefinger. When he opened them, the bird was no longer on top of the cage. Then Ben heard a soft scratching sound on the floor to the rear of his chair, and he twisted around suddenly to look behind him.

The bird was there, walking slowly across the floor toward him, wings outstretched and beak opened wide. And it was very large now, almost the size of an eagle.

My God! Ben thought. He — he's *stalking* me!

He tried to get to his feet, but the sight of the bird had somehow drained all strength from him. "Bess!" he said, but his voice was only a whisper, and he knew his throat was too taut to call for help.

The parakeet stood on one leg a moment, the other leg extended toward Ben, the huge claw quivering in a threatening gesture. Then it moved toward him again, slowly, growing larger by the instant, eyes glittering hideously at either side of the murderous beak.

"God!" Ben whispered. Sudden terror brought with it enough strength to enable him to push himself out of the chair. But he stood erect for only a moment before he fell to his hands and knees. He tried to crawl toward the door, tried again to call to Bess for help, while behind him he heard the quickened movement of the bird. And then, suddenly, the bird shrieked and there was a pounding of heavy wings against his face and he felt the bird's talons tearing through the flesh of his shoulders. The bird's weight crushed him against the floor, and for one nightmare moment he saw the head drawn far back, ready to drive the enormous hooked beak into his face.

He screamed, and from some hidden well strength flooded into his muscles and he caught the bird's head in both hands and slammed the big body against the floor. Then he got his feet beneath him and threw the blood-wet bird against the wall with such force that he could see the broken body flatten against the plaster like wet clay.

He stood quite motionless, feeling the slow crawl of sweat across his back and along his ribs, and the acid burn of sweat in the deep raw furrows the bird's claws had made.

It was then that he heard the puppy.

He whirled, and now a new panic filled him. The puppy was no longer a puppy. It was a sleek, lean monster with bulky, corded shoulders like a wolf. The fur on its neck was erect and the wet fangs glistened yellowly in the room's soft light. It crept toward him, belly close to the floor.

Ben glanced toward the door. But it was too late. The beast had moved between them.

"It's stalking me!" Ben whispered. "It's doing just like the bird did!"

The dog crouched, and suddenly the low-throated growl became a roar, and then the animal was arcing through the air toward him.

Ben threw himself to one side, and when the dog's body hurtled past, he stabbed out and caught it by a leg. In almost the same instant, he balled his freed hand into a fist and clubbed it against the dog's back. He felt the spine crush beneath his knuckles, and then he dropped the suddenly limp body to the floor. "You monster," he said softly. "So you'd stalk me, too, would you?"

He heard quick footsteps on the stairs, and then in the hall outside the living room, and he felt his body tensing again.

But there was no fear. Not any more. There would never be fear again. He knew what to do with those who stalked him.

Bess came into the room, paused a moment to stare at the bodies of the parakeet and the puppy, and then she started toward him, cautiously, her eyes wide.

"Ben, dear!" she said. "Ben . . . what in the world has happened?" She raised her arms to him, coming toward him more rapidly now.

He was even able to smile a little as he waited until she should come close enough.

He was ready for her.

Even my own wife, he thought. Even Bess.

She's stalking me.

Portrait of a Killer

No. 15 — Joseph McElroy

BY DAN SONTUP

He worried a lot about his teeth. Even though he was a comparatively young man, he had no upper teeth at all and had to wear false teeth, and the lower ones were in very bad shape. Because of this, Joseph McElroy was terribly selfconscious about his mouth. He never opened his mouth wide, he mumbled when talking to people so that his bad teeth wouldn't show, and he often put his hand to his mouth and pretended to be rubbing his chin because he thought he could cover his mouth in this manner without attracting attention to his teeth.

It didn't work, of course, and Joe was sure that his bad luck with women was due to his teeth and to nothing else. That was why he was so happy to find a girl who seemed to like him, regardless of his teeth — and that was why, in a fit of jealousy and self-pity, he slashed the throat of Anna Mae Johnson when she refused to have anything more to do with him.

Joe and Anna got along very well after they first met. Anna seemed to like him, and Joe gradually regained some of his lost self-confidence and even began to look upon himself as something of a smooth lover. He forgot about his teeth most of the time, he stopped mumbling, and his hand didn't stray to his chin as much as it had in the past.

Joe even began to think of marriage, and Anna seemed quite willing to go along with the idea. However, she was a married woman, separated from her husband, and so any wedding plans between Joe and Anna would have to be put off for a while until Anna's previous marriage could be straightened out. But both of them figured there was no sense in living apart from each other, and since neither one of them wanted to set up housekeeping together until it was all legal, they compromised by getting rooms on the same floor in a boarding house.

The landlady was a bit suspicious of two unattached people asking for rooms on the same floor, but when Joe explained that they were more or less engaged to be married, the landlady relented and rented the two rooms to them.

At first, the arrangement worked out very well. Joe and Anna lived in the same house, saw each other often, and visited back and forth in each other's rooms frequently,

always being careful not to do or say anything that would harm Anna's reputation. Then, gradually, Anna began to tire of Joe. Perhaps living so near him and seeing him so often made her realize that Joe wasn't the man for her.

Anna was a nurse and a hard worker. She put in long hours at the hospital, had a fine reputation there, and everyone liked her. Joe, though, couldn't seem to hang on to a job for very long. He drifted around from job to job, tried his hand at being a steamfitter, and eventually ended up by being a sort of handyman who took odd jobs wherever he could find them.

When Anna saw this, she began to lose interest in Joe, and that's when they started quarreling. Joe had a short temper, and it was made even more violent now that Anna seemed to be slipping away from him. He accused her of seeing other men, and she denied it. He told her he loved her and begged her to come back to him, but Anna remained cool. Joe began to think of his teeth again, and once more he started to mumble and try to cover his mouth.

Finally, things reached the point where Anna couldn't stand Joe any more, and she moved out of the boarding house and got herself a room in another one. Joe followed her there, but couldn't get a room, so he kept the one he had. However, he kept showing up at Anna's new place, standing out on the street, waiting for her, pleading with her to come back to him. Anna wouldn't even listen to him.

Joe kept on following her, and Anna had to move again, this time to the nurses' dormitory at the hospital — but Joe still didn't give up. Anna couldn't get rid of him, but then she made the big mistake of starting to see another man.

Joe found out about this and now became even more violent towards Anna. He stopped her several times on the street, begged her to give up the other man, and even threatened her life when she refused. That's when Joe decided he would give her just one more chance to take him back.

He went out and bought a razor, put it in his pocket, put on a pair of gloves, and then sneaked into the hallway of the nurses' dormitory late one night to wait for Anna to come back from duty at the hospital.

He had timed it just right and didn't have to wait long for Anna to show up. He grabbed her by the arm, keeping one hand in his pocket holding the razor, and begged her one more time to come back to him. Anna laughed at him, and that's when Joe yanked the razor out of his pocket, flipped it open, and slashed with all his might at Anna's throat.

It was only one blow, but it cut deep into Anna's flesh and the blood began to spurt from her jugular vein.

Anna wasn't dead yet, though. She broke away from Joe, ran down

the stairs and out of the dormitory and staggered along the street until she finally collapsed. Joe had run out of the dormitory after her, and when he saw her fall to the ground, he turned and ran down the street away from her body.

Anna was still alive a moment later when a nurse found her on the sidewalk. However, even though doctors from the hospital were at her side in a matter of minutes, they couldn't do anything for her, and she died before they could carry her to the hospital.

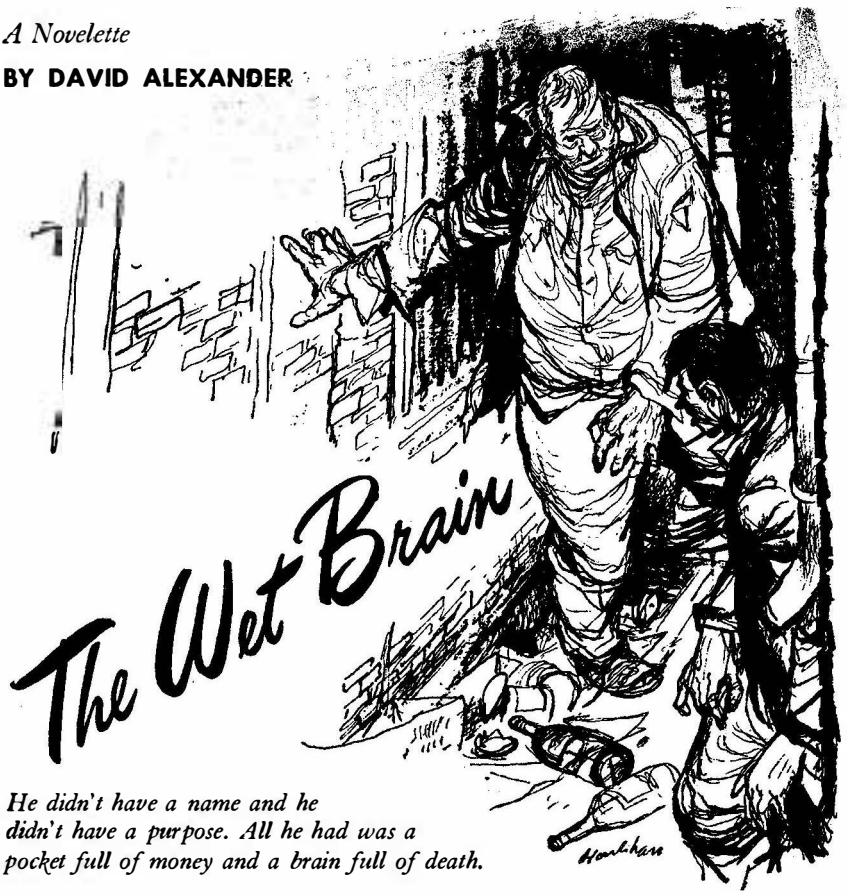
Joe got out of town as quickly as he could, but he knew that it was only a matter of time now — and it was. The police began to trace back over Anna's life, found out about Joe, and circulated wanted posters on him.

Joe was picked up in a nearby town, and he gave up without a struggle.

When giving his confession to the police, he moved his lips as little as possible, trying to keep his bad teeth from showing — and when he was finally led to the electric chair, he kept his mouth tightly shut until the very end.

A Novelette

BY DAVID ALEXANDER



The Wet Brain

He didn't have a name and he didn't have a purpose. All he had was a pocket full of money and a brain full of death.

THE WET BRAIN shambled up the Bowery at the half-lurching, half-shuffling gait that is peculiar to all wet brains. He was a hulking brute of a man but he gave the impression of grotesque monstrosity rather than of size and strength as he moved painfully along on his swollen legs and feet. That was because most of the six feet and two hundred pounds of him was bloat. He had to split the largest size shoes to get his feet into them. He had given up trying to wear socks long before. When it was warm he stuck his bare feet into whatever shoes he might find or steal after he had ripped them open. If it was cold, he wrapped rags around his ankles.

The bloat had made his fingers

almost insensitive. Sometimes, when he sniped a butt, the match would burn right down to his knuckles before his dazed mind would prompt him to lift it to the cigarette in his cracked, puffy mouth, and he would actually smell the burning flesh before he'd feel the pain. The fingers on his immense hands were like fat German sausages. Even his head was enormous and because of the bloat the mangled features lacked definition, just as a great blob of putty has no definable form. The whole of him was tumorously shapeless.

That was because he was a wet brain, because he was in the final and incurable stages of acute alcoholism. The medics at the city hospital, who wouldn't even let a wet brain through the door of the emergency ward unless he was bleeding from a fall, had a fancy name for the condition, but they had no way at all of treating it and they weren't going to allot precious ward space to a wet brain who was already dead even if he did insist on breathing. The medics called it uremia, among other things. On skid row they simply said your kidneys had backfired and were flooding your body with all the poisons stored up from the smoke and jake and sneaky pete and sweet lucy and canned heat and rubbing alky that you drank.

The wet brain was untouchable. He was the leper of the Bowery. Even the crummiest and scabbiest and filthiest bums, who hadn't quite made the wet-brain stage yet, shied away from him. The disease he had wasn't catching, but it was terrifying, because the wet brain was the bloated, walking death that they themselves were certain to become unless they took the pledge and went cold turkey and suffered through the rams and horrors and DTs until they shook the nails right out of their shoes. No cop would pick the wet brain up from a doorway or a gutter. They just let him lie there in rain or snow or blistering heat and hoped he'd die so they could call the meat wagon and get him off their beat forever. There wasn't any use in picking him up unless some shop-owner complained, anyway. The jails didn't want him. Neither did the hospitals. There was a slab at the morgue waiting for him, and a flimsy pine box, and space on the scow that conveys the dead like garbage up the East River to the Island, and a shallow hole in Potter's Field. But the wet brain had to quit breathing before he could be sent to the slab or the box or the scow or the hole. And sometimes wet brains are stubborn enough to keep on breathing for months and years, even when the bloat's so bad their eyeballs pop like the pulp of squeezed grapes.

How the wet brains survive at all is one of skid row's major mysteries. They can't brace nickels and dimes because even the softest touches are horrified at their appearance and dart away at their approach. They can't become mission stiffs and hol-

ler, "Hallelujah," for their flop and soup because the missions know they frighten all the other customers away. They can't become successful thieves because their minds are gone and they can't even concentrate on stealing. Even the lowest dives won't let them through the door. The liquor stores that sell sneaky pete wave them away the moment that they enter, even if they're clutching money with their sausage-fingered fists.

The most considered opinion on the Bowery holds that wet brains just don't eat at all but live somehow on the noxious fluids stored up in their bloated bodies. They sleep in doorways and in gutters or sometimes, when they're lucky, they find a park bench. But how they get the most important thing of all, their poison, is another question. Without the poison, whether it's sneaky or lucy or jake or any of the other Bowery vintages, they'd go right off into the frothy screams and they'd die inside an hour. Yet somehow they keep on living for awhile, so they must get the poison to sustain them one way or another.

There is a caste system on the Bowery, of course, just as there is in all other strata of society. The wet brains are the lowest of all the skid row denizens. Right next to them are the dog robbers. The dog robbers are the bums who prey upon the wet brains. They're lower, even, than the mission stiffs, the hallelujah-shouters who are generally despised. The dog robber is the guy who buys the bottles for the wet brains, with the wet brains' money, of course. He exacts his commission on the deal, either in the form of cash for services rendered or by drinking half the bottle before the wet brain gets a gulp at it. Since the wet brain isn't allowed in any place where booze is sold, the dog robber is an important entrepreneur in the Bowery economic system and if he has enough clients, he can stay drunk all day on his commissions from the wet brains and save all the stakes he braces from marks for his pad and meals.

But the means the wet brains use to get the money they give the dog robbers to buy their booze is subject to heated debate in every Bowery bar. One school holds that the smashed shop windows found almost every night on the Bowery and its tributary streets are the work of wet brains. They say wet brains smash the glass, grab everything they can in their bloated fists, and stumble off with it. This school also holds there are fences that deal exclusively in the loot of wet brains.

You could never convince a cop that this hit-and-run thievery was the work of wet brains, however. To cops, a wet brain is just a zombie, with a bloated bag of poison for a body and a reptile house of horrors for a mind. Kerrigan, the best known Bowery cop, hoots at the theory that wet brains are capable of crime. He maintains that if a

wet brain picked up a brick he'd forget what he was doing with it in his hand before he could smash a window. Doctors who have examined a few selected guinea pigs among the wet brains accord with the police opinion. They say wet brains have the span of interest of a baby in a cradle, although their fogged minds are likely to have vivid flashes that amount to total recall of incidents that might have occurred years before.

The wet brain who was staggering up the Bowery at the halt and limping gait was as fearsome-looking as anything human is ever likely to be. He was huge and bloated and filthy and he reeked, and passersby sometimes stepped off the sidewalk to avoid contact with him as he careened forward. Despite his appearance, the cops and the doctors would tell you he was entirely harmless. They said that in the first place he was physically as weak as any invalid in a wheelchair and in the second place what was left of his mind had to concentrate entirely on the next drink, and that he was incapable of planning felonies and misdemeanors. The wet brain had been arrested numerous times for petty theft, vagrancy and loitering when he was just another bum and not a wet brain.

Oddly enough, after he'd become a wet brain and therefore completely harmless in the legal view, two serious charges had been lodged against him. Each time it was a sex offense that had brought the shambling creature before an obviously disgusted magistrate. But they had dismissed the charges both times and had sent him staggering back to the slow death of the skid row streets. Once he had lurched at a fourteen-year-old Italian girl whose prematurely developed breasts were too noticeable beneath her sweater. The wet brain had grabbed for her, making terrifying animal sounds in his throat. They probably wouldn't have taken him to court even then if the girl's parents hadn't been sitting on a nearby stoop and seen it all and raised holy hell with the cop. The second time the wet brain had taken all the rags he wore off his filth-caked body before a crowd of people in a subway station. The city psychiatrists, concerned with the overcrowded condition of the wards and prison hospitals, had testified each time that the man was not dangerous, that there could be no sex drive, even of a perverted sort, left in him. They said he had meant the young girl no harm, that his fogged mind was probably dwelling in the dim past and he had mistaken her for some former playmate or, perhaps, his sister. They said that undressing in public was typical of the infantile mind, that when the wet brain had shed his rags in the subway station the act was no more significant than that of a baby tearing off its swaddling clothes.

The bug doctors who had pre-

sented such testimony in regard to this particular wet brain might have been shocked to learn what was going on in his clouded mind as he lurched and stumbled up the Bowery through swirling fog and pelting rain.

2.

There was wildness and exultance and brilliant colors and crashing music inside the wet brain's head. There was a sense of joy and power and triumph that stimulated his rotten, bloated body like glowing wires. He was unconscious of the brutal pain in his feet and legs, of the cold, sharp little knives that hacked his spine and his guts at every shuddering, labored step. He did not think of himself as a thing of filth and horror and disease. He thought of himself as an heroic figure, standing on a high, floodlighted stage. The pelting rain was his applause and the humming traffic was the surging roar of the audience's cheers.

I have murdered, he told himself. I have killed. I will stand on the great stage now in the blinding pool of light and all of them will cheer.

I am rich, he told himself. I am rich because I killed. I killed for money. Money and the spotlight. And the cheers. They cheer me because I am rich. Because I am a rich murderer.

His sausage fingers clutched at the bulging right-hand pocket of his tattered, greasy pants. It was there. Hundreds, thousands, millions. He began to chuckle. It was a rasping, throaty sound. Spittle drooled out of his cracked mouth and oozed over the graying hair-spikes on his chin. He would stand on the high stage in the spotlight and throw the money at them. He wished it was gold coins instead of paper. Gold coins would clink and bounce and make a mad, metallic music when he hurled them by the handful. The paper would only float, like great, green snowflakes, soundlessly. But it would buy him everything he wanted. It would buy the world.

No, not quite. It would not buy the high stage and the spotlight and the cheers, the wet brain thought. It had taken more than money to buy him that. It had taken murder. Only God and the wet brain dared take human life, he thought excitedly, as the rain slapped its applause.

But money would buy all the other things, the things of a value far greater than glowing rubies and winking diamonds and the plump, pink flesh of women. Money would buy him the bed with the white sheets and the soft mattress. Money would buy him inexhaustible piles of bottles filled with hot, sweet wine.

Suddenly a great fear sounded like an alarm bell inside the wet brain. The fat, quivering fingers clutched desperately at the bulging pocket. Perhaps it was not money

at all. Perhaps it was only a wad of the dirty papers he was always picking up from the street and tearing into strips and stuffing in his pockets. He had no idea why he did this. It was simply a compulsion he could not resist at times. If it was only dirty paper in his pocket, he was lost. That would mean he had not really murdered, that the murder was one more of his confused half-memories that were only dreams. If he had not murdered, they would not let him stand in the spotlight on the high stage. They would boo and hiss him into the wings.

He came to a sudden stop and stood uncertainly, teetering back and forth, almost falling down, clutching at the bulge of his pocket. The great bloat of his body shook and quivered violently. He tried to remember the details of the murder, to convince himself that it was reality and not delirium. He was horrified that he could not remember the name of the man he had killed. Then his breath hissed out of his mouth and nostrils with an explosive sigh of relief as he realized the reason. He had never known the man's name. That was it. He had killed a stranger because for some reason he knew the stranger had untold riches on him. But mainly because only God and the wet brain dared to take a human life.

On skid row they say a bum becomes a wet brain when he forgets his nickname. Few men on skid row answer to any name except that bestowed upon them by their fellows. They are called Pickles and Goosey George and the Canned Heat Kid, and many actually forget their real names entirely. That means nothing. On the Bowery nobody is expected to have a square name, anyway. But when a bum forgets his nickname, it's serious. It means he's just one short jump from the wet-brain stage, if he's not there already. No wet brain is called by a nickname. If he is addressed at all, they simply yell, "Hey, Wet Brain!"

The wet brain who was shambling down the Bowery through the rain and yellow fog could remember his nickname. He exulted in this fact, just as he had exulted in remembering the murder. Sometimes he could not remember what they had called him on skid row, but now it was clear. This proved his mind was crystal-bright at the moment, he thought, and it meant he wasn't just imagining the murder and the money. His nickname was Mary Dugan. They didn't call him that because he was any kind of queer, though. They called him that because he used to boast about how he'd been an actor before he became a bum and had acted in a play called *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. The wet brain could seldom recall his real name, not by just trying to remember, anyway. They'd called him so many different names on so many different skid rows it was very hard to think who he'd been before the

booze got him. But he considered his real name very important and before he became a wet brain he'd devised a means of checking it. He carried his real name on a little card. He had the little card inside a celluloid container and always, no matter what rags he was wearing, he had that pinned somewhere inside his tattered garments. Whenever he wanted to reassure himself, he would examine the card, surreptitiously, as if he was looking at a pornographic picture.

The wet brain who had been called Mary Dugan was being followed, but he didn't know it. He was too concerned with his thoughts of murder and riches and soft beds and great stacks of bottles of sweet, hot wine to pay much attention to his physical surroundings. It would have been hard to see the little man in the ochre smoke of fog. The little man was called Jockey because he was undersized and scrawny and had a ferret's sharp face. Jockey was a dog robber. He had preyed upon this wet brain before, or had rendered him services upon a commission basis, to put it more politely. Tonight he had bought the wet brain two bottles of sneaky pete and hadn't even exacted a drink from either of them. He had been too astonished, really. The wet brain had handed him a ten-dollar bill to buy the booze! Who the hell ever heard of a wet brain with ten dollars in his pocket all at once? The bottles had cost seventy cents apiece and the dog robber called Jockey had kept the change, of course.

