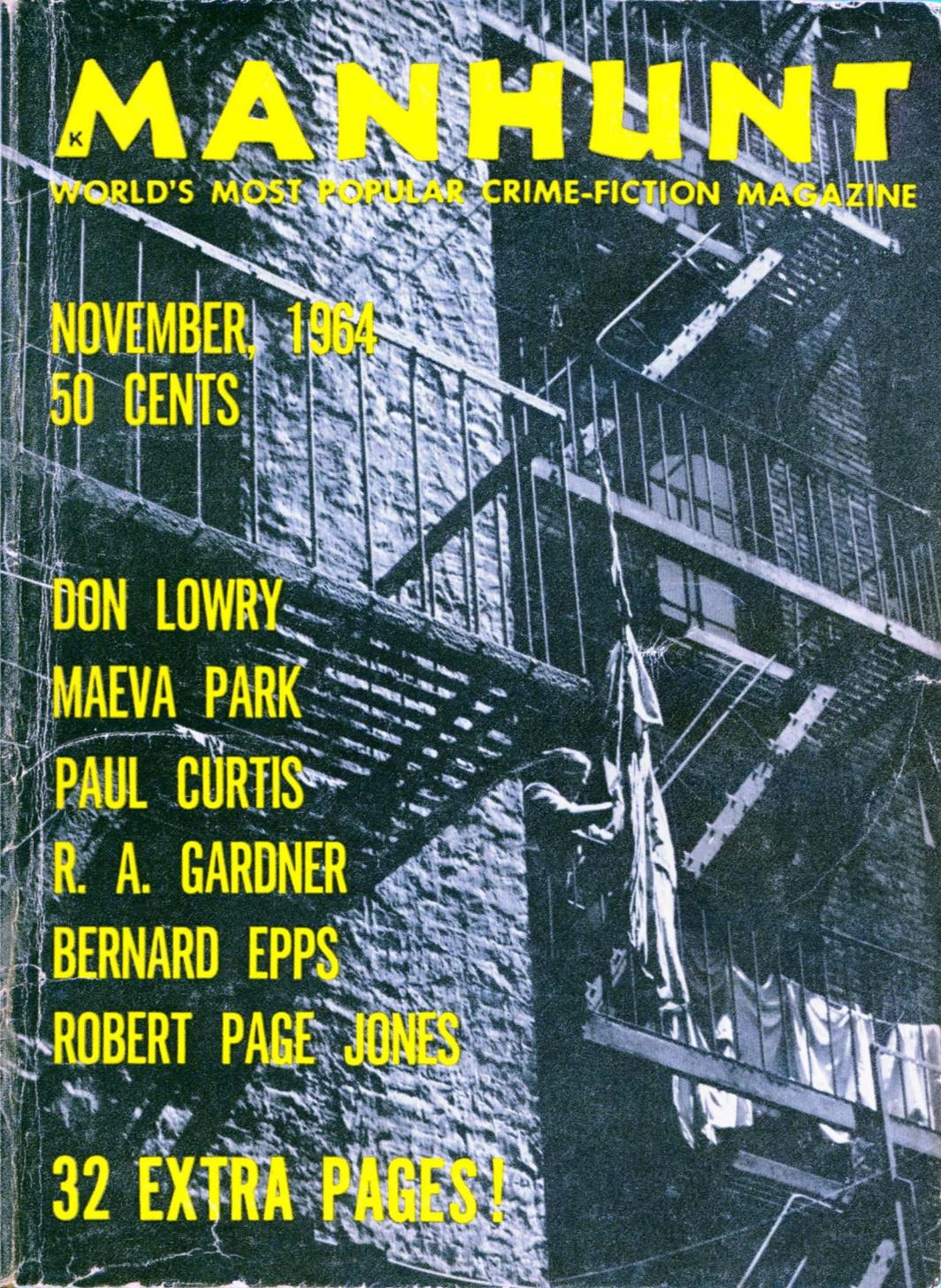


MANHUNT



WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1964

50 CENTS

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CONTENTS

NOVEL

- THE STUD *by James Harvey* 60

NOVELETTE

- THE SLAYER *by Robert Page Jones* 22

SHORT STORIES

- COURIER *by Don Lowry* 1
- WHITEMAIL *by Edward Wellen* 13
- ONE HUNGRY PIGEON *by Patrick Connolly* 17
- EYES IN THE NIGHT *by Nel Rentub* 54
- THE PRO BEAU *by R. A. Gardner* 65
- ASTRAL BODY *by Maeva Park* 70
- TWO FOR THE SHOW *by Bernard Epps* 77
- BANKER'S TRUST *by Paul Curtis* 86

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*

GERALD ADAMS, *Art Director*

JOHN UNDERWOOD, *Editor*

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B. WADSWORTH, *Business Manager*

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The South American attache was made to order. And the Mafia knows when it's got a good thing.

COURIER

BY
DON LOWRY

BENITO RAINONE's climb in La Cosa Nostra ranks had left the dead, drugged and defeated in its wake. In his course from punk hood to Mafia don he'd developed style. His casual but studied gesture of dropping an ever-present carnation from his lapel into a diner's finger-bowl gave Rainone a grim delight. The gesture was a death sentence more irrevocable than that rendered by any court in the land. There was no appeal. Rainone knew the heady glow of omnipotence.

Rainone and Anthony Garmoni were alone in the paneled, tapestry-hung library of Rainone's Long Island estate. The two Mafia dons were settled in deep leather chairs facing a wide stone fireplace.

"Our own *thing* isn't the only international organization concerned with heroin, Ben," the elderly but



well-preserved Garmoni whispered. " 'N' men and the damned Interpol people are everywhere."

Rainone grimaced. "Yeah, for all I know the bastards are inside in my ballroom right now dancing at my daughter's engagement party. But right now I'm more concerned with our losses. They've run into the millions in the last couple of years. We've poured a lot of money into this racket and there still isn't one damn dollar of return on our investment. I've poured a big part of the take from my casinos and legitimate businesses into the heroin traffic. But I ain't General Motors. I can't write losses off of corporation taxes."

"You think the 'N' men are inside our *thing* again?" Garmoni asked. "Those bastards infiltrate everywhere. They crawl out of the woodwork."

"They've been inside for twenty years, Tony, but at lower levels . . . or you and I would be in a Federal pen with Vito and the other boys from that Apalachin meet. We know the Narcotics Bureau keeps the pressure on. Like stool pigeons, they'll always be around. But this racket paid good before . . . and they were around then."

"So," Garmoni shrugged, "what's our move now?"

"I'm not sure," Rainone sighed as he pulled himself up out of the deep chair. "This racket is like war. A good general always learns by going back into the history of past wars. You and I have been around a long

time, Tony. We've seen a lot of our own war. What worked before may work again, in a modern setting and with modern tools. Come on . . . let's see how the younger generation enjoys itself."

From the roles of plotting Mafia lords, the two dinner-jacketed men walked casually into the roles of socially-respected business men, doting parents, and pillars of their communities. Few dancers in the ornate ballroom of their dual roles. Those that did, knew as well the code of the *omerta*.

Rainone's daughter was a product of posh finishing schools whose registrars were ignorant of her father's Cosa Nostra status. Garmoni's son, Frank, had graduated from an Ivy League school.

Rainone and Garmoni mingled with reserve and sedate composure among the guests in the sixteenth century baronial hall into which the mansion's ballroom had been converted by a Manhattan interior decorator. Benito Rainone was among the few remaining tycoons who nonchalantly spent thirty thousand dollars for a daughter's engagement party.

"This is Senor Jules Hernandez, Daddy." The radiant and raven-haired Maria Rainone introduced her current dancing partner.

Rainone beamed his own genial-host-smile and acknowledged the introduction. "From Central America?" he asked in Spanish with only a hint of Sicilian accent.

"South America," his guest replied, and identified himself as an attache to a Washington embassy.

Rainone didn't pursue the conversation. "Have fun, my dear," he smiled at his daughter when the next dance began. With Garmoni he quietly moved back to his library.

"Remember that prohibition caper when we used that South American presidential yacht to run a cargo of rum into Miami, Tony?" Rainone asked when the two dons had again settled in front of the fireplace.

"Like yesterday," Garmoni laughed, "It was like having a license to run booze."

"As I said, Tony," Rainone spoke low and thoughtfully. "Think back to the old days and you can come up with an answer to modern problems. Now I got a way to keep 'N' men, customs and treasury agents from knocking off our heroin shipments."

"What's your answer?"

"A courier that can't be touched, Tony. A diplomat." He explained about meeting the young attache on the dance floor and his recollection of using the diplomatic immunity dodge for running rum during prohibition. "This may not be our boy, Tony. But I'll find one who will be."

Jules Hernandez, the attache, failed to notice any significance in his suddenly increasing popularity. More invitations were forthcoming from party hostesses . . . and at every party a particularly striking blonde seemed accidentally to become his

dancing partner. Louis Brand was the blonde's name, and the meetings weren't accidental. Jules was easily charmed and seduced by a technique acquired as a C-note call girl on Manhattan's upper East Side. Within two weeks they were lovers. Within a month Jules was trying, vainly, to keep up with her luxurious style of living. He couldn't keep her Jaguar in gas and oil, let alone buy her mink. At the end of two month's bedroom games with the blonde sexpot, he was in hock to D.C. loan sharks, to whom Lois had introduced him, for a cool seven grand. A steady diet of love and martinis kept his mind from the money-lenders . . . who enthusiastically kept him flush with funds.

In a posh Maryland gambling casino to which Lois had introduced him, Jules figured he had discovered the answer to his financial problems. For three nights in a row both he and the blonde were modest winners. And, as with the Washington loan sharks, his credit at the casino seemed to know no limit. "Any friend of Lois," the suave manager had told him, "is good for any amount here." When the Latin lover returned that night with Lois to her Georgetown love-nest, he dreamed innocently of using the house money to beat the house. He planned a coup on the casino wheels.

That week-end he ran up a ten thousand dollar tab at the casino.

"No hurry," the manager smiled. "Your luck may change next time."

In hock to Washington loan sharks for seven grand, hooked at the casino for ten, and hopelessly in love with the blonde, Hernandez was ripe and ready to be plucked. A few days later he kept an appointment with a Rainone lieutenant at a District of Columbia motel "to discuss financial problems of mutual interest."

"This need not be embarrassing, Senor Hernandez," the Sicilian smiled as he sorted I.O.U.'s. "In your embassy position you can provide us with minor services. For each one, we'll return one of these to you."

"What services do you desire?"

"The delivery of small parcels from your country to me," the Mafia lieutenant replied. "They'll fit easily into a diplomatic pouch or attache case."

"What would be in these parcels?"

"You won't know."

"But I must. I am responsible for what I bring in under diplomatic immunity. My career would end if I were caught smuggling," Hernandez naively observed.

"It would end if your ambassador saw these I.O.U.'s"

"I must know the contents of these parcels," Jules continued to protest.

"They'll be sealed, Senor Hernandez, when you pick them up and when you deliver them to me. Break one seal and your career ends. No bargains. No information. You deliver . . . or else."

The diplomat delivered and Rai-

none's heroin traffic once again began to show a profit. One by one the I.O.U.'s were handed over to Hernandez until the last one was in his possession.

"Now, senor," he told Rainone's lieutenant, "my services to you end. There will be no more deliveries."

"Take a look at these photostats, pal," the Mafia lieutenant snarled. "They'd have the same effect on your ambassador as the originals . . ."

"But . . ." the diplomat tried to interrupt.

"But nothing sucker. You keep on picking up those packages and handing them over. We don't want you to play messenger-boy for nothing. You'll get a grand for each delivery you make. And Jules," he paused and looked through narrowed eyelids at the shaken diplomat, "no tricks. Those stats ain't the only aces we hold. I'll call you when another parcel is ready." He slapped the trapped embassy employee on the shoulder and laughed, "Hell, Jules, you got a good thing going for you. You play ball and this could make you a millionaire."

Jules Hernandez drove from the motel to Georgetown and Lois Brand. He was not aware that he was followed. Nor that a telephone call, from a mobile phone in the tailing Mafia car to Lois Brand, preceded his arrival.

"Your Latin lover is on his way to your pad, Lois baby," the driver warned. "Leave your window open and go into your act. Our boy is get-

ting a little independent. The boss wants to really sew him up, so make it good and take your time."

The attache stopped briefly at his own apartment and was only momentarily out of sight of his Mafia tail. When he parked in front of the Brand house, his tail parked a few yards away.

"Martini, darling?" Lois asked. "You look like you've had a bad day."

"O.A.S. conferences again," he mumbled, "a tiring sort of thing."

"I'll soothe those tired nerves, darling." And three martinis later Lois went into her act. Jules watched a sheer negligee slip from bare shoulders and breasts. He stared at the familiar sight of perfectly formed legs and hips and firm pointed breasts. For a moment he regretted having stopped at his apartment for the small, .25 calibre Beretta. Suicide, he felt, would not only end his shame and slavery to the Mafia, but also his life of love with this source of pure sexual joy. The firm warm pressure of her body, pushing, demanding, giving . . . that hypnotic body . . . had turned his career from one of bright promise to dark threatening disaster. A searching, darting tongue beneath his own, and slim long entwining legs drove the morbid thoughts from his mind.

Spent, emotionally and physically, they lay smoking. Their thoughts were far apart. "Did that damn shutterbug have time to get his pictures?" Lois wondered. Hernan-

dez mentally concluded, "I'll take her with me."

Depressed mentally and exhausted physically, Hernandez was no longer capable of thought. He could only act. He reached to the pocket of his coat on a bed-side chair and palmed the Beretta. When the blonde reached across the bed for an ash tray, he fired. The slug went through the nape of her soft neck and into her brain and her instantly dead body sagged back onto the bed. Hernandez broke into convulsive sobs while he stared at a growing blotch of blood ooze out into the pastel green pillow case. Slowly and laboriously he raised the little automatic to his temple.

The Mafia movie-maker lunged from behind the heavy window drapes to the bed in a grasping flying tackle. The Beretta bounced unfired to the carpeted floor. Hernandez screamed once before a karate blow to his neck silenced him. His attacker bound him with bed sheets and darted back to the window. Their was no commotion in the landscaped yard and no lights went on in neighboring houses. He turned to a bedside phone and dialed with frantic rapid jerks of his finger.

"I got the pictures," he spoke into the phone, "but I got more than we planned. Get over here . . . fast."

"If you fouled this up, Bello, I'll . . ."

"I said get over here. And I mean fast," the Mafia hood retorted with unaccustomed insolence to his su-

perior in the drug ring. "You'll see why when you get here."

The Sicilian looked down on the bedroom murder scene and cursed as Bello related what had happened. Suddenly, the Mafia lieutenant broke into a smile. "He O.K.?"

"Just knocked out."

"Well get the creep into that closet while we pack the stiff in a trunk. And make damn sure nothing happens to that film. When the spic sees himself playing the lover-killer bit in the movies, he'll be my boy for keeps. We've got him, and we've got him real good."

The Sicilian snarled as he repeated his order into the telephone, "I said a steel drum . . . half filled with cement, the quick-drying kind, you jerk. We'll be out there in an hour. Have it ready." He perched on a bar stool at the ornate four-stool bar in the murdered blonde's living room and poured the last of her martinis from a tall glass pitcher. All was right in his world . . . a cement-filled steel drum for a coffin and a watery grave far out in the Atlantic would take care of the blonde. And there was enough on Hernandez to make him kill his own mother.

"What about our boy in the closet?" Bello asked when the trunk and all evidence of murder had been removed from the dead blonde's bedroom.

"Get him out to the lodge on Route 11 and keep him wrapped up. And make sure that film comes out O.K. I'll be out there tomorrow."

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" Hernandez screamed when he was shown his filmed act of love and murder. "What do you want from me?" he raved hysterically, incoherently.

"Lock him up, Bello," the Sicilian ordered. "And give him a mainline shot of 'H'. Then keep him on the stuff. This boy's flipped. He's liable to hurt himself. If he ever kicks his habit, the film will still keep him in line."

When Benito Rainone was told his Sicilian lieutenant wanted to see him, he showed no sign of irritation to his butler. But when his library door closed behind the obsequious narcotics lieutenant Rainone made no attempt to conceal his anger.

"What the hell do you want here? It damned well better be something that couldn't be handled elsewhere or by someone else. You know your job and you damn well know better than to come here. Now, talk!"

"Lois got it . . . from Hernandez."

"And?" Rainone stormed.

"And we got a movie film of the spic in action . . . making love to the blonde and pulling the trigger that blew her brains out. Bello was shooting the pics and stopped him from killing himself."

"And?" The Mafia don asked disgustedly without altering a wrinkle on his face.

"And now I've got him locked up at the lodge. Bello's keeping him on 'H' until he's hooked. He'll be our

courier for keeps now," the lieutenant reported in a tone anticipating at least a nod of approval from the don.

"And you came here to entertain me with this crap?" Rainone whispered in a hoarse growl. "Hear me, and hear me good . . . for the last time. Who gets hit or who gets hooked . . . I don't give a damn. You look after the stuff that comes in. You get it out to the distributors. You run the racket. But Goddam your stupid Sicilian heart, keep away from me! I bank you. I think for you. I don't share the federal heat that gets to you. If you ever beat a path to my door again with this kind of routine crap you're going to get a flower and you're going to get kissed. Now get out, and keep that courier in line . . . hooked on 'H' or any other way."

The Mafia lieutenant didn't wait to explain the care he'd taken to prevent himself being tailed to Rainone. He hurried back to the country lodge where Hernandez was literally imprisoned. He handed on Rainone's verbal lashing to lesser members of the drug ring.

"How's Hernandez?"

"Hooked. A grain a day."

"Bring him in here."

Hernandez walked into the room showing no outward appearance of addiction other than the acutely dilated pupils of his eyes. He had been "mainlining" pure heroin for over a week. He made no comment when the Sicilian offered him a

chair. "Smoke?" the Mafia lieutenant pushed a humidior of Havanas across a carved desk. Hernandez picked out a cigar and leaned across the desk in a slow unhurried movement to accept a light.

"Think you'll have any trouble explaining your absence from the embassy?" the Sicilian asked.

"Hardly, senor. Your man, Bello, sent a telegram a week ago. I personally telephoned a few days later."

"You get this suicide idea out of your head?"

"It seems I have a new mistress now," he smiled. "There is a new drive in life. Correct me if I'm wrong in my conclusion that I've been running this heroin from my country up here."

"You're so right, Jules. And now that you have the monkey on your back you can appreciate how much the people who use the stuff up here depend on you. If you remember my offer, you'll still get a grand for each trip you make . . . with a regular bonus. You'll get your own supply of heroin."

"As you say, senor, I'm in. Hernandez declared slowly in a drawl-like tone.

"Good. We'll contact you when another parcel is ready south of the border. Get what stuff you need from Bello."

Fourteen men were seated around a room-length director's table in a guarded and locked Washington office. They were law enforcement

officers charged with fighting illicit narcotics traffic through five continents from which they came. The U.S. Bureau of Narcotics representative outlined his growing problem: "Until a few months ago we'd pretty well plugged the flow of heroin into the United States. The supply had been dropping steadily. Today, every addict with the price can get it in any major city in the country. We've made sweeping raids in city after city, bringing in every known peddler and pusher. We're satisfied that they are all ignorant of the top distributors and the current source of supply. The usual sources of supply . . . Europe and the Near East are not making deliveries into this country. But there is more heroin on our underworld market today than at any time in the last three years."

A Canadian R.C.M.P. delegate reported a similar increase of illicit heroin in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Interpol's European representative could throw no light on the growing North American drug traffic. "We have implemented a greater surveillance than ever on west-bound ships and planes, especially those leaving for North Atlantic ports. It's unfortunate we have no delegate here from Cuba," he remarked with sarcasm.

"I'm satisfied our barriers are tightly drawn around Cuba," the U.S. speaker interrupted. "Our lab tests show heroin seized recently does not come out of Red countries."

The conference ended with no conclusion on the source of heroin continuing to reach the underworld. While the delegates were mingling in the conference room on the way out, an aide brought a teletype message to the U.S. delegate. He scanned it rapidly and then caught up with Interpol's man.

"Here's a puzzler from our own Washington Metro Police Department. A South American diplomat is in a local hospital showing obvious withdrawal symptoms. And traces of heroin were found in a syringe in his personal property. Want to check this out with me?"

"Might as well see who it is," the international representative shrugged. "Might provide a new lead."

"He was brought in here from Dulles International Airport . . . became ill, according to this police report, on a plane landing from a South American flight," the staff physician explained when the two 'N' men identified themselves.

"What's his condition?"

"He's reasonably rational now. In another few hours he'll probably become a raving maniac. From the needle scars and the appearance of the veins on his arms, he's been an addict for some time."

"Where is he?"

"Private room in psychiatric. Want to see him?"

"I don't think so," the 'N' man said thoughtfully. "Will he be normal for another few hours?"

"He should be . . . depends on how much time has elapsed since the last shot."

"Can he be moved? To a private room equipped with a telephone?"

"I suppose so," the puzzled physician answered. "But not permanently. It won't be long before he'll wreck the room and disturb the other patients. Staff in that building isn't equipped to handle these birds."

While Hernandez was being moved, the 'N' man explained his unusual request to the Interpol agent. "He'll be on that phone to his connection as soon as the door closes. Hang on here while I phone for help and let the people downtown know what's going on."

The narcotics agent was right. As soon as the orderly and nurse left the room, Hernandez grabbed the telephone and dialed with shaking fingers. "Bello," he whispered into the mouthpiece. "I'm at Grace Hospital. *Por dios*, bring me a fix. I'm sick!"

"You got those two parcels?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"In my attache case."

"Where?"

"It will be at the embassy. Will you please come down here. I haven't time to talk. I'll die!" Hernandez wiped cold beads of sweat from his forehead and retched. "Hurry, Bello!"

"Can anyone open your case? At the embassy?"

"No, I have the keys. And it's

sealed. Bello, are you coming down here? I'll kill myself!"

"I'll be there. Keep cool."

Every word of the conversation was monitored by the two agents who permitted Bello to enter the room, and watched him leave . . . followed by a team of 'N' men. They watched later when Hernandez signed himself out of the hospital. He too was followed by agents of the Narcotics Bureau.

The Sicilian raved when Bello reported what he had done. "You fool! You unadulterated pure Goddam fool! You walked into a trap. You think they hospitalize even big-shot junkers in that wing? And then just let them sign their way out? That phone was tapped and you were tailed. Some 'N' man is watching you right now. Where you calling from?"

"Lobby of the Manger Hamilton."

"Well, hang up you fool. Get a plane for Chicago and lead them off our trail. You know who to contact. I'll get in touch with people out there." He hung up the receiver with a clang in the bar where he had received Bello's call . . . and immediately called Chicago.

"He'll be tailed by 'N' men," he explained to a Chicago Mafia confederate. "Have someone hit him as soon as possible."

When Bello was gunned down the following day on Chicago's Mannheim motel strip, local papers wrote the slaying off as just another un-

derworld killing of an out-of-town-hood.

Hernandez posed a more threatening problem for the surly Sicilian who was trying desperately to undo the 'N' man knot that Bello and Hernandez had caused to be tied around the drug ring.

"Bello's out of town," he abruptly told another member of the Mafia heroin ring. "A call will come from a spic today or tomorrow. And the call will be tapped. Don't let the caller say anything. Just tell him to be at the casino after midnight. Then hang up fast and get out. And don't go back to Bello's place."

Jules Hernandez entered the Maryland gambling casino with mixed feelings of anticipating a connection to his heroin supply and memories of his murdered blonde bed-mate. He lost a few chips on the wheel and strolled toward a blackjack dealer, waiting for some sign or signal. The dealer didn't look up from his cards as he spoke.

"Keep playing like it's for real, Hernandez, and keep your eyes on the deck. You got two parcels at the embassy for Bello. Right?"

"I have."

"Wrap them well . . . like any other package mailed from the embassy. Have them mailed by your mail clerk, with regular embassy mail, to John Mallack, Penn Hotel, West 34th Street, New York City. You get that address?"

"Yes. What about my own stuff?"

"It's in the mail for you now."

"Where's Bello?"

"Out of town."

"Why all this mystery?" Hernandez asked. "Why use the mails?"

"I'm just handing on a message to you, Mr. Hernandez," the dealer answered through non-moving lips. "And the last part is for you to get out of here *now*. Your stuff's on its way to you." In a louder voice, with his head raised in a smile, the dealer continued, "You win, sir."

The conservative news report in the next day's Washington Post failed to announce the cause of death when it reported the attache's collapse in his apartment. Discrete arrangements conducted by State Department officials made a pathologist's report available to the narcotics commissioner. The diplomat-drug courier's last fix had contained heroin *and* cyanide.

"There are no witnesses," the Sicilian explained to Rainone. "The 'N' men learned nothing," he insisted as he finished his report. The lieutenant looked across the table, seeking a smile of approval from the Mafia don. He had been *invited* to dine with Rainone, Garmoni and a third Mafia don from Chicago. The dinner setting was an isolated but palatial hunting lodge accessible only to private planes. Rainone's own Beechcraft had flown the lieutenant into the Sierra lodge that afternoon from Las Vegas. The presence of two other Cosa Nostra lords con-

noted one of two possible meanings for the Sicilian . . . a court or a conference. Now, as he looked at Rainone across the candle-lit table, he knew he faced a court. A servant brought wine and the Sicilian watched candle-light dance on gleaming silver. Shadows on the cloth from the servant's arm moved away. Rainone spoke quietly.

"I had the embarrassment today of learning, through *our friend*, of testimony given only yesterday at a Senate hearing. An 'N' man included these facts in his testimony . . . the seizure of two kilos of 'H' and the arrest of an omertan in New York; a detailed report of Hernandez' movements *and* telephone calls from the time of his hospitalization until his death; the cause of his death;

and events leading to Bello's execution in Chicago. Hernandez was tied in with Bello. Bello can be tied with you."

Desperation gave the Sicilian nerve to interrupt, "But I've taken care of Bello and Hernandez!"

"Have you also taken care of the possibility that 'N' men were sufficiently thorough to use simple deduction? There is a possibility that you, my Sicilian friend, could be tied to me. I see no need to overlook that possibility."

As Benito Rainone rose from his chair, he removed the ever-present carnation from the shining lapel of his dinner jacket. He casually reached across the table and dropped the flower into the Sicilian's silver finger bowl.



by
edward
wellen

UNDER the white-on-black shingle that read GENE SIBSON, D.V.M., the smaller sign by the bell said RING AND ENTER. Someone had rung and entered. With word and touch Dr. Sibson calmed the collie lying on the padded table and fighting the soporific, then went out to the waiting room.

Eyes sweeping the furnishings, the man stood rocking slightly, hands holding to brown Sunday best lapels in the manner of Lincoln. Dr. Sibson looked down around the man's legs.

"No, I ain't brung no sick hound. I just brung myself."

Dr. Sibson's helpfully inquiring

"Why sure. Silence is golden. But it don't make no never mind to me about the color."



hitemail

smile fled and his gaze shot to the man's face, a face all bones and hollows under a wide-brimmed brown felt uncreased as a derby, the living face of the dead past. The man grinned.

"Yeah, you know me. Cole Cawwood. But what counts is I know you. Just a coupla hungry boys together, wasn't we?"

Cawwood's right hand suddenly unlinked itself and stuck out. Dr. Sibson's moved forward, then drew back.

"No, hold your hand out, boy."

Dr. Sibson slowly put his hand out. Cawwood held his next to Dr. Sibson's. Cawwood's skin was darker, and not merely because it was less clean. He shook his head. He smiled but his eyes looked mean.

"Damn if nature don't beat all. Here's me, pure white, and here's you, mostly black, and you're a shade lighter. Ain't changed one bit since the old days when we was boys together down in Blaylock County."

Dr. Sibson remembered those days and his face tightened. He thought of present and future and his chest tightened. A thundering in his ears threatened to mute what Cawwood was saying and it was urgent to hear what Cawwood was saying.

"—I seen you behind the wheel of a shiny new Caddy, and without no shofar cap neither. I said to myself, doggone if that don't look the spit of old Pink from down home. So I nosed around and—" His face

sharpened. His eyes darted to the inner door. "Anybody else here?"

Only us chickens. Dr. Sibson wanted to laugh a crazy laugh but he held himself in so that his voice would be level when he answered.

"Nobody. My receptionist's day off."

But Cawwood was pushing through to the inner room.

"See for myself. Wouldn't want to spoil this now." His face darkened and swung around. "Receptionist, hey? Got you a white woman doing for you, hey?" He worked himself calm and smiled. "My Pappy always said the world was coming to an end."

The collie stirred and blinked at them.

"What's ailing him?"

"Nasal burn. Common in collies. Comes from too long exposure to the sun. I was just about to inject . . . something to form a screen against the sun—"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, there aint nobody else. Now we can get down to cases, boy." He shook his head. "Doggone if it's fair to all them fancy social folks what brings you their no-account purty hounds and pussycats to fix. Facts, it's a crying shame to let 'em go on believing they're dealing with a sure enough white man. Oh, I tell you I had me a right hard time of it fighting down my conscience. But I got it licked now to where I figger long as I get what's mine the rest is their own lookout."