This particular wet brain, the one they used to call Mary Dugan when he had a name, was about the most hopeless wreck on the whole Bowery, Jockey thought. He couldn't do a damned thing for himself except fall down. He had never even shown himself capable of rolling a lush, which is about the easiest way there is of making money, except finding it. One way or another he did manage to get his big fat fingers on enough dough to buy canned heat or rubbing alky but he seldom had enough for sherry and what he did come up with had always been coins, jingling money. Now he had folding money and Jockey couldn't understand it. Jockey guessed he must have found it on the street. but he couldn't figure who the hell would be dropping sawbucks on the Bowery cement. Furthermore, the pocket from which the wet brain's fingers had extracted the bill had been stuffed full. Jockey knew Mary Dugan's peculiarity. He knew he filled his pockets with wads of dirty paper and thought it was full of thousand-dollar bills. That was one of the big laughs on the street. But what he'd pulled out this time hadn't been just dirty paper.

Jockey shook his head. He couldn't figure it, but he wasn't going to let the wet brain get too far away. just in case the rest of the paper in his pocket had numbers on it, too.

3.

The wet brain had come to a sudden, shivering stop, so Jockey pulled up short, too, and pressed his slight body close against a building, watching covertly. The wet brain was holding on to his pants pocket like he had something live inside it that might escape if he didn't hold it tight.

Mary Dugan thought, I've got to look at the money. I've got to find some light and make sure.

He looked around him apprehensively, but he did not see the small figure pressed close against the building a few yards away. His dim eyes didn't see much of anything in the fog. He was afraid to take the money out of his pocket to make sure. He needed more courage to do that. He pulled a zipper on the ripped windbreaker he wore and felt inside. His fingers encountered the comforting plumpness of two bottles. He drew one out. It was a fifth of cheap domestic sherry and it was half-empty already. The wet brain uncorked it and lifted it to his mouth, right there on the street. He had no fear of cops. Cops wouldn't arrest him, no matter what he did. He'd found that out. But they'd have to arrest him now. He was a murderer. He was famous. He was back in the spotlight again. He drank most of the sweet-sharp fluid without lowering the bottle. Then he stood gasping horribly and coughing for a few seconds. When that was over, he drank what was left and sent the bottle crashing into a thousand pieces on the sidewalk.

As the wet fire burned in his belly, he lurched toward a dimly lighted doorway with the intention of making sure it was money in his pocket, not just strips of dirty paper. But his attention was immediately distracted. A beefy man in uniform was approaching him through the fog. It was Kerrigan, the cop. The wet brain was so excited he forgot about examining the money. He tottered toward the policeman, waving his arms wildly and making sounds with his mouth. He spoke like a man with a cleft palate talking into a rain barrel.

"I killed him!" he croaked. "I murdered him! I'm rich! I got millions!"

Kerrigan lurched back and raised his nightstick as if a boa constrictor had suddenly reared at him out of the fog.

Then he roared, "You goddam wet brain! Get out of my way! Don't come any closer, you crummy pig, or I'll break your head with the nightstick!"

"I killed him! I got millions!" the wet brain protested.

"You got millions!" the beefy cop retorted. "You got millions of snakes crawling around inside your head, you wet brain creep. Go die in some gutter off my beat."

Kerrigan went by hurriedly, skirting the bulk of the wet brain. The wet brain stood looking after him,

mumbling. Then he began to make sounds like a child sobbing. As Kerrigan went by the scrawny little man, Jockey leaned down and fumbled with the knotted strings of his rain-soaked shoes. Kerrigan bellowed, "Get moving, bum! Bums on my beat got to keep moving. There ain't no bum on this beat stands still one minute, y'understand?"

"Okay, okay, Officer Kerrigan," Jockey answered politely. "Just tying my shoe, that's all."

Kerrigan hated bums and wet brains. Christ, he thought, the stink of them. He wished the damned force wasn't getting so lily-fingered. You couldn't drag 'em in any more until you caught 'em really doing something serious. The worst part was you weren't even supposed to break their damned lousy heads with your stick.

"Get off my beat," he growled at Jockey. "Go roll some wet brain, you stinking bum."

The wet brain suddenly stopped sobbing. Something across the street had attracted his attention, just as a bright bauble will stop the crying of an infant when it is dangled in front of its eyes. Through the fog he could see a winking neon sign that read: *The Castle — beds 35 cents — rooms 75 cents.* The wet brain forgot the disappointment he had felt because the cop refused to drag him onto the high, floodlighted stage where he belonged. Now he thought only of a soft, clean bed. He could not remember the last time he had slept in a bed. He'd get a room. Seventy-five cents meant nothing to him. His pocket was stuffed. He could pay seventy-five million for a room if he wanted to. He'd get the room with the clean bed and he'd fill it full of bottles, stacked right up to the ceiling. Then he'd just lie there and drink and wait for them to come and get him and usher him on the stage where a man who had killed belonged. He'd give them his right name, too. He had it written down on the little card attached to his clothes by a big safety pin. He'd say proudly, "That's my name! I'm a murderer!" They'd have his name in all the papers and over the radio.

He stumbled across the street, heedless of traffic and cursing drivers.

Jockey thought: What the hell now? Even a dumb slob like Mary Dugan knows they ain't a flophouse on the street will take a wet brain. And the *Castle* ain't the worst flop by no means. They'll toss him down the steps right on his can. What the hell's got into him?

Mary Dugan knew that Bowery flops wouldn't take wet brains. He knew that as he stumbled toward the lighted door of the *Castle*, but he had it all planned how he would get the room. He'd rush right in waving the money at the guy behind the desk and that would fix it.

Just outside the door to the flophouse, the wet brain lost his courage

again. It had been a long time since he had dared expose himself to the abuse of a flophouse proprietor. To the wet brain, this was a tremendous adventure, walking right in like any other man and demanding a room. He fumbled inside the windbreaker and pulled out the second plump bottle of sweet wine. He uncorked it with the trembling sausages that were his fingers and lifted it to his mouth with both hands. He drank deeply, letting more than half a pint of the stuff trickle down his throat and add more fire to his burning guts.

As he stuffed the bottle back inside the windbreaker a crackling sound like sputtering firecrackers went off inside his head and he was half-blinded by flashing streaks of brilliant light. He grabbed the railing of the stairs with both hands and began to haul himself upward, gasping and stumbling. In the urgency of the moment he had completely forgotten his plan of taking the money from his pocket and waving it as he entered the upstairs lobby so they would see it and wouldn't throw him out.

A chunky man with the fist-mangled face of a barroom brawler sat behind the scarred desk of the *Castle* lobby. He jumped to his feet the minute the wet brain's wavering figure appeared at the head of the stairs. He began to shout, "Get out of here, you filthy wet brain!" He picked a ball bat up from under the counter and waved it at the wet brain. "Get out! Them lice of yours can jump!" The clerk advanced menacingly toward the wet brain, shaking the ball bat at him.

Several bums who had been sitting on the hard wooden chairs of the lobby and staring straight ahead with vacant eyes watched the tableau, fascinated. One of them was a big, hard-looking man with woolly eyebrows. He jumped alertly to his feet and his grim mouth twisted into a grin. He moved quickly toward the wet brain, before the chunky clerk with the ball bat could come from behind the desk.

The gasping wet brain mumbled, "Money! Murder!"

The big bum sent a looping right into the wet brain's bulging belly and a sound like a small explosion belched out of Mary Dugan's open mouth. Before the wet brain could fall or even double up, the big man clutched his shirt collar, twisting cruelly as he supported the weight of the bloated body upright against the wall. He dropped his other hand into a pocket and brought it out again with brass knucks on the finger joints. Three times he smashed the brass knucks into the wet brain's face and broke it open.

The man with the ball bat was grabbing at the wet brain's assailant now. The other bums continued to sit on the edge of the hard chairs, their eyes bugging.

The man with the ball bat cried, "Lay off, you goddam fool! I don't need no bouncer, hear me?"

The big man was immensely strong. He shoved the clerk away, said, "There ain't no charge. I like working wet brains over. It hands me kicks." He laughed almost pleasantly as he released his hold on the bleeding wet brain's collar and booted him down the steep flight of stairs.

The wet brain lay at the bottom of the stairs and looked dead. The man with the woolly eyebrows threw back his head and the lobby was filled with his pealing, crazy laughter. The chunky clerk cursed as he scrambled down the stairs. The clerk did not bother to examine the man at the bottom of the stairs to determine if his heart was beating. He peered outside to make sure that Kerrigan, the cop, wasn't in sight. Then he propped the door open. He leaned over and got a fist full of the wet brain's collar and the long hair that grew down the back of the neck. He showed the same revulsion, in touching the wet brain, that a man might show in picking up a dead and odorous sewer rat.

No one was passing at the moment. The chunky man dragged the wet brain a few yards down the street, out of the glare of the *Castle's* neon sign, and left him lying against a wall. He hurried back into the flophouse and closed the door, still cursing.

The wet brain lay on the sidewalk for a long while, looking as if he were dead. Blood from his ripped face began to form a little pool around his head. Wine flowed from the shattered bottle inside his torn jacket and made another little pool on the pavement. Several shadowy figures passed and glanced sidewise at the wet brain, but none paused.

Across the street the little dog robber, Jockey, still watched. Presently he crossed the street. He glanced around him. There was no one in sight at the moment. He knelt down hurriedly beside the wet brain. Jockey was used to smells. He lived on skid row. But even to him the mingled odors of wine and filth and blood and sourness were intolerable. He held his breath. The wet brain was alive. He was breathing with snorting sounds. The wet brain was lying on his right side and Jockey could not reach the stuffed pocket from which the ten-dollar bill had come. Jockey glanced around him again, then tried to roll the wet brain's body over. The wet brain came suddenly to life and threshed at Jockey with a log-like arm. Jockey was knocked off-balance and sat down on the sidewalk. At the moment he saw two figures approaching through the fog. He clambered to his feet and moved off down the street, flattening himself against a building in the shadows. He couldn't afford to be seen ministering to a wet brain. They'd run him off the Bowery.

4.

The shadowy figures passed and

paid no attention to the huddled wet brain or to Jockey. The wet brain was trying to get to his feet, Jockey observed. Under any other circumstances it would have handed Jockey a laugh. The wet brain was floundering around on the rain-soaked sidewalk like a big, fat porpoise. He would get on all fours, try to raise himself to his feet, and then plunge on his face again. Jockey knew he would never be able to get the wad from the wet brain's pocket right out there on the street. In the first place, he might be seen. In the second place, the wet brain was almost twice as heavy as the scrawny man and despite his condition he had some brute strength left. Jockey knew that he had to get the wet brain to his feet and he also knew that a drink was the only thing that would do the trick. Of course, the drink might pass the wet brain out again. Wet brains were unpredictable. But that was a chance Jockey had to take. He felt the flat pint of the fortified port called "sweet lucy" in his pocket. There was one good drink left in it. It was an unheard-of sacrifice but Jockey decided to give the wet brain a drink from his own bottle. After all, he figured, he still had seven dollars and sixty cents of the wet brain's money in his pocket. That would buy a lot of sweet lucy.

Jockey made sure no one was approaching from either direction. He walked toward the spastically floundering figure, knelt down beside it. He took the bottle from his pocket, uncorked it, let the wet brain smell the alcoholic fumes. He moved the mouth of the bottle against the wet brain's blubbery lips. The wet brain gasped and clutched the bottle, tilted it, let the wine gurgle down his gullet. He began to snort like a wounded animal. The wet brain was kneeling on the sidewalk. Jockey placed a hand beneath his sweat-soaked armpit, said soothingly, "Get up, Wet Brain, get up. We're going to get some more to drink. This is your old pal, Jockey, Wet Brain."

With some assistance from Jockey, the wet brain managed to get to his feet. He leaned against a building, still making snorting sounds. Once again Jockey peered into the yellow fog. He saw dark figures floating about in the rain-whipped haze, but they were some distance away. He had to take a chance. He had to get this wet brain across the street, then steer him about a hundred yards to the alleyway across from *Grogan's Palace Bar and Grill*. That was the nearest island of comparative safety where he could rifle the wet brain's pocket and see if the paper stuffing had numbers on it.

Jockey got the wet brain to the curbing, but the bloated hulk almost fell on its face as it stepped into the street. Despite the cold rain, Jockey was sweating profusely by the time he made the opposite sidewalk with his reeling burden. He still had a hundred yards or so to go. If he met

any of his pals and they saw him escorting a wet brain, he'd be finished. They'd never speak to him again. They'd send the rumble out that he was a dog robber and he'd be ostracized. He hoped to God it wasn't just a wad of dirty papers in the wet brain's pocket.

Jockey kept mumbling soothingly about getting more wine as he urged the faltering hulk beside him onward. The wet brain was sputtering words, too, crazy words like "Murder" and "Rich." The wet brain kept coming to sudden stops that almost knocked Jockey down. He insisted on leaning up against buildings and twice he almost fell down again. Finally they made the alley, and Jockey, sighing with relief, steered the wet brain up it. When they were at the dead end of the alley, out of sight of the street, Jockey said, "Gimme that money in your pocket, Wet Brain. Lemme see how much you got. I gotta get you some more pete, remember?"

The wet brain mumbled, "Murder. Rich," and clasped his big paw over the bulge in his pocket. Jockey said, "Come on now, Wet Brain. Gimme the money or I won't get you no pete. We ain't got all night, Wet Brain. The liquor stores will close." Jockey reached a hand tentatively toward the stuffed pocket. The wet brain's arm flailed out again and crashed into the little man. Jockey was plummeted into a wall and fell down. The effort threw the wet brain off his precarious balance and he slid down the wall and sat on the ground, still mumbling about murder.

Jockey sat on the ground rubbing his jaw. He said, "That wasn't nice, Wet Brain. All I want is to get your booze for you. Don't you want no pete?"

The wet brain continued to mumble senselessly. Now he was talking about a spotlight or something. The only thing to do, Jockey reflected, was to pass the big goon out. He thought the wet brain would be safe enough while he went for the wine. He hated like hell to spend more of the money he'd taken from the wet brain, but he knew there wasn't any other way. He'd only buy a pint, but he'd make sure this time that the wet brain would pass out cold. Jockey figured the wet brain couldn't possibly get to his feet without assistance.

The scrawny man stood up, out of the reach of the wet brain's sprawled legs and thick arms. He said, "Now listen, Wet Brain. You listen good. I'm going to buy you a great big bottle of pete with my own money, understand? You sit right there and I'll bring it to you. Don't you move if you want a drink. You hear me, Wet Brain?"

The wet brain mumbled something that might have been an affirmation. Jockey moved hurriedly up the alleyway. Once he was back on the street he began to walk so fast he was almost running. He walked two blocks straight ahead,

then he turned right. Midway up the street he found a grimy little store that sold wines and liquors. Jockey was an avaricious little man and he thought of buying rubbing alcohol instead of sherry. Rubbing cost only nineteen cents. He decided against it, though. The wet brain liked sneaky pete and in his condition he might possibly refuse to drink anything else. Jockey paid the warty-faced old woman in the liquor store forty cents for a pint of California sherry. Then he exited hurriedly and continued down the same street, in the opposite direction from the alley where the wet brain was waiting. He turned into a dismal bar called *Pat's Place.*

There were only three customers in *Pat's Place.* Two of them were sound asleep. The third was an old man who was croaking Irish songs while tears streamed down his face. The bartender was a tall, skinny man who looked like something out of a horror film because his mouth had been slashed to twice its width in a knife fight. He was called Scar.

Jockey beckoned the thin man to the end of the bar where no customers were within earshot. He said, "Listen, Scar, I got to get some knock-out drops."

Scar shook his head, said, "I sell booze, bum."

"Listen, Scar," Jockey persisted, "I know you got the stuff. I see you slip a mickey to Croaker one night when he was getting nasty. I got dough, Scar. I can pay."

"How much?" Scar asked.

"Two bucks. Two bucks, Scar, for just a few little drops of mickey."

Scar shook his head. "Five," he said. "I can't sell you no few drops. It comes by the ounce."

"Three," Jockey offered.

Scar said, "Get off, bum. You ain't talking business." He turned his back on Jockey and started to polish a glass.

In the end, Jockey exchanged a five-dollar bill for a tiny bottle. He had little more than two bucks left from the wet brain's ten now. That better not be dirty newspaper in his pocket, he thought bitterly.

Scar said, "Don't give him all of it unless you want to kill the guy."

Jockey went into the filthy closet that served as a bathroom. He opened the bottle of sherry and drank deeply from it. Then he poured the small bottle of colorless liquid into the sherry. He poured all of it out and tossed the tiny bottle on the floor. He didn't care whether the wet brain lived or died. Wet brains were hard to kill anyway. He got a wad of newspaper from a trash can. He tore the newspaper into strips and stuffed the strips into his pocket.

5.

Jockey went out into the fog and rain again and hurried toward the alley where he had left the wet brain. He had almost reached the mouth of the alley when several

noisy figures lurched toward him out of the fog. Jockey stopped abruptly, flattened himself against a building and cursed silently. This was the worst possible luck. There were four of the drunken bums approaching. They were Croaker and his pals. Croaker was a little man and he was getting old, but he was widely feared on the Bowery because he was mean. They called him Croaker because he claimed he had worked as an interne or something in a hospital once. One of the bums was carrying a half-gallon jug. Jockey, who heard most of the rumbles on the Bowery, knew Croaker had won on a 20 to 1 shot at Dave's pool room that afternoon. The boys were celebrating. They'd take the jug of sherry up some alley and drink a little out of it, then they'd pour a pint of cheap rye into the sherry and make a blockbuster. That was the way you celebrated on the Bowery. The worst part was they'd chosen this particular alley for their ball. They were turning into it now.

Jockey was gnashing his broken teeth. He'd spent five bucks for the mickey and he couldn't even drink the goddam sherry because he'd spoiled it with the knockout drops and now *they* were going to get the wad out of the wet brain's pocket. Jockey edged himself along the edge of the building and peered up the alley. The goddam wet brain had evidently crawled half-way up the alley and then passed out. If he'd only waited a little he wouldn't even have had to spend the five bucks, Jockey thought darkly. The bums were too engrossed in their own affairs to notice the recumbent wet brain in the middle of the alley. They tilted the big jug and when they had drunk enough from it. they poured the contents of a pint into the sherry, just as Jockey had anticipated.

Then one of them stumbled over the wet brain. He cried out, "Hey! Hey, guys! Look at the sack of coal I found here!"

"Who?" asked Croaker with interest.

"A wet brain," the other answered.

"What wet brain?" Croaker inquired, moving toward the heap of rags in the alley.

"The one we used to call Mary Dugan."

"Ah," said Croaker with satisfaction. "*That* one's my favorite. He has hardly any sense of feeling left. Very interesting. Scientifically, I mean. Maybe we should conduct an experiment."

"You got something to experiment with?" one of the bums asked eagerly.

"Croaker's always got something," another bum said, laughing. "Razor blades. Little knives. A long needle, maybe. Tell 'em about the wet brain in Chicago, Croaker."

Croaker chuckled at the memory. "There was this bum on South Street," he said. "He was passed out

cold and the boys bet me I couldn't rouse him. Well, I tried everything and nothing worked. So I decided to practice a little of the surgery I'd learned when I was a medical student. I amputated this wet brain's ear and he still remained unconscious. Highly interesting. I bought a bottle of rubbing alcohol and put the ear inside it. To preserve it, understand? Had a heck of a time stuffing it down the neck, I remember. Carried it around for years, just for laughs. Whenever I'd see some drunk shaking so hard his eyeballs rattled, I'd ask him if he wanted a drink of rubbing. I'd show him the front of the bottle so the label would cover the ear. When the drunk accepted, I'd turn the bottle around so he could see the ear inside it. Very interesting reactions I got."

The bums howled with laughter. "You gonna cut this one's ear off, Croaker?" one asked.

"No," Croaker said. "Nothing so drastic. I happen to have a bit of candle stub on me. If you'll remove one of his shoes, we'll stick the candle stub between his toes and light it. Then we'll see how long it takes for him to react. All in the interest of science," he added, chortling.

One of the bums pulled a shoe from the wet brain's outstretched foot. Croaker stuck the candle stub between two toes and lighted the wick. The bums stood around drinking from the jug and watching the hot tallow drip down on the wet brain's bare foot, tensely interested. The hot tallow drippings did not awaken the wet brain. It took about five minutes, Jockey judged, for the candle to burn down far enough so that the naked flame licked at the bare flesh. It was seconds before the roasting flesh pained the wet brain. Then he suddenly let out the most unearthly, nerve-tearing howl that Jockey had ever heard and leaped like some black devil popping straight out of the crater of hell. Croaker and the bums retreated a few paces as the wet brain danced around screaming. The hot tallow had stuck the candle to Mary Dugan's foot and he could not shake it off immediately. The tiny flame spun on the tortured foot and described a crazy pattern of whirling light in the shadowed alleyway before it finally flickered out. The wet brain continued to howl. For a few moments the bums stood and laughed uproariously at the spectacle, then Croaker became alarmed. "Silence him!" he commanded. "He'll attract Kerrigan."

The youngest of the bums picked up a heavy piece of board and smashed the cavorting wet brain over the head with it. Mary Dugan collapsed. Croaker and the others left the alley, carrying their jug.

Jockey retreated to a doorway. When Croaker and his pals were out of sight, he stole into the alley and knelt down beside the wet brain with the battered head. Mary Dugan was still snorting, so Jockey guessed he wasn't dead. Jockey re-

moved the wadding from the pocket of the wet brain's tattered pants. When he saw it he expelled his breath audibly. Fives, tens, twenties. He counted it rapidly in the half-light and figured there must be five hundred bucks. He stuck the money in his pocket. Then he filled the wet brain's pocket with the wadded strips of newspaper he had torn. Jockey crossed the street hurriedly and went into the *Palace Bar and Grill*. He knew the wet brain wasn't allowed in there.

6.

The wet brain regained consciousness, or as much consciousness as he ever had, a few minutes later. There were new pains now. His head and his face and his foot hurt him. He started to stand up and reeled dizzily. He crouched on all fours. There was no shoe on the foot that pained him so intolerably. He flapped his hands over the ground, seeking the missing shoe. He looked ridiculously like a big seal. His hand found the shoe. He managed to get it on his foot, but he shrieked with pain. There was something warm and soft and sticky all over his foot.

Suddenly he remembered the murder and the riches and the fame that was due him and he forgot the throbbing pain. He patted the reassuring bulge in his pocket. He crouched on his hands and knees, peering dazedly at the mouth of the alley. He could see the lighted sign of *Grogan's Palace Bar* but he did not recognize it as such. He thought it was a distant stage with footlights shining, a stage that awaited his appearance. It was his cue. It was time to walk on the stage and tell them of the murder and listen to their applause. The wet brain began to crawl toward the mouth of the alley. At the head of the alley he groped against a building and pulled himself to his feet. He hobbled painfully across the sidewalk. As he stepped into the gutter, shrieking sound filled the night. Two police cars had veered to the curbing in front of the lighted saloon. Men in uniform and plainclothes spilled from the green and white cars. They walked hurriedly into the gin mill.

The wet brain smiled happily, even though moving his mouth hurt his split face. Cops. Everything was working out just right. The cops were making their entrance on the lighted stage. Now he would walk into the spotlight and tell them he was a rich murderer and soon his name would be in headlines in all the papers. The wet brain tottered across the street. A big truck hurtled by and barely missed him.

A hush so sudden it was startling fell over the chattering bums who lined the bar as the cops, led by Officer Kerrigan, barged into the *Palace Bar and Grill*. Jockey, at the far end of the bar, slid away toward the rear. He knew where there was a grimy window that opened into an areaway. In the gloom at the rear,

unseen by the policemen, he waited, wanting to hear what it was all about.

The bull-seal roar of Officer Kerrigan filled the place.

"All right!" Kerrigan was bellowing. "These men are from Homicide and they play for keeps. They don't take no double-talk, so don't you lousy bums try giving them none. They found a stiff down by the warehouse near Worth. The stiff is Mooshky Klein."

There was an exclamatory murmur among the clustered bums.

Kerrigan said, "You guys know Mooshky. He makes collections for the Lenny Fassio mob that handles the books and numbers. He'd just made collections from Dave's pool room and a dozen or two numbers peddlers and somebody caught him and beat his head in up that alley by the warehouse and took the collections he had made. Every one of you stinking bums uses that alley for passing the jug around, so some of you saw something tonight. If you did, you talk. Talk fast, understand? You talk to this man here. He's a Homicide lieutenant."

The door flew open and a bloody-faced, mumbling apparition lurched into the bar.

"The wet brain!" somebody cried.

Mary Dugan was croaking excitedly, "I murdered him! I murdered him! I'm rich!"

Kerrigan drew back his nightstick, bellowed, "Get out of here, you crummy wet brain pig!"

"Wait a minute now," said the Homicide lieutenant quietly. "We're looking for a murderer and this man barges in and says he's killed somebody and you tell him to get out. And he's got blood all over him, too!"

"He's a wet brain," Kerrigan said defensively. "Wet brains have always got blood on 'em. They fall down."

"Who'd you kill?" the lieutenant asked the wet brain casually.

The wet brain swayed back and forth and his bloated, blood-stained face took on a grotesque expression of puzzlement.

"I — I don't know," he stammered.

"How'd you kill him?" the lieutenant asked.

The wet brain tried desperately to think. He knew that this was the big line of his entire performance, that it would make or break him. It was the curtain line and he mustn't muff it. But the tremendous excitement of the moment had blotted out his dim memory completely. The silence in the bar was heavy. The lieutenant waited patiently. Officer Kerrigan snorted. Somebody at the bar tittered. Then the wet brain began to remember, only it didn't seem quite right, somehow. The shadowy, elusive memory was taking dim shape in his hazy mind. He was on a lighted stage. He had a gun in his pocket. The other man entered, upstage, left, and he took the gun out of his pocket and pointed

it at the man and pulled the trigger.

"I shot him!" the wet brain croaked triumphantly. "I shot him with my gun!"

Kerrigan snorted. The Homicide lieutenant shook his head. The lieutenant said, "The only trouble is that Mooshky had his head beat in with a big, fat crowbar."

"Get out of here, you goddam wet brain!" roared Kerrigan.

"I got his money," the wet brain pleaded. "I got it right here!" His fat, fluttering fingers groped into his pants pocket. He pulled out wads of dirty newspaper. Strips of paper floated to the floor. The bums broke into peals of ringing laughter. When the wet brain heard the laughter he suddenly became conscious of all the pain in his sick and battered body, the raw burn on his foot beneath the hardened tallow, the aching of the lump on his skull, the searing agony of his torn face. He had expected applause and shouted acclamations. But they were laughing at him.

Strong hands were shoving the wet brain toward the door. The ribald laughter still rang out.

7.

Inside the *Palace*, Jockey was climbing out the window into the narrow areaway. There might just possibly be a shakedown and he didn't want them finding five hundred bucks on him when a murdered man had been robbed. Jockey made for the alleyway where he had rolled the wet brain and retreated to its farthest and darkest corner. From this vantage point he could watch the *Palace* and see the cops when they came out. He saw the wet brain standing in front of the place. The wet brain looked as if he were about to fall down again.

The shuddering wet brain thought suddenly of a way he could convince them he had committed the murder. He could show them his name, his real name. He would show them the little card in the celluloid envelope that had his real name written on it. That would prove to them he was a man, a human being, and not just a wet brain.

The trembling sausages explored his garments, found the sweatshirt underneath the layers of rags. He always had the little card pinned there. But it wasn't there now. It wasn't anywhere. It was gone.

The wet brain began to sob. Salt tears mingled with the blood on his face. Suddenly he quivered with anger. He knew who had stolen his name. It was the little man. The little man who bent over him when he fell down. The little man who brought him bottles. He knew where to find the little man. The little man had told him to wait in the alley.

The wet brain lurched across the street and his great bulk suddenly appeared at the mouth of the alley.

Jockey was cornered. It was a blind alley and there was no exit

except the one the wet brain was blocking. Jockey plastered himself against the wall and tried to melt into the shadows but the wet brain continued his stumbling advance down the alley. Suddenly the little man thought of the bottle he had doctored with the knockout drops. He pulled it from his pocket hastily and advanced toward the wet brain, holding it out in front of him at arm's length as a man might hold a hunk of meat toward a vicious dog.

"Look, Wet Brain," Jockey said, coaxingly. "Look what I got for you. I got a bottle of pete, Wet Brain. It's all for you. Here, take it."

The wet brain's thick arm flailed out and the bottle flew from Jockey's outstretched hand and smashed against the wall. Jockey retreated again and flattened himself against the building at the farthest end of the alley. The wet brain continued to move slowly toward Jockey, limping and tottering.

"You stole it!" the wet brain said. "You stole it from me."

Jockey's hand plunged frantically into his pocket. He drew out a few of the bills he had taken from the wet brain, held them out in mute appeal.

"Wait, Wet Brain!" he urged. "I've got it, see? I'll give it back. I didn't steal it. I was just holding it so they wouldn't roll you."

The wet brain had both heavy arms out in front of him as he still lurched forward. The sausage fingers were curled to grasp.

"You stole my name!" the wet brain said as his fingers found Jockey's skinny throat.

Jockey squealed once before the hurtling figure and the pressing fingers forced him to the ground. The wet brain fell on top of the little man, his enormous fingers pressing, choking. Jockey began to gurgle. The wet brain was still sprawled on top of the little man, his fingers pressing, when the cops left the *Palace Bar and Grill* across the street and drove off in their cars. The fingers still pressed long after there was no more breath in Jockey.

Then the wet brain gasped and fell unconscious across the dead man.

8.

The filthy fingers of a Bowery dawn were probing the alleyway when the wet brain awakened again. He was still lying on top of the dead man. It made no difference to him. No one would believe he was a murderer, no matter how many times he killed. He scrambled to his feet, gasping and snorting. There was green paper on the ground. It looked like money. But the wet brain knew it wasn't money. It was dirty paper. The money was only in his dream, like the stage and the spotlight.

He shuffled up the alley and turned into the gray, deserted street.

He had no wine, no money, no hope.

He didn't even have a name.

The Man who had too much to Lose

Jason Gracie claimed he hadn't been poisoned. That was why the police were so interested.

A Complete Novel

BY HAMPTON STONE

THIS one I got myself into. I won't say I had nobody but myself to blame. Don't think that I'm going to take the responsibility for every last thing that happened, but I can't complain that the Old Man stuck me with this one. That is the way it usually happens. The best man the office has ever had for murder cases is Assistant District Attorney Jeremiah X. Gibson and the only man they've ever had who could work with Gibby, keep any sort of checkrein on that enthusiastic screwball's impetuousness, and manage it without running into

intra-office bloodshed is Assistant District Attorney of New York County Poor Misbegotten Me.

That makes us a team, Gibby and me; and to that extent the office routine did work. I got myself into this one and it was my being in it that pulled Gibby in. That, of course, did it. Nobody ever pulls Gibby out. He hits one of those cases and he comes out with a murderer. Short of that, he's in there and, come hell or high water, he stays. He's not only enthusiastic and impetuous. He's also persistent.

Gibby, however, we'd better leave for a bit later. You'll be hearing enough about him once we get to the murder part of it. First I'll have to fill you in on how we got there. It started with the girl. She was a pretty girl. Matter of fact, she was better than that. She was beautiful.

Have you ever seen a girl who didn't give it any play at all? The shoes were sensible. The dark blue, tailored suit was the kind of thing they wear in the Visiting Nurses. The hat was a dark blue felt job and it looked as though all she asked it to do for her was cover up her hair. Allure, charm, sex appeal — call it what you like — this was one dame who didn't dress for it.

And do you think that made the least bit of difference? I suppose it did. This same babe, if she had been wearing one of those off-the-shoulder jobs, if she had allowed that hair of hers to run loose, if she had done anything with her dark grey eyes but keep them demurely lowered, this babe would have incited riot. As it was she only stopped traffic a little.

It was just inside the main entrance to the Regent that she was standing. I won't try to tell you that she was stopping all the traffic that went through that entrance, but there wasn't any of it that didn't at least miss a step and hesitate a moment before going about its business. There were the women, for instance. The women didn't stop. They just looked as they went by and after they'd gone by would turn to look again. Then they'd hurry to the nearest mirror and they'd take a good look at themselves. They would be scowling just a little as they hurried away from there.

It was the men who were really slowed up, though. The ones who had women with them would give this girl the eye; and, as they walked along, their heads would swivel to keep her in sight as long as possible. Then would come the moment when they could strain their necks no farther and they would trip over their feet. It was then that their women would speak to them and it would be one of those sweet little utterances that has the sharp right in there under the thin coating of sugar. The men would brace themselves and tear their eyes away as they went on out of there.

The men who happened to come through alone — and I was one of them — simply forgot where they

were going and what they were going there for. They had a sudden change of plans and they stationed themselves at the various vantage points the lobby offered. Nobody has to know, for instance, that you are not waiting for a friend, but that you had just been on your way to the bar for a quick one and you'd forgotten all about it because you'd seen something in passing that you wanted a lot more than you ever wanted a drink.

I found myself a good place. It was one of those columns of yellow-veined marble they have here and there around that lobby and I found I could nestle it cosily between my shoulder-blades and assume a fine air of bored nonchalance while I studied this remarkably lovely girl.

She was, of course, not unaware of us. You could read her awareness in the small smile that came and went at the corners of her mouth. Unfortunately, I thought, there was nothing else you could read it for. It was an aloof smile. There wasn't a breath of invitation in it.

Very abruptly even that bit of smile faded and she raised her eyes. It was then that I was hit with the lovely grey of them although they weren't even looking in my direction. I turned to see where they were looking and at what. I saw and for a moment it did seem as if I would have to be mistaken. It was a man, although I am tempted to describe it rather as a thing that might once have been a man. It was a great, perambulating globule of oleaginous flesh.

It carried its tremendous belly before it, and that belly bulged with roll on roll of tremulous suet and, overhanging the mighty equator of his belt, it was as heavily pendulous as the dugs of a gravid cow. Similarly the swelling bulges of his ankles overhung his shoetops. The massive edema of his wrists overhung his pudgy hands, and even the fat overlaid thickness of his stubby fingers seemed to overhang his fingernails.

His face was another globule, superimposed on the major globule of his trunk. It rested uneasily atop a graduated series of chins and it rode there with the peculiarly sickening, rolling motion of a howdah perched on the shoulder bulge of an elephant. This was a face that almost concealed its features. Fat encroached on every part of it but most particularly on the eyes. The great curves of cheek obscured the eyesockets and even the eyelids seemed thickened, swollen with fat. The eyes themselves showed only as narrow slits of vein-reddened whiteness.

This appalling mountain of stuff might have been less horrible had it been suffused with any of that ruddy glow that covers enormously fat people when you see them in pictures. This man was grey, with the cold, wet greyness of a November fog. There was color enough in the man but none of it was his own. His thinning hair was lank and a bit overlong and it was black with the

dull, lusterless black of an undertaker's coat. It showed up at first glance as one of those tired dye jobs. The blue of his suit was a little too light and more than a little too intense even for a man of more normal bulk. The pink oxford shirt was a terrible mistake. I don't know that anyone ought to wear a pink shirt, but a man who has to have them made up for him in a size 19 collar or thereabouts should know that he is likely to be quite sufficiently eye-catching in conservative white. Let's skip the necktie. I have a vague recollection of black and blue zebras rampaging over it, but I could be wrong. At the time it didn't catch my eye quite so much as did the fact that it was freshly stained with slobber.

That nobody could miss. It smeared the pyramid of grey chins and he kept trying to wipe it away with the backs of his wet, grey hands. He reeled some and tottered as he walked but my first thought on this gait of his was that there was no telling that a man who had that much weight to carry around could ever carry it any more competently.

I swiveled my gaze back to the girl. She had started forward. The hint of a smile didn't return but in its place there was a hint of worried frown. As she moved towards the man she picked up speed, and then she first spoke.

"Mr. Gracie," she said. "What's wrong? Are you ill, Mr. Gracie?"

You know how the string section sounds in the quieter, dreamy parts of a Brahms slow movement. She didn't try with her speaking any more than she did with her clothes, but, nevertheless, she did make music. Perhaps I should have felt even then some small concern for this lardbelly she was calling Mr. Gracie, but I must confess that I couldn't have cared less. At that moment none of me was Assistant D. A. All of me was music lover.

His hands made futile pawing motions in her direction and his twisting lips gave out a sound. The sound, however, wasn't anything that even resembled words. It was a gasping wheeze and it had in it a marked undertone of whimper. Swaying dizzily, he turned away from the girl and staggered a few steps as though in flight from her. The girl started running but, even if she had reached him, she could never have done anything toward supporting his weight when his rubbery knees gave out from under him.

She crouched beside him and that richly toned string section murmured its Brahmsian harmonies of concern. I was in there in a moment and, as I reached them, old hog-dripping found himself some words and managed to sprinkle them among the less articulate noises of animal distress that still were coming out of him.

"Poison," he gabbled. "I've been poisoned. Somebody do something.

Can't you see I'm dying? Get an ambulance. Get a doctor. Get a policeman."

The girl rose from his side. She was again the perfect picture of composure she had been while she was waiting and drawing every eye. She looked about and spotted one of the hotel boys who was pushing his way toward her.

"Mr. Gracie," she said, "has been taken ill. Could you find him a doctor, please?"

She stood back and waited. Things happened fast. You know how it would be, Regent service being what it is. There was a boy with water. There was a boy with smelling salts. There was a boy with aromatic spirits of ammonia. In no time at all there was a doctor. A few of the bolder spirits spoke to the girl, offering assistance. She gave them short shrift.

"Thank you," she would say coolly. "There really isn't a thing you could do."

I stepped in and made my pitch, and I was handed the fluff along with the rest.

"Thank you," she said. "He has a doctor. I can't imagine he would be needing anyone else."

I'd held back on my curve ball, and now I slanted it at her. I introduced myself. "New York County District Attorney's office," I added.

I'd have expected she would look annoyed and I was braced for that. I'd hoped she'd accept the identification as an indication that I was different, that she could safely lean on the strong right arm I was offering her.

What I didn't expect was the look of eager delight. It was a look I had to grab on the fly, because it didn't last more than a moment. She did a quick cover-up on it, slapping the freeze back on.

"I am confident," she said, "that the doctor will have him right again before long. Thank you very much."

"He said he had been poisoned," I told her. "He wanted a policeman."

She twinkled at me. I had a feeling I might have been too noticeably eager, because now she was laughing at me.

"And you would be something like a super-policeman, wouldn't you?" she said. "I don't know whether it will have been a cucumber salad or a lobster thermidor that committed this vicious assault on him. Can you put a cucumber salad under arrest and how would you go about bringing it to trial before a jury of its peers? It would have to be twelve good cucumbers and true, wouldn't it?"

"Has he been this way before?" I asked. I was trying to sound official without sounding too official. There wasn't much of the personal element between us, but what little there was I didn't want to kill under any blanket of frigid Q and A.

"He has had indigestion before," she said.

The doctor picked that one up. "Like this?" he asked.

"I don't know that he has ever fainted before," she answered.

The doctor nodded and looked thoughtful. He had yanked loose the fantastic necktie and was loosening the fantastic shirt at the throat. It was the automatic routine, but when he had the collar opened, he saw something that jerked him right out of routine. It hit the both of us at the same time and in the same way. It was right there on the neck and it was unmistakable — the ugly, greenish-blue bruises that once you have seen them on a man's throat will sit in your mind's eye forever. That great hunk of tissue was carrying on his suety neck the clear marks of manual strangulation.

"I don't want . . ." the doctor began. He didn't finish. Turning to speak to the girl, he got the full impact of eyes and face and figure. He wasn't any lobby wolf. He was all silvered hair and dignity and professional eminence; but he was still male and he was human. He went all gentle and tender. "Are you his daughter, Miss?" he asked.

"I'm his secretary," the girl said.

The doctor smiled at her. "I don't want to alarm you," he said, getting the whole of it out on his second try, "but I do think we had better play this safe. I would suggest an ambulance and hospital."

The girl looked astonished and then quickly she began looking skeptical.

"For indigestion?" she asked. "An ambulance and hospital?"

"There is some indigestion," the doctor conceded. "I'm not too much disturbed by that, but it could be a mistake to trifle with cardiac failure."

"His heart?" the girl exclaimed.

I couldn't see why the thought should be so much of a shock to her unless it was that she hadn't been prepared for the news that old haunch, paunch and jowl had a heart. Even on our negligible acquaintance I had already come to think of him as nothing more than a walking stomach.

"You could call it an overworked heart," the doctor explained. "There's no heart built that can go on indefinitely handling an excess load of upwards of 150 pounds."

It hadn't occurred to me that the excess load, whimpering on the lobby floor, would be having any ear for all this. Evidently he had taken in every word.

He spoke, and his voice was womanish in its waspish sharpness.

"Are you going to stand there and flirt with some unknown quack," he asked, "while you let me lie here dying of poison?"

There was poison in him then. There was no question of it. It was in his personality. The man lay there fighting for breath, smothering in his own fat, but there was so much malice in him that he had to lash out at her with his nastiness, whatever the effort cost him. He had the querulous voice of a eunuch but there was more than querulous-

ness in it. There was an ugly strength there, a power for evil.

The girl flushed. She looked as though she wanted to turn and run. I could see her steel herself to stand and take the public nastiness of it.

"Doctor," she said tremulously, "ought he to be allowed to talk? Mightn't it be too great an effort for him?"

The doctor turned back to blubber-head. "There will be an ambulance here for you in a moment," he said. He made no specific reference to the man's unflattering characterization of him, but he was speaking now in a tone of cold, weary contempt. "I see no indication, sir," he added, "that you have been poisoned, unless at this late date you have awakened to the slow poison of your own gluttony. I would advise you to consult your own physician about it as soon as you can. He will tell you that this episode should be a warning to you."

Gluttonous Gracie fixed his slitted little eyes on the doctor in a baleful rage; but, when he spoke, he was addressing himself to the girl again.

"A hotel doctor," he said. "What can you expect a hotel doctor to say? I've been poisoned. I know I've been poisoned. Heart failure, heart failure, heart failure. Get that parrotting medical moron away from me."

Frozen-faced, the doctor indicated to the girl the marks on her employer's throat. "How did these happen?" he asked.

The girl looked at the marks and she was at least as frozen-faced as was the doctor. She had gone cold and aloof in her recovery from her embarrassment.

"I wouldn't know," she said frostily. "I am his secretary. I don't ordinarily see him with his clothes off."

"Somebody's tried to strangle the man," the doctor told her.

The victim wasn't missing a word of it. He raised his voice in fresh accusation and complaint.

"And that's another thing," he said. "The clumsy idiot who tries to pick up an unconscious man by grabbing him around the neck. For that alone I can sue."

At that point the stretcher-bearers arrived. With difficulty, they put Fatso on the stretcher. The girl walked alongside it.

"I will go with you to the ambulance, Mr. Gracie," she said.

"No," he said. "No. Go prancing off with your new-found friends to get yourself sozzled in the cocktail lounge. Leave me alone."

"I'll go with you in the ambulance," she insisted quietly.

"Thank you for nothing, Florence Nightingale," the stretcher case said with heavy mockery. He subsided for a bit after that and worked on his breathing. It took work, hard work. I followed along and stood by while they got the stretcher loaded into the ambulance. The ambulance doctor, who was beginning to look happier than ambulance boys usually

look, helped the girl in after they had the stretcher set. When I started to climb in after her, he was quick to get tough.

"Where do you think you're going, bud?" he growled at me.

"In," I said.

"Not in here," he said. "You're confused. The bus stop is across the street. Get lost."

"District Attorney's Office," I said, and I told him who I was.

He hesitated a moment, and then he stepped aside and let me climb in. It added up to a lot of people for an ambulance. The girl gave me nothing. She had her armor riveted around her and she just sat there looking permanently above the battle. It was the patient who raised the squawk. He wanted to know who I was and what I was doing in his ambulance.

The doc answered for me. "You yell murder," he said, "brother, you get the D. A.'s office."

"Who yelled murder?"

"Poison," I said.

He thought for a moment and I saw the guileful look grow in his eyes. Then he fumbled at his pocket and came out with one of those little cellophane packs they use for putting up chocolate caramels. It was a crumpled pack and it had only a couple of the caramels in it. He pushed them at me.