Dr. Sibson kept his voice level.

"You mean you want me to pay you to hush your mouth?"

"Why, sure. Silence is golden—ain't that what they say? But it don't make no never mind to me about the color. It can be gold or silver or green."

Dr. Sibson looked at the man Cole Cawwood and recalled the boy Cole Cawwood. It would do no good to reason or plead. He gave a sigh almost of relief.

"I'm not paying a red cent, Cawwood. You go on and tell."

Cawwood shook his head sadly but his eyes grinned.

"Ain't using your head, boy. How you reckon all them nice white friends of yours going to take it when they learn you're black? Here you been in their homes, sitting and eating and drinking with them. Dancing, maybe even sleeping with their womenfolk. They ain't going to like it one bit."

Dr. Sibson braced himself against a give in his legs. He stared at a vision of white faces. Some of his best friends, once they got over the shock, might want to stick by him. But even these might fear to stand up against the rest and might find his having deceived them a ready excuse to wash their hands of him. No, he wouldn't want them to know, not until he could break it to them himself. Times were changing and one day every man could be his own true self. But now was not the moment, not here. Yet he could not

pull out. He had sunk too much into this practice.

But he could not give in to Cawwood. Cawwood would bleed him white, then find it his bounden duty to inform anyway.

He felt anger but he wasn't sure where to direct it. At himself, for not having owned up to his origins from the start? At whites, for valuing a man in inverse proportion to the amount of pigment in his skin? At fate or God or blind chance, for making him him and vulnerable to this Peckerwood? But it was Cawwood who was bringing it all to light and it was Cawwood who as staring at him hard with a hostile smile and it was Cawwood who was saying now,

"Well, what you waiting on, boy?"

He struck out. Perhaps because he surprised himself he took Cawwood by surprise. Even so, Cawwood flashed a knife as he fell back. Dr. Sibson moved in fast before Cawwood could regain balance. He chopped the knife out of Cawwood's hand and slammed Cawwood back against the wall. Cawwood needed air too much to curse but his eyes were curses. Dr. Sibson pounded away at Cawwood's jaw. Cawwood's skull pounded away at the wall. The eyes glazed. Cawwood slid to the floor. Dr. Sibson put a hand to the wall to keep from falling.

The sleeve hung in shreds. He didn't see how his white jacket had taken slashes but it had. He looked

down. When the white man came to he'd talk; that would be the end of Dr. Gene Sibson.

He knelt beside Cawwood. Breathing slow and stertorous; coma. Bleeding from the ear; skull fracture with secondary pressure on the brain. Dr. Sibson rose. *If* the white man came to.

The collie ran in its sleep. Dr. Sibson stared at the collie, then at the hypodermic syringe he'd been about to prepare for the collie. Slowly, Dr. Sibson smiled. The smile had a bitter curve.

"You'll have to wait, Buster," he told the collie.

Details. He made for the waiting room, looked out the window. Good. No car at the curb. Cawwood had walked from the bus stop. He bolted the door, switched off the waiting room lights.

His hands were stiff. He almost enjoyed the pain of working them free. As he did so, his eyes running over Cawwood, other details crowded his mind. Shave off Cawwood's hair. Change Cawwood into old, label-less clothes. Make fingerprint identification impossible—not acid, something more natural-appearing; scratch and scrape the fingers raw as though the dying man had been dragging himself through brambly brush.

One thing at a time, though. And the first thing was to inject a massive amount of pigment, let it take, then . . . put him to sleep. The law, the white law, would not strain itself to find out who the dead black man was and how he had come to die. Especially if the nameless corpse in the brush on a back road was a deep deep black.



ALL the way from University City he was uncomfortably aware that Carol—and probably just for fun had decided to be difficult, to play games with him. In spite of her awareness of the time element involved, that they could not stop, how many times had she wailed, “I’m hungry!” Spoiled, self-centered, nineteen-year-old brat, approaching every whim with a greed that even disgusted him. Well, she had damn well better realize that if he was to remain No. 1 on her list of pleasures, it would take a heap of hard cash. She had better not chicken out now.

She was a spoiled brat . . . but he put up with her. She was just a means toward his end.

one hungry pigeon

BY PATRICK CONNOLLY

As they approached Circleville, he said, “We’re right on schedule. It took two hours exactly.”

Just two hours since Carol had entered the University’s library, deliberately greeting friends and then wandering back through the high “stacks,” to slip out unnoticed through the little-known back door that served as a fire exit—and into his waiting car.

“What a dump this is,” Carol said as she brushed a strand of chestnut-colored hair from her cheek “Two grocery stores, a joint, a gas station—that’s Circleville,” and she gave a

short disgusted snort. Then on the other side of Circleville, she pointed to a dirt detour. "Take that. It's a mile back into the hills. Imagine! An apartment in New York, a house on Long Island, a summer place in Florida, and they spend half of their time out in this isolated spot—their little hideaway—jerks!"

The bitter tone pleased him. He said, "Light me a cig, hon," and he admitted to himself that she was quite pretty with that long hair framing pale skin and deceptively-soft brown eyes. But what a stupid broad! He put his free arm around her shoulder, and she moved closer to him.

When she handed him the lighted cigarette, she whispered, "Do you love me, Peter?"

"You know I do."

She pressed her head against his shoulder. "Are you sure we won't get caught? I mean . . . they are so damn tight . . . treat me like a child . . . that damn measly allowance! . . . Imagine, Moms was ancient when she had me. 42!"

He patted her shoulder. "Think of them as pigeons, hon. Perching up there in their little hideaway . . . sitting pigeons," and he laughed.

"What's so funny?" Carol jerked away from him. "What's so screamingly funny?"

"Look," and he laughed again as he waved a hand at the grey gloom of the day that hung heavily on the low hills speeding by them. "Nice weather for pigeon hunting."

"Funny! Ha Ha! But remember they are my parents. In some ways I'm fond of Moms and Daddo." And from the corner of his eye he saw her lower lip quiver and then stick out in the sullen pout she often affected.

Miserable fool. Was she merely playacting? She had certainly taken it cool when he had whispered what all that inherited loot could do: Paris, Hong Kong, the Bahamas.

But Carol, with another long sigh, snuggled back to him and with a limp hand pointed to a twisted cottonwood tree ahead of them. "Park there," she said. "They can't see it from the cottage. The main gate is just up the road."

When he stopped beneath the twisted branches, he stretched and then put his arms around her. "Are you frightened, doll? I'd like to go with you, but I'd throw them off. It's best as we planned." As he pressed his lips against her ear in short kisses, he whispered, "Just say you had unexpected time off from school . . . wanted to surprise them . . . and friends dropped you off at the gate."

She sobbed, and he knew it was another of her damn pretences. She loved her drama. "I hate the sight of blood."

His fingers twitched. It would be so pleasant to draw back and slap hard against that pouting mouth, but he turned his head until his eyes almost brushed her long eyelashes, and he crooned, "But doll, baby,

honey . . . you already know . . . no blood, no pain . . . just sleep, honey, with the little powders . . . they will just sleep, sleep . . .”

“Do you love me, Peter? Truly?” and her arms tightened around his neck. “Will we go to Paris and Portugal, and all those places? Promise again.”

“Yes, but, dearest, first things first. I’m not really enjoying this, you know.”

She drew away from him. Her mood, again, had switched. “I’m hungry,” she said and rummaged in her purse.

Hunger pangs grumbled in his stomach. He had skipped lunch, but, now, irritation dominated. Dammit, he thought, Moms and Daddo deserved a more violent death for producing this clunk.

“You’re mad at me,” and she poked in her purse. She gave a gasp of joy. “Look what I found!” and she pulled out a chocolate bar. “Want some?”

Patience. Don’t goof now. He had staged this expertly from the first time he had spotted her in that college students’ beer-garden hangout. An obvious pigeon. Carelessly, but expensively dressed. Talking too loudly. Insecure, plagued by loneliness. A stupid broad. An easy pickup.

“They’re tight,” Carol had told him on their second date. “Moms and Daddo just aren’t with it.” And she adored older men—like him with curly hair. They were so suave. She

was sick of adolescent college jerks. And wouldn’t Moms and Daddo be furious if they knew? Of course, she understood that their dates had to be secret from her classmates, too.

It hadn’t taken long until she understood that their romance could only flourish from the nourishment of money. How else could they glide down the canals of Venice? And after all, Moms and Daddo owed her something. Did she ask to be born to old fogeys? It might be illegal, but wasn’t it just to remove happiness’s only obstacles?

But now she sat chewing chocolate. A dribble formed at the corner of her mouth.

Peter turned on the key and started the motor. “O.K., pet, we will call it off. Goodbye, all those sweet, sweet dreams . . .”

Carol, nonchalantly, turned off the key. Her voice was cool. “What time is it?”

“5:45.”

She dabbed at the chocolate on her lip with a crumbled handkerchief. “It’s cocktail time for Moms and Daddo.”

“And you mix them?”

“Always when I’m there. While they sit on their fat rumps, darling daughter prepares cocktails and hors d’oeuvres. Daddo calls it togetherness. And I for being so sweet, get to sip gingerale.”

“Good,” he said. From his pocket he took a small bottle of white powder. “Mix this in, doll face. It’s our passport to the world.”

Without looking at it, she dropped it into her purse. He noticed that her eyes gleamed, and her lips were moist as she whispered, "Will it take long?"

"A minute, just a minute. But I'll wait half an hour. Give you time for greetings, the mixing. O.K., hon? Then I'll show to check things out."

"Kiss me," she said, and her lips trembled when he did.

When she opened the door and stepped out, she whispered back to him, "Peter, you're so goodlooking . . . I adore you," and she blew him a kiss. Then she was slowly walking up the dirt road, her high heels kicking up little puffs of dust. Really not a bad looking chick. When he got all that dough, he might regret, just a bit, dumping her. What a setup for him.

If things didn't work out, he was in the clear. Hell, she didn't even know his real name. None of her friends had ever met him. And she had agreed—after heavy persuasion—that he would disappear until all legal formalities were settled. If she were picked up, it would be soon, and the newspapers would tip him off. How could they trace him?

Carol stopped at a bend of the road, turned, waved, and then raised one arm high, two fingers stretched in a V for victory. Then she disappeared around the bend.

He waited nervously. Dusk was creeping over the hills. A breeze began to squeal among the branches of the cottonwood. He lit one cigar-

ette from another. He switched on the car radio, and immediately, switched it off.

They had to be back before the library closed at nine o'clock. Then Carol would slip back through the fire-exit door, wander innocently from the stacks, greet friends, and check out a book. A good alibi established.

When his watch showed 6:20, he got out of the car, stretched luxuriously, and then stepped carefully up the dirt road. When he found the open iron gate, he did not hesitate but turned in. His stomach once more growled in hunger. He patted it gently and promised that later that night he would have a couple of martinis and the biggest, juiciest steak that he could find. And the gravel path led him through bushes and tall blooming flowers until suddenly the cottage loomed in front of him.

Cottage! It was a mansion, low and sprawling, hugging the curve of a gentle hill. As he climbed the few steps to the porch, he strained his ears, but he could hear only the rush of a brook that wandered by the side of the house, and the twitter of a bird from its high perch in one of the many trees.

The front door was open, and he stepped into a lighted hallway whose walls were lined with bright landscapes. Peter remembered that Moms was supposed to be a fairly competent artist. His heart was beating just a little too quickly, and he

felt beads of sweat warm on his forehead. The silence was eerie!

"Boo!" and he jumped. Carol laughed at him from the kitchen's entrance. "Expect ghosts?" She waved the last bite of a sandwich at him. "Fixed myself a snack."

Hadn't they been home? He stared at her chewing jaws, waiting for her to give some indication of success or failure, but she only chewed and smiled. "Well?" he almost shouted.

"Oh, oh, yes," and she walked slowly to him and took him by the arm. "You do want to pay your respects, I presume. In here," and she led him into a large, but cozy room.

A fire burned slowly in the fireplace. A lamp gleamed softly in one corner. Two sofas, separated by a coffee table, faced each other in front of the fire.

Moms, slender in a long blue-velvet hostess gown, lay on her side on one sofa. A leg was tucked gracefully in a bend beneath her other leg. Firelight danced blue glows through her short silver hair, and from one dangling arm, almost touching the floor, a stemmed glass hung upside down from lifeless fingers.

Daddo sat leaning forward on his sofa. His bald head almost touched the coffee table as he stared his shocked dead stare at his glass sitting innocently beside a plate of crackers and a dainty pot of soft-creamed cheese.

Peter turned and snuggled the girl in his arms. "We better get going, sweetie. Let's check everything." He released her and looked around. "That bottle the powder was in . . . be sure and bring it along."

"It's in the kitchen. I'll get it."

When she was almost to the door, he said, "Bring a bottle of booze."

She hesitated, then laughed, "Good idea," and was gone.

He felt pleasantly excited. This would surely call for a celebration later on that night. Drinks. A juicy steak. Red red wine. He bowed to Daddo. "May I?" and he dipped a cracker into the cheese. "Delicious! And thank you, Daddo, for everything."

Then Carol was back, and she put a bottle of gin and two fresh glasses on the coffee table. "What a gorgeous idea. A toast to us," she said.

"No my pet," and he bowed to her. "Not for us . . . just to rinse the inside of their glasses . . . the inquiring gendarmes will find nothing but traces of booze . . . confusing you know." As he reached for Moms dangling glass, he said, "Pardon, Madam. Your glass, please?"

"Don't be silly, darling," Carol giggled and poured liquor into their glasses. "I wouldn't spoil good gin that way," and she pointed at the little pot, "I mixed that devil's potion in there . . . in that ickey cheese." She raised her glass until it glittered wickedly in the firelight. "Cheers," she said.

THE



SLAYER

A Novelette

BY ROBERT PAGE JONES

He was a genius of sorts . . . a wizard at games. Then he discovered the ULTIMATE GAME . . . and lost.

IT WAS not yet daylight when Johnny Polichek was awakened by the muggy heat trapped in the small rented room. He tried to go back to sleep but the humidity would not let him. Long before morning he gave it up and lay there smoking until the first scorching red of the sun showed on the horizon.

He thought about the night before. About the Chianti he had drunk. About the man he had killed.

The man had been a rummy old cripple, a newspaper peddler, both legs gone below the torso and nothing but a flat piece of board with wheels on it to get around on. A stack of papers had been across his lap. Three words, "Storm Threatens Keys," had run across the top line.

Polichek remembered the words clearly. He had read them as he had

bought one of the papers. Then, without hurrying, he had placed his foot against the little wooden scooter and sent the man spinning out into traffic.

It had been so easy that it hadn't given him much of a thrill, hadn't even excited him.

At seven o'clock Polichek threw back the single sheet and sat naked on the edge of the bed. He had a bus to catch.

There was a faint pulsing of the Chianti behind his eyes but beyond that he didn't feel too bad. He hacked out his throat and went into the bathroom. He shaved, showered, pulled on clean underwear and faded khaki trousers.

He had just selected a clean shirt from a battered suitcase when the knock came.

"You live in this room?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Police."

Polichek did not look at the badge pinned under the leather flap. As soon as the man walked past him into the room he closed the door. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw the man watching him.

The man was a city cop. That much he could tell. He lacked the raw-boned, bully-boy look of a county policeman.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

"Carterson. Sidney Carterson," Polichek told him.

"I'll have to see some identification."

Polichek didn't wait. When he swung around from the door he brought his foot up swiftly. The cop sank to his knees, grabbing at his crotch. Polichek lunged at him, twisting his body sideways. The cop grabbed for his gun but as he squeezed the trigger Polichek kicked him in the throat. The bullet raked across Polichek's ribs, slamming him into the dresser. He lunged forward again but the cop lay motionless on the floor.

The wound did not appear to be too serious but it oozed blood steadily. Polichek bandaged it with strips torn from the bedsheets, wrapping them around him tightly. Then he finished dressing.

His change still lay on top of the dresser. Next to the change was his bus ticket and a package of Rol-

aids. He put the ticket carefully inside his wallet, scooped the change and Roloids into his pocket, picked up his suitcase and went out.

At the top of the stairs, he hesitated. He went back into the room. The cop still lay on the carpet, twitching slightly and moaning. Polichek walked closer and stood over him. He wasn't sure how much the police knew about him but he couldn't afford to take any chances. He put down his suitcase and picked up the gun. It was a Smith and Wesson .38 Terrier. With the trigger squeezed three-quarters of the way back, he hesitated again. He took a pillow from the bed and used it to muffle the noise. He pumped in three of the remaining four cartridges just to make sure.

He left the gun on the floor beside the body.

II

When he got to the depot he had twenty minutes to wait before bus time.

He tried to sit outside on one of the wooden platform benches, but the heat made him dizzy. The sun poured down fierce and white. He could feel the sweat and blood trickling underneath the bandage where it had crusted and stuck to him.

He closed his eyes for a minute and tried to swallow down the nausea in him.

They knew about him now. That

much was certain. But they'd have to be a lot smarter than the cop back there in the hotel if they were going to take him.

After a while he got up and went inside the air-conditioned cafe and sat on one of the stools. There were about a dozen people at the counter and in the narrow booths. Their conversation drifted to him over the sputtering of the griddle.

"What'll it be?" the waitress asked him.

"Two eggs over easy, grits and coffee," he said. He figured he might feel better if he ate. "The coffee now."

The waitress was already at the big stainless steel urn, drawing the coffee off into a chipped brown mug, her hands growing rough and red from skinny white wrists.

Polichek lifted the mug with his left hand, staring down into the inky liquid for several moments, feeling the warmth of it on his face before drinking. His right arm hung straight down beside his stool. It had been injured in birth and badly attended to by the doctor. The stiffness did not bother him because he had never known anything else but it angered him that people sometimes regarded him with contempt just because of it. He felt a small chill of hatred and swallowed it down with his coffee. . .

He swung around on his stool and watched a skinny, up-and-down colored guy frying sausage patties on the griddle.

"It's gonna rain," the colored guy was saying over his shoulder to one of the customers.

"There ain't a cloud in the sky," the customer said.

"You sound just like one of them weather boys," the colored guy said. "I know what I knows. And I'm telling you it's gonna come down 'till it washes this town clean off the map."

The waitress brought Polichek's breakfast on a heavy platter and put it down.

"Watch it. The plate's hot," she said.

Her uniform needed washing. It was splattered with grease and what might have been syrup or jam. On her lapel was a little plastic card with *Shirley* written on it in grease pencil.

Polichek couldn't stand people who were dirty.

"I didn't order any sausage," he said softly.

"Huh?" Shirley went over her pad with a stub of pencil so short the point seemed to start right out of the eraser. "I guess he put 'em on your plate by mistake. Sometimes I think the son-of-a-bitch can't read."

"Get it off."

"Forget it. It was our mistake."

"You heard me." Polichek shoved his plate out. He had a thing about pork. It went back to the time when he had made his living by slaughtering pigs in a packy in Iowa. "I don't want it."

"Listen, mister. Two eggs over

easy: sixty cents. Two eggs over easy with sausage: sixty cents. It's all the same."

"Get it off!"

"Okay. Okay. You don't have to get so pissed."

"Give me the gentleman's plate," the colored guy said. "The gentleman don't care for none of my fine sausages."

He took the plate and with a greasy spatula scraped the sausages back off onto the griddle.

When Shirley brought back the platter with just the eggs she was no longer scowling but Polichek didn't notice. Except for simple, animal lust, he had no feeling for women. They didn't interest him one way or the other.

He felt suddenly sick.

He got up off the stool without taking a bite of food and went into the men's room. He ran water full cold in the sink and splashed his face and head. Then he went into one of the stalls and closed the door so that if anyone came in they wouldn't see him working with the bandage. He took off his shirt and gingerly peeled off the strips of sheet where they had crusted and stuck to him. He soaked a paper towel in water and squeezed it against the wound and watched the water drain off across his belly in pinkish streams.

The shallow slice was still open and oozing but there was no real flow of blood. He mopped up as best he could, using nearly a whole box

of paper towels, and wound on a fresh bandage made of stripped undershirt. Then he went back out to the counter.

Polichek was still trying to choke down some of the eggs when the screen door banged and a man and a dog came in. The man half-pulled the dog along on a short chain leash. He was not a tall man but he had wide shoulders with slabs of moving fat on them and thick, freckled forearms.

The colored guy raised the greasy spatula in half-hearted greeting and then continued scraping it across the griddle, guiding the grease into a little trough.

Polichek felt a sudden chill of resentment toward the man. He watched through the steam from his coffee as the man fastened the loose end of chain to the post supporting one of the stools and then started back toward the rest room. Polichek's stomach flopped. He had not failed to notice the man's big campaign hat and the six-pointed Sheriff's badge pinned to the front of his sweat-sopped khakis.

"How much do I owe you?" Polichek asked the colored guy.

"Don't know. You'll have to ask the waitress."

"Then get her!"

"Yes, *sir*." The cook looked hard at Polichek, then yelled through a small serving window cut into the wall. "Miss Shirley, there is a gentleman here says he is in a hurry, and would you please attend him."

Polichek left his stool and went over and stood by the register. As he walked past the dog, it got up from its haunches, hackles raised, and stood straining against its leash on all fours, growling.

Polichek looked at the old Western Union clock. He had only a few minutes to catch his bus.

"That the smallest you have?" Shirley asked him.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"A fifty?"

"That's it."

"You must have robbed a bank, eh?"

"Just give me the change," Polichek said.

"I'll have to go in the back."

Polichek waited. The dog continued to growl at him, damp flews rolled back over its teeth, narrow head held motionless and pointing. Polichek wondered if it could smell the fresh blood beneath his shirt.

After a few moments the colored guy came over and tossed a chunk of sausage on the floor between the dog's front paws.

"He don't seem to like you," the colored guy said pointedly.

Shirley came back and counted out Polichek's change.

"Thanks," Polichek said. He picked up his bag and went out.

The Sheriff—his name Karl Oberdorfer—came out and sat on the end stool near the cash register. He waited until Shirley brought his coffee over and then leaned across the counter and pinched her cheek.

"Karl, you know you're not supposed to bring that mutt in here—" she said.

"You have some kind of trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"All them bloody towels in the john. Looks like somebody's been killing chickens in there."

"Beats me," she said. She waved her mascara-smearing lids at him. "Maybe one of the bus passengers cut himself shaving. Lots of them go in there to shave after a long trip on account of the warm water."

She leaned over the counter to write his order, the front of her uniform dipping open, revealing her breasts. They looked as if they were about to spill out of her brassiere. He cupped her chin and pulled her face forward.

"How'd you like to take the pickup and drive over to Porterville tonight?" He laughed. "I got a mattress I can throw up in the back and—"

"And how'd you like this cup of coffee in your face?" she said, laughing.

When he had finished his breakfast, Oberdorfer sat there smoking. Something bothered him. After a while he went back into the men's room and rummaged down in the bloodied towels.

He pulled out the torn strips of sheet and stood looking at them. There was a small label sewn into the corner of one of the strips. It said: *Maryland Hotel, Bleckley, Florida.*

"Now, what the goddamned hell —" he muttered to himself.

The first sparse drops of rain had begun to fall when he went back to the counter for a second cup of coffee. He did not like the way his day was beginning. If the weather continued bad the only way he would get Shirley to Porterville would be to spring for six bucks for a motel.

He looked out of the window bleakly. The rain was beginning to come down pretty good. He belched.

Shirley was a pretty good lay, but she sure as hell wasn't worth any six bucks.

III

The bus barreled along, wipers flapping at the rain, big duals throwing up a thin cloud of gray-white spume.

Polichek stared disinterestedly through the beaded window. He could not remember passing a single car or town for the better part of an hour. He could see nothing beyond the grayness of the rain except the endless flat tangle of the Everglades.

He tried to shake off his feeling of depression.

He knew it was probably caused by the inevitable let-down after the two killings in Bleckley. He always felt this way afterwards. And now there was the anonymous opacity of the rain to add to the sogginess of his mood.

He picked up a two-day-old news-

paper from the seat next to him and began working the crossword puzzle. It took him only two or three minutes to finish it. He was so good at puzzles that even the most difficult of them failed to challenge him.

He had been a prodigy at games almost from birth.

At the age of four and a half he consistently beat his father at checkers. At nine he was an expert at chess. By the time he was eleven he had mastered most of the usual games so completely that they no longer held any appeal. The challenge was gone. So the brightly-colored boxes and the die cups and the plastic markers were shunted into a seldom used closet.

Polichek was in his fourteenth year when he discovered the ultimate game.

He was playing with his best friend, Harry Oldburn, on a gray overcast afternoon after school. Actually, it was Harry who suggested that they take turns climbing into the old abandoned icebox and closing the door, enjoying the delicious terror of complete isolation, making a game out of who could stay inside the longest without crying out in near-hysterical fear. Toward nightfall Polichek began to tire of the monotony of the game. Harry was inside the box. He had already rapped twice, the pre-arranged signal for release, and Polichek was just reaching for the rusty handle when a sudden shiver of excitement stopped him. In a

matter of seconds the screams began. They reverberated horribly in the tiny cubicle, until Polichek clapped his hands over his ears. He stood staring at the massive door until the sounds from inside no longer resembled anything human. Then they stopped abruptly. With an odd feeling of triumph and superiority, he turned and walked briskly across the vacant lot toward his home.

Polichek smiled faintly to himself. That had been nearly nine years ago. He was twenty-two now and The Game still held for him a crushing excitement that he had found in none of the others.

A sudden gust of wind slapped hard against the right side of the bus, swaying it.

Polichek sat forward in his seat and looked around.

There were only five passengers besides himself on the bus. He wondered vaguely what urgency in their unimportant lives caused them to begin the trip across Florida despite the threatening weather. He gazed for several moments at each of them.

A frazzle-faced old broad sitting next to a ten or eleven year old girl who must have been her daughter because they both had the same washed out red hair and pasty skin. A scared-looking, doughy-skinned fat guy—about Polichek's age—chewing nervously on a cigar. A girl barely out of her teens, her thoughts somewhere ahead or somewhere behind her, who wore her

breasts out in front of her like the *Croix de guerre*. A skinny old preacher, hair puffed out on his head in wispy strands, carrying a little blue bird in a small wooden cage.

Counters.

Polichek regarded everyone he met or saw as a potential counter, human markers used to keep score in the world's greatest game.

In the nine years since he had closed the heavy icebox door on Harry Oldburn he had scored seventeen times.

Seventeen!

Polichek naturally assumed that there were others who played the game. The game had too much natural appeal for it to be otherwise. But he often wished there was some way for the players to compare scores, to establish some sort of official ranking. He was quite sure that he would be one of the world's leading players.

One reason that he was so good was that he had never been hamstrung by even the slightest twinge of sympathy for any of his victims. He had been bred on bitterness and hate. He had never known anyone who really deserved to live. People were never what they seemed. The other people on the bus, for example. They were no good. He was sure of that. He had not the slightest doubt that they all deserved to die.

Perhaps the long trip across the Everglades to the coast would not be such a bore after all.

He lit one of the last of his cigarettes and began to work out a plan for increasing his score.

IV

By noon the storm had moved inland from the Gulf and dumped tons of water on the swamp and on the fragile man-made highway that slanted across it like a crude smear of white lipstick.

With the rain came the wind. It hit with enough force to uproot more than one of the giant cypress trees and topple them into the swamp. It slammed so hard against the side of the bus that the driver had to make sudden compensating jerks to hold the bus on the road.

The Reverend C. Minton Huggins leaned forward intently and watched the rain being driven nearly horizontal by the wind.

He was suddenly aware of his face reflected in the window. He knuckled his eyes and noticed how the skin beneath them had begun to wrinkle and sag. He noticed, also, the faint blueness of the tissue but decided it was nothing to worry about.

He was not quite fifty-five, much too thin, but still hard-bellied and muscular. In high school in Greenville, Alabama, he had been a track star and had set a school record in the two-twenty low hurdles. He had thought he would put on some weight and fill out when he stopped growing but he hadn't.

He was as skinny now as he had been as a kid. But the effect of his height, in the clerical collar and black tropical worsted suit, wasn't half bad. His leanness only added to his appearance of gentility.

He continued to gaze at his reflection and struck an attitude of unyielding austerity, eyebrows raised, head tilted backward so that his gaze was directed along the swooping line of his nose.

"Risk not the blasting thunder of damnation," he said in an imaginary voice whose intensity increased with each word, "but prepare your wicked hearts unto the Lord!"

Not bad, he thought.

That might be a pretty fair way to begin his first sermon in Brooksville. Although he'd have to be careful not to scare everybody to death the first shot out of the box. Sometimes it was better to get settled in a new parish before really turning it on.

And Reverend Huggins was determined to play it smart this time.

There had been a little trouble in his last parish in Hallandale, a little unpleasantness, and he was going to make certain he didn't make the same mistake again.

He took another look out at the rain. The wind was getting a lot stronger. He had spent a lot of years around the southern part of the peninsula and he knew the beginnings of a real hurricane when he saw them.