I took them from his hand. "What are these?" I asked.

"You asked about poison, didn't you? You can get these analyzed."

"Where did you get them?" I asked.

He shut his eyes and worked at looking sick. As far as looks went, he didn't have to work at it, but I wasn't convinced that he was too sick to talk. He had looked a lot worse a few minutes before when he had been all too voluble.

I tried it again. "Where did you get the candy and who tried to strangle you?"

"Nobody tried to strangle me," he mumbled.

"I know the marks of strangulation when I see them," I insisted.

"Hotel doctors," Fatso groaned. "Hotel District Attorneys."

There was nothing to be done with that. I decided to ignore it for the time being. Happily, it was the last syllable anybody had out of him till after he had been delivered to the hospital.

2.

Officially there wasn't any good reason why I had to hang around. The doctors pumped out his stomach and they gave me every assurance that Gracie was in no immediate danger of cashing in his chips. Unofficially there was a reason. The girl was my reason and I've never felt more unofficial. I had maybe twenty minutes alone with her and I did try to use them to the best possible advantage. I can't say I got much out of those twenty minutes. I did get her name.

Dorothy Harris.

I also got her address and I didn't like it much. It was an address that would take you about as far east as you could go and still be in anything you could call the Murray Hill neighborhood, east of Lexington and pretty well down toward Third. What I disliked about it was that it was the same address she had already given for Gargantuan Gracie when she had taken care of checking him into the hospital.

"Same building as the boss," I said. "Unusual."

I was thinking: "Or is it?" If it had been the usual run of girl I would have asked, but at this stage of the thing I wasn't really working on the case. I was working on her. I had nothing to gain by insulting her.

"It's an unusual sort of job," she said. "He's retired."

"Retired from what?"

"I don't know. He was already retired when he employed me."

"As his secretary," I said, "you take care of his letters?"

"Yes. His letters, his engagements, anything that needs doing."

"Are these business letters and business engagements or are they personal?"

"Both, whatever needs doing."

"Let's take the business part of it first," I said. "What sort of business?"

"There are always bills to be paid, coupons to clip, calls to his broker. Nothing unusual."

"What part of his business is unusual?"

"No part of it."

"His personal life?"

"Nothing there that could interest the D. A.'s office."

What I really wanted to know was whether this most desirable girl could have been any part of the monster's personal life. I hoped she understood that and was telling me she wasn't any part of it.

"You said it was an unusual sort of job," I reminded her. "In what way?"

"I do the sort of thing most secretaries do. I keep track of his appointments. I take care of his mail and messages. I run his errands. I shop for him. Ordinarily that kind of thing is what you might call a fringe to a secretary's real job. She does the little chores because she is around and it saves her employer the fuss and bother. My job, you might say, is all fringe. Ordinarily, if a man has nothing more important than that for his secretary to do, he also has nothing more important to do himself. He takes care of his own little tasks."

"Your boss does have something more important to do?"

"Not that I know of."

"Who's he scared of?" I asked.

She smiled but unfortunately not at me. It was a private smile, the reflection of a private little joke she was having with herself.

I reminded her that strangulation wasn't funny. I went on reminding

her for what it was worth. What it was worth was a little more time alone with her in that hospital waiting room. I asked her what she knew about the caramels. She knew nothing. He always carried candy on him. He was always chewing on it. I kept the questioning going just to make it look good and there was never any point at which I could have stopped the questions and done anything except pick up my hat and pull out of there. Any switch into making a cozy little twosome of it was steadily forestalled by her manner, which was uncompromisingly peddle-it-someplace-else-brother.

Even so, I was more than a little annoyed when company came. Company was four of them — mixed pairs — and Dorothy Harris took them just as dead pan as she had been taking me.

3.

The room we were in had a swinging glass door. One of the women reached it first. She was a big gal and I guessed her for a youngish-looking thirty. I've already called old Gracie fat and I don't want to suggest that this babe was built on his style. What she was would be roughly a size forty or at worst a forty-two. She was tall and that did help. Women don't come tall enough to carry as much rounding out as she carried, but as a thirty-eight she mightn't have been too bad.

I don't know that I would have had that first quick thought of comparing her with the old man if it hadn't been for the way she was dressed. She had on one of those mannish tailored suits and the only thing that made me any less than certain that it had been cut from the same bolt of too vivid blue cloth as Gargantua's suit was the question whether any one bolt could contain enough material to drape the both of them. She also had a pink shirt on. In the necktie department, though, Gracie was one up on her. She was wearing her shirt open at the throat and she had a string of pearls around her neck. It was one of those short strings, but it was long enough to make it over the hump of the lower of her chins.

She let the door swing after her and the man who was following at her heels had to get both his hands up in front of his face to defend himself. She turned quickly and with a mixture of impatience and contrition she caught at the door and pulled it away from him.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked. "I wish you'd look where you're going."

"I'm all right," he mumbled. "Don't worry about me. Never worry about me."

His tone was sour and he put a sarcastic emphasis on the pronoun. If he wasn't ten years or more older than the woman, he looked it. He was a bit shorter than she was and he was a lot thinner. I don't mean

just the lank remains of hair that festooned the grey pallor of his scalp. Those were very thin. He was also thin in the shoulders and in the wrists he was actually bony. He had a thin and bony nose and a thin sour line of mouth. He was hollow-chested and he was pot-bellied, but the worst of him was his color. Fatso had been that color when he collapsed in the lobby of the Regent. This man seemed in no danger of collapsing. He just walked around with the color of death in his face.

The other pair came close behind him. Again the woman was leading the way. This one was little and spare. She was quick and efficient in her movements and she wore an expression of sulky waspishness. I spotted her right off as a bad dame to tangle with, a dame who would have her own way, or else.

She wore her hair in frizzly bangs that were the color and shape of an uncooked omelette, and the hat that rode the bangs had flowers on it and ruffles of lace and bows of ribbon and some feathers here and there. Her dress was more of the same. It had bows on it and lace ruffles and bits of fringe here and there. It also had, so help me, a bustle; but if she wanted to kid anybody she should have worn falsies as well. I noticed her hands. You don't often see women with hands that look so strong and competent.

The man who followed her came at a distance of a couple of paces and he was yawning as he came. His lady waited for him at the door and in his own good time he caught up with her and, coming to rest, he waited with her. While he waited he yawned again. These weren't smothered yawns or covered-up yawns or anything like that. They were self-indulgent, unrestrained, comfortable yawns. He enjoyed them. His companion spoke to him and indicated the door. The man yawned again and moved to lay his shoulder against the door. The way he was built, his waistline got there first and, yawning again, he bellied the door open.

The woman strode into the room. Her eye fixed on me and she looked me over. With the eye of a woman who had seen enough and liked nothing that she had seen, she turned to the girl.

"Dorothy," she said. "What in the name of God has he done now?"

"He was taken ill very suddenly, Mrs. Simmons."

"That should surprise no one," Mrs. Simmons snapped. "I've been expecting it." She turned on the woman with the mannish clothes. "Nobody can ever say I didn't try my best," she said self-righteously. "You were possessed that he was to have that candy."

The stout job who dressed like Fatso flushed angrily.

"I've heard enough about that," she said coldly. "He likes candy. He's always eaten candy. It's never done him a bit of harm."

Her face twitching with rage,

Mrs. Simmons glared. Her companion, the yawner, spoke to her.

"Now don't go upsetting yourself, Clara," he said in a slow and lazy mumble.

She turned on him savagely, breaking in on him in the middle of his words. "Who asked you?" she snarled. "You're as bad as he is. You're disgusting, all of you."

The big gal in the man-tailored suit turned to the grey-faced character who had come in with her. "Really, Jim," she said. "I should think you might be able to do something about her."

Jim shrugged and looked away. Clara Simmons had a cigarette now and she had tapped it down and set it between her lips. She hadn't put any light to it. Sleepy was yawning again and she stood with her eyes fixed on him. Her foot was tapping. "Artie," she snapped. "Haven't you noticed that I'm waiting?"

Artie dragged a cigarette lighter from his pocket and droopily lit her smoke for her. She didn't thank him. She blew the smoke out without inhaling it.

"About time," she said.

"Uh-huh," said Artie and ambled to the easiest of the room's easy chairs.

Clara Simmons moved slowly across the room. She waited until she was right in front of him.

"Are you offering me that chair, dear?" she asked.

If a woman ever called me dear and put that much curve on the pitch, brother, I'd take to the hills. Artie just mumbled something inaudible and pulled the back of his pants away from the nice, soft seat cushion. Then he moved away and settled in the second most comfortable chair in the room. He closed his eyes. Clara simpered.

Dorothy took the opportunity to introduce me around. She started with the big babe in the blue suit and pink shirt and that was a Mrs. Gracie. I guess she read the look in my eyes because she made the identification more specific.

"Mrs. James Gracie," she said.

That made her the wife of the grey-faced guy, Jim, and when Dorothy came to Jim she introduced him as Mr. Gracie's nephew. Clara also got further identification. She was old Gargantua's niece and Artie, of course, was her husband.

She introduced me and then she picked up her purse and gloves. "This gentleman," she said, indicating me, "has questions to ask. I'll leave him with you. There's no need for me to stay on any longer now that you are here."

They evidently didn't care a hoot whether she stayed or went, all except Clara Simmons. She might have cared some.

"No need at all," she said.

It was a dismissal and there wasn't the first hint of graciousness in it. She was telling the girl that it had been presumption on her part to assume that she might have been needed then or ever.

Dorothy smiled serenely and started for the door. I tagged along after her.

"I wouldn't consider bothering the family," I said, "not while they are so worried about their uncle. Just one or two questions and then I'll go along with you."

With an air of tired resignation she waited. I tried out on the family the question about manual strangulation. They exchanged wary glances but that was it. For me they knew of no such thing. They couldn't imagine. It was impossible. Everybody loved their Uncle Jason Gracie.

I doubted that, but at the moment there wasn't much I could have done about it. I switched to asking them about the candy. Clara Simmons was outraged.

"He always has caramels," she said. She couldn't have taken a more disgusted or a more disapproving tone if she had been telling me that the man was in the habit of practicing some particularly foul perversion.

Mrs. Gracie glared at her. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I gave them to him. They were mine."

It was no good asking them which of his family he would expect might poison him. I saved that to ask him. I told Dorothy I was ready to go.

She shrugged and started out the door. I went along.

It clearly wasn't the moment. I thought it better to try again another time.

"You've had a difficult time of it," I said. "Suppose I just take you home. I'll call on you another time and we can work on this some more then."

"If your questions can wait?" she said.

"They can wait."

"Thank you," she said, and she gave me her hand. I held it. It was a nice size and it had a nice firmness to it. I liked her hand.

"But I'm seeing you home," I insisted.

"I shall manage very well alone," she answered, firmly withdrawing her hand from mine. "Thank you very much."

And that was that. She hopped a cab and went her way. I hopped another and went mine. As part of the next day's routine the hospital report came to my desk. It was completely as expected. No trace of poison in Jason Gracie, no trace of poison in the two pieces of candy he had turned over to me. Nothing wrong with the old goat but gluttony and that was wrong enough so that he might easily die of it. The only reason I had for filing the report anywhere but in my wastepaper basket was that the hospital doctors had also noticed the strangulation marks and they most strongly doubted Gracie's explanation of those marks.

I made up a folder for the report. I just missed labelling it Dorothy Harris.

I bethought myself and labelled it Gracie.

4.

I waited a couple of days and took a trip up to the Murray Hill address. There were no apartment houses in that district. Solid rows of five-story deals all looking like private residences. The sole exceptions were a couple of jobs down toward the Third Avenue corner. Those had shops at street level and looked like tenements above, but I knew I wasn't concerned with them. I drove slowly along the block looking for the number. I found it on a double brownstone deal. There were a few steps up to the front door. The door had a brass doorknob and along the steps there was an iron railing topped by brass knobs.

I climbed the steps and rang. I was beginning to think that the unusual arrangement was more unusual than I had imagined. This would be Gracie's residence and Gracie's secretary didn't only have a domicile in the same building. She lived in her boss's house.

I rather hoped she would answer the door, but she didn't. The woman who did answer it was everything I hadn't come for. She was tall and she had one of those gangling big-boned frames that can carry a lot of muscle without showing it. She had steel-grey hair pulled back tight from her bony face and skewered into a tight knot at the back of her head; and she wore steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Well?" she said. "You took me away from my kitchen." What she left unsaid was that I had better have a good reason for it.

"I should like to see Miss Harris," I said. "Miss Dorothy Harris."

Her eyes narrowed and her gaze travelled over me from head to foot. It wasn't any surface scrutiny. I could feel her eyes bore into me at every point.

"Who do I say is calling?" she asked, and she spoke the question as though she were prepared to believe not a word I might say.

I gave my name. Grudgingly this dame opened the door and told me I could come in and wait. She, Ethel, would check on whether Miss Harris could see me.

Carrying my hat in my hand, I meekly went in and meekly I waited. Ethel didn't offer me a chair or anything like that. I was just left standing in the hall, and I was left there long enough to have ample opportunity to look it over. It was old-fashioned, spotlessly clean, and conspicuously shabby. I noticed a ragged hole in the stair carpeting, one of those holes people catch a foot in. One of those holes that is a cinch for breaking legs. The hall contained only one piece of furniture, a large combination hatrack and umbrella stand. There were no hats hanging on it and no umbrellas standing in it. It had a mirror and I looked into it to adjust my tie. The mirror had a crack running diagonally across it and the mer-

cury was blistered and splotched. The glass, however, had a polish on it that recalled the gleam of the brass outside.

The knot of my tie was all right and it was by all odds my favorite tie. I like the way that tie looks and it just seems as though I'm always lucky in that tie. I had almost acquired a pleasant feeling of relaxed satisfaction when my mood was rudely ruptured by a shout from the stair landing. Ethel had gone upstairs. Now she was leaning over the banister and waving a wooden spoon at me.

"It won't do you any good primping," she said. "Miss Harris isn't at home."

"I'll wait," I said.

"She might not be home for a time. She's gone shopping somewhere."

That was, repetitively, that. I blew the joint. My car was at the curb where I had parked it, but against its door a young man was leaning, taking his ease. As I came out of the house, his eyes fixed on me and he flicked off into the gutter his newly lit cigarette. He waited by the car, looking me over. It was easy to see that he wasn't just waiting. He was waiting specifically for me and I wondered what his pitch was going to be.

Even at first sight I didn't like him. He looked tough and that isn't necessarily a bad way for a young fellow to look but you don't want them looking at once tough and smooth. That's a bad combination. You find it in the middle echelons of the rackets, among the professional gamblers, and most specifically among the pimps. I took in the longish but neatly trimmed, wavy, blond hair; the big, knuckled hands with the well-tended fingernails, the slick shave that could have been nothing but a barber-chair job and, on a guess, I set him down as a field-grade racketeer. He balled his hands up into fists, and my eye was caught by the large star sapphire on the little finger of his left hand.

I took my car key out of my pocket and walked across to the curb. He saw me coming. He wasn't watching anything else, but he didn't move. If I wanted him out of the way I was going to have to ask him to move.

I asked him. "You'll have to lean it some place else, brother," I said. "I'm going to be using my car."

He looked me straight in the eye. "How far," he asked, "are you planning on having it take you?"

"As far as I want to go, and I'm going now."

"Don't plan on coming back."

I dropped the car key back into my pocket. "You wouldn't be having any ideas about me, would you?" I asked.

"I would," he answered. "I have the idea that guys who persist in bothering women who don't want to be bothered could be looking for some broken arms."

I grinned at him. "I'm not without ideas about you," I said. "Guys who make threats of violence are looking for an inside peek at Sing Sing, or have you made that trip already? Any time you're interested, we run a good travel service downtown."

He stepped to one side and opened the car door for me. "Miss Harris," he said, "would like you out of her hair; and I make it my job to see that Miss Harris has things just the way she likes them. There will be no visits, no telephone calls, no nothing. The last time she had trouble with a guy it was a Hollywood talent scout. He figured there was no dentist anywhere could make him teeth that would be half as good as his own. So he never comes east to do his scouting any more and he has a smile people admire all the way from Dago to Puget Sound."

It was a tedious conversation and that afternoon it never did get beyond conversation. I finally did have the last word, but I managed that only by stepping on the starter as I was speaking it. It had been adding up to a bellyful and Junior with the muscles was more than I needed. I was sore, sore clean through. I was sore at him because he hadn't really started anything and I was sore at myself for that damn prudence that had made me remember that if you are an Assistant D. A. you can't very well go around throwing the first punch. I wasn't deluding myself. I knew well enough that if we had really come to mixing it up, the odds were good that this character could take me, but there's always that irrational little feeling that it was indecent not to have made the try.

5.

Back in the office I took the Gracie folder out of the Pending Investigations file and put it with the closed cases. About a week later I met a pretty wonderful girl at a dinner party and she did let me take her home. Life went on and Dorothy Harris became one of those receding memories, and I was even beginning to think that she had never been anything like the terrific deal I had dreamed her up for. Then when a whole month had gone by and I was spending a quiet evening at home, my phone rang and right away I knew I hadn't dreamed up anything. The Brahms fiddle section was on the wire, and everything that was music-lover in me was up and stomping.

"Jason Gracie's secretary calling," she said.

I played it cagy. "Oh, yes, Miss Harris," I said.

"Could you, please, come over to the house right away?" she asked.

So far as my head went, it was off some place trying to remember how I was fixed for clean white shirts; but some instinct did rise up and speak for me.

"Don't you think you ought to tell me whether tonight it will be white tie or brass knuckles?" I asked.

"It was all my fault," she said. "I could never dream you would be so right and I would be so wrong."

There it was. All that music and now sweet contrition, too. That instinct of mine flipped over and died like a dog.

"Has something gone wrong?" I asked.

"This time it is poison."

"Mr. Gracie —"

"It isn't Mr. Gracie. It's Ethel, his cook. The doctor is calling the police. Was it wrong of me to call you?"

"Does the doctor say it's poison this time?"

"Yes. Ethel died just a couple of minutes ago."

6.

The kitchen area of the house was in the hands of the police. The doctor was there and the usual assortment of precinct detectives. With them they had the men of the family, the Gracie nephew blubbering with nerves and fat-boy Simmons. Simmons seemed to be alternating between yawning and pulling at the waistband of his pants. He was still the round man I remembered from that one time at the hospital, but the way his pants kept sagging it did look as though his tailor had somehow managed to overestimate the rotundity. Neither the Medical Examiner's man nor any of the lab boys had turned up as yet and, of course, nobody from our office.

I checked with the cops and I got the story from them and the doctor. There was no doubt it had been rat poison; and Ethel had been all but dead by the time the doctor had been called. They had found the rat poison and they had found a flock of other cans and bottles. The other stuff ran the gamut of nostrums and medications and the picture they set up was clear enough. Ethel had somehow taken a lethal dose of the poison. This poison is not one of your easy killers, and Ethel after a short time had been feeling very badly. She had tried bicarbonate of soda and a half dozen of the widely advertised packaged variants thereof.

"When she finally went under they did get around to calling me," the doctor said bitterly. "So far as I can see, she ran through this whole crazy pharmacopeia of hers and she didn't take the first damn thing that could have done her any good."

"Had she been your patient, doctor?" I asked.

"Mr. Gracie is my patient," the doctor growled. "She wouldn't have anything to do with doctors. She didn't believe in them."

There was a phone extension down in the kitchen and I used it to call the office. It seemed a good idea to make my being there official. I got through to the Old Man himself and I filled him in on the background

of the thing. He had already seen on the police teletype the early report on the poisoning.

"Good," the Old Man said. "Stay with it. I'll send Gibson up to work with you."

I stayed with it. Simmons and the younger Gracie were right there in the kitchen, so I tried hitting them for a couple of facts. Simmons wasn't too much help. He was bored with the whole thing. If you ever wanted out of that character any response that wouldn't be a yawn, you had to work on him. I knew that. I had, after all, seen his wife work on him. The nephew was cooperative, eagerly cooperative. He answered all the questions.

First I got myself straight on the household. There were six of them and the one servant. The nephew counted them off for me: Old Gracie himself, the Simmons couple, this nephew and his wife, and the fair secretary — my gal, Dorothy Harris. Ethel had done all the cooking and the housework, and she had been a fixture of the household for more than twenty years.

"Who did the marketing?" I asked.

"Ethel did."

That gave me pause. The smallest rudiments of a theory had begun rattling around among my thoughts, but this answer rather knocked it on the head. It was a lot of house and a lot of people to run on just the one servant. There were obvious evidences of wealth. A retired gent keeps an expensive-looking secretary around when there is really not much for her to do. He lunches at the Regent. He dresses like a peacock. He is surrounded by family, all of whom he keeps under his roof and all of whom wear expensive clothes. I was adding all that up and it did add up to money somewhere.

On the other hand, there was the house. There was the one most peculiar maid. There was the general air of shabbiness and neglect. There was the murderous hole in the stair carpeting. The whole picture presented madly sharp contrasts between the evidences of lavish expenditure and the evidences of miserliness. It might have been the custom, though, to set two tables, one for the family and another for the help. Any explanation seemed to scream for such an arrangement. If Ethel's food had been separate and different from the family's food, there would have been no need to inquire into the question of how she might have been poisoned while the rest of the household was evidently in the pink of good health. Ethel, however, had done the marketing herself. It didn't seem likely that she would have done it that way, setting up one table for the family and another for herself.

I did ask. "Did she fix the same food for herself as she fixed for you?"

"For most of us."

"Who ate special food?"

"Uncle. He's on a diet. She was cooking specially for him."

"Has he been feeling ill today?"

"Nothing wrong with him today."

"And except for your uncle, all five of you ate the same food?"

"Seven of us."

I counted them up. "You and your wife, your sister and her husband, and Miss Harris. Who else?"

"She isn't my sister. She's my cousin. And you're forgetting Ethel. She ate too."

"And the seventh?"

"Paul Bates. He was here for dinner. He's a friend of Dorothy's."

I described my blond racketeer. The description checked out. "I've met Mr. Bates," I said.

"He makes seven, doesn't he?"

"Are you certain Ethel ate what you ate and nothing else?"

"I wasn't down here in the kitchen watching her eat, but if you think the poison was in her food, it wasn't."

"You don't doubt that she's been poisoned?" I said.