And Reverend Huggins didn't

like what he saw. He didn't like it at all.

Stooping carefully, he shoved the cheap wooden bird cage with its tiny passenger carefully under the seat. Then he took a small bottle labeled *Cough Syrup* from his inside coat pocket, unscrewed the cap, and swigged heavily from it. The sting of the whiskey was like a friendly hand rubbing him gently in the stomach.

He struck another pose in the thick, reflecting glass.

"The Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries. His sword shall cut thee off. His wrath shall eat thee up like the cankerworm. . ."

"Can I sit here with you?"

Reverend Huggins whirled almost too quickly to gaze into the no-color eyes of the girl who had gotten on the bus with her mother in Bleckley. She appeared to be about nine or ten, longlegged for her age and flat-chested, but with firm thighs that stretched tight her soiled cotton dress. Her dull red hair hung straight beneath a frivolous straw hat decorated with an assortment of artificial flowers.

"Can I sit with you?" she asked.

"The children of the Lord are welcome everywhere," he said, and thought that was a pretty good reply.

"What's in the bottle? Can I have some?"

"Medicine, my child. Terrible—"

"It smells like the medicine my father drinks." She sniffed. "Are you really a preacher?"

"Of course."

"Are preachers supposed to ride the bus?"

"I suppose they are. I've never given it much thought." Reverend Huggins had begun to feel uncomfortable under the girl's steady gaze. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Emma."

"Emma what?"

"Emma Touchberry."

"Well, Emma, let's see if I can't entertain you for a while—"

He took out a silver dollar good luck piece he had carried with him ever since the thirties. Every now and then he went over the serrated edges with a small jeweler's file to make sure it had a good gripping surface. He was an amateur magician. And a pretty good one. He could make that coin do almost anything he wanted.

Right now he was holding it up between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, turning it back and forth slowly so that it glinted in the dim light. Slowly, as the girl sat looking at him solemnly, he reached up with his right hand and pretended to close it over the coin while in reality he palmed it off with his left. Then he extended his right fist until it was just inches from her nose. He snapped it open, turning it palm-up and palm-down quickly, to show that the dollar had really disappeared.

"It's gone," she said matter-of-factly.

"A feat far less imposing than the

miracles of the Lord," he said, and thought that he really was getting quite good with a phrase.

"Where did it go?"

"Maybe it's in my pocket." He pulled the lining out to show that it was empty. Then the other pocket. "No. Not there—"

"Find it," she sniffed. "It's only a trick. It's not really magic."

"Ah! I think I see it." He gave a gentle yank on her ear lobe with his left hand, bringing the coin back into view as he did so, and held it for her to see. "It was in your ear."

In spite of her laughter her eyes were hazy and heavy-lidded. He was very conscious of her small breasts and the woman-look of her thighs stretching the cotton dress. He felt a pulsing in his head and the perspiration break out anew beneath his clothing.

"Do it again," she said demandingly. "Again."

The rain slashed against the windows.

Back in the thirties, before he got into real trouble and got sent out with the road gangs around Atlanta, he used to follow the cheap carnivals that worked down along the Gulf in summer. It had been plenty rough. Working as a roustabout or a squawker whenever he was lucky enough to get regular work and, when he wasn't, hiring out as a shill or a tip man to the grifters and con artists.

After a while he had become a pretty fair con man himself.

He learned how to flash a crowd. He learned how to work a tip and pick a pocket with the best of them. But there had been a lot of empty pockets in those days. Times had been tough.

One night—they'd bedded the show down in Tallahassee and gone into town for a drink—he'd tried to make time with one of the townner's girl and there'd been a fight and he'd killed the townner by hitting him in the chest several times with a broken pool cue.

He'd spent fourteen years on the road gang. Fourteen years with a pick and shovel. They'd taught him something.

When he finally got out he began playing it smart. He slung hash in a cheap hotel in Atlanta until he earned enough money to put himself through the Cornelia C. Bride-weather Ministerial College. Then he hitchhiked down to Southern Florida and after a while he was making more money in a week than he used to make in a whole month following the carni.

Reverend Huggins produced the silver dollar with a flourish.

"What do you know about that?" he asked in a mock-solemn voice. "In your elbow."

"Again," the girl said.

"Once more," Reverend Huggins said.

The closeness of the girl had started a strange sensation in his stomach. He felt a vague spinning. He wiped the sweat from his hands

and with a practiced gesture palmed off the coin and showed her his empty fist.

"Is it in my ear?" she asked.

"No." He gave a gentle tug on her ear lobe. "Not there."

The spinning increased as he dropped his hand between the placid dampness of her thighs, brushing his fingers against the moist flesh. He hesitated and for the brief part of an instant he thought he saw a faint glimmer of intuition in her eyes. Then she stiffened instinctively and he withdrew his hand quickly with the coin clutched between thumb and forefinger.

"There," he said tremulously. "Right there in your little ol' knee."

"I think I'll tell my mother," she said softly.

"Your mother? I don't understand. I—"

He felt the old sickening fear.

"I will. I'll tell her. You're nothing but a nasty old man."

"See here, child. You mustn't talk that way. You mustn't—"

Without hesitating she jerked the coin from him and sat clutching it tightly to the front of her dress. She stared at him solemnly, defiantly.

"I'm going to keep it," she hissed.

"But, it isn't yours. It doesn't belong to you."

"It's mine." She pulled her lips back into a confident grin. "If you try to get it back I'll tell my mother. I'll tell everyone on the bus what you are."

"Now, you listen to me—"

And then she was gone.

Reverend Huggins sat there spent and shaking. He looked around quickly. Most of the other passengers sat gazing out at the rain.

He slid the bottle from his pocket and took several long, trembling swallows. He was going to have to learn to quit behaving like a fool. He had a good thing waiting for him in Brooksville and he wasn't going to ruin it this time, not this time.

He imagined himself looking out over his new congregation. Maybe two or three hundred people, just waiting to drop something into the collection plate if he handled them the way he knew he could, if he flashed them the way he'd flashed the crowds in front of his "knock-the-lady-out-of-bed" joint when he'd been with the carní.

"Neighbors. What I want to talk to you about today is sin," he would say. "Pure, unadulterated, putrescent, cankerous, gangrenous, stinkin', leadin'-us-down-the-road-to-hell *sin!*"

That's what he'd say.

He imagined his voice shrieking out through the vastness of the big tent, breaking like giant waves against the canvas roof.

"Oh, brothers and sisters. . ."

V

Johnny Polichek put his hand in his pocket and clenched it around

the folded pen-knife. The knife had a fragile three-inch blade as thin and as sharply-honed as a surgeon's scalpel. The blade could cut through heavy shoe leather as if it were tissue paper.

He wondered who it would be.

The preacher? There was something strange about him. There was something in the weathered features, something almost self-deprecatory, that didn't fit. The red-headed broad with the kid? All washed-out and broken like his mother. The fat, scared-looking kid with the cigar? Probably smokes the cigar so he'll look like a man.

Polichek imagined the short blade sinking into that puffy body, right into that big fat belly. It wouldn't work at all. The point wouldn't reach anything vital through the slabs of blubber. Better a lightening-fast slash across the neck, then a quick step backward to avoid the sudden spurt of blood. . .

Polichek liked to wonder about it. Part of the fun was in selecting just the right victim and deciding exactly how and when he was going to do it. He still had plenty of time to work out a plan.

Who could tell? Maybe, if the opportunity presented itself, he'd find a way to kill all of them. The idea appealed to him. A thing like that would make him unquestionably the greatest player in the world. And something told him that his time was running out, that he was nearing the end of the game. . .

Although it was still the middle of the afternoon the driver had switched on his headlights and running lights. A small cypress branch came out of nowhere and smashed loudly against the side of the bus. The wind seemed to threaten to move the big vehicle sideways into the swamp.

Someone touched his arm and sat down in the seat next to his. He smelled gardenias, thickly sweet in the muggy closeness, and turned his head to look at the face of the girl with the big hips and breasts. She sat looking at Polichek with a determined, set expression.

"I don't suppose you have a drink on you?" she asked quickly.

"A drink?"

"That's right." She didn't smile, offered none of the usual feminine charms of persuasion. "I know it's a strange thing to be asking but, well, this awful storm . . . I thought it might settle my nerves."

"Scared?"

"Not really. I've been in storms before. What really worries me is the fact that we might be delayed somewhere and . . . well . . . I've simply got to get back to Tampa by tomorrow morning." The bus swayed suddenly and she grabbed his arm convulsively and then released it. "It's terribly important." "We'll make it," Polichek said.

"I ain't so sure." The pudgy man with the cigar leaned over and joined the conversation. "My name's Boyd. Johnny Ray Boyd."

"Phoebe Ann Williams," the girl said, taking his hand.

Polichek ignored her.

"I know this country," Johnny Ray was saying. "I know these storms. And this one is fixin' to turn into a real smasher. I tell you, we're gonna be in real trouble before we're out of this."

"Why don't you shut up," Polichek said acidly.

He didn't want to have to put up with a hysterical broad. And this one wasn't far from hysterics. He looked at her and there was an expression of mute pleading in her eyes.

It bothered Polichek. Sent a chill running through him. It was obvious that her fear went far beyond the threatening danger of the storm.

Another loose piece of debris banged against the side of the bus and the girl sucked in her breath.

"Whew-eeel!" Johnny Ray Boyd said. "We're fixin' to get stomped clean off the road—"

Polichek turned away from both of them and gazed out of the window. The rain was as heavy as any he had ever seen. Through it he saw the red rhythmic flashing of a dome light as a highway patrol car swung out and around the bus and then disappeared in the gray mist ahead.

The bus had already slowed to a walking pace in the treacherous wind. A few seconds later it stopped completely, the big door hissed open, and a state trooper climbed quickly aboard. Beyond him, the rain slashed

windshield, Polichek saw the patrol car parked twenty to thirty yards ahead, signal light still flashing wetly.

A sudden excitement gripped Polichek. Instinctively, he groped into his pocket for the knife and held it there.

The trooper said a few words to the driver and then came back toward the center of the bus, looking at each of the passengers as he walked. He seemed almost oversized the confining aisle, red, meaty hands and strangely misplaced standing in supporting his weight between the two rows of seats.

"Folks, my name is Roundtree," he said in a clear voice. "I'd like to tell you a little bit about what's going on out there. Sometimes when you know about something it's less apt to bother you—"

"Is it a hurricane?" Mrs. Touchberry asked tremulously.

"Not exactly. At least, that's not what we're experiencing right now. But there's a hurricane, all right. At the present it's out over the Gulf, about fifty miles southwest of Tampa, but we've had a report that it's heading back toward the coast."

"You mean it's going to hit Tampa?" Phoebe Ann said.

"There's every possibility that it will."

"But that's where we're going." Phoebe Ann straightened, looking scared. "I've got to get back there. I—"

"Excuse me, Officer." It was the

Reverend Huggins. "We're still quite a few miles from the coast here. Is there any reason to believe the storm will strike this far inland?"

"It's hard to say." He grinned. "They're not very predictable, you know. It may turn around and go back out to sea or it may travel all of the way across the peninsula. Your guess is as good as mine."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime I suggest we find shelter until the storm commits itself or until the worst of it is over."

"When will that be?" Mrs. Touchberry said.

"Again, it's hard to say. If it continues on its present course, it should pass over this area within the next hour or so. If it changes course in that time you'll probably be able to continue on into Tampa."

"I don't like it," Johnny Ray said nervously. He took out a diaper-sized handkerchief and mopped his face. "Where do we find shelter out here? There's nothing but swamp for a five-hundred mile radius. I tell you, this goddamned bus company is going to hear from me. They had no business—"

"I wouldn't worry too much. There's a combination gas station and cafe about seventeen miles ahead," Trooper Roundtree said. "I'm sure we'll be okay there."

"You must be crazy," Johnny Ray said. "I seen a storm once that stomped hell out of brick houses, just smashed 'em to bits."

Trooper Roundtree looked at him and smiled. "Not this building. It's made out of cypress logs, it's boarded up, and it's provisioned. Who knows, you may actually enjoy it. And there's a bar. You can have a couple of beers while you wait things out."

"Are you going to stay with us?" Emma Roundtree asked.

"I sure am, little lady. I'll lead the way in the patrol car and then stick around in case you need anything." He grinned through broken teeth. "Say if it's okay with your mother, you can ride along with me in the car. We'll open the siren all the way—"

The bastard, Polichek thought resentfully. That's all I need. First a hurricane, and now this cop, just hanging around to screw things up.

"Who'd like to join me in a hymn?" Reverend Huggins asked as the bus lurched forward again. "Nothing like a rousing hymn to bolster up one's courage."

No one paid any attention.

Polichek looked at the others. They were all scared, every one of them. The silly-looking kid with the cigar, the comic strip preacher, the two women, the bus driver. Not an ounce of strength in the whole bunch of them. Except, perhaps, for the little girl. There was an odd silent depth to her. He sensed it in her face and in her eyes. She had the stuff in her to survive.

But he had no use for the others. Suckers. Every one of them.

Polichek felt a fleeting sense of excitement. So what if there was a cop around. The greater the risk the greater the reward.

After all, that was the name of the game.

He clenched his fist once more around the knife and gazed up pleasurably at the swaying roof.

VI

Johnny Ray Boyd sat staring out at the storm, pudgy hands clasped nervously in his lap, heavy thighs stretching tight his faded khaki trousers.

He wondered what it was about people that made them mean and unfriendly. Like the smart mouth across the aisle. The broads always went for a guy like that whenever things got a little rough.

Well, broads who did that weren't worth caring about anyway. He'd heard about women like that from his mother. They were coarse and cheap, no better than sluts. . .

He reached in his pocket for the candy bar his mother had bought for him just before he got on the bus in Bleckley, felt nothing but gritty pocket lining, and remembered that he had eaten it almost two hours before. He was always hungry, it seemed. It was as if he realized that eating was the only thing he was any good at.

At twenty-three, he was fat and unattractive. He knew that. But he had been that way for so long that

it no longer bothered him unless somebody made an out-and-out crack about the way he looked.

What really bothered him was the fact that he couldn't seem to get ahead. Something always seemed to be working against him.

It wasn't that he didn't try. He did the best he could. He tried hard in school but when he reached the seventh grade they told him he'd gone as far as he could and that he'd have to leave school and go to work.

What they didn't tell him was that nobody wanted to hire a fat kid without any education. It was as if they'd stamped the mark of a loser right on his forehead. Now and then he'd get a job for a week or month but in the end it was always the same.

As soon as he was old enough, he tried to join the Army. Even they didn't want him. They classified him 1-Y—that means limited trainability—and for a long time after that he felt too depressed to even look for work.

His mother got him the job in the bakery.

For a while it looked like it might turn out all right. In spite of the bad hours, he liked the work. He and another fellow worked all night in the kitchen, making doughnuts and icing them, so they'd be nice and fresh when they went out on the trucks the next day.

And this time he stuck. When he'd been on the job exactly six months

the boss called him in the office and told him he was doing fine and then gave him a small raise. Johnny Ray regarded this recognition of his talents as a major triumph.

But the mark was there.
Johnny Ray Boyd, *loser*.

It was as inevitable as death. And each loss was a little bit like dying.

The bakery job blew up on a Thursday night.

Johnny Ray's kitchen mate was a colored guy, a strong, silent man in his mid-forties with the name of Cavanagh, whose job it was to ice the doughnuts as soon as they'd cooled enough not to melt the sugar. The two of them got along okay. Neither one of them talked much and there was a radio they kept turned to a local music station.

Johnny Ray had just taken a fresh batch of doughnuts out of the boiling fat when the first of the men came in.

There was just two men at first, white men, dressed in faded Levi's and T-shirts. But Johnny Ray could hear a lot more men outside in the alley. After a while they started coming in too, two and three at a time, until the little kitchen was packed so tight there wasn't any more room and still he heard voices, excited and high-pitched, outside the screen door.

He figured there must have been sixty of them all together.

He'd seen some of them before. Not many. Men with sunburned, tattooed arms and calloused fists.

They wanted Cavanagh.
"What's he done?" Johnny Ray asked.

"He knows what he's done," somebody answered.

Just then one of the men sagged against the cooling rack and fainted.

"What's the matter with that bastard?" a drunken voice yelled. "We ain't even lynched him yet."

"What's he done?" Johnny Ray said again.

"Raped a girl."

"Jesus. Who?"

"Elmer Pine's girl."

"Sally?"

"The young one. Thelma."

"Are you sure he done it?"

"Sure enough," the drunken voice said. "What're we waiting for?"

"Yeah. What're we waiting for?" another voice called from outside.

Then men moved in closer.

"Who's got the rope?"

"Wait. I've got a better idea," one of the men up front yelled.

Johnny Ray felt himself being pushed along by the two men on either side of him. He didn't want any part of what was going on but he knew he could not get out of there if he tried. He didn't even try to remain stationary, but allowed himself to be jostled up forward where two pot-bellied men had Cavanagh pinned against the cutting table.

Cavanagh didn't say anything. He didn't plead or argue. But there was panic in his eyes.

Johnny Ray looked around him at

the men, at their distorted faces. They formed a tighter and tighter circle around the cutting table.

He had never been part of a lynching, had never even seen one, but he could tell by the slow and deliberate movement of the crowd that nothing could stop them.

"Strip them clothes off him," somebody yelled.

"Yeah," said the man next to Johnny Ray.

"Let's get goin'."

"Yeah. Let's do it before Sheriff Oberdorfer gets here."

"What are we waiting for?"

Johnny Ray couldn't see what happened then. The screen door banged and a couple more men came into the kitchen. He heard a splash and muttering curses behind him as someone got sick.

Then he saw two burly men up on the cutting table. One of them had a tattoo on his forearm, a heart with the word *Mother* written across it. After a few moments they had Cavanagh up there too, hanging head down between them, and then they were holding him out over the giant vat of boiling grease. . . .

"Jesus!" somebody yelled.

"Stop 'em!" another voice yelled. "I don't want no part of this. Not this!"

But it already was too late. It wasn't just a mob any longer, but a single organism, acting independently of any conscious thought.

Afterward, Sheriff Oberdorfer talked to all of them one at a time.

Johnny Ray tried to explain that he hadn't been part of the thing. But when they found out that Cavanagh hadn't raped the girl there was a big stink. It got in the northern papers and the guy who owned the doughnut shop told Johnny Ray he'd have to let him go.

Johnny Ray Boyd, *loser*.

Now, as he sat thinking about it, he felt a hopeless resentment growing in him. It didn't seem right somehow, didn't seem fair. If it hadn't been for the nigger he might still have a decent job.

And he wouldn't be riding across Florida in this rain, on his way to Tampa to look for a job, maybe about to get himself killed in a hurricane before he even got there.

VII

The gas station-cafe was a shoddy woodframe building with two derelict pumps out front and a long line of empty oil drums, each painted with a single two-foot letter, spelling out the words: *Trading Post—Eats & Gas*.

Inside, the place looked sturdy enough. To one side was a scattering of tables and chairs, the inevitable jukebox and a scarred wooden bar over which hung a motheaten moose head. The windows had already been boarded up, a precaution prompted by the first twisting clutch of the wind, so that now the only light was from a couple of low-watt bulbs that swung from the ceiling.

Rain pattered into an assortment of pots and pans set around on the floor under the roof leaks.

The man called Johnny Ray Boyd looked at the pans and then at the trooper and said, "I thought you told us this place was solid—"

"Don't worry," Roundtree said. "All we have to do now is wait it out."

"How long will that be?" Phoebe Ann said. "I can't tell you how important it is that I get back to Tampa by tomorrow morning."

"It's hard to say, Miss. I suggest we find ourselves a place to be comfortable and just take it easy for a while."

"Is there a telephone?" Mrs. Touchberry asked.

"The line's dead," Roundtree said. "I just tried to call the highway patrol station at Bleckley. We'll just have to wait—"

"How about a radio?" someone asked.

The proprietor, a skinny, loose-jointed ex-boxer with a wrinkled left ear and flattened nose—his name was Benny Sire—brought out a radio from under the bar and plugged it in to one of the overhead cords. They clustered around it. All except Polichек, who sat up at the bar, watching them with a sort of crude amusement.

". . . it is expected that the storm will continue inland, perhaps as far as Tattersville and Hemet, pushing great quantities of water with it. This is a very vicious hurricane,

ladies and gentlemen. Damage to Tampa and the South Coast is already estimated in the millions. Sections of State Highway 62 are under water as far inland as Portertown. . . ."

Phoebe Ann, her face peculiarly expressionless, left the others and joined Polichек at the bar. She forced a smile.

"At least now maybe I can have that drink," she said.

"No reason not to," Polichек said.

He called the bartender over and ordered a bourbon and water for both of them. Johnny Ray Boyd came over, also, and sat drinking beer. Even Reverend Huggins ordered a straight shot, tossed it off with a simulated shudder, and said something about how all of them could benefit from a little something to settle their nerves.

"You got anything to eat?" Johnny Ray asked.

"Some crackers," the bartender said. "Cheese or peanut butter."

"Peanut butter. And another beer."

"How about you?" the bartender called over to the bus driver who was seated at one of the tables writing something on a notepad. "You want a beer?"

"Just some coffee if you've got it," the bus driver said.

He said something else but the sound of his voice was lost in a sudden crack of thunder. The lights dimmed, went out for a moment, and then came back on.

"You the only guy here?" Johnny Ray asked the bartender.

"Yeah. The guy who runs the gas station and the cook live near here. They went home to be with their families."

"Do you think the storm will come this far inland?" Phoebe Ann asked.

"I don't know," the bartender said. "Even if it does, we'll be okay here."

"But what about the water? Won't it get higher?"

"If it does, we'll stand on the chairs," Polichек said wearily.

"Don't pay no attention to them," Johnny Ray said. Sweat poured down his face and neck. "This whole place can go like a matchbox if the water hits high enough and hard enough. I don't want to scare you, lady, but it's best to expect the worse in a thing like this so you'll be ready with a plan. You've got to know in advance what you're going to do—"

"And how about you?" Polichек said. "What's your plan, bright boy?"

"There's some high ground just east of here," Johnny Ray said. "It's got some trees on it that look like they'll stand up under anything. As soon as this place starts to go I'm going to swim over there and climb right up to the top like I seen a raccoon do in a storm once."

"Do you think it's possible?" Phoebe Ann said. "Do you think the water can get that high?"

"I wouldn't worry, Miss," Trooper Roundtree said. He had come up behind them. "It will surprise me if we get any water at all this far inland, and if we do, I don't expect that it'll be more than a foot or two."

"I hope you're right," Phoebe Ann said.

Polichек ordered another drink. The lights dimmed, went out, and came on again. It had gotten considerably darker outside and during the time the lights were out it had been almost impenetrably black in the room. Polichек estimated the period of blackness at about five to eight seconds.

He could kill a man in half that time.

Suddenly he felt a shiver of anticipation in him. There would never be a better time or place. If the storm continued, it might be days before they found the bodies. And by then he'd be someone else in another town a thousand miles from there.

Polichек thought about it carefully. He wondered just how he would go about doing it. He'd have to be careful. He'd have to kill the cop first. That wouldn't be any problem. Just a quick flick with his knife when the lights were out. Then, using the dead cop's gun, he'd shoot the four men even before they knew what was happening. After that he'd take care of the two women and the girl.

Eight of them. He felt another

jolt of excitement just thinking about it. He wondered vaguely if any player before him had ever scored eight times in a single wild spree of killing.

Somebody put a nickel in the jukebox.

"That Sinatra," the bartender said. He popped open a bottle of beer and put it on the counter in front of Johnny Ray. "He swings."

"Yeah," Johnny Ray said.

"He's the greatest. Absolutely the greatest."

Johnny Ray drained half of his beer. "Talent counts," he said.

"I'll say. It must be wonderful to do something, almost anything, and know you're better at it than anybody else in the whole world."

"It is," Polichek said in a voice so soft that none of the others heard him. "It sure is."

VIII

Phoebe Ann Williams thought about the orange groves around Hemet Bay as she sat listening to the music. She thought about how good the trees had smelled before the big bulldozers had come in and knocked them over. Now there was nothing but a black welt of land scattered with the anonymous plaster-board boxes of Hemet Bay Estates: new life and new leisure for folks fifty and over.

With the trees had gone the little white frame house with the green shutters where she was born.

When the bulldozers came she moved with her father and mother to another section of town. Same kind of house. Same small green shutters. Same screened in porch. Nothing changed.

Not even the way she looked.

The awkwardness of limb, the too soft flesh had remained with her from childhood through girlhood and now into young womanhood. Not that she was altogether unattractive. She had gone up several bra sizes during the past few years and she had a placid, pretty face in spite of the faint beginning of a double chin.

At nineteen she regarded her life as a single, unending scene in a play. Boredom. Silent father, detached mother, uninteresting brothers and sisters.

She worked as a receptionist-secretary for a small construction firm. The office was set up in a house trailer that went from job to job. They were building a twelve unit apartment on a small bayfront lot north of town when she met Alex Ross.

He was a carpenter who had last worked on a bridge project up near Hernando, a muscular, sunburned man in his early twenties.

They began to go around together. Just the two of them. They saw sexy movies at the Plaza, ate broiled lobster on the beach and, inevitably, made love on white sand nestled in a grove of cabbage palm. After that they saw fewer movies. She began

to look forward to the brief interludes in the palm grove with an almost primitive anticipation. She regarded Alex, the fulfillment he brought her, as the most precious thing in her drab life. Through his acceptance of her she found a pleasure beyond anything she had ever known.

Three weeks after their first date he was fired for loafing on the job.

She was in the office when he came by to pick up his check. He did not say anything, didn't even look at her, but simply put the folded check in the pocket of his short jacket and went out. She was so shocked by his behavior that she sat several moments listening to the sound of his feet walking away over the raked shell before running after him.

"Alex!"

She caught his arm and he turned and held her away from him.

"Take me with you," she pleaded.

"With what, baby? With this?"

He held up the check and the wind whipped the corners against his fingers. "Forty-one bucks. Nothin'!"

"I've got money," she said.

"How much?"

"Almost a thousand dollars."

"Go back to the office," he said.

"Please, Alex." She moved closer and thrust herself against him, deep breasts sliding over his chest, colorless hair flapping against his face. "I love you—"

"Okay, kid. It's your funeral."

"I'll have to go home first," she

said. "I'll need some things. I'll meet you in the bus depot in an hour."

"In an hour," he said. "I ain't gonna wait."

She did not have a thousand dollars. In her purse was a dollar and seventy cents and there was another ten dollars in her lingerie drawer at home. It was all the money she owned in the world. But there was nearly a thousand dollars in the safe in the office and it was Friday and by the time they opened the office Monday morning she and Alex would be gone forever.

She slept with her head on his lap as far as Bleckley. They checked their luggage, except for her smallest suitcase, and walked to a nearby motel. The room was small, musty smelling, with the usual cheap chenille spread and sticky knob on the television set and hangerless closet.

He had not said much all the way from Hemet Bay. He said nothing now except to send out for a bottle of bourbon and cold sandwiches. Then he undressed as if it were the thousandth night they had spent together, as if it did not hold any special meaning for him.

It irritated her faintly. A vague resentment rose in her as she turned on the shower, waited for the water to become warm, then stepped into the stinging spray and picked up the bar of soap from the little rusty dish. But by the time she had dried herself and helped herself to the bourbon she was filled with a bursting sweet-

ness that overshadowed everything but the shuddering gratification of her body.

But as they made love she was aware of the annoying drip of the shower in the dingy little bath.

Toward morning she came awake and lay staring up through the muggy grayness. For a moment she did not know where she was. Then she remembered and in remembering she turned and looked at the man who lay next to her.

The sweat-damp sheets had been pushed into tight knots at the bottom of the bed, and in the semi-darkness she was aware of the muscle-knotted legs and slanting shoulders, the sunburned neck and wrists. There was a scent of him in the room, whiskey, and a not-unpleasant sweat smell. She felt a sudden warm swell of tenderness for the man whose face she could not see clearly and realized it was not the darkness that blurred her vision but the distorting prism of her tears.

She went into the bathroom, closed the door quietly and turned on the light. She looked at her tear-streaked face in the mirror. The face smiled back at her and asked aloud, "Who do you think you're kidding, Phoebe, girl?" and in that instant Phoebe Ann Williams shed the last unfriendly clutch of adolescence and became a woman.

She left the motel before sunup. She had kissed him on the forehead just before picking up her suitcase and he had not stirred. By the time

she was a hundred miles from Bleckley the whole episode had begun to seem unreal, as if it was part of a half-forgotten movie.

But the money was there to remind her.

The money was real.

It rode snug and cozy in the bottom of her suitcase, wrapped in the frilly pink shorty she had bought for the trip and hadn't used, an uncomfortable reminder that the wonderful escape hadn't been entirely a dream.

As she thought about the money an overwhelming terror choked her breath and soaked her body. She felt as if the bus was moving in slow motion. Then she relaxed sheepishly as she realized that there would be plenty of time to return the money to the safe before the start of the business day on Monday.

She settled back comfortably and closed her eyes just as the window spotted with the first sparse drops of a drenching rain.

IX

By mid-morning the rain was falling heavily on the little farming town of Bleckley. It fell on the raw plowed land, on innumerable roofs, on the new Little League diamond; it thundered on theatre marquees and rattled against tin Copenhagen signs.

Karl Oberdorfer had been sheriff of Bleckley for fifteen years and he had never seen a rain quite like it.

The force of it shocked him. But he had too much work on his desk to close up and go home the way they were doing over at the courthouse.

People didn't stop breaking the law just because of a little storm.

He put down the report he had been reading and leaned back in his chair. His sinuses hurt. He lit a cigar and drew heavily on it as the door opened and Deputy Miller came into the room.

Oberdorfer handed him the paper with the information he had been able to gather so far.

"Jesus Christ," was all Miller could say.

"He's the one killed the Miami cop in the hotel. There's no doubt about it. And he's the one left them bloody rags in the john at the bus depot."

"He must be some kind of maniac," Miller said.

There was a scratching sound at the door. Oberdorfer got up, opened it, and went back to his chair. Nothing happened for a minute. Then his dog came in, hair wet and matted from the rain, and sprawled out under the desk.

"Tell me what you found out," Oberdorfer asked Miller.

"Not a hell of a lot. There're two buses he could of left town on, assumin' that's what he had in mind?"

"What do you mean, 'assumin'?"

"It's possible he left the rags in the depot to throw us off. He may still be here in town. Or he may have driven out. Or walked—"

"I doubt it." Oberdorfer shifted the cigar in his mouth, spilling ashes. "That too goddamned fancy. My guess is he's on one of the busses."

"Maybe. But it wouldn't hurt none to throw up a couple of road blocks. Shouldn't be too hard to spot a man with a bullet in him."

"It ain't in him, Miller. I just got a call from Duggan over at the hotel. The bullet burried itself in the dresser." Oberdorfer blew his nose violently. "Now what about them busses?"

"Like I said, there're two of 'em. Actually, there're three. There was a seven forty-five south-bound for Miami, but since a witness placed him at the hotel at seven-thirty it ain't likely he made that one, unless the witness was wrong."

"Check it anyway. What about the other two?"

"There was an eight o'clock that's moving north right now for Jacksonville, which he could have made okay, and an eight-fifteen that's travelin' overland to Tampa."

"You got both of them covered?"

"Jacksonville's covered okay. There're four scheduled stops between here and there and I've got men waiting at all of 'em. But we're having trouble with Tampa."

"Trouble?"

"Can't get through. Hurricane came in off the Gulf about an hour ago and smashed hell out of everything. Just turned around and came slammin' in. If she don't blow her-

self out we might git it right here in Bleckley."

"Well, keep trying. Locate a ham in the area and find out what's going on over there. If we let that son-of-a-bitch slip out of here after killin' a city cop it's gonna be my ass. It's gonna be all our asses."

"Yeah. And if we don't get him soon it's a sure bet he's gonna kill somebody else."

Miller finished his coffee and went out.

Ten minutes later a man arrived breathlessly from Miami. His name was Detective-Lieutenant Melrose. He was a small man with wrinkled skin and shaggy eyebrows that grew together over his nose.

"Are you Oberdorfer?" he asked a soon as he was shown into the office.

"That's right."

"What've you got?"

Oberdorfer shoved the file across and he stood reading it carefully. Water dripped from his worn gabardine raincoat. He read the report a second time and then slammed it down on top of the desk.

"That's just the information I gave you over the phone," he said irritably.

"That's right. I ain't had time to bring it up to date."

"Then you'd better fill me in," Melrose said.

"Ain't much to tell. Not yet," Oberdorfer said. He opened a drawer, lifted out the bloody bandages, and dropped them on the desk.

"Found these this morning in the men's room at the bus depot. They're part of a sheet that was in the room where your man was killed. We figure the killer is on a bus right this minute, probably headin' up north and out of the state."

Melrose looked surprised.

Before he could recover, Oberdorfer smiled and said, "We ain't too up on your modern scientific methods, but we keep our eyes open, we try to stay on top of things."

"I appreciate your alertness," Melrose said.

"You want some coffee?"

"Yeah. Some coffee would taste good." He toop his cup to the window and looked out at the rain. "Is there an intercept out on the bus?"

"There're two possibles," Oberdorfer said. "We're checking 'em out."

Melrose turned from the window and stared him straight in the eyes.

"The man's a psycopathic killer," Melrose said. "He's responsible for seven murders that we know about. Only God knows how many more are on the books as accidents or naturals. And the worse part of it is he's been having some kind of bloody field day for the past couple of weeks. Three killings between here and Miami--"

"Maybe four," Oberdorfer said suddenly.

"Huh?"

"Last night. A rummy news peddler got run over in traffic not more than a block from the hotel where

your man was killed." Oberdorfer pulled another paper over in front of him. "Its been bugging me ever since. The guy was a cripple. Pushed himself around on one of them low carts that are only a couple of inches above the pavement. Driver of the car that killed him said he came shooting out into traffic like he'd been pushed. But there were no witnesses, no clues, no nothing."

"Make it four, then," Melrose said. "Four since last Tuesday. And one of 'em a cop—"

"What's wrong with him?"

"How the hell do I know? The guy's some kind of nut. He just likes to kill people."

"Jesus."

"Yeah," Melrose said.

"Maybe we've got him this time," Oberdorfer said.

"Maybe." Melrose went to the window again and looked out. "I ain't so sure. This guy is crazy but he isn't dumb. It's almost as if killing is some sort of game with him. As if he enjoys putting himself in jeopardy and then thinking his way out of it—"

"Don't worry. If he's on either of those busses we'll nab him."

A call came in and Oberdorfer picked up the phone.

"What's that? Orlando. You're sure? Okay, hold on." He slapped a palm over the mouthpiece and said to Melrose, "The Jacksonville bus just pulled into Orlando. Our man ain't on it." He took away his hand and said into the phone, "Send

Miller in here." Then he slammed down the receiver.

"What's up?" Miller asked as he came in.

"You get through to Tampa?"

"Not yet."

"Well, that's where he's headed.

"You sure?"

"Sure enough to want to go after him." Oberdorfer got up and put on his jacket and rain coat. "Come on—"

Melrose just stood there looking at them.

"You mean you're going to drive a car into the teeth of that hurricane?" he asked in astonishment.

"Sure."

"That's crazy."

"Maybe." Oberdorfer unlocked the gun rack and selected a sawed off shotgun. "It's just like I told you. We ain't too practiced on your fancy scientific methods. But when we know there's a mad dog around we get ourselves out and kill it."

"But shouldn't we wait for—"

"Not unless you want him to kill somebody else."

"Maybe he already has," Miller said.

Before they left the room Melrose said, "Wait. If you don't mind I think I'd like to come along."

X

Darkness came at five minutes past five.

Hard gusts of wind still struck the cafe. But the rain seemed to

have abated some. It fell now with a heavy somber patience instead of in thundering volleys that threatened to crush through the roof.

Polichek sat at the bar with the bus driver and the fat kid called Johnny Ray. Trooper Roundtree came over to them.

"I've been looking around," he said. "The place looks pretty solid. But I'm worried about the wind. There's a big pine out back that could tear us in half if it falls on us."

"How much longer will we have to wait?" Phoebe Ann looked up from where she was seated at one of the round wooden tables. "I've simply got to get back to Tampa before Monday."

Trooper Roundtree laughed. "Might as well make yourself comfortable, Miss."

"Yeah," Johnny Ray said bleakly. "It's gonna get worse before it gets better. That wind out there ain't even got itself warmed up yet. Soon's it get to blowin' good it'll stomp this here shed into kindlin'."

"Where's the Reverend?" Roundtree asked.

"He's a mighty peculiar actin' reverend," the bartender said. He reached under the bar and brought out a big five quart jar of pickled eggs. "He took a bottle and went over to the corner booth. Wants to be by hisself, I reckon. Only I thought preachers was supposed to go around encouraging everybody whenever there was trouble."

Polichek felt himself getting a little nervous. With a hurricane bearing down on them, maybe the smart thing for him to do would be to double back to Tattersville and then swing up north. Maybe he ought to finish everybody right now and take off. In a way, the hurricane was a blessing in disguise. The cops were going to be too damn busy to waste time looking for him.

The patrol car was outside. All he had to do was kill the suckers, take what dough they had on them, and hit the road. He could change cars in Tattersville and, if he didn't run smack into the storm, be in Atlanta the following day.

"Mister?"

The voice was directly behind him. He turned to gaze into the washed out eyes of the little Touchberry girl. For a moment he thought he saw a peculiar awareness in them, an intuitive maturity beyond her years, but the feeling passed. A sudden flash of annoyance drove through him.

"What is it, kid?"

"Are you afraid of the storm?"

"Are you?"

"No."

Polichek believed her. "I'm not either, then," he said.

"My mother's afraid. She's always afraid of everything."

Polichek looked at Mrs. Touchberry. He could hear her voice faintly above the wind, thin and nervous, as she sat talking to the Williams girl.

There was a sudden crack of thunder and for a moment the room was thrown into complete darkness.

Polichek looked at the face of the girl and saw a faint grimace, but there still was no sign of fear. He could not work up any feeling of bitterness toward her. He could not feel anything one way or the other.

Several seconds passed.

"Why don't you want to talk to me?" the girl asked.

"Beat it, kid."

"If you aren't nice to me I'll tell them about you. I know what kind of person you are. You're an awful man. If you aren't nice to me I'll tell them you grabbed me, just like the preacher—"

"I said beat it," Polichek growled.

"Come over here," Mrs. Touchberry said. "Come sit with me and stop bothering the gentleman—"

The girl did not leave but continued to stand there, watching him with an expression of distaste.

I'd better do it now, Polichek thought vaguely, the next time the lights go. I don't want to get trapped in this place by the storm.

He took another check of the inventory. Eight of them. Three women, counting the little girl, and five men. As soon as he killed the cop and got his gun away he'd go for the bartender. He couldn't be sure about the bartender. He hadn't had a chance to study him like the others. Maybe this one kept some kind of weapon down behind the bar. The bus driver would be third. Polichek

had watched him. He wasn't running scared like the others. Not like the fat kid and the preacher. They'd be too scared to act, too scared to do anything but slobber for mercy. The two women and the girl would come last. There wouldn't be enough bullets in the gun so he'd have to finish them off with the knife.

Polichek tried to look at their faces and discovered that he did not feel bitterness for any of them. They were no more to him than markers in a huge game of chance. But for some reason the old excitement wasn't there. It was almost as if he had lost interest in killing.

There was a high, screeching crack of thunder but this time the lights did not dim.

Eight of them, Polichek thought almost aloud. He imagined their bodies strewn about the room. When he used the knife he would have to be careful to avoid the blood. . . .

Polichek fished the knife from his pocket, opened it slowly and carefully, and sat cleaning his nails. The blade flickered in the half-darkness of the room. He turned on his stool and gazed at the neck of the cop who sat one stool away, shoulders hunched forward almost as if against an anticipated blow, staring down into his coffee.

Polichek knew it was his imagination but it almost appeared that the force of his gaze caused the hair to prickle at the nape of the muscular neck.

He put the knife on the bar and picked up his beer.

Only a few moments, Polichek thought. *The next time the lights go. . .*

While he waited he thought about the time when he had worked in a packy in Iowa. He remembered how it had been inside the killing room, a long, narrow room with a fenced off area along one side where visitors could come and watch the pigs being slaughtered. As each animal entered through a wooden chute a shackle was fastened around one of its hind legs and it was perked up into the air, each dangling by a foot and squealing. Polichek's father worked in the killing room. When each pig swung past his station there would be a flash of knife, so fast that sometimes the visitors would think he had missed, and then the pig's throat would open and a stream of bright red would pour out onto the floor. Polichek's job was to keep the place clean. There was so much blood that he worked full time sweeping it through round holes cut into the floor.

Polichek waited.

He heard a sudden *thunk*, as if someone had dropped a heavy grapefruit, splitting it. He looked up with amused eyes at where the preacher slumped down in the booth with his head on the table. The whiskey bottle was still upright, no more than a half inch of liquid showing in the bottom.

Polichek felt vaguely annoyed at the man for passing out. He finished his drink with a feeling of irritation. It seemed unfair to him that he would not be able to watch the man's expression when he killed him.

The thought so occupied him that he was caught off guard when the lights finally dimmed and went out. He groped out for the knife. He was going to have to hurry if he was going to kill the cop before the lights came on again. . . .

XI

Detective-Lieutenant Melrose was the first to spot the bus, outlined in the driving rain like the bloated gray carcass of a whale.

"That's it, all right." Miller instinctively tromped on the brakes. "And there's a highway patrol car. They must have all taken shelter in the cafe.

A funny feeling took hold of Oberdorfer.

"I just hope we're not too late," he said.

Miller parked next to the patrol car and they walked, Miller and Oberdorfer with their guns drawn, slowly and with difficulty through the wind toward the rain-slashed building.

They had not expected to find what they did.

By the time they arrived inside the excitement was nearly over. Trooper Roundtree had everything

under control. He stood over the body of a man stretched out on one of the tables, working with him, trying to stem the flow of blood that pumped from the man's throat.

"What the hell?" Oberdorfer blurted. "What happened?"

"An accident," Roundtree said. "It's crazy. He was sittin' up there at the bar, just messing around with an opened pen-knife. The lights went out. I guess he was drunk. He must have fallen off the stool and jammed the knife in his throat. I ain't never seen nothin like it—"

"Will he live?" Melrose asked.

"Nope. Not unless we get him to a doctor. And that ain't likely in this storm."

Miller patted the man's pockets, took out a wallet, and went through it.

"No identification," he said.

"It's him, okay," Melrose said. "They sent down a make on him from Atlanta."

"What're you talking about?" Roundtree said. "Who is this guy?"

"You ain't gonna believe it," Oberdorfer began. "You're lucky you ain't all dead. . . ."

In spite of the pain, Polichek was aware that they were talking about him. His head flopped sideways and he coughed blood out of his throat. He opened his eyes and saw their faces for a moment and then sagged back into blackness again.

He had a sudden odd thought that the game was over.

He tried to think about what had

happened. When the lights went out he'd reached out for the knife and felt only the worn smooth top of the bar. That much he remembered.

But the rest of it was. . . .

Pain. He remembered the pain and it suddenly came clear to him. All of it. He'd been searching along the top of the bar, scrabbling frantically with his fingers, when he'd felt the pain. He'd made a thin screeching sound as the three-inch blade buried its full length in his neck. He remembered falling off the stool in the darkness and lying on the floor but he hadn't lost consciousness.

He tried to laugh and coughed up blood.

Cops. They never knew anything. They thought he'd fallen in the darkness and accidentally stabbed himself. Well, that was a laugh. He knew how to handle a knife. He knew how to take care of himself. . . .

But who? why? A wave of impatience surged over him. He could not work up any emotion over the fact that he was dying. He felt only a vague despair. But he hated to go without knowing who had stabbed him. To know would somehow give meaning to his death.

He opened his eyes again and saw their faces clearly, as if his eyes had just then become adjusted to the light.

They stood in a tight circle around the table, watching him. The light

was behind them and their faces were blue-black, but he recognized each of them. The hard-looking trooper with three more hard-looking men who wore "cop" in their faces like primitive masks. The ripe-bodied girl who had to get back to Tampa by morning. The bus driver, looking tired but unafraid. The doughy-cheeked kid called Johnny Ray, fear visible in his eyes in spite of the beer. The bartender. The preacher, defeat written all over him, in the way he stood. Mrs. Touchberry, tears running through the makeup on her face. And the little girl.

After a moment they began to feel uncomfortable looking at him and drifted away from the table until only the little girl was left standing there.

She smiled at him, and her smile

sent a shuddering chill through him. He had played the game for too many years not to recognize the glimmer he saw in the small eyes. The look was unmistakable.

He wondered vaguely if he would be her first score, or if there had been others.

He did not feel hatred but smiled back at her knowingly just as the pain began pulling him under again. His thoughts fogged together. He tried to breathe and sucked blood into his lungs.

"Come away from the table, Emma, dear. Leave the poor man alone," was the last thing that he heard.

Then the full force of the hurricane struck and the people forgot the man on the table and prayed for the preservation of their own precious lives.



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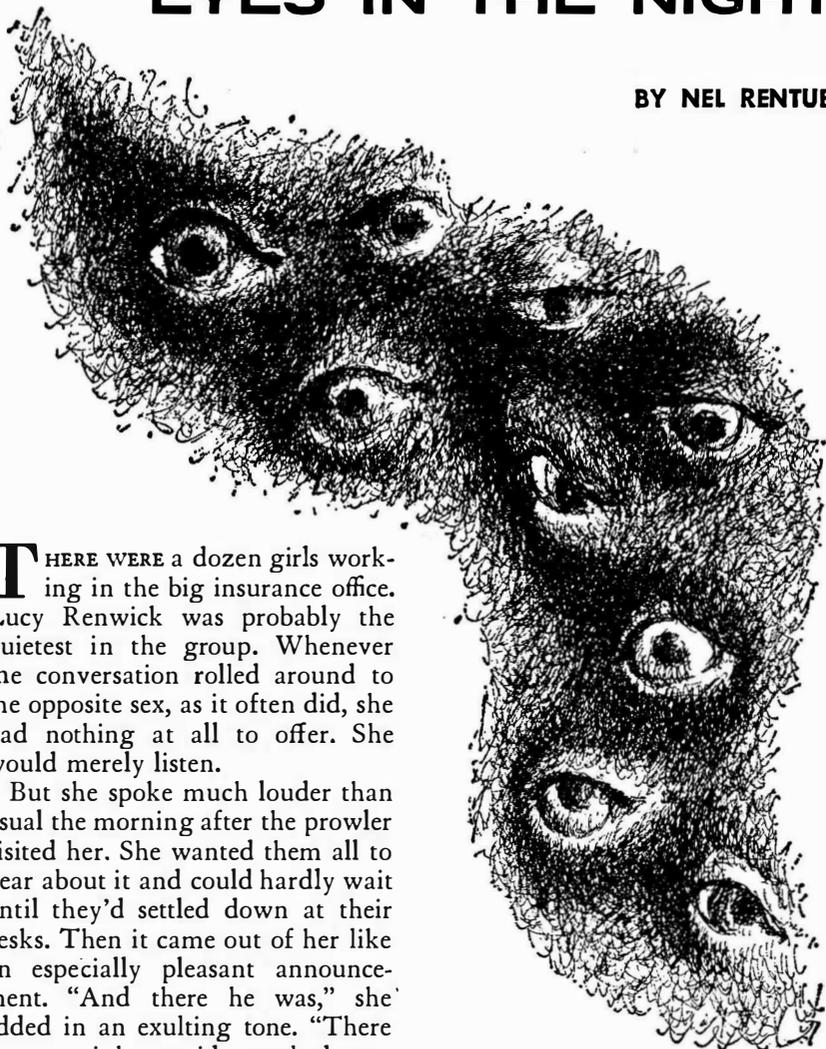
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She was lonely and unnoticed. Then the prowler came . . . and hope.

EYES IN THE NIGHT

BY NEL RENTUB



THERE WERE a dozen girls working in the big insurance office. Lucy Renwick was probably the quietest in the group. Whenever the conversation rolled around to the opposite sex, as it often did, she had nothing at all to offer. She would merely listen.

But she spoke much louder than usual the morning after the prowler visited her. She wanted them all to hear about it and could hardly wait until they'd settled down at their desks. Then it came out of her like an especially pleasant announcement. "And there he was," she added in an exulting tone. "There he was—right outside my bedroom window."

The typewriters that had just begun to sputter around her abruptly ceased. Heads turned.

"What happened? What did he do?"

Lucy regarded the eyes focused on her appreciatively. "He was watching," she replied. "Watching me. I had just begun to undress for bed."

"A Peeping Tom! You must have been scared to death. Did the police catch him?"

"The police?" Lucy shook her head. "I never bothered them. He ran off the moment he saw I'd discovered him."

"You should report it anyway. He *could* come back, you know."

"Yes, I suppose I'd better report it."

But Lucy had no intention of alerting the police. If the prowler paid her a second visit, which she strongly doubted, she believed she could handle him without assistance. She kept a loaded .38 revolver in her dresser drawer and had learned how to shoot it while growing up on a remote Arizona ranch.

She turned back to her job, regretting that she had nothing more to add. But it had been such an unusual and exciting experience for her that the telling of it alone had given her a bit more confidence in herself.

When Mr. Stoker came to work, passing her desk on his way from the elevator to his cubby-hole, she greeted him warmly and considered

her chances of becoming really acquainted with him.

Al Stoker wasn't any prize package. Short, bald, protruding from the middle, he was perhaps twenty years older than her thirty-two. But unmarried and recently transferred from some small mid-western branch of the company, he was practically a stranger in the city. She knew how long and lonely the week end could get. Like herself, she decided, he couldn't afford to be too particular.

Twenty minutes after the five o'clock commotion had subsided he started through the big outer office, and Lucy blurted out the words she'd been rehearsing to herself most of the day: "You look tired, Mr. Stoker. Bet you could use a drink right now."

"Why, hello—you still here, Judy?"

"It's Lucy—Lucy Renwick." She arose eagerly and reached for the pocketbook on her desk. "Know what? I could go for a martini myself. I really could."

But the sudden clatter of high heels, loud in the stillness, took his glance from her.

"Al, darling—did I keep you waiting long?"

"Quite all right, my dear."

Lucy's face clouded with disappointment as he passed by her desk. She knew she might not have been there at all and she could hear more than enough of their conversation without bothering to turn around.

"I simply *had* to put on a new face."

A soft whistle.

"Don't look at me like that. You're sweet, Al—but oh so full of young ideas!"

Lucy fumbled with the typewriter cover until she heard the whisper of elevator doors. Then she got up slowly. She hesitated in front of the plate-glass door long enough to make a face at herself and then stepped out into the corridor.

In the downstairs bar, Sam grinned at her. "Same as usual?"

"Same as usual, Sam."

"OK. One manhattan coming up."

"No, no—a martini."

Mixing it, he said, "Carol was in about this time yesterday."

"I know. I was with her."

"That's right, sure you were."

She leaned toward him, frowning. "Look, Sam—make it a double, will you?"

A while later she drifted along Wilshire. The sky glowed with neon and sunset. The homeward rush was in full swing and the fact that it was Friday only increased the tempo. Snatches of female chatter floating to her on the soft spring air concerned husband and boyfriend mostly.

She was not a part of it. The big city hadn't helped. She'd be just as well off out on the desert, taking pot-shots at jackrabbits. She peered sadly into the shop windows on her side of the street. At the drugstore

near her bus stop, she picked out a paperback novel.

It did not surprise her that none of the men on the crowded north-bound bus offered her his seat. She'd ceased to expect it long ago, deciding that courtesy depended to some extent on face and figure. She'd grown used to taking the whole twenty-minute ride standing.

She got off in an old and one-time prominent Hollywood neighborhood and went uphill to an ornate mansion that had been chopped up into a half dozen small apartments. Hers was on the ground floor in the rear and she followed the narrow walk alongside the house. A bitter little laugh broke from her as she used the private entrance. It had sold her more than anything else on renting the place, but had turned out to be about as essential as the telephone in her bedroom that hardly ever rang.

She made herself a sandwich, washed it down with a glass of milk. The unusual quiet reminded her that the couple who lived upstairs were out, and she hoped she wouldn't be tormented again tonight by the sound of their love-making. Lucy turned the radio down low and tried to get interested in her book.

Her gaze roamed to the old Victorian place next door. She could see the young girl again, dressing for the evening. The sight wasn't anything new, because the girl never bothered to draw the blind or turn

off the light when she changed, and she was escorted somewhere almost every evening. She must have been very popular, and staring across the wide expanse of lawn separating the two houses, Lucy could plainly see why. She slammed her book against the screen.

Hurrying to the nearest bar, Lucy imagined she could have very easily been mistaken for an alcoholic. She knew that such was not the case, however. But the burning desire within her seemed equally overpowering and she couldn't do anything at all about it just by staying in another night, could she?

A little breathless, she perched on the high stool and ordered her drink. She sipped it slowly. Four men were gathered around a cute blonde at the other end of the bar, and Lucy doubted they'd have noticed her had she climbed up in front of them and stood on her head. For the better part of an hour she sat by herself and stared in disgust at the way they were slobbering over the blonde. Why did they have to hog everything in pants, she wondered bitterly. Why couldn't they leave something for the desperate ones? She got up and marched out.

The small, congested place on Sunset was either her fifth or sixth stop and she might not have stayed there long enough to finish her drink had it not been for the argument. The man sitting next to her seemed rather upset that the bartender refused to cash his check and

she jumped at the chance of buying him a drink.

"Hey—that's swell of you, Miss—Miss—"

"Just Lucy."

"Lucy, huh? Say, I like that. I'm Carlos."

He had dark and thick wavy hair and long sideburns. She had heard a lot about the Latin type, and the fact that he must have been ten years younger than she only encouraged her all the more.

After what she considered a reasonable passage of time, she mentioned her apartment. "We could get a bottle," she added.

"But I'm buying," he said. "I insist. They know me at the liquor store. They'll cash my check. You just wait here. Hey—we'll have a ball!"

In getting to his feet, he brushed against her and the sigh in her throat was quick and tremulous.

Lucy waited, warm and eager. Ten minutes went by—then fifteen. The excitement stirring within her began to wane. She glanced nervously from the clock to the entrance-way. She needed another drink, she decided, and ran her hand into her pocketbook. Then she snatched up the pocketbook and her fingers were scrambling inside. Her billfold was gone!

She flounced out onto the sidewalk. The obscene epithets she labeled on Carlos slowed a passing police car. She fell silent immediately. She managed to straighten

her meandering course. Still scowling, she shifted all the blame to herself. She should have known that Carlos was after her money. What a fool she'd been to dream he'd want anything else of her!

Finally she flung back the door of her apartment. She stalked through the darkness, going directly to her bedroom. Kicking off her shoes, she leaned over the lamp on the night table. A slight sound made her hesitate. At the same instant the cricket-singing beneath her window cut off with an electrical suddenness. Her head swung around.

She saw him then. Her palm slapped against her mouth, muffling the cry forming in her throat. As she sank down on the mattress, her eyes were wide. He stood as motionless as one of the shrubs outside. Sitting rigidly erect, she stared at him from the black depths of her bedroom. It was only a shade darker than the night and the prowler was a faceless outline. He did not move. He was at least fifteen yards away from her and her heart-beat began slowing to normal.

She could have screamed, but dropped her hand from her mouth without uttering a sound. She thought of telephoning the police. She remembered the revolver in her dresser drawer. Just switching on her light and letting him see he'd been discovered would have frightened him away as quickly as it had the night before, she believed.

Lucy was thinking of something

else as she turned on her light, however, and she pretended she hadn't noticed him. She still sat facing the window and hadn't touched the open blind, but she managed to keep her gaze from straying in his direction. With lowered eyes, she crossed one leg and then the other as she rolled down her hose. The window sill was low, and realizing that nothing obstructed his view, her breath quickened.

But not with fear. The thing that had frightened her the previous evening was the very thing that thrilled her now. So she was very much aware of his gaze. She'd drawn him back to her window. She did not want him to go away. She wouldn't cry out in alarm. She'd offer him no resistance. He'd have no reason to panic. Would he want to use a knife on her then? Or perhaps strangle her?

The urgency clawing inside of her screamed that she take the chance. Or maybe it was the alcohol in her system. Or a combination of both. But it kept her from racing to the outside door of her apartment, which she remembered leaving ajar.

She stood up. She reached for the zipper at the back of her dress and slid it downward. A hissing of shoes against the dew-damp grass interrupted the deep stillness. He had taken a step closer to her. A tiny wild fluttering started in the region of her heart. Moistening her lips, she lifted her dress. She wriggled, working it over her head. In bra and pan-

ties, she crossed the room to hang the dress in the closet.

For a few seconds she did not turn. She listened intently. She heard nothing and began doubting he'd taken another step in the direction of her window. Perhaps the quiet held him back. She went to the radio and twisted the knob. When it had warmed, a soft popular tune filled the room.

Lucy was frowning, wondering if he'd gone, when she glanced in the mirror over her dresser. But the reflected window framed his head and shoulders, and her bare flesh tingled with the sight. She could distinguish little from the feeble light falling on his face, but it no longer mattered what he looked like. The urge within her had stirred to a point beyond caring. Sucking air into her lungs, she unfastened her bra and tossed it on a chair.

Another fleeting glance in the mirror assured her he was still there. He knew that she hadn't closed the door. Hadn't he been waiting outside for her to return—waiting and wanting her? Did he need even more encouragement?

A smile creased the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were narrow as her thumbs dug beneath the elastic top of her panties. She leaned over

slightly, feeling the heat of her flesh as she slid them below her hips. She let go, and lifting her leg gracefully, flung the flimsy material from her. She spun around. She was completely naked. Her eyes diverted, she strolled directly toward him, her hips swaying. If the window hadn't been screened he could have touched her. She felt as if he had. She fought to control her rushing breath. She thought that she would smother.