"Not in her food. Not until after dinner. She was always taking stuff. Things for her digestion, things for her rheumatism, things just for luck. She got absent-minded and picked up the wrong can, the rat poison. She had it here for rats, I suppose. This is an old house."

"And she took it by accident?"

"Of course."

"Is that what she told you?"

"She didn't tell me anything. She was too far gone to tell anyone anything. When we got to her, she couldn't talk any more."

"How did you happen to get to her?"

"The telephone."

That took a bit of working over, but he did explain it. About an hour after dinner he had tried to use the telephone. He had picked it up and he had heard the most peculiar noises, and he had fussed with the phone for quite a while before it had come to him that the noises were not some mechanical defect. They were human and they were horrible. He had thought first of Uncle, checked upstairs and then checked through the house. "Down here," he said, "was the last place I thought of, and of course it was down here. Ethel had knocked the phone to the floor and she was down on the floor beside it. I could see right away she was dying. I called the doctor."

I took a tour of the kitchen, looking all of it over carefully.

"Anybody been cleaning up down here?" I asked.

"Nobody's touched anything," the nephew told me.

On believing that, I had my reservations. If the poison had been in the food she had eaten I doubted that she would have been able to get all the dishes and stuff washed up and stowed away before she was so far gone in agony that she could do nothing. I put the question up to the doctor. He saw it my way and he was most definite about it.

The nephew broke in on him. "Naturally," he said. "It's as I told

you. She couldn't have gotten the poison in her food. We ate the same food she did and we're all perfectly fit."

The doctor shook his head. "She couldn't have taken it straight," he said. "The taste would have stopped her. It tastes awful."

Simmons interrupted with a yawn. "We knew Ethel," he said. "She didn't think medicine was worth a damn unless it tasted awful."

The kitchen was beginning to get crowded. The M. E.'s men arrived just then and the lab boys had been coming in. I got the doctor and Gracie and Simmons out of there. Coming upstairs from the basement, I ran into Gibby. He was just arriving.

"Hi," Gibby said. "I pulled your file. The Gracie thing. Have you talked to him yet tonight?"

"Not tonight."

Gibby looked troubled. "We better get on him right away," he said, "before he gets over being scared. That's what tore it the time before. He had a chance to get over being scared."

"No," I said. "Right from the first."

"But you did keep trying on the strangulation marks?"

"That," I said. "I was riding along mostly because of the secretary. She's a dish."

Gibby said, "Oh. Where do we find Jason Gracie?"

I started up the stairs and I warned him about the carpeting.

"How does this crummy joint fit in with lunching at the Regent?" he asked, as he stepped around the hole.

"You'll find Gracie eccentric," I told him.

"What's on the dame who got the poison?"

"Maid of all work, hypochondriac who didn't trust doctors, another character."

"Fat, too?"

"No," I said. "Spare." We were outside a room. I knocked. There was a noticeable pause before there was any answer. Then Gracie spoke.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

"District Attorney's Office," I shouted back.

There was another pause and then another shout from Gracie.

"All right," he growled. "What are you waiting for? Why don't you come in?"

I turned the door knob and pushed the door open. I was starting into the room but Gibby dropped his hand on my arm and held me a moment. The next door down the hall opened a crack and then quickly closed again. We waited but it stayed closed. Through the door crack in that one moment I had caught a glimpse of something palely greyish.

Gracie spoke again. "God damn it," he shouted. "Come in or stay out. Don't stand there playing games with me."

I wondered why, after telling us to come in, he should have scuttled

through to the next room and opened the door a crack there to sneak a look at us. The grey business I had glimpsed was right in front of our eyes now, acres of it. On this occasion the monster had draped himself in the lightest of light grey flannel. There was also a yellow oxford shirt but there was no telling what the necktie had been. He had pulled his necktie off.

He was showing the effects of his dieting. His trousers hung loopily from his suspenders and his coat sagged around him in folds. He was still a gross blob of a man, but not quite the blob he had been. I introduced Gibby.

Gracie ignored Gibby. He concentrated on me. I wanted to duck.

"I think you'd better calm down," I said.

"Just be quiet and wait till I've been poisoned."

I wasn't having any of that. "Suppose you settle on one tune, Mr. Gracie," I said, "and sing it. You've switched again."

Gibby pushed into it, and for him it was a brand new role. He was spreading oil on troubled waters.

"I've just come in," he said. "Suppose you give me a bit of background."

Gracie filled him in, briefly and colorfully. Gibby took it all stoically. Gracie finished up with: "This I do know. She's dead. She's been murdered. And if I have to depend on you to see that I won't be the next one, God help me."

"Then you have returned to the belief that it was poison the other time, the day you fell ill in the hotel lobby?"

"I let myself be talked out of it." Gracie answered. "Now I see I should have known better. One tries not to believe the worst."

"The worst being what?"

"The worst being that somebody's trying to kill me. Do I have to draw you a diagram?"

"Yes," Gibby snapped. "We can use a diagram. It will be more use to us than your shouting." Gibby was getting around to troubling some waters of his own. I had expected that. Gracie had from the first been a cinch to place a disastrous strain on Gibby's patience.

Gracie scuttled to an easy chair and settled himself in it. He glared at us balefully. "There are," he said. "only two possible reasons why Ethel is dead tonight and both of them are obvious."

"Good," said Gibby. "Now make them obvious to us. Draw us that diagram."

With a great deal of impatience Gracie drew it. It was a simple argument he presented. Ethel had been his servant, nothing in this world but his servant, for over thirty years. People didn't murder nobodies. The only person of any importance in that household was himself. Therefore, since there was murder going, it was clearly directed at him. Having pursued his argument that far, he came to what

he called the only two possible reasons why Ethel was lying dead in the kitchen.

One was that the poison had never been intended for her at all. It had always been meant for him and, through some lucky misadventure, it had gone into the servant's food instead. The word "lucky" in this connection was his, not mine. He sat there and he used the word in cold blood. He wasn't saying that it might have been lucky for him. He said it was simply lucky. I could guess that, as he saw it, the world could spare his late cook. It couldn't spare him.

He went on to the second possibility, and it was clear that it was the one he preferred. In this hypothesis there had been no mistake, no misadventure. In this hypothesis the murder of his cook was only a necessary step in the direction of his own murder.

"She had been with me all these years," he said. "She was faithful and she was trustworthy. She had to be put out of the way. As long as I had her to watch over me, I was safe. Now I'll never again dare let a morsel of food pass my lips. It's diabolic."

We worked on him some more but it was an exercise in futility. Gracie's life was in danger. He was looking for protection. It was our job to protect him, and that was it. We could ask him again and again from whom or from what, but he didn't know. That was our job. To find out.

Throwing that sort of challenge at Gibby isn't smart. Gibby was right in there digging and the last thing he needed was a push. He made as though he were moving out, but he moved his own way. The room had three doors. There was the one we had used in coming in. The other two were in the back wall of the room. One of those stood ajar and we could see a shaving mirror and a washstand. The other was shut. I don't know that I'd ever noticed it before and if I had I would have dismissed it as a closet door. It wasn't until Gibby had it open that it came to me at all how obviously it wasn't a closet door.

In Gracie's room there were three of those big, old-fashioned wardrobes, the kind people have in these old houses where built in closets were unknown. This just wasn't the kind of house for closets. Anyhow Gibby went to the closed door.

"Not that way," Gracie yelped. "You go out the way you came in." He worked at bringing his voice under control. "I mean," he said. "You've gotten turned around. That isn't the way out." He was trying to make it sound merely helpful.

Gibby ignored him. He stepped into the room and turned on the light and I followed him. It was like walking into another world. We were in a room that bore no visible resemblance to the solid but simple comforts of Gracie's room and even less to the shabbiness of the rest of

the house. The whole room was a rosebud blush of pink satin and damask. It was a room in which the most delicate of ladies might spend her days in elegant idleness. The wall was covered with pink brocaded satin. There was a pink bed.

There was a wardrobe. It wasn't a huge, double-doored deal like the three in Gracie's room. This was a small one. Gibby opened it. It was full of women's stuff and at first glance it struck me as a mess. There were about six pairs of shoes in the bottom of it and they lay in a disorderly scramble. On the shelf at the top were four or five hats and they also seemed to be scrambled together. In between a row of clothes hung from the usual bar.

I recognized a dark blue jacket and the words that popped into my mind wouldn't look well on paper. The jacket belonged to the schoolmarmish job Dorothy Harris had been wearing the first time I'd seen her. I'd had a couple of thoughts from time to time about her living in the boss's house. I'd been trying to kid myself it couldn't be this far in.

Gracie was in the doorway, watching Gibby paw at the clothes.

"You will have a hard time," he said, "justifying a search of Dorothy's room."

"Who's Dorothy?" Gibby asked. He had pushed the little blue job back into the closet and swung the door shut. Now he was just wandering around the room.

"Miss Harris," Gracie said. "My secretary."

"You do her well," Gibby said. "I want to see the secretary who rates all this."

Gracie smiled. If you could have read anything into it, it would have been a thin edge of malice. "You're making assumptions," he said smoothly, "which I could easily resent."

"A man," Gibby said, "has a secretary. They live in connecting rooms. Her room is a babe's dream of elegance. The man doesn't do himself that well and the rest of the place is falling apart. The assumptions, mister, make themselves."

Gracie shrugged. "You happen to be quite wrong," he said, "but that's beside the point since it is none of your business."

Gibby started from another direction. It had long since been high time, but Gracie, instead of giving out with anything, started questioning Gibby. He asked him whether or not Ethel had been poisoned. He then suggested that it was high time that Gibby changed his tune.

"I'm tired of being treated as though I were a juvenile delinquent who had been caught turning in a false alarm," he complained.

"At the hotel," Gibby reminded him, "you did turn in a false alarm."

"At the hotel I made an honest mistake. I had been taken suddenly ill and I not too strangely mistook the nature of my illness. Now I don't want to talk about it any

more and I don't want to be harried about it."

"But you do think there is a poisoner in the house and you do want us to protect you."

"That," said Gracie loftily, "is your job."

We were wasting our time. We pulled out of the pink room. We didn't go the long way, back through Gracie's room. We went right out to the hall. We used the door that had opened a crack when we had been waiting in the hall for Gracie to tell us to come in.

7.

Dorothy was with Paul Bates in the living room, and when I came into the room he rose as though he were offering to leave. Then Gibby followed me in; and Bates, who had been looking most affable, stopped looking affable and sat down again. There was something decisive about the way he sat down. He was planting himself and challenging us to get him out of there.

I took up the challenge. I told him that we wanted to talk to Miss Harris alone.

Bates shook his head. "No dice, brother," he said. "I stay right here while you talk or you just don't get to talk to her at all."

Gibby looked him over. "Who are you?" he asked.

"The name's Bates. Attorney."

"Attorney," Gibby repeated after him. "Representing whom?"

"Representing Miss Harris."

"What does she need with an attorney?"

Bates shrugged. "You never know," he said. "If you have any questions for my client, ask them. I'm not going to allow you to harry her."

Gibby had questions. He ran her through the dinner menu: oyster cocktail, roast lamb, plain spinach, asparagus, green salad, a lemon pudding for dessert, and coffee.

"You all had the same dinner?"

"All the same."

"What about Mr. Gracie's diet?"

"It was all low-calory foods except the pudding and he had a special pudding. It looked just like ours but it was made with gelatin instead of cornstarch and saccharine instead of sugar."

Gibby was interested in the pudding and he kept on about it at great length. Dorothy was ready with all the answers. It had been her job to scour the bookstores for cookbooks of reducing diet recipes. Gracie was satisfied so long as his food looked no different from the food that was served to the others.

"So tonight for instance," Gibby said, "she would cook a big pot of pudding for the rest of you and a small pot of non-fattening pudding for his nibs."

Dorothy nodded. "And at the table you couldn't tell his from ours," she said.

"How did this lemon pudding taste?" Gibby asked.

"It was sour," Bates volunteered. "It was the sourest damn thing anybody ever put in front of me."

"If you were going to pick something in that dinner to poison," Gibby asked, "it would have to be the pudding, wouldn't it?"

Bates scowled. "My client can't possibly have any knowledge on that point. Neither can I."

"You remarked on the pudding being unusually sour."

"It was."

"Did anything else have an unusual taste?"

"No. Damn dull, but not unusual."

"Did Ethel eat the same things as she served to you?"

"She did," Dorothy said. "Of course she did."

"How do you know?"

"Because she always did. She always cooked what she liked. If the family asked for something she didn't care for herself, she wouldn't be bothered with it."

Dorothy started to explain, but Bates took care of it for her.

"These old servants," he said airily. "You have them around long enough, they get bossier all the time."

The picture was all right. I wasn't doubting it for a minute. It just had a most peculiar sound coming from Bates. There was too much of the *haute monde* air in it and Bates wasn't the sort of lad anyone would spot as having been waited on by servants all his life. He also wasn't the sort of lad who could be expected to come up with any generous understanding of the foibles of an old and faithful servitor.

"As we understand it," Gibby said, "she cooked the dinner and served it to the family. She did the whole job herself without any help from anybody. Is that the way it was?"

"Yes, that way," Dorothy said.

"When did she get to eat her own dinner? Would you have any idea?"

"After we had finished. She liked to wash up as she went along. She would remove a course from the dining room and she would be washing up that part of it while we ate the next course. When we would leave the table, she would take out the dessert plates and coffee cups and she'd wash those up and put them away before she sat down to her own dinner."

"And you are certain that tonight she didn't change her ways?"

"Tonight was no different from any other night."

"Good," Gibby said. "That does something toward explaining what happened. If she got the poison in her dinner, she could very well have had enough time to wash up her own few dishes before it began working on her."

"Plenty of time," Bates agreed truculently. Gibby ignored him. He spoke to Dorothy.

"Did you go out to the kitchen tonight at any time during dinner?" he asked.

"No. I was at the table during dinner."

"Did anyone leave the table and go out to the kitchen?"

"No. Nobody."

"Alibi for everybody," Gibby said. "But Mac tells me you called it murder. It was you who said she wasn't the sort of person who could possibly have had an accident with rat poison."

"Has anybody checked on the door from the kitchen to the back yard?" Bates asked.

Gibby laughed. "A convenient person unknown who slipped in from outside to do the foul deed?" he asked.

Dorothy flushed. "We are doing the best we can, Mr. Gibson," she said.

"Miss Harris has been cooperative and helpful," Bates put in. "What more do you want?"

"A lot more," Gibby said, and he said it so blandly that even I wasn't prepared for what he shot in after it. "I'd like to know what sort of a hold Miss Harris has over her employer."

It would have astonished me not at all if Dorothy had shown some evidences of being frightened, but I could read in her face nothing of fear. There was a strangely eager excitement there, that and a sharp questioning. She took a long breath, but Bates spoke for her.

"On advice of counsel," Bates said firmly, "Miss Harris will not answer that."

"Paul, please," she murmured.

"On advice of counsel," Bates repeated, "Miss Harris will not answer that." A rasp of anger was now edging his voice and I had the feeling that he was not so much being firm with us as he was being firm with her.

"We have just come from having a look at your client's room," Gibby said. "When the secretary has a room that looks like something the Caliph brought home from Paris for his favorite concubine, the setup becomes downright suggestive. In a house where everything else is on the shabby side and even the boss's room is hardly more than just all right, that room looks like one hell of a lot of money to spend on making a secretary comfortable."

Dorothy had been sitting there with her head bowed and her lips trembling. She caught the full force of that word, concubine, and she jumped to her feet, her face flaming with protest. Bates grinned at her and gave her a playful little push. It sat her down.

"How simple-minded can you get?" Bates asked. "I thought just looking at Gracie and talking to him for a few minutes any man would know the score. How many passions do you think one man can handle? Some guys go in for women. Some go for eating and drinking."

"I've known plenty who went for both," Gibby murmured.

"To a degree," Bates said with a man-of-the-world air. "Only to a degree. When they run to belly as

much as Gracie does, you can lay bets that's all of it. That room's a laugh. I don't know how long he's had it there fixed up like that. I don't know what impotent dream he thought he was trying to work out. Anyhow there was the room. It was handy. It was empty. He needed a place to put his secretary, so he let Miss Harris use it. If you want to make something of that, you're welcome."

Dorothy wasn't satisfied to leave it at that.

"You can check the decorator's bills," she said eagerly. "They're dated. They'll tell you when the room was done up that way. I was a child then."

Bates perched on the arm of her chair and dropped his head on her shoulder. He did it with a familiar ease, the sort of ease that doesn't come out of anything that is only an attorney and client relationship. I noticed that the familiarity didn't startle her. She even leaned against him a bit.

And that was that. That was entirely that. I'm not saying we didn't try, but we didn't get any more at all. Gibby insisted on taking the rest of the household, but we didn't get any more from them.

Not directly, that is. One thing struck me, and I wondered at the time that Gibby didn't make a point of it. When we saw Hilda Gracie I discovered that, once again, she was dressed precisely like Fatso. Her light grey flannel suit even hung on her chubby frame with the identical baggy sloppiness that was now evident in the clothes of Mr. Jason Gracie.

8.

Our first stop was the nearest bar, but we didn't stay there long. Across the street there was a neighborhood drugstore. Behind the plate glass we could see an elderly man in the usual white jacket. He was puttering around, doing the stuff they usually do when they have a quiet interval before their midnight closing. We crossed the street and went into the drugstore. We introduced ourselves.

"Yes," the pharmacist said. "I heard about it. If it matters any, she bought the stuff here."

"Rat poison?"

"These old houses. It's one item I can count on moving itself. I haven't a neighborhood customer who isn't in here for it regularly."

"Had this location a long time?" Gibby asked.

"Longer than any time you can remember," the pharmacist said proudly. "I came here as a drug clerk on my twenty-second birthday. Next month I'll have my seventieth." He grinned at us. "Wouldn't think it to look at me, would you?"

"I wouldn't think it," Gibby said. "Forty-eight years, that adds up to a lot of rat poison."

The old man shook his head. "I can't say I ever liked her," he said, "but it's a bad way to die."

"You knew her?"

"Forty-eight years in the neighborhood. What do you think?"

"You know everybody."

"Not that I don't mind my own business, but behind a drug counter a man sees a lot and he hears a lot."

"I bet you do. Tell us about her."

The old man sighed. "The thing that always got me," he said, "is her coming back to the same house. I still say that beats everything."

"We had it she's always been with Gracie."

"Oh, yes. Ever since. I mean before. Forty-eight years. I go back to before she even had the house herself. Real nice people in there when I first came into the neighborhood. They were elderly. As a matter of fact they'd built the place and brought their family up in it. You know how it goes. The kids grow up. They marry and they scatter and then the old lady dies and the old man stays on just with servants. I go back to the time when people had servants. Three, four, five in a house that size. It was empty a couple of years and then she bought it from the estate. I never did know whether they had any idea what they were selling for or whether it went so long empty, they weren't caring any more."

"Where had she been before that?"

"Who knows? She was never one to tell anybody her business. She wasn't in there more than a couple of days before I knew which way was up. But there were some people on the block didn't even have an idea before the police came along and shut her up, her and her girls. Then, of course, everybody knew."

"Sounds like a really high class pleasure palace," Gibby said.

"High class? Fifteen dollars. Maybe that wouldn't mean much these days but it was different back then. You could find two-bit places in those days, plenty of them."

"That's inflation for you," Gibby laughed. "When was all this?"

The druggist thought a bit and then gave up trying to fix an exact date. "A long time back," he said. "If you look in old newspapers, you'll find out all about it. These morals scandals, people think they're maybe something new. You stay around as long as I have, you learn there's nothing new except maybe terramycin. Scandals, that was a beaut. Special investigator, grand jury sitting for months, new headlines every day, cops killing themselves."

"Gracie?" Gibby asked.

"Don't ask me about him. Me, I'm a pharmacist. Gracie, he's for a psychiatrist."

"When did he come into the picture?"

"After they shut her down. They had her dead to rights and when she came up for sentence, that judge, he piled it on. She went to jail. That's when Gracie took over. He bought the house. Moved in with the two kids. You know the niece and

nephew. They were only kids then."

We kept the old man going by tossing in a question whenever he showed signs of running down, but he liked remembering the old times and he kept going pretty much on his own reminiscent steam. Despite having disclaimed any psychiatric skill, he made an excursion into Gracie's mind and came up with a theory that echoed something we'd had earlier in the evening from Paul Bates.

He told us that Jason Gracie had always been a fat man, ever since he had first known him.

"The first time he ever came in here," he said, "I had him figured for the kind you look at him you can see right off what he is. Most men have appetites, pretty much the same appetites. One will go overboard a little for one, another goes overboard a little for something else. A man really goes overboard for one of his appetites, it like squeezes down the others to the place where they don't work right any more. Here's a guy. He's not the kind that even looks at a woman. Why not?"

"Because he'd rather eat," Gibby put in.

"That's it. He sets himself up in that house and if it isn't to dream what used to happen right there where he's sleeping nights now, what is it for? Then taking her on when she comes out on parole. I ask you. What's that for?"

Gibby winked at him. "You're behind the drug counter where you get to hear things and see things," he said. "You tell us."

The old man shrugged. "What always beat me," he said, "was her going back there. I'd say she would want to go any place in the world but there, wouldn't you?"

"On the face of it, yes," Gibby said. "If she's been murdered, though, we're going to have to know what lies behind the face."

The old druggist shook his head. "I know how it is," he said. "Unless it's perfectly clear and above board for natural death, you boys have to look into every possibility. You can't just assume suicide, but, of course, that's what it'll come to. Suicide."

"Motive? Not remorse at this late date?"

The old man shrugged. "That's for the psychiatrist again. I'm a pharmacist and I'm giving you a pharmacist's opinion. That rat poison now — it's hard to keep down. You've got to want to keep it down and it takes a woman like her to have the will power even then. It's got to be suicide. Just because it was the rat poison, it's got to be."

We filled him in on how she kept it down — mixed with the pudding. It wasn't my idea or Gibby's, but the doctor's, and it was the only possibility we could see. The druggist agreed with us.

"Yeah," he said. "It is a funny one, but it just goes to show. No matter how bad a thing is, there's always some good in it."

Gibby laughed. "In our job," he said, "the good isn't often in our line but just because I'm curious, tell me what's good about it?"

The old man approached it cautiously. "You understand," he said. "It's not like I had any real knowledge. All I've got is ideas and the last thing in the world I'd want to do is point a finger at anybody ever, but I wasn't born yesterday. If you're thinking about murder, you're thinking of the family."

"Among others," Gibby said.

The druggist looked interested but he put his interest aside. First he wanted to go ahead with what he had been saying.

"The family," he said. "Have you talked to Jim? He's the nephew."

"We've talked to all of them. Everybody in the house."

"You asked me what's the good in it. That's it. Jim. If you're looking to suspect people, you can cross Jim off your list. The way she died, it put Jim in the clear."

"How do you make that out?"

"I could tell you I know him. I've known him all his life almost. He's as straight and clean as they come. I can tell you that, but you're not after character references."

"It's an item," Gibby said.

"Here's another item and this one is fact. Jim's a chemist and a good one. If Jim hadn't gotten sick — lungs, you know — you would have heard about him and it wouldn't have been this way. It would have been because they would have been giving him a Nobel prize or something. Take the greenest drug clerk in the world and he wants to poison somebody, he'll put his hands on fifty poisons that will do a better job than what she got. Rat poison makes it somebody who didn't know any better. Jim Gracie knew better. He's off your list."

"Then why is he so scared?"

I don't know whether to say it was a good question or a bad one. It did look like a good question in that it seemed to go to the heart of the matter. The old man bit his lip and he pulled out his watch and looked at it. He was bothered and he worked at making us think he was bothered by the fact that it was way past his closing time and he'd be late getting home and his wife worried about him when he was late getting home.

He came from behind the counter and busied himself with the chores of closing up. We had to follow him around the place to talk to him at all, and that made it seem as though it might have been a bad question. It had dried him up.

We helped the old man lock up and, mumbling about his wife, he hurried away from us.

9.

It was the very next morning that we had a call from a man named Joe Gallicchio. I won't say we were expecting anything like it and I also won't say that even Gibby wasn't a little startled by it.

This Gallicchio explained that he'd had a robbery and the patrolman on the beat, a nice cop, all the workers in the building liked him, thought we might be interested. Because Gallicchio hadn't been robbed himself; it had been his tenant, Paul Bates. Gallicchio shared the office with this man whose desk had been robbed. We got a full description of the desk. I fought to get the address from the excited Mr. Gallicchio, and finally I did get it, an office on the East Forties, a stone's throw from the Gracie home. I told Mr. Gallicchio that we would be right down, and Gibby and I grabbed our hats and left.

Joe Gallicchio told us all about the robbery. He hadn't been there himself, you understand, but he had heard all about it from the patrolman. It sounded like an ordinary robbery — and Gibby was much more anxious to examine the desk. "When will Bates be back?" he asked.

Gallicchio told us Bates had moved out.

"He's got to come back for his papers," I said. I indicated the pile of papers scattered on the desk.

"He said I should burn them," Gallicchio said. "He came in, first thing this morning, and told me he was moving out. He'd paid the full month's rent and he didn't ask any rebate. He didn't say he had a beef or anything like that. He just said he wouldn't be needing the place any more and thanks."

"Did he say why he wouldn't be needing it any more?" Gibby asked.

"No. He was just like the day he came in and rented it. Casual. You know? Then he wanted it, now he doesn't, but it was the same way. He was happy about the whole thing."

Gibby had it first. "When he came back this morning, what did he take away with him?"

"Nothing much. Only a picture. I remember he looked in a little drawer for something. He was very nervous about it, is why I remember. But I guess he didn't find it, and finally he took the picture and went away."

"What kind of a picture?"

"It was a girl, just her face." Gallicchio described the picture. I looked at Gibby. There wasn't any doubt that the picture had been that of Dorothy Harris.

"Do you know what was in the drawer?"

"No. I think it was a notebook. I saw him looking at it once, but he put it back in the drawer when he caught me looking at him. A man wants privacy, I guess he's entitled to it."

Gibby left that track and tried a new one. "What about his papers, the stuff he kept in the desk?"

"I asked him was he coming back for those, and he said no. He said there wasn't anything there worth his time to even look over. He told me to put the papers out with the trash. They weren't any good to anybody."

"Are they still in the desk?" Gibby asked.

"You can see for yourself. I haven't touched a thing. The patrolman told me you might want to look at everything."

We did but we could have saved ourselves the time. It was a fine collection of junk, an accumulation of absolutely nothing. There were racing forms so old that, if there was a horse listed in them that would still be alive today, it would be out to stud or running in Havana. There was a drawer full of personal letters and we read all of these. They were all from women. Sometimes it would emerge clearly from the context and oftener it would be there just in the approach and the feeling, but there was no mistaking it. Most of them were from older women.

There was a variety of signatures, and the letters seemed to come in groups of from three to six and in each group each successive letter would be a little more desperate. There would be spurts of defiance in which he would be called cruel and heartless or where the writer would express the hope that he would know some day, that some day there would be a cruel, young thing who would hurt him as he was hurting her. There also were some devious ones with their tragically obvious attempts to make him jealous by recounting to him patently fictional adventures in which the writer was being pursued by "really the handsomest boy." Whether defiant or frankly grovelling, they all came to the same thing before the signature: "Call me, dear boy. Please, call me. Don't hurt me this way."

Just to make sure, we did check all the signatures, but none of them was Dorothy and none of them was Ethel and none of them was Clara and none of them was Hilda. There were no envelopes and therefore there was no possibility of checking postmarks. A few did carry complete dates and of those only one or two postdated the time when Paul Bates, three years ago, had first rented his desk space in Joe Gallicchio's office. The others were as much as seven and eight years old. It was evident that this character had brought with him at the beginning to store in this office of his the souvenirs of his past conquests.

One had to assume that Bates didn't much care who might read these old letters. I even wondered whether he mightn't have hoped that Gallicchio, at least, would look at them. I wouldn't have put it past the character to have left them as a subtle form of boasting.

Gallicchio did read some of them over our shoulders and he was not noticeably impressed.

"The lousy, no-good, two-timing heel," said Gallicchio, and he said it over and over again. That Gallicchio was clearly a nice fellow.

Outside of that there was nothing. Gallicchio told us about it, how Bates would come in from time to time and all the advertisements that

Gallicchio had been fishing out of the letter-box would be sitting on the roll-top desk. Bates would open the desk and sometimes he wouldn't even stop to sit down at it. He would flip through the envelopes, occasionally showing enough curiosity to rip one open and look at its contents, but mostly just looking at the outsides and discarding them unopened. He would run through them and, when finished, stuff the lot into his desk.

"And that was all?" Gibby asked.

"That was all," Gallicchio said. "Maybe once or twice a month, that was the only time I saw him."

Gibby nodded. "A happy guy," he said. "He moved in with the picture and the book and he moved out with just the picture, but happy both times. Did he leave any forwarding address with you?"

Gallicchio laughed. "For the kind of mail he gets?" he asked. "Are you kidding? No. He just went out of my life the way he came in."

Gibby nodded. "We'll find him," he said. "If we need him, we'll find him."

10.

We did find him and without even looking. That was later. First we were downtown and we had a go at the stuff the lab boys had worked up, the stuff the M. E. was furnishing in the way of autopsy findings, and the stuff that had come out of the files. Of the three the work of the lab boys showed up worst. They had drawn a blank of blanks. There wasn't a thing in fingerprint check that could do us the least bit of good. The notion I'd gotten, that someone might have substituted rat poison for the contents of one of her medicine tins, didn't pan out for anything either. Analysis of all the containers and their contents showed that everything was as labelled. There'd been no tampering with any of her medications.

The Medical Examiner's report wasn't any better. The cause of death was the rat poison. Along with it Ethel had taken a variety of stuff, but none of it was any news to us. What it added up to was that she had dined, as the family had, on oysters, lamb, spinach, asparagus, green salad, lemon pudding and coffee, to which she had added rat poison and what seemed to have been a quick run-through of her store of patent medicines. The M. E. was of the opinion that the rat poison had either been in the cocktail sauce she might have had with her oysters or in the lemon pudding. He was more inclined to suspect the pudding than the cocktail sauce since she would have had to have eaten her dinner in a very odd order of courses to have had time to get all of it and clean up after herself before the poison took effect. As verification of the opinions we had had the night before from the doctor and of the guesses the M. E.'s man had made for us before doing his post mortem, all this was

dandy. Beyond that it didn't go.

We didn't waste much time on any of that. It was the stuff out of the files that filled our morning. Most of it was on Miss Ethel and I must say it was a bit startling, even after the statements we'd gotten from the pharmacist. She had been the operator of a flourishing house and of a fantastically active call business. The house had been at the address which we now had as the residence of Jason Gracie.

Then had come the fall; and, so far as we could determine from the records, the fall had been swift and it had been complete. It was the old, familiar, ever-recurrent story.

It was all Miss Ethel and her payoffs. The charge of operating a house had never been prosecuted. The special prosecutor had gone in for the bigger splash. He'd pressed the bribery charges and he'd made them stick. He had run into some bad luck on that. The way we read it, the town, right in the midst of its pride in the ruthless efficiency with which it was cleansing itself, turned maudlin; and the big reform deal petered out in a rush of sentimental regret. It was a suicide that touched them off. A vice-squad cop who had been exposed as a bribe-taker put a bullet through his head. This man, Detective Gus Harris, had been a widower and he'd left an infant daughter. It had been all the baby pictures that had started the citizenry doubting whether they wanted their city all that clean.

By then, however, Miss Ethel had already had her trial. She had been found guilty and she had been sentenced. There was a complete string of appeals, but you know how that is. Appelate judges aren't as sensitive to the fluctuations of popular sentiment as a special prosecutor is likely to be.

And Miss Ethel served her sentence on the bribery rap. When she came out, it was on probation, and she came out broke. Presumably everything she'd ever had went on the trial and those appeals. It was in the probation reports that Gracie first appeared. One point on which the probation people are most rigid is that the probationer have something decent and respectable, a good, honest, hardworking job.

That was where Jason Gracie came in. Mr. Gracie, then owning and residing in the house which prior to her fall had been Miss Ethel's base of operations, had benevolently come forward to offer Ethel a job as cook-housekeeper. That was the good, clean, hardworking job.

It was right there in the file. The probation officer had been convinced that it was a *bona fide* job and that Ethel was really working at it and at nothing else. As the first astonishment petered out in the probation reports, they settled down to routine. It was everything okay, everything okay, report after report right through to the expiration date of the probation period.

It looked almost normal. I actu-

ally wondered aloud if there had been anything out of the ordinary about any of this whole case.

"The woman was murdered," Gibby said, "and murder is never without a reason."

II.

We were still looking for the reason when we went back to the Gracie house. What we found there was a variety of things and notable among them was Paul Bates, although he wasn't the first.

The first thing was bedlam, a female uproar that was going full blast when we arrived. It was Jim Gracie who opened the door for us and, after a moment of hesitation, decided to let us in.

He didn't grin at us. He said, "Isn't this one hell of a note for a guy who likes to live in a little decent privacy?"

"Sounds like old times," Gibby said as we went in.

The inference was clear enough but it seemed to bewilder Jim Gracie. "Anything new?" he asked.

We hadn't come to make any news broadcasts. Gibby disregarded the question.

"Miss Harris," Gibby said. "We'll have to see Miss Harris."

Jim Gracie tried not to look relieved, but for a moment his relief did show. He covered it up quickly but he had nothing with which to replace it. He went back to looking suspicious and worried.

Then he grinned briefly.

"People do have to talk to you whether they like it or not, don't they?" he said. He waited a moment before he went on with it. "The thing is," he said, "that Dorothy isn't feeling very well today."

"That," Gibby said, "is too bad. I hope we aren't going to make her feel worse."

Gibby stepped past him and started down toward the basement. I set myself to follow along. It was from the basement that all the screaming came.

Jim Gracie hurried after us. "She isn't down there," he said hastily.

"Who is?" Gibby asked.

"The women. My wife, my cousin."

"What's the beef?"

You might be thinking Gibby would have had no occasion to ask. With all that we were hearing, it should have been possible to draw our own conclusions. The reason why we couldn't was that the women were too furious. They were incoherent with rage. They just yelled imprecations at each other and those imprecations told us only how extraordinarily foul-mouthed they could be.

"It's the cooking," Gracie said. "I can see no end to it."

We came down into the kitchen and whatever might have been happening there in the way of cooking seemed to be very much on its own. The two women turned on us and they did look a pair of harridans.

Hilda Gracie made the quicker recovery. Physically she had the advantage of Clara Simmons. Hilda was wearing an apron I was certain must have been one of the late Ethel's and she had only to rearrange her expression from furious contempt to its more usual mood of placidity, and then she could confront us competently.

Clara was caught flatfooted. She was also arrayed in an apron, but hers was pink and it had frills on it. The frills, I suppose, were meant to pretty the thing up but the apron was askew and it wasn't doing anything for her. She had to make the switch from rage to a pout or simper. It took time.

She worked at it. Hilda turned to her husband.

"This," she said, "is quite impossible. If it was in any way necessary I would try to put up with it, but this is fantastic."

Jim Gracie shrugged. It was one of those meaningful shrugs. It twisted his shoulders vaguely in our direction. "Careful, my pet," that shrug was saying. "We are not alone."

Hilda chose not to read it that way. She turned wearily back to us.

"We'd been told," she said, "that you people were quite through messing the kitchen about."

Gibby grinned at her. "Call it preventive action," he said. "You sounded as though you might be poised on the brink of bloodshed."

Clara, who now had her pout in order, pouted at us.

"Don't concern yourselves about us," she said plaintively. "It's too late for it now, certainly."

"Too late for what?" Gibby asked.

"Too late to be any help," Clara wailed. "When you could have helped, you wouldn't, and I knew just how it was going to be."

We went round and round with that and it was slow going. Eventually, Clara did come around to voicing her complaint.

Uncle Jason was in terror of his life. Uncle Jason believed all this nonsense about rat poison. Uncle Jason was convinced that the poison had been meant not for Ethel but for himself.

"Not that Ethel would have been any loss," Clara wailed, "but now Uncle Jason won't have any other cook. If poison could happen with Ethel in the kitchen, he says, then there isn't anybody he could trust to do his meals, nobody but us."

That was it and Gibby was quick to catch it. Clara Simmons feared that she would be forced to undertake the cooking. I saw that much of it, but I did have to be filled in on the rest.

"Why don't you take turns at it?" I asked.

"Take turns?" Clara screamed. "He's my uncle. He's my own flesh and blood."

Hilda laughed. "Touching," she said. "So touching."

Gibby left them to it. He started back upstairs, and I followed along.

Jim Gracie was tiptoeing up the stairs after us. "You have to know Clara," he offered hopefully, seeing how we might be prejudiced against her. "Clara has always been a pain in the neck. Even as a child, Clara was troublesome."

Gibby ignored it. Gibby said, "I can quite understand Uncle Jason's feeling that he might be safer if he has them both in the kitchen so that they can watch each other. Is that the way it is?"

"Of course it isn't," Jim Gracie shouted. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"And it could be such a pleasant little murder," Gibby growled, "if the horrid man didn't say horrible things."

"No need to be sarcastic," Jim Gracie muttered resentfully.

He took us into that living room where we had seen Dorothy the night before and he did try to explain. Actually he made a very good case of it and I found myself wishing that he might have done it with less nervous agitation. His words made a quiet reasonable sort of sense but it was his manner that threw everything out of whack again. He sweated far too much.

"I know Uncle keeps saying he's scared," he said, "but he doesn't really mean it. He's an old man, gentlemen, and he likes having his own way. What it amounts to is that he just doesn't want to make the effort of getting used to a new person with new ways. Ethel's gone and he doesn't want anyone in her place. He wants Hilda and Clara to take over and do the cooking themselves. He knows that they don't get on well together and that they are bound to hate that arrangement, so instead of just leaving it that it happens to be his whim that it should be that way, he dreams up all these arguments to appeal to their affection for him. He says he is afraid of being poisoned. He says he won't feel safe unless he knows that the cooking is in the hands of people who love him. You see, he's an old faker and he's getting his own way."

This picture of Uncle Jason as the cute, little, old rascal seemed ingenious but it wouldn't jell. It was up against too much background. Gibby brought up a salient bit of that background. He reminded Jim Gracie of that first time his uncle had yelled poison.

"And now," Gibby said, "he insists that both of them do the cooking for him. Why does he want the two of them in the kitchen together unless he means for them to watch each other?"

Jim Gracie shook his head. "But you have that all wrong," he said. "It wasn't Uncle Jason's idea at all. It's the damn diet."

He thought a minute and then he went on.

"He hates it and he really doesn't want to keep it at all. On the other hand, that thing he had that day in the hotel does have him frightened. He's afraid not to diet. What it

comes to is that he doesn't want to make the decision for himself. As you know, Ethel was cooking exactly according to his diet and it had actually come to the place where he seemed to have himself convinced that this diet was something Ethel inflicted on him, that she was making him eat it and he couldn't help himself. Now Ethel's gone. Mrs. Gracie would be perfectly happy to take over the cooking entirely. My cousin doesn't trust her to watch Uncle Jason's diet properly. She thinks Mrs. Gracie doesn't believe in it and that if Mrs. Gracie handles the cooking Uncle Jason will be getting things he shouldn't eat."

"And," said Gibby, slipping it in, "these things he shouldn't eat might easily kill him."

12.

Jim Gracie winced. "My wife," he said, "certainly doesn't have the enthusiasm for the diet that Mrs. Simmons has, but she would never do anything that could possibly harm Uncle Jason."

"Then why doesn't she just leave the cooking to your cousin?" Gibby asked.

Gracie sighed. "It's my damn lungs again," he said. "That's a new problem. You know the standard treatment — rest and nourishment, nourishment and rest. I never had to have anything special in the way of diet because the table Ethel used to set took care of me beautifully. Then the doctor said Uncle Jason had to cut down and that did create a problem. No butter on the table, no cream, but I managed all right. Ethel cooked separately for Uncle Jason and separately for the rest of us. I was getting enough."

He was just as roundabout as he could be in his telling of it but gradually the picture did emerge. He was a lung case and he needed feeding up. Uncle Jason could have no cream and Uncle Jason could have no butter. Therefore there could neither be butter nor cream on the table. His nephew, ill as he was, would just have to manage as best he could with such foods as Uncle Jason could bear having around. Jim Gracie had been managing on the meals Ethel had been cooking for the family but he would never manage on what his cousin Clara might cook.

"You have to understand my cousin," he said. "She has ideas of her own, ideas on anything and everything. The fact that the doctor tells me that I must do all I can to put on weight, that cuts no ice with Clara. Clara knows better. She doesn't care what the doctor says. We'll all be the better for dieting."

He went on and on about it, but I've given you the essence.

Gibby nodded. "Okay," he said, "we're still going to have to see Dorothy Harris."

"She's up in her room. She isn't well."

"Poison?"

"Let's not have all that again," Jim Gracie moaned. "Of course not. We were told she'd had an accident."

Gibby looked at the man sharply. "What kind of an accident?" he asked.

Jim Gracie shrugged. "All I know is what we were told," he said.

We went up to the pink room. Jim Gracie trailed along. Gibby knocked and we only had a moment to wait before the door was thrown open and Paul Bates came out, slamming it shut after him. Bates was in his shirt sleeves and without a tie. He looked very much at home.

"Now what is it?" he barked.

Jim Gracie undertook to answer for us. "They're looking for Dorothy," he said. Bates turned to us.

"What do you want with her?" he demanded.

"Some questions," Gibby said. "Quite a few questions have come up overnight."

"Suppose," Bates suggested, "we see if I have the answers."

"Suppose we talk to her," Gibby growled. "I don't for a minute doubt that you have plenty of answers. We want hers."

Bates gave Gibby a long, level, challenging look. Then he turned to Jim Gracie.

"Take them downstairs," he said. "We'll be down."

He turned to go back into the room. Gibby stopped him.

"How long," he asked, "are you figuring on it taking you to get her briefed for seeing us?"

Bates disposed of his scowl. He was grinning now.

"She doesn't need briefing," he said. "She needs persuasion. You made an unfavorable impression on her last night. You know that laymen don't always understand that they can't choose their company in a thing like this."

At this point Jason Gracie opened his door. He darted a quick glance at Bates and quickly looked away. He spoke softly and his words were polite. It was completely new in our experience of him.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said. "Perhaps while you are waiting for Miss Harris, you might be induced to come into my room and wait with me."

"You wanted to speak with us alone?" Gibby said.

Gracie hesitated only as long as it took him to shoot a quick sideward glance in Bates' direction.

"No," he mumbled. "Nothing like that." He threw the door to his room wide open. "But come in," he urged. "Do come in. Miss Harris will join us here."

Bates moved to come along but the hall was hardly wide enough for three to go abreast. Bates had to follow after us. Jim Gracie had dropped into the background and he made no move. He stayed back but I did hear from him a small sound which could easily have been a chuckle of amusement. Jason Gracie was holding the door for us, but Gibby took the door.

"After you, sir," he said.

Bates was right on my heels, but Gibby had been waiting for him. He stepped into the room and pulled the door shut after him. Bates was left outside with Jim Gracie.

"Now if you want to talk with us alone," Gibby suggested.

13.

For a moment Jason Gracie made no answer. A boneless mound of tremulous blubber, he dropped into a chair. Taking a long breath, he finally spoke.

"I don't want any trouble," he bleated. "I'm just nervous. Ethel was with me for many years."

A door behind his chair opened and he jumped. You could call it fright or nerves. Either way, he wasn't in good shape. He didn't turn his head to see who it was. It was obvious he knew.

It was Paul Bates and he was ushering Dorothy into the room.

Dorothy was not looking her best. It was the prim deal again, the forbidding, schoolmarm neatness of that first time in the hotel lobby. Now, however, there was not so much to set against it. There was her figure. That was always there, but now she had most of her face screened from us by the large icebag she held pressed against the side of it.

She sat down, her face averted. Gibby strolled over to her.

"I'd like to see your face," he said.

She lowered the icebag and looked straight at him. It was a steady look, but it was also a look of loathing. Dorothy had a black eye and a swollen lip. She also had a considerable swelling and discoloration at the side of the jaw.

"Will that do?" she asked. "May I put the ice pack back now? It is far more comfortable with the ice pack."

"How did that happen?" Gibby asked.

"I fell down the stairs," Dorothy said, withdrawing behind her icebag again.

Bates amplified it. "You know the hole in the stair carpet," he said. "It's lucky she didn't break her neck."

"Or have it broken for her?" Gibby asked.

Bates didn't turn a hair. "Those stairs are murder," he said.