She threw herself across the bed. She closed her eyes. She squirmed a little. Then she rolled over and reached for the lamp. She turned it off—and waited. She heard him move. Opening her eyes, the window was empty. Turning the radio off, she listened. Dizzy with anticipation, she waited expectantly for the sound of his footsteps on the walk, in the house. . .

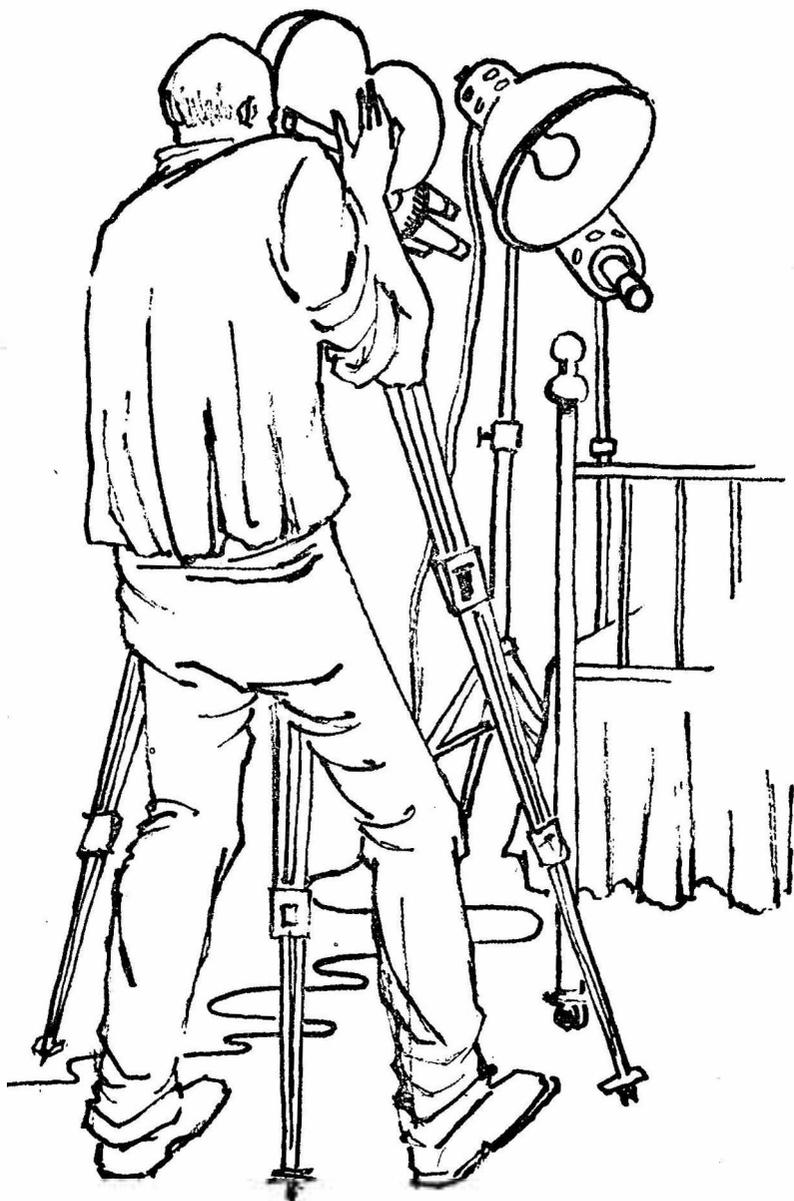
In a short while she raised up on bed. Looking out worriedly, she saw him on the lawn. He was slowly creeping away from her, toward the lighted window next door.

Her next few seconds were crammed with blind fury.

The awful quiet following the explosion of the .38 made her voice on the phone sound very loud.

"I just shot a prowler," she told the police.





THE STUD

*A
Novel*

BY
JAMES HARVEY

Vic's agent was close-mouthed about the job. It only paid a hundred dollars . . . but Vic needed that hundred bucks badly.

VIC HARPER slammed his right fist into his open palm. He thought of Monty Ferguson. He promised himself to get one of two things out of his agent; a job, or his fifteen dollars back.

As he walked down 47th Street, which was just about the center of Manhattan's Times Square, Vic's attention was suddenly arrested by two well stacked rear ends. Forgetting his anger he stared hard. He wondered why all the big-bottomed girls insisted on wearing slacks that were too tight for them. He was surprised when the girls turned into the same building he was headed for. Vic quickened his pace when

he realized that he could squeeze into the small elevator with them if he got there in time.

Once inside the elevator Vic took a closer look at the girls, their faces this time. Both of them were about his age, twenty-eight, but they had enough make-up on to disguise the wrinkles fifty years of hard living would bring. When they got off on the same floor with him Vic was sure that they were show girls and were headed for Monty Ferguson's office too. He followed the girls down the dark hallway with his eyes riveted on their bouncing buttocks. Life could be beautiful after all.

Monty's office was a single room

with a thin partition in the center in order to give the impression that the agency had two offices. Monty himself was seated at his desk talking to a girl of about eighteen. "Just fifteen dollars," he was saying, "and your face and name will be in the brochure that goes all over the city to producers, directors and club owners. *Fifteen hundred* of them altogether. That's only a cent a contact! Now tell me, where can you get a better deal than that?"

The girl plucked nervously at her pocketbook. Vic surmised that the poor kid was almost as broke as he was.

"Save your money," Vic told her with a firm and quiet voice.

Monty raised his head and noticed Vic and the two girls for the first time. His sickly white face flushed. "What?" he said sharply.

Vic ignored him and talked directly to the youngster. "This bum got fifteen bucks out of me the same way. There isn't any brochure and there never will be."

"Now wait a minute, Vic," Monty said, getting to his feet.

Still Vic ignored him knowing that the agent was too much of a coward to do anything but fight with words. "I figure that he took fifteen bucks from about two hundred people with that same pitch. Fifteen times two hundred comes to 3G's this bum sticks in his own pocket. . ."

"That's a lie!" Monty shouted.

"Then just give me one name

your so-called brochure went to!" Vic shouted back.

Monty began to sweat. "I . . . I don't know who gets the brochures exactly," he said. "I have a distributor who sends them out."

"What's the distributor's name?"

Monty brought himself to his full five-foot-six and answered coldly, "I refuse to answer. Your allegation is beneath the dignity of a reply."

Vic had to laugh. There was no question about it. Monty was an experienced phony. "Come off it," he snapped. "I want my fifteen bucks back. Right now."

"You'll get your money back," Monty said in an angry tone. "Now young lady . . ."

The girl looked at Vic, then at Monty. "I don't know which one of you is right but I don't want a part of it," she said. With that she got out of her chair and left in a rush.

Monty drummed his fingers on the desk. "I hope you're satisfied," he said sounding like an outraged innocent. "That girl had a career ahead of her. You've just ruined it."

Vic extended his hand. "The fifteen bucks, Monty."

"I said you'll get it. I just haven't got it with me at the moment," Monty responded dully. He turned to the heavily made up girls and forced a smile on his pale face. "Ah, yes!" he said with manufactured heartiness, "the La France Sisters! I believe I do have a booking for you both."

The girls didn't react. "Is that

true about the brochures, Monty?" one of them asked. "They just ain't?"

"Don't believe everything you hear, girls," he told them. "After all, I *did* get you into that nightspot over in Jersey."

"You didn't answer her question," the other half of the La France sisters said. "We don't have money to throw away on advertising that doesn't get advertised."

Monty snapped his fingers. "Girls! I just remembered I've got to make this phone call first. Both of you sit down and take it easy."

As the agent dialed the phone the La France Sisters sat down but uneasily. They placed their rumps on the edges of two hard chairs.

"Hello," Monty bawled cheerfully into the phone. "This is Monty Ferguson, Paul. I just wanted to tell you you're in luck. I have just the girls for that club of yours, the La France Sisters. They've just finished a very important engagement and I'm calling you first before . . . Sure, Paul, sure, they're two of the best exotics in the business . . ."

Vic looked at the girls again. "Exotics" was the polite term for "stripers." He never heard of a sister strip team before. He tried to imagine both of them in action and crude visions flashed in his mind.

"I've got 'em in my office now, Paul," Monty said into the phone. "I also have a lot of offers from other clubs in town on my desk in front of me . . ."

Vic glanced at Monty's desk. It

was empty except for a half-eaten cheese Danish and a girlie magazine.

"Yes . . . yes," the agent went on with a smile. "I'll have the girls drop over right now. Goodby, Paul."

As soon as Monty put the phone down he scribbled a name and address on a slip of paper and handed it to a La France. "Your next job," he announced grandly.

"Thanks, Monty," the girls said together. They left the office all smiles and Vic watched them until they reached the elevator.

"You've made them happy," Vic said turning to Monty. "Now make *me* happy. Either give me my money back or get me a job."

Monty took out his wallet and opened it showing four shabby looking singles. "Look, that's all I got," he pleaded. "If you want that fifteen back you'll get it but not now. I've got expenses after all."

"So have I. My rent is due in a few more days."

"What do you want from me?" Monty all but screeched.

"A job. You're supposed to be an agent."

"I could find you a job . . . if you were a stripper," Monty told him. "But, for an actor . . ."

"Then how about a modeling job? You told me you had a confession magazine cover lined up."

Monty lifted his hands helplessly. "It turned out you just weren't the type. You're too good looking. They wanted a mug."

"If I'm so good looking why can't you get me into a T.V. commercial? That's where the real money is."

Monty shifted his eyes. "The . . . er ah . . . competition is rough."

"Sure its rough," Vic said bitterly, "especially to an agent who doesn't have any franchises."

"F . . . franchises?" Monty stut-tered. "Look, Vic, why don't you just go back to Los Angeles, maybe things will be better out there."

"Don't change the subject. Besides you know I've spent five years on the coast before I came here. I came to New York to get on Broadway. I'd even take a walk-on part. Since you don't have a license you can't even get me that."

"I *had* a license," Monty said with a sigh. "I'm trying to renew it."

"With *your* lousy reputation? Forget it, Monty. The world is out about this phony brochure racket of yours. One of these days the cops will walk in here asking questions. One of your suckers is bound to lodge a complaint . . ."

Monty rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Vic," he said thickly, "I've got something for you. I don't know too much about it, you understand. There's this guy I know who makes films . . ."

Vic smiled. "What kind of job is it?"

Monty shrugged. "I told you I don't know too much about it. This is a new contact. It may not amount to anything."

"Why are you trying to tout me off it, Monty? Is it because you owe somebody else a favor and you're holding it for him?"

"No, Vic. Its just that I don't know much about these people. They're shoe-string operators."

"How much do these people offer?"

Again Monty shifted his eyes. "A hundred dollars."

"And you were trying to hold back a little hundred buck job from me? For a minute there I thought you really had something lined up. I'll take the job, Monty. And I'll also take your percent. That'll make us even."

Monty's hand trembled as he wrote a name and address on a card. "Just remember that you asked for this job. I don't know what kind of outfit it is. I want to protect my clients."

Vic picked up the card and looked at it. "Doug Engi, c/o Happy Times bar," he said reading it aloud. "That's a joint on Eighth Avenue, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's why I didn't want to send you there. It must be a real cheap outfit that has to work out of a gin mill."

When Vic entered *Happy Times* he was struck by the odor of stale beer. The bar was almost empty with a female bartender serving drinks. "I'm looking for a Doug Engi," he told her.

She pointed to the rear of the place

CONTINUED ON PAGE 97

THE PRO BEAU

It was completely out of character. The whole idea rubbed Harry the wrong way. But when he met Linda, Harry Gerod decided . . . to marry for love!

BY

R. A.

GARDNER

WHEN most men marry, their object is usually the companionable state of matrimony. Harry Gerod's object was murder. Harry was a professional husband. He had disposed of nine wives over the years. They'd all been cut from the same cloth, all homely, unloved drabs, but having something in common, money. Each had possessed a little nest egg, some small salable property, or stocks and bonds, and one had owned four thousand dollars worth of jewelry.

A simple man, Harry had killed all of them the same way, by tossing a plugged-in radio into their bath water, while they were bathing.

The nine murders occurred in different parts of the country. He had chosen his victims so carefully, only women who had no ties or relatives, that he'd never been suspected by the police.

His method was to quickly marry some unattractive, love starved female, and as quickly, move her to a large nearby city, where both were only faceless strangers in a crowd. After a suitable time lapse when the woman's property had been conveyed to Harry for a "business venture", he had used the radio-in-the-bathtub gimmick.

He had always been surprised at how easily things had gone, how

all the foolish females fell for him. For he wasn't handsome. In fact, he prided himself that he looked somewhat like a church deacon. He was short, rotund, always neatly dressed in grey which showed off the silver in his black wavy hair. His eyes were dark, his teeth excellent and he cultivated an austere expression that somehow inspired trust and suggested sincerity. But he could turn on the male-ness at will, charm some romance hungry woman into believing he was the answer to her prayers.

His last wife, Mabel Innis, had been so repulsive to him, he almost swore off marrying and murdering for a living. Mabel had been forty-four, a widow, waddling fat, and had a thick black mustache on her upper lip. She'd been good for thirty thousand, a really big score to Harry.

"I'm sure glad to see that one underground," he told himself with relief, after the funeral.

He took the thirty thousand and flew to Las Vegas. Harry wasn't a gambler and he didn't smoke, rarely drank. But somehow the gawdy gaiety of Las Vegas, appealed to him, after six nerve wracking months with fat Mabel Innis.

He registered at a good hotel as Harry Gordon, he always used his real first name. Then he strolled about the exciting town, gazing with interest at the Hollywood-like beauties in sausage skin tight slacks. He wasn't looking for a victim, so he enjoyed himself.

After a particularly spectacular redhead in magenta pants had flapped her eyelashes at him, he said to himself, "For once I'd like to marry a beautiful woman. One I really liked."

Swiftly, the ugly faces and bodies of his nine wives, paraded through his mind and he shuddered, said aloud, "I'll do it. By God, this time, I'll do it."

Then he proceeded to scrutinize each passing woman with marriage for pleasure in mind, instead of marriage for murder.

He wandered into a gambling casino, and for want of something to do, had a whiskey sour at the bar. The unaccustomed alcohol quickened his blood and blunted his perception.

He sauntered over to a crap table and before he knew it, he was throwing dice. What was more, he won and kept on winning. It was just incredible, he simply couldn't lose.

A crowd quickly gathered around him and excited cries of "He's hot!" and "He's hit a winning streak!" spurred him on in spite of himself. It was like a burning fever in his blood.

In a semi daze, he saw the gorgeous blue eyed blonde at his elbow, smile at him encouragingly.

She said, squeezing his arm, "This happens only once in a lifetime. You better shoot the works. You can't lose."

The gorgeous blonde guided him from game to game and she was

right, he just couldn't lose. He doubled his thirty thousand and added ten thousand to it, before sanity returned, told him to quit while he was ahead.

He had seventy thousand dollars! He'd never had so much money at one time in his life. And he had the most beautiful blonde in the world on his arm. Her figure was perfection, her hair spun gold, her eyes telegraphed promises and her lips were temptation itself. He was suddenly a God.

She said, "My name's Linda, Honey. What's yours?" as they stood at the bar for a celebration drink.

Harry savoured her name on his tongue. The name was sweet, after years of mouthing the unlovely names of his nine wives, Agnes, Gertrude, Pearl, Bessie, Maude, Hor-tense, Nellie, Hazel and Mabel.

He told her his name, said he was a retired hardware store merchant from Detroit, a widower, on his way to settle in California.

They had dinner together, then the next day, breakfast, lunch and dinner again. He could hardly bear to let her out of his sight. Harry was in love. Actually in love at last. When he declared his love the third day, asked Linda to marry him, she told him she loved him too and consented to become his wife.

The fly in the ointment was Linda's brother, Rod. Linda and Rod were a dance team at the Red Gate night club. Harry disliked Rod on

sight, he was too young, too darkly handsome, too smooth for Harry's liking. But Linda refused to marry Harry until Rod got another dancing partner.

So Harry's days were spent lunching, dining and riding about in a rented car with Linda and counting the seventy thousand dollars he carried around his waist in a money belt.

He had told anyone who'd listen, bell boys, maids, cab drivers, about his big win, adding he'd sent a bank draft back home to his own bank in Detroit. While he enjoyed putting on the rube act for them, he hoped to foil any robbery attempts. But he told Linda about the money belt, swore her to secrecy.

Harry and Linda were parked in front of her motel, one sunny Sunday afternoon, he had sudden qualms about marrying a twenty-two year old girl, when he was so much older.

He said to her, "Linda, Sweetheart, I've been thinking about us, I'm twenty years older than you are, I'm forty-two. I'll be an old man when you're forty-two."

Linda snuggled up to him, patted his face and hair, "Now Honey," she admonished, "You trying to get out of marrying me?"

"God no," he breathed, "I just want you to be happy with me."

Linda kissed him lingeringly and he gasped rapturously, "I'll get you a house in Hollywood, a new car, a big diamond engagement ring, you'll

have everything you ever wanted.”

“Linda cooed, “I only want you Darling. I want to settle down and be a wife. I’m so sick of show business.”

The days went by and Harry fumed, waiting for Rod’s dancing partner to show up. The girl was expected any day, but Linda refused to marry Harry until she had actually arrived.

He moved from the hotel to a lavish unit in a motel near the Red Gate night club, so he’d be nearer to Linda, and have his own secluded quarters for entertaining. He had a living room, bedroom, small service kitchen and bath. It was luxuriously furnished in new Swedish modern. Harry gave Linda a key so she could rest there between acts if he was out.

He came in one night after watching Linda and Rod’s last show. He was later than usual as he’d stopped off for a bite to eat. Linda hadn’t arrived. She dropped in every evening after the show to have a night cap with him. And he enjoyed the petting, the kissing, that made his heart race madly with future expectations.

He switched on the living room lights, hummed happily to himself as he got out the Scotch, ice and glasses. He plumped pillows on the green divan where he and Linda always sat. He twitched at a flowered drapery, stared at himself in the mirror, spreading his lips to examine his perfect teeth.

For some unaccountable reason, he was nervy, edgy, as he usually was

just before he murdered one of his wives.

He went into the bathroom to take an aspirin. He felt a blinding pain at the back of his head, then darkness came and black oblivion.

He awakened to find himself naked, partly submerged, in the warm water of his bath tub. His first thought was for the now under seventy thousand he always wore around his waist in the money belt. Then he heard voices in the bedroom. Linda’s voice and Rod’s.

Harry was so bewildered by what had happened, he lay there in the tepid water and listened.

Rod said, “Where’s the dough, Honey?”

Linda answered, “Right here in my shoulder bag. He hasn’t spent more than five hundred. The poor sap. We’re on easy street now.”

Then Rod said, his voice sounding worried, “You’re sure this is going to work, Baby? We don’t want to get in no bind with no cops.”

Linda cried, “Sure it’ll work, Rod. You got a smart dame for a wife, never forget that. With no motive, the cops won’t suspect a thing. He told everyone he’d sent the dough back to Detroit. It’ll be okay, an accident, like I told you.”

Rod said, “Go over it again, I want to be sure.”

Linda said, “Well I saw this piece in the paper, woman’s radio fell in her bathtub while she was taking a bath. She got electrocuted. Reason I remembered, I knew her when she

worked in the carney with me. I was only a kid then. But she was a nice old bag, named Mabel Innis. She'd just married some guy a few months before she died."

Rod said, "Okay, so we do it and beat it. Let the maid find him. Hand me that radio you brought with you. Let's go."

Harry screamed like a woman, started to struggle out of the tub.

Linda and Rod raced into the bath. Rod pushed Harry back in with his foot. Harry fell with a great splash. Rod quickly plugged the radio into the wall outlet, placed there for electric shavers, snapped on the switch.

Harry screamed, "Don't do this to me, Linda, I love you."

Rod tossed the radio into the bath water.

Harry screamed only once more.



ASTRAL BODY

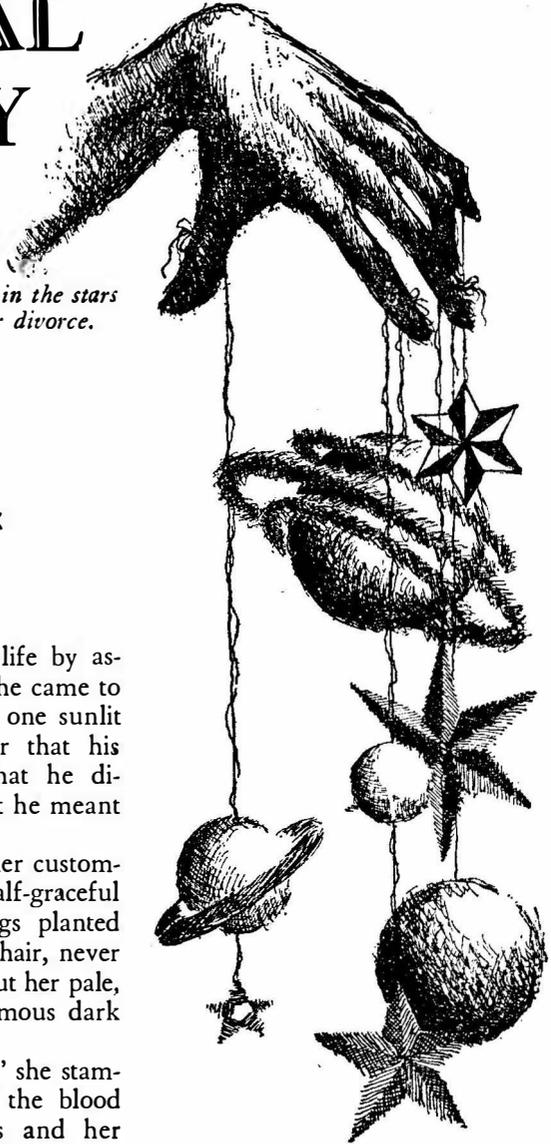
*Their marriage was made in the stars
. . . but then, so was their divorce.*

BY
MAEVA PARK

CYRUS WILSON lived life by astrology, and when he came to his young wife Pamela, one sunlit afternoon, and told her that his horoscope demanded that he divorce her, she knew that he meant what he said.

She stood frozen, in her customary half-awkward, half-graceful stance, straight, slim legs planted firmly apart. Her black hair, never in style, swung loose about her pale, oval face with the enormous dark eyes.

"What do you mean?" she stammered, actually feeling the blood drain from her cheeks and her heart. "You said—you said when



we were married, that the stars had ordained it. Why should it change now? I *love* you, Cyrus!"

"Pamela," he said patiently, his handsome, god-like face devoid of expression, "our marriage is over; the stars always know best. Who are we to dispute them?"

Pamela's whole body began to tremble with rage and indignation. She knew as well as anyone else that she was not clever nor witty, but she was pretty and young, and she'd been a good wife to Cyrus.

"People don't go out and get divorced, simply because their horoscopes say to make a change!" she told him. "Why, the world would be in chaos, if everyone did that!"

As always, he ignored her attempt at logic. "This is the way it must be," he uttered majestically, turning away. "You're young and attractive; you'll find another husband. Besides—I'm going to marry Mina."

There were yellow roses in a silver bowl on the coffee table. She'd bought them herself; Cyrus never sent flowers nor candy, nor, indeed, any other little sentimental gift. Pamela found herself possessed by an almost overwhelming urge to pick up the roses and the bowl, and hurl them at Cyrus' head; but in the next instant, she was aghast at her own emotions.

He is my own dear husband, she told herself. This will work out somehow. I'll never let him leave me; we are meant for each other.

She watched him walk away, his expensive tan suit draped perfectly from his shoulders, his back and knees unbending, in that peculiar, stiff-legged gait of his.

She sat down hopelessly in a big chair and heard the front door close firmly behind Cyrus. She beat her hands together in despair, and the sound, so sharp and definite, seemed to waken her from a trance. She lit a cigarette, and felt a swift, childish surge of defiance, because Cyrus abhorred smoking in a woman.

Then she forced herself to think. It was difficult, because her father had always impressed upon her the idea that men liked an obedient, docile woman. She had let first him, then Cyrus, do her thinking for her. "Gentle and biddable, although inclined to stubbornness when something dear to your heart is involved," said her horoscope.

Each day Cyrus read his three-line horoscope in the morning paper, and planned his life accordingly, concentrating his sales efforts on those days when the stars were favorable to him, lying dormant on unpropitious days. And even the most open of scoffers amongst his fellow employes, could not deny that he was a successful salesman.

In recent months, Cyrus had acquired a personal astrologer, a wealthy-middleaged widow who dabbled in horoscopes because she had little else to do with her time. Pamela herself had found Mina

Myers kind and generous, and until this moment, it had not occurred to her that Cyrus could possibly be interested in Mina, in a romantic way.

Pamela ground out the cigarette and wet the ashes with her tears. The faint, acrid smell made her a little sick, and she thought how right Cyrus was, not to allow her to smoke.

It is absurd, she told herself now, to imagine that he is in love with Mina. He must have misunderstood his horoscope—or Mina made it come out this way, because she wants Cyrus for herself. Or Cyrus wants Mina's money, said a little, cynical voice she didn't recognize as her own.

The answer, so obvious as to make her laugh, came to her in an instant. What did a wife do in these circumstances? Why, she went to visit her rival, of course, and the other woman, seeing the foolishness, the hopelessness of her situation, left town gracefully.

Pamela ran down the hallway and into the bedroom, which she secretly thought looked exactly like Cyrus, with its muted greys and tans. She changed into a brown suit and crushed a smart hat over her dark hair. Then, satisfied that she looked sufficiently dignified to confront her rival, she caught up her bag and gloves and left the house.

Mina Myers lived in a large, vulgar apartment, replete with furni-

ture and thick white rugs and pink satin love seats, tucked here and there like shiny worms in a pulpy apple.

"Mina," Pamela said earnestly, waving aside the offer of a Manhattan—Cyrus disapproved of cocktails—"I suppose you know why I've come."

Mina smiled kindly. Her mouth was painted orangey-red, all the way to the corners, so that it looked sad and clownlike. The mouth of an old woman, Pamela thought, feeling a little vicious.

"Pamela, dear, I'm so sorry, but this is bigger than Cyrus and me—or you. It's as big as the stars!" She waved a veined hand, clutching a long, expensive cigarette holder.

"You're not seriously planning to marry Cyrus, are you?"

Mina's eyebrows rose in astonishment. "Of course I am. It's all there—" She gestured toward the desk. "In his horoscope and mine."

"But he's too young for you!" Pamela cried, too hurt to be diplomatic.

"And he's too old for *you*," Mina said sweetly. "No, my dear, you can't change our minds. It's destined."

She got up and went to her desk. "Here's the horoscope I worked out for you awhile back, Pamela dear. Take it home and read it; you'll see that there are good days ahead for you."

That night Cyrus spoke to her sharply about her visit to Mina. "It

was very undignified of you," he said coldly, "and quite useless. You know that I always obey the stars implicitly. I'm going to marry Mina."

"I won't let you!" Pamela cried, with the terrifying sensation that she was beating at the wind.

"You can't fight it," he said matter-of-factly, cutting his steak firmly, his knife and fork across the plate.

She scarcely knew where her courage came from, but it was there when she needed it.

"I won't give you a divorce," she said softly. "You can go and live with her if you want to, but you'll remain my husband. I haven't done anything wrong."

She felt the first chill touch of fear when he looked up at her, his face blank.

"That would not suit my purpose," he said, and his sharp white teeth showed briefly between his thin lips. "I advise you to go off to Reno and get a nice, quiet divorce."

The tug-of-war between them began that night and continued for several weeks. Pamela was unexpectedly adamant, but the thing which made her sob into her pillow half the day and left her sleepless and shaken at night, was Cyrus' complacent self-assurance. It was his nature to be this way, she reminded herself; but still, it was oddly nerve-shattering to have him ignore her rights, her wishes, her softly voiced arguments.

When, during the sixth week of their one-sided battle, he suddenly gave in and suggested that they go away for a second honeymoon, she was shyly delighted, happy and relieved to be once again her old loving, yielding self.

"We'll go to Mina's cabin in the mountains for a long weekend," he said. "Get in a little fishing and hiking."

"I should think—" she began.

"Think what?" he asked, in a repressive tone.

She turned away quickly. "Oh, nothing. I just thought she might not like having us go together to her cabin."

"Mina's a sensible woman." He dismissed the subject.

On Friday, they set off in the clear, cool hour of dawn, with the sun like a splattered orange in the sky, and the early dew sprackling the grey hood of the car with silver. They drove up, up, up, between rows of encroaching evergreens, along red-clay roads so rutted and narrow that they were little more than paths.

From time to time Pamela looked at Cyrus adoringly; it was so nice to be able to adore him again.

"I'm very happy," she said. "So glad you saw the light at last, darling, in spite of your precious stars."