Gibby turned his back on Bates. "Miss Harris," he said, "tell us about your father."

"My father is dead," she answered, her voice faint.

"Suicide, wasn't he?" Gibby asked.

The question seemed to have a curious effect on her. Suddenly, she was less tense.

"My father shot himself," she said.

"Detective Gus Harris?"

"Detective Gus Harris."

Gibby waited before he changed the subject. "Mind telling me what gives the boy friend the right to hang a shiner on you?" he asked.

"He's not the boy friend," Dorothy began.

Bates broke in on her. "She fell down the stairs," he said firmly.

"She fell down the stairs," Gibby repeated after him, "and you're not the boy friend."

"She fell down the stairs," Bates said again, "and she's my wife."

14.

When Bates first said it, I simply didn't believe him. I no more believed that Dorothy was his wife than I believed that she had picked up the shiner by falling down the stairs. Gibby went to work on it but Gibby confined himself to the one point.

"Whirlwind romance?" he asked.

Bates smiled smugly. "Suppose you ask us when we got married," he suggested. He wasn't turning a hair.

Gibby studied him for a moment. "Something in the neighborhood of two years," he said. "Possibly a little more, possibly a little less."

Now Bates did change color. His fists clenched and his eyes narrowed. "If you knew that," he snarled, "why the crack?"

"I was making a guess," Gibby said. "The way I have you figured, given a proposition that has a quick profit in it, you take the profit and you run. You don't stick around for marriage or anything like that. In a deal that calls for slow development, marriage can protect your interests. It gives you an option."

"Suppose you drop the insinuations," Bates snapped.

Gibby grinned at him. "When we get around to bringing charges," he said, "you'll know all about it. You're an attorney. You'll understand easily."

"Think you can bluff me?"

At that point we were interrupted by a knock at the door of the old man's room. Bates went to the door and he was confronted with the family, all four of them.

"What do you want?" Bates snarled. "We're busy."

Gibby stepped to the door. "Come in," he said. "This concerns all of you."

Glowering, Bates stepped aside. They trooped into the room. The globular Simmons brought up the rear. As usual he was yawning.

Hilda Gracie hurried to the old man's side. The others sat down.

Gibby turned to Jason Gracie. "It's time we had a talk about your late cook," he said. Without elaborating on them, he laid down the bare facts of Miss Ethel's history and the history of this house that had once been hers. Gracie rushed in to explain.

"I make no excuses for her career," he said, "but that was all long in the past. She had lived these many years as a thoroughly good woman. She had squared her score with society. I was foolish enough to hope that I might be permitted to see her to her grave without spattering her with fresh mud."

"This connecting room here, the pink one," Gibby said. "That doesn't look as though her career had all been so far in the past."

"If that's a crack at my wife . . ." Bates began.

Gibby waved him off. "Quit the acting," he said. "Who do you think you're kidding?"

That set Bates back on his heels. I almost found myself sympathizing with the lug. If Gibby had Bates hanging on the ropes, he had me there with Bates.

"Look," Bates growled. "I've had enough riddles."

Gibby laughed at him. "You liked the riddles fine," he said, "until we started cracking them. In the face of everything, we were supposed to go on believing that Ethel was a cook-houseworker here. It was a good try, but it wasn't good enough. Mrs. Gracie did her best. She moved Ethel's stuff up to your wife's room and she moved your wife's stuff down to Ethel's room. It wasn't her fault that the wardrobe that had been big enough for Ethel's few rags wasn't nearly big enough for your wife's clothes. Your wife's a neat dresser, Bates, and she couldn't always look the way she does if she was dressing out of that crowded closet. And that brings us to the point that really matters. Why does the cook-houseworker live in all that pink elegance in a room that connects with the boss's room? What sort of reformed character does that make her?"

Bates shrugged and turned away. "You'll have to ask Mr. Gracie," he said.

"I'll want his answer," Gibby said, "but I'll also want yours. Since you made your wife a party to this deception and since the whole household was in on it, I'll be expecting answers from the lot of you."

Jason Gracie was scrabbling about on the top of the little table that stood beside his easy chair.

"My capsule," he fretted. "I put it right here to take it and now it's gone."

"If you put it on the table, Uncle dear," Hilda Gracie said, "it must be there."

"But it isn't," he roared. "I had it right here and now it's gone. This isn't the first time, either. They keep disappearing."

His face looked pasty white and his slitty eyes glittered between his narrowed lids. Isolated spots of high color stood out on the doughy mounds of his cheeks.

"Those damn capsules," Clara Simmons growled. She dropped to her hands and knees and searched the floor.

There was considerable fussing, but eventually Gracie was persuaded that the one particular capsule was of little importance, since he did have a whole bottle of the things and could as easily take another. Then Hilda had to look for the bottle. She found it on the floor. It had rolled under the chair in which Artie Simmons had been

taking his ease. Even the lethargic Artie had to move so that she could get at it.

Hilda brought the old man the bottle and shook a capsule out for him. Her husband held the glass of water.

Gibby waited until the old man had taken his capsule and had washed it down with a sip of water. Then Gibby put it to him again. We were still waiting for him to explain his relations with his late cook and houseworker.

The fact that we got no answer was no fault of Gibby's. We had an interruption and it was the sort of interruption that could not be ignored. It came from Jason Gracie and it came in the form of a strange, little, strangled sound. It was hardly more than a whisper but it was as startling as a scream of agony could have been. Everything stopped. Everyone turned to the old man.

Jason Gracie's face had gone rigid in a convulsive spasm. His lips writhed and his mouth opened, but not as though he were trying to speak. It was rather that his tongue seemed abruptly to have swollen in his mouth, forcing his lips apart. It appeared between his parted lips, pulsating, monstrous. It was brilliant, a dreadful red, and within the moment that same horrible color appeared in splotches on his lips. His eyes bulged and blood suffused them, and the bright red splotches sprang out on the skin of his cheeks and his forehead. His limbs twitched and he bent over. Some mighty and horrible cramp was twisting his whole body and gathering it together in a twitching knot.

His hands reached out. They were half clenched, frozen midway toward making a fist. The bright splotches mottled his palms and his fingers. Gibby jumped forward to help him. The color of Gracie's skin was changing so fast that there was no keeping up with it. Horror overlapped horror. Now there was none of his ordinary color left. His contorted face looked like one great, horrible bruise, all red and purple. His pudgy features had been twisted into a mask of agony.

He had jerked out of his chair and Gibby was trying to help him back into it. A spasm that stiffened Gracie's whole body jerked him out of Gibby's grasp and he slid to the floor.

The whole process had only been a matter of moments. I was moving toward the phone, and all this had happened in the short space of time it had taken me to take the two or three steps and lift the receiver out of its cradle. Dorothy heard the rattle of the receiver against the cradle. She turned to me and gave me the number. I didn't stop to ask. I assumed it would be the doctor's number and I dialled it. While I was dialling, Gracie lay on the floor, still in convulsion, but now it was feebler. His face twitched and his hands and feet twitched.

I got through to the doctor, but

before I could tell him anything, Gibby spoke. He told me what to say.

"He's dead," Gibby growled. "But not like Ethel. Somebody found a better poison. Tell the doctor that this time it was the best, cyanide."

15.

After I called the doctor I put through the usual calls to precinct and headquarters. By the time I was through with the telephone, Gibby had moved to the old man's body again. He laid the back of his hand against the dead man's cheek.

"Hot," he said.

I felt of the body. It was extraordinarily warm, disturbingly so. An elevated temperature is not one of the effects characteristic of a death by cyanide poisoning. All the other symptoms were right, but there shouldn't have been the fever. I wondered if Gibby could be wrong about the cyanide and I was trying to think what it would mean if he were wrong.

Gibby left the body and went to the table. He looked the table over carefully before he spoke.

"Those capsules he was taking," he said. "There was a bottle full of them on this table. Where is it?"

Nobody moved. Patiently Gibby lined it out for them. He could have the lot of them searched if necessary, and he would. He was asking for the bottle now, but if he had to get tough about it, he was prepared to get just as tough as need be.

Hilda Gracie sighed. "You can search me, Mr. Gibson, right now," she said. "I would rather you did."

"Yes," Bates put in. "Let's get this much cleared up anyhow."

He started turning out his pockets. Gibby waited and watched. Artie Simmons pulled himself to his feet and followed Bates' lead. He also was turning out his pockets. Hilda Gracie, as always in one of her man-tailored jobs, had almost as many pockets as any man. She started to turn hers out. Clara Simmons had only one pocket. It took her no time to show Gibby the inside of that. It was a very small pocket and it had nothing inside it but one of those handkerchiefs women use, the ruffly lace kind. Dorothy didn't move.

Gibby didn't bother about her. He turned to Jim Gracie. Fumblingly Gracie started to empty his pockets. His wife stepped between him and Gibby.

"Can't you leave him alone?" she stormed at Gibby. "You can see he's a sick man. You know he was never anywhere near that table."

Jim Gracie staggered to his feet. He looked more than sick. He lurched past his wife and staggered toward Gibby.

"It's all right, Hilda," he panted. Bringing his clenched hand out of his jacket pocket, he thrust his hand at Gibby. "Here," he said. "This is what you want."

When we had last seen it, the capsules had filled it almost to the top. Now they were gone. The bottle was empty. Gibby took it from him. It was just a bottle, the right shape and size, but that was all.

16.

The boys came over from precinct and soon after them we had the rest of the pack, the headquarters crowd, the M. E.'s men, the works. They took over on the body and on the room, and Gibby handed the empty bottle over to them. Dorothy and Bates and the family were herded out of there, but we stayed on for a while. I had called Gracie's doctor while the old man was dying and, once we had him there, Gibby got a few questions out of the way.

The temperature of the body frankly puzzled him. He had no explanation for it and, once Gibby had covered the ground, we moved on to other matters.

"Doctor," he asked. "Do you have any other patients here?"

"I've attended all of the family at one time or another."

"The nephew? James Gracie?"

"Yes."

"Anything you can tell me about his condition?"

The doctor thought for a moment. "I don't see any harm," he said. "It's T. B., an arrested case. He does not too badly, but not as well as I would like. He should go out of New York. Colorado or Arizona — it may take a couple of years or more, but a good sanatorium could still put him on his feet."

Gibby jumped at that. "You say 'still.' He should have gone before this?"

"He should have gone when it was first diagnosed. I've done what I could for him here, but recently he's been slipping badly."

"Any reason for it?"

"Nothing I could find, but one doesn't have to look for anything in a case like his. All he's had is as good care as he can get here. I've never considered that good enough."

"You advised a san?"

"I talked to both of them every opportunity I had, but it was a blank wall. The old man couldn't spare him. He couldn't leave his uncle. That was the way they wanted it. He can leave his uncle now."

When we had finished with the doctor, one of the cops — the house, of course, was swarming with cops now — told us that Paul Bates had been clamoring for us.

"Okay," Gibby said. "We can start with him."

The cop brought us Bates. This was again the friendly Bates, the pleasant, man-to-man Bates.

"Look," he said. "I'd like to make a fresh start with you two."

"If it's going to be some more malarkey," Gibby said, "we haven't time for it today."

Bates shook his head. "No malarkey," he said. "I'm ready to make a statement."

Gibby looked him straight in the eye. "About two years ago you marry the daughter of Detective Gus Harris. About the time of your marriage you take that desk space in Gallicchio's office. Also about the same time your wife comes were to take on this job as Gracie's secretary. The job involves living here in the house and that isn't too usual. Any of that you want to correct?"

Bates shook his head. "No," he said. "You have it exactly right."

"Mrs. Bates came here not as your wife, but as Dorothy Harris. She wore no wedding ring. You made a secret of your marriage. Are you ready to take issue with our conclusion from these facts? It is our conclusion that your wife's employment here has not been at all what you were trying to make it seem, that in securing this employment for her and in keeping her in it you have been exercising certain coercive measures."

"If you want to call it that," Bates said coolly.

Gibby said, "I want to call it blackmail."

He laid it out in detail. I hadn't been within miles of the conclusions myself; but, as I listened to them, they did seem more than plausible. The way Bates reacted to them indicated that they were even better than that. Gibby had it right on the nose.

The humanitarian picture Jason Gracie had tried to build for us had been phony right down the line. What Gracie had done he had done not out of generosity but out of necessity. Back in her lush days Ethel had had a silent partner, and that partner had been Gracie. The cleanup campaign had come. Gus Harris had taken his life. Ethel had taken the rap. Gracie had taken nothing except the money.

Then Ethel had come out and she had presented him with the bill for her silence. She was eligible for parole and he was going to provide that respectable, law-abiding job she needed for parole.

That had been the beginning. At first Ethel would have had no choice. There was nothing she could have done but toe the line during the years while she was still on parole; but there had come the time when her parole was up and she was completely a free woman. She had gone on doing her job.

"That takes a little understanding," Gibby said, "but there's evidence enough to explain it. First of all, she was essentially a domestic type. Her kind very often are. Keeping a house is keeping a house and the kind of house it is doesn't make too much difference in the basic housekeeping routine. The cooking and the housework were evidently things she liked to do."

He went on to draw the conclusion that when Ethel had taken over, she had evidently taken over completely — the whole works, Jason Gracie, his money, everything. As soon as it had been feasible she

had established herself in that room next to his.

"Jason Gracie," Gibby said, "was a fat slob, a man who lived only for the comforts of his stomach. Ethel gave him those comforts and they were what he wanted most. Everything else she took away from him. She took command of his money and she took command of his life."

Bates got up and started pacing the floor while he listened to Gibby. He just walked up and down, not making a sound unless you want to count as a sound the little clicks his heels made each time he traversed the room and passed over the metal grating of the old-fashioned hot-air register which in winter would bring heat up from the basement.

"Ethel had pressure," I suggested. "He liked her cooking and he was afraid of her, physically afraid. Those marks of strangulation he wouldn't explain. Ethel put those on him."

"Ethel," Gibby said, "or our boy Bates."

Bates shook his head. "She never let anyone else touch him," he said.

Gibby nodded. "Right," he said. "But there had to be something more. There was something here you used as your handle."

"As a matter of fact there was," Bates said, "even though I never had any part in it. Officially, his money was his. As far as control of it went it was hers. Year after year she worked up some real cute income tax frauds and they appeared on his returns over his signature. She never let it come to the place where there wasn't something the statute of limitations hadn't run out on."

Gibby outlined some more of it. Ethel would be afraid of the children, who would move out, get away from her power. Clara grew up and married and Ethel was lucky in that direction. Nothing Artie liked better than moving in as a free loader.

But Jim, Gibby said, was the boy who almost got away.

"He came to uncle for the money that would take him out west for a cure, but there couldn't be any money without Ethel's okay," Gibby said. "Jim could come home and he could bring his wife, but that was all Ethel would go for. Jim was trapped."

"Trapped, nuts," Bates exploded. "They all hung around to inherit. There were places he could have gone as a charity patient."

"Maybe," Gibby said, "but that's enough for background. Let's talk about you. Let's talk about Gus Harris's little, black account book that was stolen out of your desk."

There was a sharp clang as Bates's heel came down hard on the metal grating of the register.

"Gallicchio," he growled. "Gallicchio was into my desk."

"No," Gibby said. "Gallicchio remembered the book because you were so secretive with it."

"How did you know it was Harris's book?"

Gibby laughed. "Tell me what

else it could have been," he said. "The daughter finds it and she thinks she has something there, so she consults a lawyer. This lawyer is a great boy with the dames and he sweeps little Dorothy off her feet. First thing she knows, he's married to her and they are partners in this little something she's got. Then he moves her in. All of a sudden Gracie not only has a cook. He has a secretary, too, and they own the old slob between them."

"It wasn't blackmail," Bates said.

"All right, tell me. What was it?"

Bates told us. In the drawer had been the account book, and also in the drawer was Gracie's will. Bates had been Gracie's lawyer.

"How did the will read?" Gibby asked. "Everything to Ethel?"

"Everything to Ethel unless she predeceased him. In that case a fifty-fifty split — half to Hilda Gracie and half to Artie Simmons."

"What was there for you in the will?" Gibby asked.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Bates went on trying to make us understand how things were.

Up to the point where he had married Dorothy, our versions — his and the one Gibby and I had — coincided. Then they began to diverge. According to Bates, everything was as fine as it could be, except for this one rift in the lute: his wife was hagridden by the old scandal. She had to know the truth. She had to see justice done.

"I couldn't blame her for it," Bates said. "I didn't think she was wrong or anything like that. I couldn't be selfish. I had to get for her some sort of peace of mind."

He had gone after his wife's peace of mind by putting her in a place where she could gather the evidence they needed. She had naively thought she could just take her little, black book to the D. A. and that would be it, but Bates had shown her that she didn't have nearly enough.

"People bring us the thinnest leads all the time," Gibby said. "We take it from there and develop the case."

"Ethel was too smart. Working from the outside, nobody would develop a case against her or against Gracie. Somebody had to be right in here."

"You should have tried us," Gibby said. "We might have welcomed your collaboration. You should have let us know what you were doing."

"Yes," Bates conceded. "That might have been better. Of course, I would have taken Dorothy to you at the first if I'd had any idea that she really had something. I didn't think there was any case at all, not until we got into it. Then, after we did get started on it, I guess it was the thrill of the chase got me."

"You can't expect us to take your word for all this," Gibby said. "Your wife had a motive for the murder of Jason Gracie."

Bates smiled. "There are better

motives around," he said. "No reason for Dorothy to take the risks that go with murder when she could have put both of them in jail and taken no risk at all. What about Jim Gracie?"

"What about him?"

"If you're going on motive, he has the best. He has a lot more besides. He's a chemist. He knows poisons. First it's rat poison and he's been giving everybody a big song and dance about how nobody who knew anything would use rat poison. See how smart that is? It sets Jim up as the one guy who knows too much to use rat poison. At the same time it fixes it so that by the time he's through everybody knows what to use. Then he slips in cyanide. Take a look at his motive. He's a lunger. He comes to uncle for the dough to take him where he can get cured. Unk won't give him the money because Ethel won't let him. Jim fixes that. He gets rid of Ethel and he gets rid of unk."

It bothered me to hear this theory from Bates. I just didn't like Bates enough to want to see him come out of this thing clean. Also I couldn't help feeling sorry for Jim Gracie. If ever a man had had cause for murder, Jim had been the man.

Gibby changed the subject. "That leaves only one more question," he said. "Why did you beat up your wife?"

"She fell down the stairs," Bates said. "You know that hole in the carpet."

17.

That hole in the carpet finished Gibby. He thanked Bates for his cooperation and he sent him away.

"I don't like the air in here," Gibby said to me. "Let's take a break."

We went out. Gibby turned and headed for the corner, and on the corner, of course, was the drugstore and another talk with our old friend, the druggist.

We went in and Gibby asked where the old man was. The soda jerk said he was in the back. He had ideas about stopping us, but we identified ourselves and went on through. The old man was back there in a little office he had, working on his books. He didn't look at all glad to see us.

Gibby smoothed him down and then Gibby asked him who from the Gracie house had been in since we'd seen him last.

"Mrs. Gracie was in this morning," he said. "That's Jim's wife, you know."

"She's the one who dresses like the old man;" Gibby said. "Did she buy something?"

"She bought some capsules, a patent preparation. It's crazy stuff, but people want it and you have to sell it. The stuff's called Leanogen."

"Can we see some of it?"

"Sure." The old man called out to the front of the store and told the clerk to bring back a box of the Leanogen capsules. The clerk brought

them and the old man handed one to Gibby. "I don't like selling them," he said, "but you'd be surprised how much call we get for them."

Gibby opened the box and lifted out one of the capsules. It was nothing fancy, the usual gelatin job filled with white powder.

"Do they work?" he asked.

"Like being sick in bed," the druggist said. "You can lose weight that way, too."

Gibby nodded. "They raise the temperature," he said. "Produce an artificial fever that's supposed to burn the fat off."

"Yes," the old man said. "Maybe it burns a couple of holes in the kidneys, too. People swear by the stuff."

"How long has Hilda Gracie been taking these?" Gibby asked.

"Just since this morning. First reducing item I ever sold her."

"You didn't put them in a bottle for her or anything like that?"

The old man blinked. "Funny your asking that," he said. "As a matter of fact I did put them in a plain bottle. How did you know?"

"We may have seen the bottle," Gibby said. "You got one like it around now?"

The druggist went to a cupboard where he kept stocks of empty bottles. He brought out the twin to the one that had first been on Jason Gracie's table, had later disappeared, and had finally reappeared empty from Jim Gracie's pocket.

Gibby thanked the old man and we got out of there and returned to the house. When we got there, the headquarters and precinct lads had pulled out. Precinct had left one cop in the house, just to hold it down for us and to be around in case we needed him. He opened the door for us.

"The nephew," he said. "You know, the dead man's nephew. He said he wants to talk to you the minute you get back."

"Good," Gibby said. "We want to talk to him."

We went into the living room and Jim Gracie joined us there. Hilda was with him and I hoped Gibby wasn't going to hold still for that. As I saw it, Hilda was going to be no help at all. She looked haggard, completely stricken. I didn't see that she could contribute anything but hysterics. Gibby, however, did nothing to get her out of there.

"You have something to tell us?" he said, speaking to Jim.

Jim nodded. "Why you haven't already arrested me for Uncle Jason's murder," he said, "I'll never know. I didn't kill him, but I don't expect I'll ever be able to prove it. Nobody's going to assume my innocence."

"Let's find out," Gibby suggested.

"I had potassium cyanide," Jim Gracie said. "I had it as recently as last night when I decided it would be better not to have it around and I flushed it down the toilet. That

doesn't matter though, because I have enough other stuff. No trick at all to whip up a batch of potassium cyanide overnight."

There was a knock at the door.

"Hold it a moment," Gibby said, and went to open the door.

It was the cop. "Excuse me," he said. "I was forgetting. While you was out, this guy Bates, the lawyer, he was looking for you. He gave me this to give to you." He reached in his pocket and brought out a legal-size, white envelope. "He was all hopped up about it. I had to go upstairs with him and get it because he had it put away safe and he didn't want to carry it even downstairs without I was with him. Really the big deal."

Gibby took the envelope. "Thanks," he said, and shut the door.

He opened the envelope, which contained Gracie's will. Bates had had it letter perfect. We didn't spend much time looking it over. Gibby put it back in the envelope and put it away in his pocket. He turned back to Jim Gracie.