He took his eyes from the twisting road for just a second and smiled at her briefly. She had an instant in which to wonder at his smile; then it was gone. But Cyrus,

she was remembering uncomfortably, had never given in on one single detail, important or trivial, in their entire married life. The color of the living-room furniture, the price of her winter coat, the brand of breakfast coffee—all these were decided upon, with majestic assurance, by Cyrus.

Mina's cabin, as she had expected, was as comfortable as any city home. The rugs, in an effort to look homespun, were hand-braided, the walls were done in gleaming knotty pine. There was a small but complete kitchenette, and a knotty pine bar took up one corner of the vast living room.

With childlike pleasure, Pamela went straight to the huge stone fireplace which dominated the room.

"Oh, do build a fire, Cyrus!" she exclaimed. "It will be so cozy. That brass poker and tongs alone must have cost a *fortune*. It's the most beautiful fireplace I ever saw."

Obligingly he laid a fire and touched a match to it. Indeed, he seemed honestly anxious to make her happy, and she felt a little thrill of power. She had made him give in to her this once, stars or no stars. It was almost worth the weeks of misery and anxiety, to know that he loved her this much.

Their evening passed happily, with Cyrus at his most amiable, and Pamela doting, waiting on him slavishly. After supper, they sat before the fire and Pamela, to please him, read aloud parts of the horo-

scope which Mina had created for her.

"It was very kind of her," she said conscientiously. "It must take a great deal of time."

"Months," he said briefly.

In the morning they breakfasted together leisurely, and read a little, and in the afternoon, Cyrus suggested a walk through the woods, to blow the cobwebs away.

"Oh, let's" she agreed eagerly. "We haven't been away from the city for so long."

They tramped through the forest until they were flushed and panting with the unwonted exercise. Cyrus, who had a smattering of knowledge about many things, pointed out, with his authoritative air, trees and plants and rocks, and Pamela was quite honestly impressed by his knowledge.

A sudden rain darkened the sky and made walking treacherous, and Pamela said doubtfully, "We'd better go back. I don't think this is going to let up for awhile."

They were standing on a high shelf of ground, from which they could see a tiny brook cleaving the mist-shrouded gorge far below them.

"Oh, I wish it hadn't begun to rain," she lamented, looking down. "I love a little creek. I'd like to climb down and see it."

Suddenly her foot, in its flat-heeled loafer, slipped upon the red earth, and she caught at a low pine for support. The needles pricked

her palm, and she cried out in fright, stretching out her other hand to Cyrus for steadying.

It was then that she felt it, quite plainly—a shove, strong and deliberate, as Cyrus was strong and deliberate.

Why, he means to kill me, she thought incredulously, even as she began to slip and slither down the steep embankment, first on her feet, then, losing her balance, rolling on her side, over and over.

It seemed an eternity that her body slid downward, over the glassy pine needles, and her mind, its activity accelerated by terror, could think only of the chasm which lay below, offering her its deep, uneasy grave.

But her progress was halted, halfway down the mountain, by a boulder which protruded from the wet ground, and she lay there in the downpour, her body bruised and torn, waiting for Cyrus to come and complete his job.

Then, blessedly, there came the faint chugging of a motor, carried dimly to her on the mountain wind. A tractor, perhaps, driven by some solitary woodcutter.

She began to scream, and in a moment, there was Cyrus' solicitous face bending over hers.

"Hush!" he said. "I'm here now. You're all right, but that was a close call."

He picked her up and carried her up the mountain side. The tractor was just around the bend of

the road, but before it came into view, Cyrus had carried her on into the patch of pines and hemlocks, then down the path to the cabin.

He laid her tenderly on the studio couch before the fire, and got water and towels and sponged off her cuts and scratches. He looked so much the role of the loving, anxious husband, that Pamela almost persuaded herself that he was exactly what he seemed—until the memory of that definite shove came back, and she found herself shaking violently.

He bent over her again. "I'll get you some aspirin," he said kindly.

Strange, I never noticed how close together his eyes are, she thought, taking the pills, swallowing the water obediently. She watched him take up the gleaming brass poker and stir the fire into flame.

The gravity of her situation began to creep over her. If Cyrus had succeeded in killing her, who, she wondered, would have cared? Her parents were dead, and she had no close friends in Pemberton: Cyrus did not approve of women wasting their time on bridge games and kaffee klatsches.

No one, except possibly Mina, knew where she and Cyrus were right now. If she had fallen all the way to the bottom of the gorge, would Cyrus have reported it as an accident, or would he merely have left her body there, to moulder and eventually become one with the red-brown earth?

She closed her eyes and let the frantic thoughts race on. No, whatever happened to her must be an accident, and her body must be found, so that Cyrus would be free to marry Mina. For she had been, she saw now with painful clarity, her usual foolish, gullible self, daring to imagine that Cyrus had given up his plans.

She picked up her own horoscope and began to read, searching for some indication that she was meant to leave her husband.

I'll tell him tonight, she thought drowsily, for the dulling pain was making her sleepy, that I'll give him the divorce. I want to live even more than I want to stay married.

When she awoke, night had fallen. Cyrus had not turned on the lights in the cabin; there was nothing but the firelight, shining hypnotically on the brass poker and tongs, flickering uneasily over Cyrus' impassive features as he entered from the bedroom, a pillow in his hand. She saw that he meant to keep up the pretense of solicitude, until his next opportunity to arrange a neat, unsuspecting-seeming accident.

From beneath her lashes, she watched his swift, silent progress. In his socked feet, he made no noise at all, as he glided over Mina's braided rug.

She had a moment in which to wonder at this extraordinary concern, so unlike him, and then he had gone round behind her to put

the pillow beneath her head.

Her eyes, still half-closed, rested for just an instant on the horoscope which she had been consulting, and then, without warning, the smothering white thing came down upon her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

The utter terror of it! It was like going down in the water when you were learning to swim, and were quite, quite sure you would never come up again.

She fought him, and was able to surprise him a little, because he had thought her asleep.

Wait! she wanted to cry. Don't do it! I'm going to divorce you, I promise. Don't kill me, Cyrus.

When it was over, she found that she was quite calm. She set the hot, heavy poker back in its holder. Then she gathered her things together quickly and put them in the car, before she heaped the papers and magazines about the fireplace. For a moment, she watched the little orange tongues of flame lick at the rug, then reach out hungrily toward the body on the floor.

Before she consigned the bulky typescript to the fire, she took one final look at her horoscope. "Saturday—13th" it read. "Strike while the iron is hot."

She closed the door quietly upon the gathering fire, and walked out into the clear, clean night, with its myriad twinkling, guiding stars shining serenely overhead.

Wives are one thing, broads are another. Ask Alexander . . . he's an expert.

2 for the show

BY BERNARD EPPS

ERNIE the Apples came into the Paradise one evening looking like a three day beard.

"Bernie," he says to me. "Bernie, I got problems!"

"Ain't we all," says I and I couldn't help thinking I'd trade places with Ernie the Apples any day of the week—problem for problem.

Ernie's made good, see. He was born and raised over in Greenpoint where his old man sold vegetables from a pushcart. Ernie was brought up on leftover turnips and the back of his old man's hand but by the time he was fourteen, he already had a very nice little protection business organized among the rest of the barrow hawkers. From there, he and his mob worked through numbers running and bootlegging and the juice game until they got a corner on the banana business—the whole kit and ka-

boodle! Pretty soon there wasn't a banana sold in the entire Metropolitan area but what Ernie wasn't getting a cut.

And recently, I hear, he'd bought a joint out in Jersey with lawns and flower beds and a swimming pool half as big as the Mediterranean. He drives around town in a Caddy with gold-plated hubcaps and a silver statue of Venus de Milo as hood ornament so when he tells me he's got problems, I act like a bartender and pour him another shot of White Horse.

"I got plenty of cabbage," he says. "I got a Cadillac car, a nice business and a membership in the Diner's Club," he says. "And I just bought a joint out in Jersey with all the bank presidents. Some guys," he says, "might even think I was a success."

"They might," says I and I wink

at Alexander who's standing at the bar next to him.

"But I ain't a success," says Ernie the Apples. "All them bank presidents know I ain't a success. You know why?"

"Tell me," says I but I knew he was going to tell me anyway.

"I ain't a success because I ain't got a wife," he says.

Alexander looks at him with interest. I thought he figured the same way I did—that a guy with as many beans as Ernie who'd not been trapped at the altar was very successful indeed. But nobody's going to argue with Ernie the Apples. He has two of his boys in a booth near the door who are very good at arguing.

"You do have a problem," says Alexander. "Every successful man must have a woman by his side. It's a basic requirement of social acceptance."

Ernie turned his head and glared at Alexander. He wasn't used to being talked at like that by strangers but, one look and he could see Alexander was harmless. Alexander is about sixty and worn down thin like a knife after years on the grindstone.

"You're right," he says, after a minute. "Exactly. Let me buy you a drink."

"Delighted," says Alexander. "Innkeeper!"

I was standing right in front of him but when Alexander calls for a drink he likes everyone to know

it. I mixed his martini and popped in the olive. He raised the glass, sniffed at it, rinsed his mouth once and gulped the lot—olive and all.

Ernie watched this performance with fascination and I knew exactly what was coming.

"Don't you even chew the olive?"

"Never," says Alexander. "Can't endure the taste."

"Then why have them?"

"A man can't live on drink alone!"

Ernie blinks and looks around at me, back at Alexander and then at me again. Then he did what everybody does the first time Alexander pulls this stunt on them—he shrugged.

Alexander—nobody ever called him Al or Alex—comes from some fancy family in Philadelphia. They sent him to the best colleges and a couple of universities until they discovered what Alexander had known all along—that he only had talent for one thing—drinking. They chucked him out and he's been doing the best he can around town ever since I can remember. There's lots of characters doing the best they can around town and most of them ain't welcome in the old Paradise Bar and Grill but Alexander never causes any trouble and he sort of goes with the joint. There's plenty of guys come in just to ask his advice. He studied the Law in college, see, and that's a subject of considerable interest in this part of town.

"As I understand the problem," says Alexander, "you require a wife worthy of the name, one that can act as hostess to the bank presidents, one that will be accepted among the social lions of New Jersey. Am I correct?"

"Right," says Ernie. "I don't want no ordinary Brooklyn broad. Most of them got no manners, no education. I want something legit."

"I see," says Alexander staring pointedly at his empty glass. "This needs careful thought and, er, careful thought needs careful lubrication".

Ernie looked at him kind of glassy eyed.

"I mean," says Alexander, "A man can't stand on one leg!"

He nudged his glass forward and Ernie finally got the idea. He nodded to me.

"Similar," he says. "And don't neglect the olive."

Alexander went through his ritual again while we watched—sniff, rinse, tilt and gulp.

"Aaah," says Alexander, setting down the glass, "that's the stuff to grease the wheels."

It certainly seemed to agree with him—he looked like he'd grown another inch.

"Now to concentrate the full force of my mind on your problem. Any candidates?"

"Eh?"

"Have you any one in mind for the coveted title of 'Mrs. Ernie the Apples'?"

"O," says Ernie. "Yeah. There's two. One's called Kitten. I been thinking about her. The other's Goldie. I been thinking about her, too." He smiled a bit dreamily and it wasn't hard to guess what he had been thinking about. "They're the best dames around," he says, "but I ain't quite sure which one will fit the bill."

"Then we must devise a test," says Alexander. "The contestant with the highest score being the winner. Suppose we, er, have a re-fill and move to a booth? I always think better sitting down."

I figured he wanted a booth so I wouldn't hear what was going on but I didn't mind. I'm usually happiest when I don't know what plots are hatching among the customers. I polished a few glasses and thought of Ernie's twists.

I'd seen them each in his company at one time or another round about town. Kitten was a redhead. She had a body that threatened to bust out of whatever she was wearing like two pounds of sweetmeats in a one pound bag. She was gay, lively and as playful as they come and she loved the dancing, the dining and the night life. Ernie kept her in an uptown apartment high over Central Park West.

Then there was the blond one—Goldie. She was one of those sleepy dames that belong in bed like a fish belongs in water. She's soft, slinky, silky and luscious and she fits the soft lights and the soft music. She

goes for the luxury and she's installed in a comfortable apartment in the middle of Greenwich Village.

Either one would do me for wife and no questions asked but, then again, I wasn't Ernie the Apples and never would be.

They talked for over an hour in the booth, Alexander doing most of the talking and Ernie agreeing and egging him on. I got interested in what they were up to and several times I went over with refills but they clammed up when I got within listening distance. Ernie seemed very much impressed by our Alexander.

The next evening, Ernie comes in about one o'clock and he's got both chicks with him—one on each arm. They came in a cab and Ernie hadn't got his mugs with him and I guess I should have suspected something then. Ernie never went out without his muscle.

Anyway, Ernie and the two dames sit in a booth swigging champagne and eating the bagels and lox. Alexander is standing over against the bar spending a double sawbuck he picked up somewhere and he don't take no notice of Ernie and Ernie don't seem to know him.

Suddenly, the door bangs open and three masked hoods slam in. They each pull a cannon and blast away at Ernie the Apples.

The screaming and the blasting is over in half a minute. I lift my eyes over the top of the bar just in

time to see the two dames barreling through the door and the rest of the customers getting out faster than you can say 'alibi'. Everybody's in a desperate hurry to be someplace else, me included, because here's Ernie the Apples tumbling on the floor with blood bubbling between his lips and down the corner of his chin.

"Jesus," think I. "There goes the license for sure!"

I slip over to Ernie to see if he's quite dead, thinking maybe I could get him out to the alley or something. I bend down to listen for a heartbeat and he says—right in my ear—"BOO!"

Great Jumping Jackrabbits! I leap back about six feet and stand there shaking in my shoes while Ernie rolls over and gets up, wearing a grin like a Halloween lantern. Apart from the blood trickling down his chin, he didn't look ventilated at all.

"Take it easy, Bernie," says he. "Those were my boys and they were shooting blanks."

Right then, I wished to hell they'd been real. I was hopping mad but Ernie's bigger than me and a whole lot richer so I swallowed a couple of times and said: "You're leaking blood through the mouth."

He chuckled and spat something into his hand.

"Chicken bladder," he says. "It's an old confidence trick that Alexander taught me. You stick a blad-

der full of chicken blood in your cheek, comes the right moment, you bite down. Neat, eh?"

"Very," says I. "Only thing, if the cops get wind of this, it's me to the unemployment line!"

"Relax, Bernie," he says. "Nobody around here talks to the fuzz of their own choice. Alexander figured all that in."

"Alexander," says I. "I should have known it!"

"Where is he by the way? He was standing by the bar when the fun started."

I wondered about that, too, since I hadn't seen him leave with the others. We looked around and found him curled up under the bar, fast asleep and with an empty gin bottle cuddled to his chest like a baby.

I stepped over him and found the good brandy. I sloshed three fingers into a glass and drank it down. Ernie climbed onto a stool, wiping the blood from his chin and eyes the bottle. What can you do with characters like this? I found another glass and poured us each a slug.

"Okay," says I, feeling the strength coming back, "so far you owe me for a full bottle of gin and a night's trade to say nothing of the year's growth. What's it all about?"

"You'll be well taken care of," he says. "Don't worry. It's all part of the plan to choose me a wife."

"All the legal beagle's idea, I suppose," I says, nudging Alexander

sharply with my foot. He didn't move.

"That's right. He's smart as a fox. He figured out the best way to find out which of those broads loves me best, is to watch their reactions after they think I'm dead. If one of them grabs at the money from the will and skips town with a car salesman or something, we'll know just where we stand."

"They sure left in a hurry when the shooting started," says I. "They couldn't get away fast enough."

"Naturally," says Ernie. "They know the score about me and they're smart enough to avoid trouble when they can."

"Maybe so," says I, "but couldn't you have cut me in on it instead of scaring me witless?"

"You'd have raised plenty of objections," says Ernie. "Alexander figured it was best this way and I trust his judgment."

I had to admit he was right. If I'd known about it I'd have stopped it for sure because the flatfeet in this neighborhood are very nervous about gunshooting in bars in the middle of the night.

"But what did it prove?" says I and I slopped out some more of the good brandy.

"Nothing, yet," says Ernie. "But tomorrow the girls get a visit from my lawyer—Alexander there, sobered up and wearing a new suit. They think I'm dead, see, and he can find out which one's doing the most grieving. She's naturally the

one that loves me truly and the one that gets to the winner's circle. Clever, eh?"

I nodded grudgingly and looked down at our genius sleeping peacefully among the butts and the empties. "I hope to God it works."

But it didn't. Alexander came in next evening wrapped in his new suit and sporting a brief-case. Ernie had been chewing his nails at the bar for an hour.

"Which one?" he says.

Alexander coughed significantly and I mixed his drink. Even I was getting eager to see if it was the golden haired bitch who belonged in bed or the red-head with the overripe peach of a body.

"Which one is it, man?" says Ernie, hopping from foot to foot.

"First, a little something to lay the dust of an honest day's toil," says Alexander and Ernie had to hold his water until he'd sniffed, swilled and swallowed.

He set down the empty glass carefully and turned to Ernie.

"Inconclusive," he says.

"What?"

"The evidence is inconclusive as yet. Both lovely ladies are very much upset but it's hard to tell if they're upset over your demise or over almost getting caught in the cross fire."

"How about the will?" says Ernie. "Did you tell them about that?"

"I did and they were naturally interested as to the size of their

shares. But they were too upset to get down to details. Both claim everlasting love."

"But I can't marry them both," says Ernie. "Now what do we do."

"We have a drop more of that very excellent lubricant!"

"Go ahead," says Ernie the Apples. "It may be the last you'll get from me. Four grocers already are selling bananas at bargain prices. The news of my cashing in spreads any further and I won't have a business left!"

"We'll just have to be patient," says Alexander.

"But we ain't got the time!"

"Patience. I suggest we proceed with the funeral."

"The what?"

"The funeral. You're dead, aren't you? And dead people are buried in the interests of tidiness and public health. People expose their emotions at funerals and we can watch and see which grief is the most genuine."

Ernie thought it over and broke into a slow smile. "Give the genius another drink," he says. "He's got a brain like Einstein."

I poured the drink and popped in the olive. "What you going to use for a body?" I says. "And there's death certificates and clergymen to get by. Funerals ain't easy to fake."

"Trust you to raise objections," says Ernie. "But I got faith in the genius. Tell us what you've figured out, old pal."

"We won't fake it," says Alexander. "It'll be the real thing."

"There," says Ernie, "hear that?"

"Yeah," says I. "But you ain't dead."

"We'll simply borrow someone else's funeral," says Alexander. "There must be someone buried in New York at least once a day. We'll simply invite our own mourners."

I shook my head. "I seem to remember the name of the corpus is mentioned in the ceremony."

"There he goes again," says Ernie.

"Who pays any attention to funeral orations?" says Alexander. "Particularly two delectable morsels overcome with grief. Besides, they may have charming figures but their intelligence leaves something to be desired."

"I like it," says Ernie, rubbing his hands. "Yeah. I'll send some of the boys. Alexander will have to go, of course, and you, too, Bernie."

"Me? Why me?"

Ernie looked hurt. "I thought you were a friend of mine. Fine friend who won't even come to my funeral!"

"But it ain't your funeral," I says. "You're just pinching it from somebody else."

"Same difference," says Ernie. "And the twists might smell something if my best friend don't show up to pay his last respects."

What could I do? I got out the good brandy again and we finished it off.

Next afternoon, Ernie provided me with a substitute barkeep and promised to keep an eye on him to see he didn't rob the joint blind. I dressed up in my best sharkskin and went off in a hired car with Alexander.

The funeral they'd picked actually belonged to a butcher from the Bronx who'd had a nasty accident with his meat grinder. He hadn't much of a family, apparently, just the widow, a couple of grown sons and a sprinkling of aunts and uncles. They were gathering at the grave side when we showed up and the sons looked a bit sideways at us but they didn't say anything. Maybe they figured we were relatives they'd forgotten or friends they'd never met or old customers or something. But they looked a bit more puzzled when two car loads of Ernie's mugs drew up. And when the twists arrived, dressed in black sheaths that didn't hide one damn thing, even the aunts and uncles pricked up their eyebrows. The butcher was getting a sudden reputation.

The preacher started reading the service and the two sons whispered between themselves and started towards him. Ernie's boys seemed to shift position a little and the sons disappeared from view. The aunts and uncles somehow found themselves right at the back of the crowd and even the widow was a considerable distance from the action.

The preacher mumbled on without noticing a thing and the two skirts wept like Niagara under their veils. A couple of Ernie's pugs were sniffing a bit, too, at some of the saddest parts and the drone of the words and the smell of the flowers even had me feeling a bit thoughtful. I kept reminding myself that it wasn't really Ernie he was talking about and then I'd read the wreaths that arrived from somewhere. One of them said: "To My Beloved Ernie In Remembrance From His Very Own Kitten," and the other said: "In Memoriam Ernie the Apples. Goldie." And then I'd begin to get all gluey again. It was very touching indeed.

Back at the Paradise, Ernie wanted to hear all the details. He would have given anything to have been there, he said and he went a bit misty-eyed when he heard that some of his pugs had been seen to blow their noses. But then he got word that bootleg bananas were flooding into New York from all sides and he spent the next thirty-six hours ordering his boys here and there to insist that Ernie the Apples was still banana king and he hadn't time to worry about anything but alibis.

Meanwhile, Alexander was paying calls on the dames and comparing their reactions. He visited each of them twice, playing the lawyer in his new suit and each time he reported to Ernie that the evidence was 'Inconclusive.' Those dames

were either very fond of Ernie or damn good actresses.

But the third time he came back from his visiting, after the crisis in the banana business was over and things back to normal, he looked happy as a Chinese philosopher.

"You got something," said Ernie. "I'll bet it's that sleepy one that loves me best. Am I right?"

But Alexander wouldn't talk until he'd had his lubrication. He'd been enjoying himself these last few days and wanted to make the most of it.

"Kitten," he says at last, "is very eager for me to settle her share of the will as she's planning a trip to the Bermudas with a citizen known as Jim Florida."

"The bitch," yells Ernie. "Then I was right. It's the blond babe with the bedroom eyes!"

"Goldie," says Alexander, "has been keeping company with Side-Bet Benny, the horse-race gambler!"

"The dirty little two-timing bitch!" roars Ernie. "And me hardly cold in my grave! I'll kill her. I'll kill them both!"

I filled all glasses figuring they'd be needed and they were. I filled them again.

"Not at all," says Alexander. "The operation was a complete success."

"How do you figure that, you broken down fumfum? I start with two dames and wind up with none and you call it a success?"

"Exactly," Alexander says. "The problem was to find you a wife. We've learned that neither of them was worthy of the honor."

Ernie had another drink and thought it over. Alexander was right and even I could see that. Neither of them were the kind of dames that could carry off the social graces in the Jersey Jump and Fox Hunting Club.

"Okay," he says at last. "What now?"

"Another small drinky," says Alexander.

We watched him go through the ritual again.

"It just so happens," says Alexander, setting down his glass, "that I have a cousin who's just the type you're looking for!"

I was best man six weeks later and Alexander gave the bride away. She was small and pretty—if a mite on the plump side—and she adored Ernie. She came from one of the

poorer sides of Alexander's family but she was no stranger to the ways of society. She moved into the big joint in Jersey and started right away managing a Charity Ball. They bought an Afghan Hound and took second prize in the Kennel Club. She was just what Doctor Ernie had ordered.

But I hear Side-Bet Benny suddenly bought a one-way ticket to the West Coast and Goldie was seen leaning on Ernie's arm down at the Limey's Crap shooting gallery. And I hear that Jim Florida was found in Brooklyn with a couple bones broken in his face and Kitten escorted Ernie to an uptown bistro the following night.

I wondered about that for a while, seeing all the trouble we'd been to, but Alexander explained it.

"Wives are one thing," he says, "but women are something else entirely."

And you can't argue with Alexander. He's a genius.



BANKER'S TRUST

HE'D just shaken hands with a departing bank customer when the inter-com button at the base of the phone on his desk lighted and buzzed.

"Yes, Marie?" responded James Glenning after stabbing in on the line. He glanced across the busy network of other customer service desks and teller's compartments as he settled into his chair again. It was the usual last-minute Friday night push. He was looking forward to the pleasant suburban reprieve the weekend always offered.

"There's a call for you on extension three, Mr. Glenning," the soft, low voice of Marie Hines informed him.

He dutifully punched onto another lighted phone trunk button. "Mr. Glenning speaking. May I help you?"

A hoarsely-disguised male voice rasped, "Yes, we think you can. A hundred thousand dollars worth of help, Mr. Glenning."

Jim frowned at the receiver. "Now, listen. I haven't time for—"

"You listen. Listen very carefully. Just sit there nice and quietly—don't call any attention to yourself. Now here's your wife."

"W-What? My—!"

"Jim? Oh, please! Please do whatever they say!" sobbed a woman's frightened voice. "They forced their way into our house! They have guns! They'll kill Larry and me if you don't—!"

Jim Glenning had frozen behind the desk, numbed beyond the ability to think by her imperative, terror-wrought pleas.

"Karen?" He'd half risen from his chair as her voice was abruptly choked off.

"She's perfectly safe. So is your son. Providing you do exactly as I tell you." It was the guttural tones of the man who'd first spoken to Jim. He instructed the shocked young bank executive to appear calm and act normally so as not to

BY

PAUL CURTIS

"Jim? Oh, please! Please do whatever they say!" sobbed a woman's frightened voice.

arouse suspicions. He told Jim Glenning to load \$100,000 in small denomination, unmarked bills into his attache case and walk out of the bank with it at closing time.

"I can't do that!" Jim said tersely, holding the telephone cupped closely to his lips. He stared nervously around the modern, well-lighted bank interior. No one seemed to be aware that a vicious robbery attempt was in deadly process. That the lives of a woman and a 7 year-old boy were forfeit if he failed to comply with those coldly-calculated demands.

"You're a department head. You have access to the vault," relentlessly prodded that invisible menace. "Get the money. Walk out of there with it twenty minutes from now. Climb in your car and drive to the airport. There's a flight reservation in your name at the Trans-National desk. Be on the 10:03 P.M. flight to Mexico City. Got that much?"

"I—yes, I understand," Jim mumbled. He was sweating profusely although the building was comfortably air-conditioned. He was startled by the sudden approach of a subordinate. He hadn't seen the other man leave his desk and walk across the carpeted area towards him.

"Check into the Vista Hotel when you arrive in Mexico City. Register under the name of John Griffin. Someone will contact you there. Turn over the money, then stay put. Our contact will call us

and if everything went according to plan, your wife and son won't be harmed. You can come back on Sunday. By then, they'll be home, waiting for you."

Jim shook his head, waving off the junior departmental executive who'd wanted to ask him about something. The younger man had given him a curious look, then had shrugged and returned to where a middle-aged couple was waiting beside his desk.

"Why can't I just leave the money some place?" Jim Glenning asked in a shaken undertone. "This doesn't have to be dragged out. I'll get the money. I'll bring it anywhere in the city you say. You can hold me hostage so I can't notify the police. My wife and boy wouldn't tell anyone—not while you were holding me."

"This will be done our way, Glenning. No shortcuts. And no tricks. By the number. Just like I gave it to you."

"Yes. All right," Jim said heavily, realizing that the unidentified enemy held all the trump cards. "But let me talk to my wife again. Let me tell her that I'm going to do just what you want and—" His voice trailed off at the sharp click severing the connection.

The departmental assistant who'd been talking with the pair of middle-aged customers again rose from behind a nearby desk, seeing Jim Glenning slowly replace the receiver and sit staring at it.

"Mr. Glenning, I wonder if you could help me explain to Mr. and Mrs. Thomson about our new incentive savings plan? They—" He stared at the attache case Jim now held.

"Sorry. Not now," Jim said brusquely. He shoved back in the chair and got up, walking rapidly away from the bewildered younger official. Carrying the empty case.

It was already 8:43 P.M.

Jim flashed an anxious look at the ornate electric clock built into the paneled wall above the teller's windows as he strode through the crowded bank.

Whoever was responsible for the incredible scheme to execute a crime of such magnitude had deliberately made an ally of time.

Several employees smiled and spoke to him while he walked past the cashier's section and beyond, heading toward the vault.

He tried to return their casual smiles and nods. His face felt like a hideous death mask when he forced himself to grin to conceal the throbbing pangs of terror beating at him.

No one challenged him when he entered the shelf-lined room with impregnable walls and an elaborately-wired alarm system. He'd automatically complied with the security precautions required of the handful of bank officers who were authorized to have access to the vault.

A neatly-banded packet of 20's

fell to the floor. Jim hastily stooped and snatched up the money, cramming it into the attache case. He couldn't make his hands quit shaking. Before when he'd entered the vault to deposit or withdraw funds in the everyday course of his job, he'd never been so short of breath, so maddeningly clumsy.

It was only a matter of minutes before other executives began parading back there with coins and currency to be lodged in the vault over the weekend. Even while there were still customers at the windows, some of the staff members closed out, directing people to another cage.

Jim paused to sleeve the searing sweat out of his blurred eyes. He'd already stuffed more than \$60,000 into the attache case. He'd been working with money most of his adult life. Yet, he'd never realized what a formidable bulk the sum demanded of him would be. By the time he finished hurriedly scooping bundles of banknotes into the case, he had a devilish time getting the case to close.

Another vice-president was just coming towards the walk-through vault portal when Jim Glenning emerged with the money he'd stolen. Jim felt like a thief. He was afraid he looked as guilty and unnerved as he felt.

"Well, this about wraps up another week," cordially said the other man. "I suppose you and the family will be out sailing around

on Emerald Lake again this weekend.”

Jim summoned a dry-lipped smile as he stepped past his fellow-executive. “Could be, George. Depends on the weather and on what sort of schedule Karen has mapped out for us,” he said as easily as he could manage.

As he left the rear of the bank and walked amid the desks and billing machines arranged behind the teller’s cubicles, Jim’s thoughts flashed back to that morning.

His son Larry had talked eagerly during breakfast about another family fishing excursion on the nearby lake where their new run-about was moored.

Summer was almost over. In less than 3 weeks, Larry would be beginning his 2nd grade year at the suburban public school.

If he was still alive.

If the unknown gunman or gunmen threatening Karen and their son fulfilled that part of the ugly barter.

The \$100,000 that was a leaden weight within the attache case he propped beside his desk . . . his family’s ransom.

Jim sank into the chair, his tormented gaze encountering the telephone by which the invisible menace had intimidated him.

He had an urgent impulse to pick up the receiver. To dial the number of his house. Or to call the police and have them speed out in force to surround the place.

But what was it that hard, unrelenting masculine voice had told him? Every commanding word was sharply etched in Jim Glenning’s fear-clouded mind.

The man had told him he could return on Sunday after yielding the money to someone who would contact him at the Mexico City hotel he was to register at. That when he came back, his family would again be at home, waiting for him.

That meant that no one was at the house now.

Jim darted another anguished stare at the clock. Only minutes remaining until 9:00 P.M. Most of the customers were gone, already. Only a few men and women were still standing at the compartment windows.

“You’re as pale as a ghost. Are you ill, Jim?”

Those words of quiet concern caused Jim Glenning’s hand to flinch visibly away from the beige phone receiver. He swiveled around and stared up at the tall, bespectacled male who had silently materialized at his shoulder.

“I—no, that is nothing serious, Alan,” Jim said, meeting the older man’s questioning gaze.

He’d decided to dial the number of the phone at the house, hoping that his family and whoever held them captive might still be there. He wanted to talk to Karen again. To make sure that she and Larry wouldn’t be harmed if he did as he’d been instructed.

But now he couldn't make that call.

Alan Reese shook up cigarettes, extending the pack to Jim. "Lots of summer flu making the rounds. Hope one of those bugs hasn't nipped you, Jim."

Jim refused the proffered smoke, wishing there was some way he could get rid of the older man so he could use the phone.

"Maybe, that's what it is," he muttered, watching the greying first vice-president who was his immediate superior leisurely select, then light a cigarette. "A touch of flu." Jim moistened his lips. His throat was dry. He did feel sick. And more confused and scared than he'd ever imagined anyone could be. "Was there something you wanted to talk about, Alan?"

"Nothing that can't wait until Monday." The flawlessly-polished tip of one of Alan Reese's shoes gently nudged the side of the attache case leaning against Jim's walnut desk. "Better leave that here this weekend."

Jim Glenning shot a wild-eyed glance up at the older executive. "No, I can't! That is, there's work in there that I have to get caught up on. I always put in a few hours cleaning up odds and ends at home over the weekend."

"You shouldn't push yourself. Not if you're coming down with something. Why not ease off, Jim? Get some rest. The work will keep."

"I—if I don't feel up to it, I won't even open the bag," Jim said, dying a little inside with every tick of the clock. He swung back to the desk and began hurriedly sorting and stacking the accumulation of paperwork that remained unfinished.

He hoped that Alan Reese would leave. He saw that some of the other bank employees were already following the last of the customers out past the guards stationed at the entrance.

His hopes were dashed when two other men left their adjacent desks and walked over to indulge in conversation with the executive standing only a few feet from him.

Jim stowed the sheaf of correspondence, credit ratings and statements of accounts in one of the drawers, then locked the desk and stood up.

He was reaching down for the attache case when the youthful trainee functioning as one of his assistants apologetically said, "I didn't mean to bother you before, Mr. Glenning. It was just that those people couldn't seem to understand the difference between a time and a demand savings account."

Jim completed his reach for the handle of the tan leather case. He straightened with it, saying, "I'm sorry I couldn't help you, Dave. You finally got the idea across to them?"

The younger man grinned and nodded. "After a fashion. Don't be surprised if they're back next week to ask you about it!"

Alan Reese detached himself from the pair of junior executives and clapped a friendly hand to Jim's shoulder. "Remember, now. No burning the midnight oil if you don't feel up to it. See you at lunch Monday noon."

Jim Glenning did his best to grin and make his departure appear normal. He exchanged goodnights with the guard at the side door opening out to the darkened parking lot and walked rapidly towards his car with the attache case hanging heavy in his perspiring grasp.

The airport he'd been directed to drive to was located on the opposite side of the city. A minimum of a 30-minute drive. Longer if the Friday night traffic was especially dense.

Jim tossed the case on the front seat and slid in behind the wheel. He started the engine and looked at his watch, holding it in the dim reflection of the dashlights. Almost 9:15 P.M. The flight he was supposed to be on took off at 10:03 P.M.

There wasn't time to search for a phone and try to call the house. He couldn't risk missing that plane.

A one-way passage had been reserved in his name. Jim took the flight coupon from the airlines clerk and received the information that the flight would be loading from Gate 9 in a matter of moments.

He turned from the reservations desk, swiftly scanning the massive

airline terminal for the public pay phones. He spotted the cluster of glass-enclosed booths but he saw it was no use. A number of impatient men and women hovered outside the phone booths, waiting for their turns while other people tied up every available instrument.

Was he being watched?

Jim Glenning stared hard at the milling sea of faces. He saw no one he recognized. He heard the flight dispatcher announce that the south-west-bound plane someone had booked him out on was loading at Gate 9.

Even if he could have gotten to a phone, what good would that have done? By then, Karen and Larry had probably been forced to accompany their captor or captors from the house to some remote hideout. But suppose they were still at the house? If he had succeeded in making the call, he might only have aggravated whoever was holding his loved ones hostage.

The flight became airborne right on schedule. Jim Glenning and the other passengers were told they could unfasten their seat belts. Jim stared out at the blackness beyond the plane window while people seated around him talked and laughed, enjoying the long, swift streak across the skies.

He hadn't slept at all. And that damned attache case with its despicable contents was still tucked beneath his arm when he crossed the sunlit lobby of the *Vista Hotel*.

"Your first visit to Mexico City, Mr. Griffin?" inquired the desk clerk, handing a key to a uniformed bellboy. "Will you be with us long?"

Jim nodded after signing the register as John Griffin. "No, not long," he said. He shook his head when the bronzed, wiry youth in the bright-buttoned carmine uniform wanted to take the attache case. The bellhop turned and led the way towards the elevators.

No matter how fitfully Jim Glenning paced the attractive 11th floor suite he'd been assigned, his mounting anxiety failed to hasten the arrival of the mysterious 'someone' he expected.

Weariness eventually got the better of him. He sagged down on the edge of the bed, staring dull-eyed at the attache case which no one had come to claim.

The room was dark and he didn't know where he was at first when the loud poundings on the door awakened him hours later.

He stumbled across the room, groping for the wall switch. The light from the twin table lamps poured out into the hall when he opened the door.

Two men stared in at him. Both were Mexicans, both regarding him with wary intentness.

"You are James Glenning?" It was the shorter of the men who spoke.

Jim nodded, his mind too drugged from the deep slumber he'd been roused from to notice

that they'd used his right name and not the alias he'd registered under.

He looked at the credentials exhibited by the man who'd addressed him. He gave way, backing into the shadowy hotel room as the Mexican police officers moved purposefully after him. He was sufficiently awake by then to be cognizant of the gun that covered him while the taller plainclothesman frisked him for any possible weapon.

They refused to listen when he attempted to explain about the \$100,000 they confiscated. They made him accompany them to the Mexico City police headquarters building.

"This was extremely foolish on your part, Mr. Glenning," said the U.S. law enforcement official who had secured the necessary extradition documents by late Sunday morning. "It might help if you tell us what you did with the other two hundred thousand dollars."

It didn't matter who he talked to. Or how desperately he tried to explain what he'd been doing there in a Mexico City hotel with \$100,000 which he admitted taking from the bank.

No one gave any credence to his frantic pleas to check and see what had happened to his family. He was flown back to the same airport where he'd boarded a flight less than 48 hours earlier. He was escorted into another police station and asked the same infuriating series of questions.

"They'd have killed my wife and son if I hadn't done exactly as they ordered! What missing two hundred thousand dollars? I told you, I took only the amount I was instructed to take," Jim Glenning repeatedly replied to those questions.

None of it was making any sense to him. He felt as if he was acting out some crazy role in a hideous nightmare.

Then, on Monday morning, he was led back into the interrogation office. And he stared at the lovely, dark-haired woman who'd cried out his name.

"Karen! Oh, thank God you're all right!" Jim tore away from the man who'd brought him into the room. He and his wife clung wildly to each other.

She stared blankly up into his haggard features when he asked if Larry was safe, too.

"Safe? Why, from what, darling?"

Jim blinked, trying to clear away some of the murky cobwebs that refused to free his badly-jumbled thoughts.

He shook Karen's shoulders, harshly saying, "Tell them about Friday night! Tell them I had to take that money!"

Dazed, anguished tears of bewilderment welled in his wife's eyes as she stared mutely up at him.

"Ohh, Jim! W-Why did you do this? We w-were so happy! We didn't—need that money."

They were separated by one of the officers. Jim was led to a chair beside the desk. He was forced to sit there and listen while his wife denied that anyone had threatened either her or Larry. She told the man who'd asked about Friday night that they'd been home all evening, waiting for Jim. The telephone hadn't rung and she hadn't called anyone, either.

The full impact of her stricken words didn't hit Jim Glenning until hours afterwards when he was stretched out on a cot in one of the cells.

He was facing indictment for the theft of \$300,000.

Everyone—even his wife—believed that he'd been caught absconding with a portion of the money he'd stolen.

He'd admitted taking \$100,000.

There never had been a gun pointed at Karen and Larry. Whoever had called him at the bank Friday night hadn't been anywhere near the house.

A gigantic hoax.

A horribly daring bluff.

And he'd swallowed the act that someone had so convincingly staged. He'd panicked at the thought of the potential death menacing his family. He'd accepted the voice of that sobbing woman as his wife's terrified pleas for him to do as he was told.

But who?

Jim sat up on the cot. It was quiet in the dusky cell block where he'd

been confined. They'd taken his watch but it must have been long past midnight by then.

At least one man. And a woman.

They'd never intended to have anyone contact him at the hotel in Mexico City. They'd planned for him to be taken into custody.

No! They'd planned it that way!

Jim Glenning lunged off the cot. His fingers tightened convulsively around the steel bars. Oh, what a snug, sweet frame it was!

Someone had the \$200,000.

The same someone and his female accomplice who'd staged that realistic telephone drama with timetable preciseness.

And that someone, that unknown, invisible menace had to be employed at the bank.

More than that. Whoever had taken the additional money from the vault had to be a man Jim knew; one of less than a dozen executives with the authority to enter the electronically-guarded money room.

A man and a woman employed at the bank. The telephone call hadn't come in on an outside line. They'd been in one of the private offices. They'd—

Jim banged his hands against the bars, yelling for the guard at the top of his lungs.

Dawn was clawing feebly at the Monday sky when an annoyed young brunette cautiously peered out through the narrow opening of an apartment door.

Marie Hines gasped as the door was rudely thrust inward by the shoulder of her unexpected visitor.

"M-Mr. Glenning! W-What—how did you—?"

Jim Glenning did a poor job of closing the door he'd rammed open. It was still ajar as he stalked towards the sleep-disheveled bank switchboard operator.

"They had to let me out on bail, Marie. Why are you so surprised? Didn't you and your boyfriend give me credit for having any brains at all? Surely you must have known I'd eventually figure things out."

She clutched nervously at her robe, still backing away from the slowly-advancing intruder.

"P-please! I—I don't know what you're doing here, Mr. Glenning! What you're talking about," she stammered shrilly.

"Now, you sound like you did on the telephone Friday night. When you posed as my wife. I was too jolted at the time to notice any such vocal discrepancies." Jim paused, surveying the room.

It was an expensive apartment, lavishly furnished. Much too extravagant for a girl whose take-home pay was less than \$70 a week.

Marie Hines watched him prow around. Her hands twisted constantly at the belted folds of her white terrycloth robe.

"Get out of here!" she finally blurted. "You have no right busting in on me like this! I'll call the police if you—"

"Good idea. Just what I was thinking of doing," Jim quietly said, cutting in on her heated tirade. "While they're here, they can ask the super or some of the other tenants about your regular visitor. The banker boyfriend no one is supposed to know about."

"I—" Marie Hines stared helplessly at the grim-faced man so calmly confronting her. "He's married. I—I don't want to get him involved in this. Just go—leave me alone, Mr. Glenning. You—"

"How much of the money that's still missing do you have, Marie? None of it, probably. I tried to see your boyfriend. But I was too late. By now, he's long gone with both your share and his."

The girl gave Jim a wild-eyed look. Then, she defiantly shook back her dark hair, saying, "You took that three hundred thousand! There's no reason why Alan should run!"

Alan. Alan Reese. Suave, socially correct Alan Reese with his elegant wardrobe and handsomely-greying impeccability.

Jim Glenning's boss.

And Marie Hines' mysterious lover.

"Alan's wife hasn't seen him since this morning," Jim said, ad-libbing the greatest bluff he'd ever tried. He laughed, turning carelessly away from the jittery brunette. "Figure it out for yourself, Marie. He used both of us. Me as a red herring. While the police were

busy with me, he skipped the country for parts unknown with the money he'd promised to split with you. We were both suckers."

"No! He wouldn't! He loves me!"

"Love? Wise up and face the truth for once in your life, Marie! All Alan Reese ever loved was money—and the power that goes with it."

She rushed furiously past Jim, snatching up the telephone receiver. "I don't believe you! He swore he'd take me with him—after you were sent to prison!"

"Don't bother to dial the rest of that number, Miss Hines."

Marie Hines whirled, uttering a startled little shriek as a brace of detectives pushed into the apartment from where they'd been listening just outside the door.

Jim Glenning indulged in the luxury of a lazy, untroubled yawn and stretch a few hours later that balmy and cloudless Monday morning.

"Then it was Alan Reese who pretended to discover the shortage," Jim's lovely wife Karen said while she began unbuttoning his shirt there in the bedroom of their home. "After he'd taken an additional two hundred thousand dollars from the vault."

Jim nodded, having considerable difficulty keeping his eyes propped open. "One of the first vice-president's duties is to check the vault before it's closed and secured for

the weekend. That gave him the perfect opportunity to set me up. Some of the other executives verified part of the story he gave the police. They all had to agree that I'd been acting peculiarly. I looked guilty; I felt guilty."

"Right now, you just look like a pooped papa to us, doesn't he, Larry?" Karen purred.

Jim was fuzzily conscious of their lighthearted laughter as he oozed down onto the enveloping comfort of the bed. He felt extraordinarily rich as he yielded to the velvet smog swirling over him.

He was safely at home with his loved ones.

And he wasn't due at the bank until tomorrow morning.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64

that seemed completely deserted. "There," she answered simply and without emotion.

Vic thanked her and walked into the dark section of the bar. Tables with chairs placed on top of them filled a fairly large room. The only light came through a small, dusty window that overlooked an alley. As Vic's eyes became used to the darkness he saw what looked like an ape in man's clothing. He was sitting hulked in the corner of the room next to the only table that didn't have chairs on it. The man didn't seem to notice him but sat there sniffing the back of his hand. Vic cleared his throat and the man looked up.

"Mr. Engi?" Vic asked.

"Who wants to know?" he growled.

"My name is Vic Harper. Monty Ferguson sent me."

Vic waited for further response but, instead, all the man did was sniff the back of his hand with a dreamy look on his face. Then Vic realized what he was doing . . . He was sniffing cocaine!

"You *are* Doug Engi, aren't you?" Vic asked tightly.

The man nodded and looked Vic up and down. "You'll do," he said abruptly.

"Do?"

"For the picture."

"Thanks, Mr. Engi. Now could you tell me what the picture is about?"

Engi seemed lost in thought. His black eyes had a far away look to them. Vic knew the fringes of show business were loaded with nuts of all kinds but this was the first one who took dope in his presence. "The picture?" he said in a daze. "You've been in pictures before, haven't you?"

"Yes, a few on the coast. I . . ."

Engi waved his hairy paw. "What else is there to know? A job's a job, right? Be here at nine tonight. We'll all go over to a location in New Jersey to shoot it."

Vic could see that Engi was going off on another cocaine flight. He decided to talk price before he got off the runway. "About the money, Mr. Engi. Monty Ferguson told me I'd get a hundred."

"I suppose you want it right now?" Engi said vaguely. "All you people are the same."

Vic was about to deny that he wanted to be paid in advance but when he saw Engi shove his hand in his pocket he kept his mouth shut. Hell, if he was going to give him a hundred bucks he wasn't going to stop him. Besides, from what he saw of the "producer" he felt it would be better that he collected when the collecting was good.

Engi pulled a greasy wallet out of his pocket and took out two bills. At first Vic assumed that he was getting an advance of twenty dollars but his eyes bulged when he saw that both bills were fifties! He was

getting the whole hundred on the spot.

When Vic took the money he started to ask another question about the nature of the picture and what his part would be but Engi was out of orbit again. "I'll be here at nine," Vic told him, unsure whether or not his words reached him.

Promptly at nine that night Vic walked into the *Happy Times* bar. It was jammed with service men and beat looking bimbos. The woman bartender had been replaced by three men who looked like they had been in the ring, mostly on the canvas. He walked back to the rear of the joint and searched the tables for Engi. Suddenly Engi appeared behind him. "Let's go," he said quickly and strode toward the door. Vic followed.

Engi walked over to a late model car parked just outside the bar. Vic was surprised when Engi handed him the keys to it. "You can drive can't you?" he asked.

"Well . . . yes . . ."

"You know how to get to Union City over in Jersey?"

"Sure, just drive through the Lincoln Tunnel."

"Okay. Wake me up when we get there," Engi said. He climbed into the back seat and stretched out.

Vic drove down towards 42nd Street. He had planned to ask Engi more about the picture but the happy snores in the back of the car made him change his mind.

It had been a long time since Vic had a really good car in his hands. He deliberately drove slowly to lengthen his enjoyment of the beautiful, metal machine. He knew that the car must have cost Engi at least three thousand dollars. Vic wondered if he was something more than just a shoe string producer. He figured that Engi was mixed up in the rackets and was trying to move into the entertainment media somehow. There were a lot of questions Vic wanted to ask Engi but, remembering how the man was earlier that day, he was sure that he wouldn't get any where asking them. He decided to ride along and see what happened.

As soon as Vic entered Union City he drove up a quiet street and stopped. He shook Engi's shoulder. "We're here," he told him.

Doug Engi woke up immediately. "Thanks kid, I needed that sleep. I've been on my feet all week. Let me take the wheel."

Vic moved over as Engi hopped in the front seat beside him. After driving for about ten minutes Engi stopped the car in front of a photography shop just off the main drag. Vic followed him over to the shop where Engi unlocked the door.

Inside the place was dark and silent with cameras staring down at them blindly from their shelves. He followed Engi as he walked towards a door that opened to a flight of stairs that led downward. Below them Vic

saw a line of yellow light that issued from the bottom of another door. He heard voices. Engi knocked at the door in a signal. Now Vic began to worry. What was he getting himself into?

A thin, weasled-faced man opened the door. "Hello Mr. Engi," he greeted politely.

"Everybody here?" Engi asked.

"Everybody, and everything is set up too."

"Good."

At the bottom of the stairs Vic looked into a well lighted room. He saw two other men seated at a table.

"Hey, a really good looker this time," the weasle-face said. He stared at Vic.

Vic brushed past him into the room. The two men at the table looked like Mafia rejects with their squashed swarthy faces and their empty greasy eyes. "Boys, meet Vic Harper," Engi said, waving towards him.

The Mafia-types grunted. Vic, in an attempt to prove that breeding shows, said "Good evening."

"I like the way this guy talks," the weasle-face said. Then he extended his hand. "My name's Murph. I'm gonna be your cameraman."

Vic took his hand and shook it. "Pleased to meet you. By the way, can I look over the script?"

Everyone burst out laughing.

"Did I say something funny?" Vic wanted to know.

"Don't you know that . . .," Murph began, but cut himself short

when a beautiful, shapely girl entered the room. She was wrapped up in a robe.

"What's the big joke?" she asked.

"Opal, meet your co-star, Vic Harper," Murph said.

The girl looked Vic up and down with her large blue eyes. "Ummm! You're cute," she told him.

Vic was used to having people tell him how good looking he was. He especially liked it when it came from beautiful girls. "Ditto," he said gazing at her.

Murph slapped his palms together. "It's nice to have the actors like each other. Things get moving a lot easier if you know what I mean."

The Mafia-types grunted in pleasure.

"All righty," Murph said. "Everybody inside."

Vic followed the rest into the next room. It was empty except for a huge, heart-shaped bed. And it was at that moment that Vic suddenly realized what kind of picture he was supposed to be in . . .

He watched in open mouthed amazement as Murph began to set up a camera overlooking the bed and then turned on the bright lights nearby. Vic tried to speak but the words couldn't rise from his throat. All he could do was stare at the preparations. *They couldn't mean this. They couldn't believe that he would be in a pornographic film.*

Engi edged over to him. "Start

taking off your clothes, kid," he ordered.

"Look . . . I didn't know it was going to be . . . this."

Engi gazed at him blankly. "You didn't know? Ferguson told you didn't he?"

That's why Monty had been so cagey! That's why he pretended to know nothing about the assignment. It gave him a chance to act innocent. "No," Vic said coldly, "Monty didn't tell me."

The two goons walked over to Engi. "Trouble, boss?" one of them asked.

"No trouble. This punk just got cold feet that's all."

Murph shook his head in amazement. "I can't see why anyone would turn down Opal," he said.

"Then why don't you take her?" Vic asked. "I'll work the camera."

Murph laughed. "You kill me. Who would wanna buy a stag movie with ugly people in it?"

"I'll give you the hundred back, Mr. Engi," Vic told him. "I'm sorry that . . ."

"You'll be sorry if you don't make this picture!" Engi exploded. "Now stop fooling around. My time is precious."

Vic's jaw tightened. "I'm not going to do it. Find yourself another boy."

Engi backed away just a half step. As if it were a signal the two goons came in from either side and began punching Vic. He felt the breath leave him sharply. The goons knew

their business. Each held him so that he couldn't move while they worked him over with their free hands. They punched him in the body avoiding his face. Vic slumped to the floor in pain gasping for breath.

"Okay," Engi said standing over him. "You're going to do it."

"I can't . . .," Vic managed to say. "You don't understand . . . I'm an actor . . . If I ever get anywhere I can't have a movie like this around . . ."

Once again he saw Engi step back. This time the goons punched him harder, hitting him on the top of the head and the neck. Vic gagged and felt as if he were being dropped through a trap door. Blackness rose around him. Then someone grabbed his hair and shoved his face upwards toward the light. One of the goons had his face very close to his. "If you wanna have a puss like mine, pretty boy, just say 'no' once more," he said.

Vic lashed out at the face with his left fist. He felt his knuckles meet flesh and bone. The face in front of him flashed before his eyes and struck the floor with a thud. Engi grabbed Vic's free swinging arm twisted it behind his back as if he were trying to break it off. "I'm losing my patience with you kid," he bawled in his ear. "Do like I want or I'll have my boys kick all your teeth in."

"Vic, honey," Opal said slowly from the heart-shaped bed. "My ego is taking a bigger beating than

your body is. This is the first time a guy had to be *forced* on me.”

She stood up and let her robe slip off her shoulders. Despite the condition Vic was in he couldn't help staring at her naked body. Her breasts were large but firm, two perfect cones capped by dark nipples. She had long, smooth legs, a flat belly and a trim waist. Vic wondered what the hell she was doing in such a rotten business in the first place. If she wanted to sell herself she could've made a mint as a rich man's mistress.

“Come on,” Murph said. “You don't want to turn down *that*.”

“Last chance,” Engi told him.

Vic looked at the two goons standing beside him ready to tear him apart and then he looked at Opal. He nodded his head.

“Good!” Murph exclaimed. “Now this is what I want you both to do . . .” He outlined a “plot” that had Vic entering the room and seeing Opal “sleeping” naked on the bed. Sex then was to follow in several different varieties.

Vic saw Engi and his two goons standing just outside the bright lights, their eyes all but glowing. *He would have to do it all in front of them.*

Opal sprawled across the bed and Vic tried to concentrate on her. If only they were *alone* together . . .

“Okay, Vic,” Murph told him. “Now walk towards her.”

Vic heard the camera whirr. *It was beginning. He was already in*

the picture. Behind him he heard Murph urge him on, telling him what to do . . .

Dumbly, Vic obeyed. Before he had his shirt off he promised himself that, by this time tomorrow, he would be back on the west coast. He was going to use the hundred he got from making this picture to get away from it as far as possible. He wanted to put three thousand miles between him and people like Monty and Engi. He would go back to L.A. and start clean again.

But now he was naked and there was a naked girl on the heart-shaped bed waiting for him. The bright lights flooded their bodies making them seem even more naked. He reached out and touched Opal for the first time. He felt strangely mechanical and cold. *Pretend that you're alone with her . . . Pretend that you are lovers . . .*

To save money Vic took a slow moving prop plane across country instead of a jet. With all the stops the plane took he landed in L.A. almost nine hours after he left New York. In all that time he didn't eat anything more than a box lunch provided by the non-scheduled airline. Still he wasn't hungry. Every time he thought of his last night in New York it killed his appetite.

As soon as he got off the plane Vic went directly to a phone booth in the lobby of the air terminal. He dialed the number of the agent who had insisted he try New York in the

first place giving Monty Ferguson's name as a good contact.

"Hello," Harold Wells said on the other end.

"Guess who this is," Vic responded.

"Please, I have no time to play games."

"Neither have I. I don't have the time nor the money to waste going to New York and back again just for a chance to see a character like Monty Ferguson."

There was another pause. "Vic?" Harold Wells asked quietly.

"Yeah, its me. Where did you find that Monty creep? He's all con and a yard wide."

"What happened?" Wells asked.

"In the first place that so-called agent doesn't have an Equity franchise. Did you know that?"

"I didn't, Vic, honest. He was fully licensed the last time I talked to him."

"And so naturally he couldn't find me a Broadway part. That's why I went to New York, remember?"

"You mean you didn't get *one* job out there?"

Vic wanted to tell him what happened on the last night. He wanted to spill his guts out to someone but instead he said, "No. By the way, I'm broke."

"Well, I can loan you something, Vic."

"Not a loan, Harry, a job."

"There's nothing in the office right now, Vic. After all, you just came in."

"I'm dropping over to see you," Vic told him. "Right now." He hung up before the agent could reply.

Harold Wells' office in Hollywood was three times the size of Monty's. A big front was even more important in Movieland than in New York. Vic was totally unimpressed by the size of the office because he knew that Wells wasn't much above Monty's level as far as volume of business was concerned. He also noticed that Wells still couldn't afford the receptionist he had always claimed he was going to get. The only one in the office was Harold Wells himself who looked like one large glob of sunburn behind his desk. "Vic," he greeted, showing his capped teeth. "You look fine."

"So do you, Harry," Vic answered, letting his insincerity show. "How's business?"

"Well, I've made a few calls while you were on the way over and I think I've got a live T.V. commercial lined up."

"Sounds fine. When?"

"In a couple of weeks from now. A big clothing firm wants men to model their fall line."

"Just a one-shotter, huh?"

"It's the best I could do on such a short notice. I've made out an advance of fifty dollars, Vic. Will that be all right?"

Vic took the check and rubbed it in his hands. "Thanks. I appreciate this."

Wells dropped his plump, round

body back in his leather chair again with a slapping sound. "Now that you're back I suppose you'll see Ellen. Did you call her yet?"

"Not yet but its an idea. You won't mind if I beat it now, Harry? I hate to grab a check and run but I'm anxious to see her."

"Not at all. Take her out tonight and relax."

Vic waved the check at him. "Thanks again for this. I'll be seeing you around."

Vic took buses way out to Venice Beach known for its beatniks and oil wells. He went to a white stucco house he had lived in before and took a room. In Venice Beach he knew he could stretch his dollars. After changing into slacks and a clean sport shirt Vic went to the pay phone in the hall and dialed Ellen's number. He hoped that she was still at that apartment near U.C.L.A. that she shared with two other girls who took dramatic courses at the college.

He was glad when he heard one of Ellen's room mates answer the phone and then call for her. Vic held his breath waiting to hear her voice again.