"Sorry," he said. "You were working at convincing us that you had all the necessary means for your uncle's murder. How about motive?"

Jim Gracie sighed. "You'll find motive along with means," he said. "Men have killed with less reason."

His wife broke in on him. "Stop it," she screamed. "It's not true. None of it is true."

Jim Gracie spoke to her. He spoke gently but firmly. I was marvelling at the change in the man. Giving up hope and, with hope, evasion, Jim Gracie had recovered his self-respect.

"Yes," he said. "None of it is true, but there it is. I didn't do it, but the way things are there's not the slightest hope of anyone ever believing I didn't. I know when I'm licked."

Gibby told him we knew about motive. "But what about free hospitals?" he asked.

Hilda Gracie broke in.

"That was my fault," she said. "I persuaded Jim to try it. I didn't know the story then. We could try it for a while and, if Jim didn't get better, we could then do something about a free hospital."

"And he'd have his cure," Gibby suggested, "by way of his uncle's will in any case?"

"I had hoped he wouldn't have to wait for that."

Gibby didn't pursue the will question just then. There were other details he wanted to go into first. He tried to explore the various tensions and crosscurrents that had been playing below the surfaces of this strange household. Hilda's attentions to Uncle Jason had not passed unnoticed.

"He was an old man," Hilda Gracie said. "He didn't have many pleasures. I tried to keep him happy."

We established something new in the cyanide line. Jim Gracie had

disposed of the cyanide late the night before. Late enough so that anyone in the house could have gotten at the stuff.

Gibby nodded. "That brings us to the capsules uncle was taking," he said. "They were reducing capsules, weren't they? They raised Uncle Jason's temperature to make him lose weight."

"Yes," Hilda admitted. "I bought them for him. His diet makes him so miserable. With those he could lose weight faster."

We were a long time working on the story of the capsules because Gibby made her explain herself every step of the way. What her story came to was that the capsules were to have been a secret between her and the old man. When he took one and died she had gone into a panic. She had taken the bottle from the table and spilled the capsules down the drain while the rest of us were milling around.

"I was afraid you would look for the bottle," she said. "I didn't know where to put it. I thought you might search us but that you wouldn't search Jim because he had been nowhere near Uncle Jason's table. I was very foolish."

Gibby didn't contradict her on that. He brought out Bates's envelope.

"I have here Uncle Jason's will," he said. "I'll want everyone here when I read it."

He was walking toward the door. Halfway across the room he broke into a run. I ran with him. Hilda Gracie and Jim stood transfixed. We all heard it. It was a scream and it came from upstairs.

18.

We slammed out of the living room and broke for the stairs. The cop was going up them ahead of us. Jim and Hilda came running behind. In the upstairs hall we found Clara. She was watching her globular husband, Artie Simmons, as he writhed and screamed. She was also watching Paul Bates because Bates was doing things to Simmons. He was doing the things that made the fat man scream so horribly.

Bates had Simmons by the arm and he had him in one of those judo grips that puts studied pressure on the trigger point of a nerve. Get the thing just right and you hardly need bear down at all to put a man into quivering agony. Bates had it just right and with a bloodcurdling smile he was holding it there.

As Gibby put it later, we're nice guys. We like to see people have fun, but there are limits. We closed in with the cop and we took Bates off the fat man. We may have roughed up Bates in the process; but if we did, it wasn't nearly as much as we would like to have done.

As soon as we had Bates off him, Simmons sank to the floor and sat there gibbering and rubbing his arm. It took time to get him pulled together and up on his feet. Then

we herded the lot of them down to the living room. Gibby said he wanted Dorothy along with the rest.

"She's resting," Bates said. "She took a sedative. I don't want to wake her."

Gibby gave him a sharp look, but he let it pass. He had been questioning Simmons on the ruckus we had just broken up and Simmons, still gibbering, had protested complete ignorance. He hadn't the first idea why Bates had jumped him.

Gibby put it to Bates.

"He called Dorothy a murderess," Bates growled. "Nobody says that about my wife and gets away with it."

"I'll try to be very careful," Gibby said.

He opened the will and read it. The first part struck no sparks. The second part which left half of his estate to Hilda Gracie had a very different effect. It made Hilda weep. Her husband's reaction was more complex.

Now he was breaking out in a sweat and I could see the look of fear and worry creep back into his face. Abruptly he noticed that I was watching him. He put the look away and he dropped back into resignation.

The vocal reaction came from Clara Simmons. She stormed. She threatened to contest the will. She would have her due or nobody would have anything.

The last of it she shrilled at Artie, turning on him in her fury. It outraged her that he was not even showing any interest. So far as he was concerned, he might not have heard a thing. He was still nursing his arm and feeling sorry for himself.

Gibby went back to the reading. He was shouting now to make himself heard over Clara's raging.

At first she didn't even take in the meaning of the words but, as they were borne in on her, she fell silent and stood staring at her husband. He had forgotten his arm. His mouth had dropped open and now he sat with his eyes fixed on Gibby in an unblinking stare.

Gibby folded the will and put it back in his pocket. Before he said a word Bates was on him, explaining, once again, his eager theory as to Jim Gracie.

Gibby let him go all the way through it again. Then he spoke.

"Very reasonable," he said, "except that it doesn't fit the facts."

I looked at Gibby. Bates's argument, for my money, fitted the facts all too exactly. I was so convinced that I honestly didn't believe Gibby had anything. I thought he had just followed an impulse to put the insufferable Bates in his place.

Bates wasn't impressed either. "Name a fact it doesn't fit," he said.

"There is the fact that Ethel died by accident," Gibby said.

"One accident. One murder. Who do you think you're kidding?"

"Two murders," Gibby said. "One that went wrong and one that went right. Ethel's death was an ac-

cident in so far as Ethel got the rat poison that had been intended for the old man."

"That's nonsense," Bates snapped. "She was cooking separately for the old man. If the rat poison had been meant for him it would have been put in his food. How into hers?"

"Through ignorance," Gibby said. "You ate the pudding. You commented on how sour it was. You thought she was keeping him on a diet and cooking differently for herself and for the rest of you, but that's not what the evidence shows. Look at Simmons — a fat man who recently has been having trouble keeping his pants up. Look at Mrs. Gracie. Her clothes hang loose on her just as the old man's clothes after weeks of his diet hung loose on him. Look at Gracie here. In the last weeks he's taken a turn for the worse. Why? He wasn't eating so well any more."

Hilda Gracie gasped. "You mean," she said, "that she had us all on Uncle Jason's diet?"

"All of you," Gibby said. "She was doing her cooking in a large batch and a small batch, a batch of single portions. Everybody thought the large batch was for herself and for the rest of you and that the small batches were the diet meals for Uncle Jason. The large batches were the diet meals. The poison went into her pudding in the small, one-portion pot. Everyone else thought it was Uncle Jason's. The rat poison was meant for him, not her."

It had been there all the time and I had missed it. I wanted to kick myself.

Gibby went on in a different tone. "The will," he said, "doesn't answer all the questions, but it cannot be disregarded. The will is important because it is a most peculiar document. The bequest to Ethel explains itself. Ethel secured that by blackmail. But it would be expected that the old man would have left his money to his niece and nephew. He hasn't done that. He left it to his nephew's wife and to his niece's husband."

"Right," Bates said. "It's open and shut murder for profit."

Gibby shut him up. "This," he said, "is nothing but conjecture. Let's go back to the facts. You and Dorothy knew everything Ethel knew. You could have exposed the whole thing at any time but you didn't. Nothing kills blackmail so effectively as exposure."

Bates said, "It had nothing to do with blackmail."

"We'd better have Miss Harris down here," Gibby said. "We'll want her story on all this."

He stuck his head out the door and told the cop to go upstairs and bring Dorothy down. The cop went upstairs and he was gone a long time. Gibby went out to the hall and shouted up to the cop.

"I've looked everywhere for her, Mr. Gibson," the cop shouted back. "She ain't up here. She ain't anywhere."

19.

Gibby came storming back into the room.

"Okay," he growled. "Where is she?"

"Gone and away," Bates said. "Try and find her. She's my wife, man. You don't expect me to tell you?"

At that point Artie Simmons came to life. His heavy-lidded eyes were wide open now and they burned with excitement. "That's why he jumped me," he said. "Nobody could get out of the house with that cop downstairs. He got you all running upstairs so she could slip out."

Bates shrugged. "She's my wife," he said. "It was the least I could do for her. I should have realized that her hate would explode into something like this. It was my fault."

"It was Dorothy who robbed your office last night?" Gibby asked.

"It was Dorothy," Bates groaned.

Gibby shook his head. "You're a liar," he said. "You've been a liar from the first and you're still a liar. It wasn't Dorothy."

Bates stared at him wide-eyed. "It wasn't?" he gasped.

"No," Gibby said patiently. "Artie Simmons robbed your office." He turned to Simmons, who had so long since made a record for himself in going along for a protracted period of time without yawning that I had come to take it without surprise when we found him alert. "That was going to be your big play in the deal," Gibby said. "Stealing those records. You were going to put uncle in the clear and set yourself up as the white-haired boy."

Simmons yawned, but this one was a fake. "Why pick on me?" he asked in a voice that feigned what at any other time might have been an unfeigned sleepiness.

"That's a strong desk," Gibby said, "with a strong lock. It had to be the only halfway healthy man in the house. It had to be you."

Simmons shrugged. "Okay," he said. "How far will a blackmailer get with pressing burglary charges?"

"Not as far as our office get pressing murder charges," Gibby told him. "I have the will now. Where's the book, Simmons?"

"I gave it to Uncle Jason. He destroyed it."

"While it was in your hands, did you read it?"

"No."

"Then how did you know what it was? How did you know you were taking the right papers out of Bates's desk?"

"Oh, I looked at it that much, enough to make sure that it was the paper Uncle Jason wanted."

Gibby shook his head. "No," he said. "There's another way all this could have happened and it's a way that makes better sense. Simmons went to your office and stole the book and the will. He gave the book back to Uncle Jason but he was too smart to give him the will. He kept

that. There was always the possibility that Uncle Jason might get over his anger with Clara and change that bequest. There was also always the chance that Uncle Jason's affection for Hilda Gracie might grow so great that she would be inheriting the whole of the old man's estate. Simmons was the one who wanted things just as they were. He was the one who couldn't afford to wait."

"Dorothy confessed to me," Bates shouted. "Why would Dorothy take off the way she did if she didn't have to?"

"Possibly," Gibby said, "because she was afraid you'd beat her up again or even kill her."

Gibby was standing with his back to the wall, facing the lot of them. He stood firmly planted on the metal grating of the hot air register and every eye in that room was fixed on him now.

"Me?" Bates was screaming with outrage. "What would there be in it for me?"

"More blackmail," Gibby said. "We're arresting you for blackmail and accessory to murder. Simmons gave you the will to put into our hands. You had a fresh lever for blackmail and the best one of all, murder. You were going to make Simmons pay off — after he got the inheritance. You had to get the will into our hands."

Simmons tried to speak, but Bates stopped him. Bates spoke for the two of them.

"It's still your pipe dream," he said. "You can't prove any of it."

Gibby ignored him. He turned to the cop.

"Lend me your service revolver," Gibby said.

The cop looked at him in astonishment. "My revolver?"

"Yes. I better have it just to make sure nobody leaves this room while Mac is phoning precinct and getting some more officers over here."

I was already on the phone. I told precinct to send a couple of squad cars around.

"I want you to go down to the basement," Gibby told the cop. "You'll find Mrs. Bates down there. From the way I figure some little sounds that have been coming up through that heating register, you'll find her near the furnace. She's been knocked out or bound and gagged, probably both. Go down and get her up here."

Bates lunged toward Simmons. "You liar," he screamed. "You put it on to her and it was you all the time."

With a sharp click Gibby cocked the cop's revolver. Bates stopped in his tracks. The cop took off and Gibby turned to Simmons.

20.

"First of all," Gibby said, "he didn't bring me the will himself. He got the cop to do it. He got the officer busy and out of the way to give you a chance to get Dorothy down to the cellar. Then he had it

fixed up with you that you would tussle upstairs and make enough fuss to get everybody up there so he could kid me into believing that had been Dorothy's opportunity to escape. You thought it was going to be make-believe but Bates surprised you. I don't have to tell you why he did that. For him it was fun and with his fun he was doing something useful. He was showing you just how tough he could be if you tried anything."

Simmons jumped at that. The fat man wasn't yawning now.

"That's it," he babbled. "He had me scared. He made me help him."

"He had you scared," Gibby said. "But he didn't make you help him. It was the other way around. He was helping you."

Just then the squad cars came into the street and their sirens drowned everything out. I went out to the front door and let the officers in. Coming back I met the cop with Dorothy. He was all but carrying her and I could see at her ankles, where her nylons hung in tatters, the marks of the rope with which her feet had been tied. She had similar marks on her wrists and her lips were broken and bleeding. She had clearly done that to herself by forcing her lips against a gag.

By the time we had Dorothy seated Simmons and Bates each had two cops on them. Gibby stood over Dorothy and started questioning her. He was very gentle with the girl and he let her take it slowly.

"You had a book in which your father kept accounts of the business he had done with Ethel and with Jason Gracie?"

"Yes."

"You wanted to do something to bring Gracie to justice?"

"Yes."

"You went to see a lawyer?"

"I did."

"Paul Bates?"

Now her voice dropped so that it was only barely audible. "Yes," she said. "Paul."

"What did he advise you?"

"He said I didn't have enough to go on. He said I'd need more evidence. He said he'd investigate for me."

"The investigation went on for some time and you were seeing a lot of him and he got the relations between himself and you shifted from business to something else."

"Three weeks. He was very sweet. I never could have believed he didn't love me. We knew each other three weeks and then we were married."

"After that he told you that you could get the additional information you needed only if he got you into this house. That was the next step, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He got me in here by scaring Ethel and Mr. Gracie. He told them what we knew and he hinted that we knew a lot more. He made them think we were just blackmailing them." She shut her eyes a moment and she shook her head as though she were trying to clear it. "We were

blackmailing them," she said, and her voice was stronger now. "He made me think it was just so I could get in here, so I could follow Mr. Gracie everywhere he went, so I could get the information we needed to take to the D. A.'s office. No matter what happened, he always said we still needed more. I was to go on. I was to have patience. I never dreamed that he meant to keep it going for ever, that it was really the blackmail."

"You loved him?"

"Yes. God help me. I loved him."

"What changed it?"

"That day Mr. Gracie thought he'd been poisoned, I was just waiting till I could get to Paul. I thought we could give you the book then and tell you everything and that would be it, but he persuaded me to wait longer, to keep playing along. He said there were legal difficulties I wouldn't understand. I was to trust him, do exactly as he told me."

"Then Ethel was killed. What did he tell you then?"

"He said that was bad luck. He said we had to be very careful because I did have a grudge against Ethel and if you found that out, you'd suspect me of killing her. He said the family had money and influence and we had nothing. He reminded me that my father was dead and that Mr. Gracie had always gotten away with everything. He told me again that if I trusted him and I did exactly what he told me to do, it would still come out right in the end. We'd help you catch the killer and we'd get a complete case against Mr. Gracie."

"What happened last night? Why did he beat you up?"

"I refused to do something he wanted me to do."

"Ethel's pink room," Gibby said. "You didn't know you were being moved in there until after it had been done and then it was too late for you to do anything about it. He told you just before we questioned you and he said he'd explain as soon as he got a chance but meanwhile you were to do as he told you."

Dorothy nodded. "Afterward," she said, "he did explain, but it was too much. He wanted me to pretend I was the old man's —" She stopped, looking for a word she could bring herself to use.

Gibby took her off the hook. "And you wouldn't," he said. "That was too much. You refused and he struck you."

"He punched me and he knocked me down. Then he said he was sorry. He said he had to do it to bring me to my senses. He said he was half crazy because he loved me so much and he was afraid for me. He said he was fighting for my life now. He hadn't understood how I would feel. He would move in with me and we would announce that we were married. He was very sweet."

"I bet. And today?"

"Today I walked in on him and Simmons. He was telling Simmons that he knew Simmons was the kil-

ler, but that he would take care of him. He was fixing it to protect Simmons so he could blackmail him. He tried to change it for me, but I'd heard too much. I understood what he was doing and I couldn't believe him any more."

"Then what happened?"

"I told them. I told them I was through. I was going to tell everything. I wasn't playing along any more." She raised her head and now she was speaking proudly, without shame or embarrassment. "I still loved my husband," she said, "even then. I knew what he was but I still loved him and I thought I would be saving him. I thought I could save him from himself. I knew what he was then, a blackmailer, but even then I thought I could save him from doing this terrible thing. I thought I could change him, because I did think he loved me."

"You're over thinking that?" Gibby said.

"I'm over it. I'm over everything. Simmons came toward me. Simmons told me that he had killed Ethel and he had killed the old man. He said he could kill me, too. I was such a fool, I wasn't even afraid. I could have screamed even then, but Paul was right there in the room and I thought Paul loved me. I thought with all his faults he couldn't have that fault, to deceive me even in that. Simmons told me that he would knock me out and tie me up and during the night he would drop me in the river. He said I would drown and that would make it fine for everybody. The case would be closed. The police would write me off for murder and suicide and everything would be fine."

"And even then you didn't scream?"

"Even then I was too much of a fool to scream. I just looked to my husband, but he didn't move to help me. He didn't even look at me. He just got up and walked out of the room."

"Leaving you alone with Simmons?"

"Leaving me alone with the killer, and that finished it. Then I knew everything. I knew just how completely I had been fooled, how I'd been enslaved. Then I was free. For the first time in more than two years I was free, and it was too late. Simmons was standing right over me. I had no time left to scream. I did open my mouth to scream, but he had been waiting for that. He had a gag in his hand and he slapped it over my mouth and then he knocked me out."

21.

Gibby looked at the cops and nodded. We'd all heard enough. There wouldn't be any trouble at all in convicting Simmons or Bates. The cops took them away without much of a fight and the room was silent.

I was busy getting a doctor in to look after Dorothy, who was calm

and completely withdrawn. Her face was white but expressionless and I was a bit concerned about her. It was only later that I was even aware that I had noticed what the others were doing.

Hilda Gracie had left the room. She'd come back a couple of minutes later with a tall glass of milk and she'd gone over to her husband. She was coaxing Jim to drink the milk. They made a happy family group, the two of them.

Clara Simmons had been huddled alone in a corner of the room. No one went near her during the entire time I was in the room. As I say, it was only later that I realized she had been doing something I had never thought I would see Clara Simmons doing.

She'd been crying.

MUGGED AND PRINTED

HAMPTON STONE, who makes his debut in *Manhunt* with the complete new novel, *The Man Who Had Too Much To Lose*, is equally well-known under the names of George Bagby and Aaron Marc Stein. "George Bagby" chronicles the adventures of the popular Inspector Schmidt of New York's Homicide Squad, and Hampton Stone, a comparative newcomer, is the author of *The Girl With The Hole In Her Head*, *The Corpse In The Corner Saloon* and other books featuring Assistant District Attorney Jeremiah X. Gibson and Mac, his Watson.

DAVID ALEXANDER, whose *The Wet Brain* presents a picture of a man you're not likely to forget, is a former Managing Editor and columnist of the New York *Morning Telegraph*, whose three mystery novels, *Murder Points A Finger*, *Most Men Don't Kill* and *Murder In Black And White*, have been acclaimed by readers and critics alike. He insures the accuracy of his stories through study of actual police procedure, and graduated at the head of a recent advanced class in Criminology given by a former New York police inspector.

ROBERT TURNER's last story for *Manhunt*, *Necktie Party*, was a detailed and shocking yarn that drew a good deal of acclaim. Turner's the author of *The Tobacco Auction Murders*, a recent Ace book which is pleasing readers throughout the country, and he's also written hundreds of magazine stories which have appeared in almost every type of magazine. His latest story, *Shy Guy*, which appears in this issue, is a yarn you'll find just as memorable as all the other stories bearing the Turner byline.

HAL ELLSON'S first story for *Manhunt* appears in this issue: the quietly shocking and realistic *Pistol*. Ellson is the famous author of *Duke*, a novel about a Harlem gang of teen-agers, which has sold over a million copies. His other popular works include *Tomboy*, *The Golden Spike* and *Summer Street*. Ellson's stories are based on his

experience with these teen-age gangs and have gained the praise of critics and readers not only for their excitement and their realistic pace and tone, but for their obvious authenticity. Ellson's now at work on a new book, but he's promised to deliver more fine stories for *Manhunt*'s pages soon.

JONATHAN CRAIG turns up in our pages this month with another fine documentary, *Man From Yesterday*, based on actual research. We think it's his best to date. ◆ JACK RITCHIE's first story for *Manhunt* was the tough and surprising *My Game, My Rules*. Ritchie is back this month with *Replacement*, another good yarn from a young writer we're sure will go far. ◆ GRANT COLBY is a writer whose short-shorts always carry the ring of authenticity. *The Stalkers*, his latest, is no exception. ◆ RICHARD MARSTEN's latest Mexican-background story, *A Bull To Kill*, is one of the most unusual we've ever run. Marsten claims he has never been a bullfighter, and we wonder where the convincingly realistic details of his story come from. We'll be bringing you more Marsten stories soon.

—Continued from back cover

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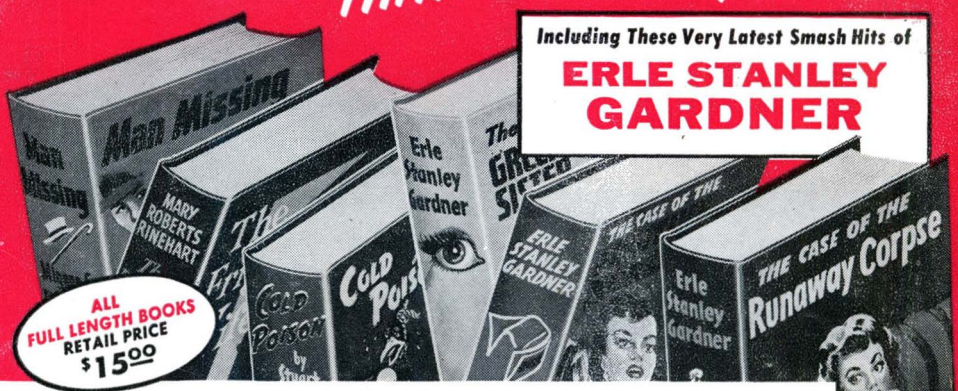

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