"Vic! Is it really you?" "Ellen all but wept over the phone.

Vic had prepared himself for her inevitable questions about New York. He decided to get his lies off right away to stop them. "Yes, honey, I'm back," he started in quickly. "Harold Wells called me back from New York. It seems that

there is this T.V. series looking for a featured player. I flew in to audition. Harry thinks I'll make it. It was a good thing he called when he did. I was about to sign a run-of-the-play contract on Broadway. It was a good but small part."

Ellen was beside herself with excitement. Vic heard her call her two friends and repeat the news . . . the lies. Vic felt his face flush. He was glad that he was giving Ellen all this gaff over the phone. He was never good at the game of putting up the big front that was so popular in the Hollywood-Broadway circles. In the game people told others about plans that didn't exist, about parts that weren't there. Later on he would get off the hook about the "T.V. series" by making up an excuse. For the moment Ellen was happy and that was all that counted.

"Vic, I'm so glad!" she cried. "Where are you now, back at your old place in Venice Beach?"

"Yes, until things get definite. No use spending money I haven't got."

"Let's get together right away, Vic. I'm going to a rehearsal at U.C.L.A. I'm playing the part of the maid in *Hedda Gabler*."

"I'll meet you at the school then," Vic told her.

After the rehearsal of the play Vic took Ellen to a small coffee shop near the campus. Under the table Vic could feel her knees brushing against his own. He held her hands. Ellen's pink skin seemed to glow

like lights. She seemed so fresh and young, even younger than her twenty one years. "Vic, now why didn't you write me while you were away?" she chided.

"I was just too busy, Ellen." What Vic wanted to say was that he had just been too damned discouraged to write her a single letter.

"I suppose the girls went wild over you in New York."

"Insane."

"I mean, after all, you're quite a catch."

Vic knew that she was bringing up the subject of marriage again. After going together for three years Ellen had the right to know what plans he had for their future . . . if any.

"And what about you?" Vic said changing the subject. "I'm sure there have been a lot of tom cats scratching around you while I was away."

Ellen nodded. "As a matter of fact there *is* one tom cat after me."

Vic felt a pang of jealousy. "Who?"

"The director of *Hedda*. You know him. Gordon Blake."

"Gordon Blake? You must know what his reputation is."

Ellen's pink face seemed to darken just a bit. "And what's that?" she asked flatly.

"He's a skirt chaser. He specializes in virgins." As soon as Vic made the statement he knew he shouldn't have. Virgins didn't like to have virginities made an issue of.

"Take me home, Vic," Ellen said standing up.

In the long walk to Ellen's apartment they didn't speak. In the hallway Vic suddenly grabbed and kissed her. Ellen melted in his arms. "Oh, Vic," she said. "Let's not fight. We can get along together. Let's find a place and shut the world out."

"Honey, I *want* to marry you, believe me. It's just that things aren't settled yet."

"But you have that series coming up. Once you get into that . . ."

Vic's embrace slackened. He was silent. Ellen held his face in her hands. "Vic, there *is* a series, isn't there?"

"Of course there is!" Vic shouted.

"Don't yell at me!" Ellen cried. "Just tell me the truth."

Vic had to get away from her. He had to get away from his own deception. "The truth is that I'm too busy to be hanging around here in hallways," he said and then tore himself away from her embrace.

He walked for hours, all the way back to Venice Beach. Every step he took was like a hammer blow against the sense of his own failure.

Two weeks later Vic went down to Television City to appear in the clothing commercial. It was a snap job that simply demanded him to stand in one spot looking off into the distance wearing a suit he was supposed to show off. Since he hadn't had another job in the two

weeks he waited for the commercial, the fee had already been eaten up in living expenses.

Vic had told Ellen to watch the commercial on T.V. just to prove he was working. He knew she didn't believe him about the series. He thought about finding another job, one outside show business. This, he knew, amounted to giving up. Other actors had taken jobs, promising that it would only be for awhile, but very few came back into the business. Vic felt that he wasn't licked so long as he kept fighting. But to go on fighting he needed money and he was almost broke now.

When Vic got back to his room his landlady told him that Harold Wells had called and that he was to go to the office as soon as he could.

As soon as Vic stepped into the agent's office he was all smiles. "Good news, Vic!" he beamed. "I've just had *two* calls for you. Gem Films and Crestwood Productions want to interview you."

Vic couldn't believe his ears. Gem and Crestwood were two of the biggest T.V. packages in the country. "They saw me in that commercial?" he wondered.

"It has nothing to do with the commercial. This came as the result of all those still pictures of you I've been sending out. I don't know what parts they have for you and maybe you'll only be a bit player but . . ."

Vic sat down and fanned himself with a magazine. "You don't have

to tell me. I'll take what ever they'll offer. When do I have to see them?"

"Both of them are at the end of the week. Believe me, Vic, this came as much of a surprise to me as you. Two calls from big companies in the same day. Somebody, somewhere must like you."

"I'm glad someone finally does."

Vic tried to call Ellen and tell her the good news but there was no answer. He returned to Venice Beach with the intention of dressing up and taking Ellen out to celebrate. There was someone in his room when he got there . . . Murph. "Hi, Vic," he said cheerily. "Your landlady let me in. I told her I was a friend of yours."

Vic blinked at the thin man. "What . . . what do you want?" he finally managed to say.

"Now Vic, is that the way to greet your favorite director?"

"You know damned well how I was forced to make that picture. How did you find me anyhow?"

"Trade secret." Murph sat on Vic's bed. The springs squealed. "You might be interested to know that *Dream Beauts* is selling very well. I just thought you'd like to know."

"*Dream Beauts?*"

"The picture you made with Opal. Damn, you kids go well together. You two can be America's favorite sweethearts easily."

"If you want me to make another of those pictures you can forget it."

"Hear me out first. We're ready

to shoot a series called *Jack and Jill*. See, this is big business just like T.V.”

“Not interested.”

Murph sighed. “I thought that was going to be your answer. That’s why Engi gave you such a big advance for doing the series in the first place.”

“What advance?”

“From Gem and Crestwood, of course. Engi used his, shall we say, pull to get you those assignments.”

Vic’s mouth fell open. “Engi got me those jobs?”

“Sure. See what comes from being nice and cooperative? You won’t be the first one Engi has helped up the ladder of success.”

“I don’t believe this! It can’t be! How can someone like Engi have such control?”

“Ah, you *artists* know so little about business,” Murph grinned. “Don’t you know that where money is, power is? And these pictures make a hell of a lot of money.”

“And what does Engi have to do with Gem and Crestwood? Don’t tell me that they have an interest in his kind of movies.”

Murph raised his eyebrows. “You’re asking me for trade secrets again, Vic. But I can tell you this; if you don’t deliver for us you just won’t be getting those T.V. jobs. If you think I’m bluffing just turn down *Jack and Jill*. By the way, Opal will play the part of Jill.”

“Opal? She’s out here?”

“Uh huh. Engi sent me out to

L.A. with her. We both needed a change. Well, what’s your answer?”

“The answer is NO.”

Murph shrugged. “Engi won’t like it. He took it for granted you were one of the gang now.”

Vic didn’t answer but stared out of the window lost in thought, anger and disgust.

“In case you change your mind, Vic,” Murph told him, “I’ll leave you my number. Give me a buzz.”

“I’d like to give you poison.”

Vic kept hoping that Murph was just bluffing about Engi being able to create and deny jobs in television. It wasn’t long before Vic found out that Murph hadn’t been bluffing. The next day Harold Wells gave him the bad news that his appointments with the T.V. packagers had been cancelled. “I can’t understand it,” the agent said. “They didn’t give me any explanation at all.”

“Maybe somebody up there *hates* me,” was all that Vic could answer.

When Ellen invited him to a party that same night Vic went with the sole intention of tying on a free drunk. It was at her apartment and there were at least two dozen people present. Most of them were Ellen’s age with the notable exception of a forty year old, Gordon Blake. Vic spent the first hour trying to avoid him but the director finally trapped him near the portable bar. “Well, Vic,” he smiled. “I haven’t seen you in years. Still acting?”

Vic knew that Blake was giving him the needle. The four drinks inside him didn't dull the point. "And how are you, Blake," Vic rejoined. "Still after the little girls."

The director didn't stop smiling. "Ellen tells me that you have an offer to do some T.V. work," he said loudly.

Several people stopped talking and looked in their direction. Vic's face turned red with anger. This time Blake had shoved a bigger and sharper needle in him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ellen's worried expression. She had told Blake his lie and Blake knew it had been a lie. And now he was throwing it back at Vic in that sly way of his.

"As a matter of fact I'm going to Gem Films and Crestwood this week," Vic heard himself say.

Vic had responded as loudly as Blake and now several others were looking in their direction. He knew that he had climbed out on a limb and Blake had the saw in his hand.

"Gem and Crestwood," Blake repeated. "I'd like to know how you do out there. I know a few people who work around those offices. I'm sure they'll fill me in. This is a professional interest I'm taking in you, Vic."

He *would* know some people at the Gem and Crestwood offices, people who would find out as to whether or not he was bluffing about those appointments. For all he knew Blake was in on the por-

nography racket somehow himself. He was the type.

"Vic," Ellen whispered to him as soon as she got the chance, "I'm sorry I told Blake but . . ."

"What's to be sorry about?" Vic said with a drink-slurred voice. "It's the truth. I never tell a lie."

Blake made a point of informing the rest of the group about Vic's rise in the television world. Every now and then someone would shake his hand or pat him on the back. Vic tried to drown his rage in drink and only succeeded in becoming ill. He threw up in the bathroom and then staggered out of the apartment. He heard Blake say something behind him but he pretended not to notice.

In the street Ellen came running after him. "Vic, are you all right?" she asked.

"Go back to the party, Ellen. You're the hostess."

She grabbed his arm. "Vic, I'm sorry about Blake."

"Why the hell do you keep apologizing for Blake?" Vic snapped. "Now let me alone." He pushed on leaving Ellen to stare after him in confusion.

Vic's head pounded and screamed like a brush-fire war. He felt like fighting someone. He wished that he had busted Blake's face in, he wished that he had Murph in his hands right now. He wished that Engi was here or Monty. Damn, he was twenty-eight years old and still he hadn't gotten anywhere in show business after ten years of trying. It

wasn't fair. He deserved a break. He had a break coming.

A break.

He stopped on a busy street corner and watched the cars speed by. He knew exactly where he could get a break. All he did was give a skinny pornographer by the name of Murph a phone call.

Murph was quick to arrange the first episode of the *Jack and Jill* series. He picked Vic up at his place in a brand new Cadillac, and Vic wondered if there was anything at all in the old bromide about crime not paying. "I'm glad you wised up," Murphy told Vic as they drove off.

The car stopped in front of a large factory in Santa Monica. Vic followed Murph inside. Since it was Sunday the place was empty. Vic didn't bother to ask Murph where he got the key to get in. He realized by now that pornography was a big business and took up office space like any other.

They went into the freight elevator and Murph drove it to the top floor. They entered a door marked; REGENT ART SUPPLY. From what Vic could see it was just that. Stacks of artist's pads, paintings and books about art filled the shelves. Then Murph opened another door. Vic saw a bed surrounded by unlit photographers lamps. On it was Opal. She was dressed in street clothes and smoking a cigarette. "No smoking," Murph ordered. "This place is full of inflammables."

Opal put her butt out slowly by grinding it under the ultra-high heels of her shoes. "Hello . . . Jack," she said.

"Hi Jill," Vic answered.

Opal lifted her shapely leg. "Dig these damn high heels. I've been trying to get used to them."

"What for, you're a big girl to begin with."

"It's not for me. It's for the picture. For some reason or other guys get a charge out of very long heels."

"That's not all you're gonna wear for this picture," Murph grinned opening a box in the corner.

Vic and Opal watched as Murph brought out a black corset, a pair of long black gloves and a very long black whip. He dumped them on the bed next to Opal. "You'll look swell in these, Opal," he said.

"You're kidding. Costumes yet?" Opal gasped toying with the corset.

"Who writes your plots," Vic asked. "Kraft-Ebbing?"

Murph knitted his brow. "Los Angeles boy?"

Vic laughed. "You might say he's retired now but he sure wrote the craziest stuff. I'll send you a collection one of these days, you might get some ideas."

"Good," Murph said seriously. "I need an idea man. After all, just how many ways can you do it?"

Opal started to take off her clothes. "I'll try the corset on for size."

Murph made a dirty crack and Vic felt like belting him.

Opal slipped easily out of her dress

and stood next to the bed in her bra, panties and nylon stockings. Vic felt a stream of red, raw lust run through him. All this and a break on T.V. too, he thought.

Opal adjusted the corset, and Vic laced the back of it up. Then she pulled on the black gloves which covered her arms past her elbows. "I'm not sold on the gloves, Murph," she complained.

"Why not?"

"Only broads getting on in age wear them. A woman shows her age at her elbows and mine are still young and pretty."

Vic shook his head. Even in a stag film Opal was concerned about her looks. "Don't worry," he said. "The guys won't even know you *have* elbows."

Opal patted his cheek with a gloved hand. "How sweet."

Murph outlined the "plot" of the picture briefly. Vic was supposed to be Opal's "love slave" who was to obey her every command. On some of them he was supposed to "object" and she would then force him by using the whip.

"Don't worry about the whip," Murph added. "It's made of paper so it can't hurt you. Opal, you can really lay that whip on Vic. Make it look good. Vic, you make like you're really suffering. I've got some cuts for realism."

"Cuts?" Vic asked.

Murph dug deep into a canvas bag looking like a dirty Santa Claus. He brought up a jar of dark paint and

a brush. "See what I mean?" he grinned.

Vic whistled. "That's real show biz."

"And now for *your* costume, Vic," Murph said. He reached into the canvas bag and brought up a small handful of cloth. When he spread it out it was nothing more than a jock strap with sequins.

"It looks like something Tarzan would wear on Fire Island," Vic commented.

"Well, I'll put the lights on and we can get started," Murph said.

The room was filled with clicking sounds as Murph tried to put the lights on. "That's funny," he said. "These lights worked only a few hours ago. I better check the fuse box." He picked up a small flashlight and left.

Vic sat on the bed next to Opal. He put his arm around her shoulders. "What the hell is a nice girl like you doing in a racket like this?"

"Now that line doesn't exactly sing with originality."

"But I mean it. With your face and figure you can go far in show business."

"Can I? Look, Vic, Hollywood is full of girls with good faces and good figures. Out here I'm just another pebble on the beach."

"Tried to break into movies, huh?"

"Doesn't everybody? Besides Engi promised to introduce me to some producers. The only ones I've met so far just gave me the old 'I'll be

nice to you if you'll be nice to me' line. Anyhow, I'm making more money now than I would ever make in the movies . . . the *real* movies, I mean."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Oh, no? Vic, haven't you noticed, I have a terrible handicap."

Vic drew back. "No!"

"Sure, no talent. Now where else can a no-talent girl like me make a buck without street walking?"

Murph walked in with the flashlight dangling loosely from his hand. His face was stark white as if he had just seen the Chief of Police in the hall. "I've found the trouble," he said. "The wires have been cut."

"Cut?" Vic said.

"Did you hear anyone in the building while I was out getting Vic, Opal?" Murph asked.

"No, I didn't hear a sound. What's wrong?"

"I've found the break on the floor below. Someone must've slipped in and done the job. You two talk about this place to anyone?"

"I didn't know about this place until you brought me out here," Vic answered.

"Don't look at me," Opal said. "I sure as hell wouldn't advertise what I do for a living."

Murph swallowed hard. "I think I'd better call Engi back in New York. This can mean only one thing . . . our competition wants us to stop operating."

"What do you mean by *competition*?" Vic wanted to know.

"Where there is money to be made there is always competition," Murph said. "And I have a good idea who it is."

"Who?" Opal and Vic said together.

"I think you'll be finding out about that soon enough. For now I'm going to line up another place. Engi wants these pictures made no matter what."

The new place Murph found to take the pictures in was a private home on Sunset Boulevard. It was large and empty except for that tool of the trade, and the world's favorite playground, the bed. This time Murph had made sure the lights worked. He turned them on and off several times, set them up around the bed and left them on. "If the wires are cut now we'll know about it," he said.

Opal and Vic got into their costumes. Vic felt like an idiot in his and couldn't bear looking at it.

Murph wasn't his usual flip self and he kept pacing the floor. "When we were driving out here," he said shaking. "Did you notice if we were being followed?"

"You're not on that kick again, are you Murph?" Vic asked. "You had us look behind the car every second on the way over. If a microbe had been following us we would've seen it."

Murph patted his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. "Sure . . . sure" he sighed. "I guess you're

right. Maybe I'm just a little too jumpy."

The movie taking began with Opal getting out of bed in her corset, stockings and gloves and then putting on her high-heeled shoes. Murph dollied in for a close-up on the shoes and Vic realized that he was making the high-heel shoe boys happy. He couldn't see what some guys saw in a woman's shoes but, then, every weirdo to his own taste.

Opal went to a drawer and picked up her whip. Murph directed her to play with it while he dollied his camera over its length. Vic still couldn't see what all this had to do with Jack and Jill.

Next Murph had Opal snap the whip and pretend to shout. This was Vic's cue. He was supposed to rush on scene and prostrate himself before her to await her bidding which, naturally, was to be an order for a carnal form of morning coffee. But, just as he was about to sprint on, there was a sound of a crash outside the house. Murph, being the only one properly dressed to meet the world, ran to the window and looked out. His pasty white face turned to a pasty green. "My car!" he gasped.

Vic put on his jacket and looked out of the window. Murph's brand new Cad was crushed to the size of a Fiat. The heavy truck that had done the job was speeding away from the scene none the worse for wear.

"Now I *know* they're after us,"

Murph said. "This is the second warning today. Look, you two stay here and watch the stuff. I've got to make that call to Engi right away."

"Murph, it was just an accident," Vic explained.

"An accident? Another car may hit and run but a truck, never." Murph hurried out of the house slamming the door behind him.

Through the window Vic could see a crowd gathering quickly around the wreck.

"You really think **it was an accident?**" Opal asked.

"Sure. I never heard of this racket being organized like gambling. Murph is just nervous, that's all."

Opal ran her fingers teasingly across Vic's bare buttocks. "I get nervous too . . . about some things."

Vic turned quickly from the window. The accident had suddenly lost its flavor. Wordlessly he placed his hand on Opal's waist and led her to the bed. He kissed her flush on the mouth, wet and long.

"What about Murph?"

"To hell with Murph," Vic answered unlacing the back of Opal's corset. After that was done he rolled her long, black stockings down to her ankles. Opal got out of her bra and panties and lay on the bed like a cat before a fire. Inside of another second Vic was naked beside her. He let his hand run slowly over her upturned breasts.

"Stop trying to play the lover," Opal told him. "Seduction is a sissy's game. A real woman likes her rape."

Vic took her in the way she wanted to be taken, brutally and sudden. He found himself emeshed over an undulating mass of womanhood that seemed intent on drawing the life out of his body. Vic closed his eyes. What a lovely way to die . . .

"Well, ain't that pretty," a voice barked in the room.

Vic and Opal parted quickly, their skins gleaming with sweat. Three men were standing around the bed looking enough alike to be triplets. All of them were squat, swarthy and peered down at them with cold, deadly eyes.

"Get up and get dressed, cuties," one of them ordered.

Vic grabbed his clothes and put them on rapidly. All of the men stared at Opal who was trying to get into her clothes in a hurry.

"Say," one of the men grunted, "let's have our fun first with the broad." He moved towards Opal. Another man came right behind him.

"Hold it," Opal warned with surprising coolness. "I can have all your badges if you try anything with me."

"Badges?" the first man on the prowl exclaimed. "This dame thinks we're cops!"

"Then who . . .?" Vic began to ask.

"Never mind," the man who seemed to be the leader cut in. "And never mind the dame, you two."

Opal seemed relieved. Vic breathed easier himself. At least he wasn't going to be arrested. But, if the trio

weren't cops that meant only one thing . . . Murph had been right about there being competition.

One of the men picked up the camera and exposed the film to the light. He then threw the camera against the wall several times. Another of the men deliberately broke the photographers lamps one by one.

After Opal and Vic dressed they were led outside and walked past the crowd gathered around the wrecked Cadillac in a hurry.

Opal edged close to Vic. "I wonder if they got Murph?" she wanted to know.

"Quiet in the ranks," the leader of the trio barked.

They all went into a big sedan parked around the block. Opal was ordered to sit with the driver while Vic was sandwiched in the rear between the other two men. One of them had Opal's high-heel shoes. He kept clicking the heels together while he giggled in a strange manner. This then, Vic thought with disgust, was one of the people the *Jack and Jill* series was being aimed at. His "audience."

As the big sedan barreled up Sunset Boulevard no one spoke. The only sounds were the strange giggles and the clicking of high-heels.

The car slowed as it crossed the dividing line between Beverly Hills and the rest of L.A. The plush mansions of the stars and other Hollywood big-wigs bordered each side of the tree lined street. The car made

a sharp right and then stopped in front of a white stucco building. The spiked heel fan beside Vic kissed each of the shoes tenderly and then left them in the rear seat. He then elbowed Vic out of the car.

The five of them walked to the front door of the large building and the leader of the group pushed the bell.

"Who is calling, please?" a cultured voice asked over an inter-com.

"It's me with Murph's couple," the man answered.

The door buzzer sounded and everyone entered. After a short walk along a thick red carpet in the hall the man next to Vic knocked on a shiny, white door. It opened. A butler who looked as if he had been hired by Central Casting bowed slightly and allowed everyone to come inside. Vic could see that who ever lived in the place was rich but had poor taste. Rugs, furniture and wall paper were the most expensive money could buy, but piled about in clashing disorder.

Somewhere in the apartment Vic heard the sounds of a party going on. With Opal he followed the leader, as the other two went off towards the merry noisemaking. They went to another room and the goon knocked at a door. Inside a mumbled voice called back. "Yeah?"

As soon as the goon opened the door Vic first saw a big shiny desk with a lot of telephones on it. Then he saw a balding man smoking a cigar behind it. He recognized him

immediately from all his pictures in the papers; Archie Saks. This, Vic also knew, was the competition that Murph was so frightened of.

Archie Saks sat in a swivel chair. First he looked at Vic and then he looked at Opal. His small, darting brown eyes ran along her curves like a sports car on a super highway. Finally he took the cigar out of his mouth and pointed the wet, chewed end at Opal. "You want trouble?"

"No," she answered.

He then turned his cigar on Vic. "And how about you?"

"I don't want any trouble," Vic told him.

Archie Saks replaced his cigar but spoke with it clamped between his stained teeth. "If you people don't want any trouble then don't make any more pictures for Murph, Engi or anybody else, do you hear? I have that racket sewed up on the West Coast and nobody cuts in on it. From now on you two are working for me."

Vic and Opal exchanged glances. "Something wrong?" Saks wanted to know.

"You mean . . . we are supposed to do the same *tihng*?" Opal asked.

Saks leered at her. "You like making these pictures, don't you baby?"

"I didn't say that. It's just that . . ."

"You're too good for that crap," Saks cut in. "I have other plans for you. And you too, mister. Don't count on Gem and Crestwood coming through because they're not. They're *my* contacts, not Engi's."

"You mean those appointments are off *again*?" Vic asked.

"That's all they were to begin with . . . appointments," Saks explained. "Engi doesn't carry that much weight with the studios out here, only I do. You were just being tossed a bone."

"Tossed a bone?"

Saks leaned over and snapped his fingers. From behind a couch came an English bulldog that walked over to its master. The animal was typical of its breed with its outthrust jaw, small brown eyes and its swagger.

"Meet Archie Junior," Saks said. "He looks like me, right?"

When the dog sat on the floor next to Saks Vic could see that there was a resemblance. The ugly little eyes were the same, the jaw, the furrowed brow and the generous supply of facial hair.

The goon who had brought Vic and Opal in tried to pat the animal but it growled at him. "After a year it still don't know me, boss," he complained.

"You got no knack with dogs," Saks told him. "Archie Junior is a very high-strung type. It only likes ladies and gentlemen."

Saks opened a drawer on the desk and pulled out a box of dog biscuits that were shaped like small bones. He wedged one between his fingers. "Now, Vic, here is what that Engi bastard was doing with you." He tossed the bone on the floor and the dog rushed over to grab it. Before the animal got it Saks swept it back

up in his hand. "See," he said holding the bone up. "*That* is the way Engi operates, he promises but he never delivers. He slipped some people at Gem and Crestwood a few bucks just to have them *interview* you, that's all. You weren't going to get any job."

Vic slumped against the desk. So the big break that he had been so willing to make a stag film for was just so much nothing.

Saks got up to his five-foot-six and walked over to Vic. He poked him in the chest with the dog-goody. "So you see, I did you a favor breaking you and Opal here away from that Engi crowd. I let them have New York and Jersey to operate in but they're greedy. They want to take over the whole stag movie business. They're not because I won't let them. They're not in my class. Here's the way I treat people who work for me." He threw the bone across the room and Archie Junior ran over and grabbed it. The sounds of it being eaten were loud.

"Now I'm not going to get rough with you people for being with Engi's gang. You didn't know what the score was out here. Well, you both know now, right?"

Vic and Opal nodded without speaking. Saks, looking pleased with himself, returned to his seat behind the desk. He stared at Archie Junior chewing away. After it had finished eating the dog walked over to Vic and rubbed against his leg. Vic leaned over and patted it.

"Hey!" Saks exclaimed. "Look at that! That's the first time Archie Junior ever took to someone right off the bat."

"I like dogs," Vic said. "I guess they can sense it."

Saks snapped his fingers. "Yeah! *That's* why he don't go for any of the boys. He knows they don't like him." Saks shot a cold glance to the goon who turned his face away.

"How would you like to be put on salary as Archie Junior's dog walker?" Saks asked suddenly. "I'll pay you a hundred a week."

"A hundred a week just for walking a dog?" Vic responded, "Are you kidding?"

A cold expression crossed Saks' face. "I don't kid," he said tightly. "I'm not Engi. I've been looking for someone to look after my dog. You see, my analyst tells me that I should have a pet to care for since I don't like people. After spending ten grand on that nut doctor that's all the advice he came up with. So, if I don't even take that advice I'd be out the ten G's. Besides, I have to have someone take the mutt out on his leg-lifting hikes. There's a lot of guys in this town that would just love to catch me outside with only a dog between me and them. Well, you want the job or not?"

"I don't know what to say," Vic answered.

"Just say 'yes,' Vic," Opal told him.

Saks laughed. "I like you, girlie. I've got a job in mind for you too

and I'll tell you about it after awhile. As for you, Vic, I've got something else in mind for you other than dog-walking and dirty pictures."

"Like what?"

Archie Saks slammed his hand down hard on the desk. "Don't you question me!" he shouted.

The dog growled a protest and Vic scratched his ear. He knew that he would have to draw the line somewhere with Saks. The mobster was the type who kept pushing people just to see how much he could get away with. Vic had met men like Archie Saks before, brutal, arrogant men who respected only one thing, a show of strength.

"I'm not impressed by you," Vic told him evenly. "I didn't come here of my own free will. You had three of your goons kidnap me along with Opal. I can tell you truthfully that I like your proposition about walking your dog for more money than I've made in years. But I can tell you this, just as truthfully . . . don't take me for one of your goons. I just won't be bullied."

Saks sat back in his chair in amazement, his mouth open and speechless. Vic knew it would come now, either his being kicked out or having Saks look at him with a rare show of respect.

"Vic," Saks said at length, "I like you. Here's a hundred for your first week's work. Now take the mutt out for a tour of the lamp posts." With that he peeled a hundred dollar bill off a roll and handed it to Vic.

For a moment Vic wondered if he should take it or not. He still didn't know what he would be letting himself in for.

"Take it Vic," Opal urged. "If you don't, I will."

Vic reached over and took the bill out of Saks' hand. Now, he realized, he was committed. To what, he didn't fully know.

Vic moved out of his Venice Beach rooming house the next day and took a one-and-a-half room apartment in Westwood Village, a middle-class suburb of L.A. For the first time in more years than Vic cared to remember he had a bathroom all to himself. He knew that his salary from Archie Saks would cover his expenses; but he couldn't say for sure how long the obviously neurotic mobster would keep him on. In any event he intended to enjoy his new status as long as he could.

When Vic brought Ellen up to his new place she was obviously impressed. Becoming more adept at the game of bluff he managed to convince her that he was on salary from one of the studios.

His work day began at five in the morning. It had to be early enough to get out to Beverly Hills in time to take the dog for his morning walk. After that he fed Archie Junior. From then until noon all he had to do was wait around the mansion until Saks woke up. It was at this time that Saks left to go to an

expensive restaurant where he held a kind of "court" in which he sat at a private table while strange, glum faced men walked up to him and engaged in whispered conversations. Vic did nothing but sit in a chair while he kept an eye on the dog.

In the afternoons Saks went to the races. He had great interest in gambling both as a business and a pleasure. Since dogs weren't allowed at the track Vic would mind Archie Junior back in Beverly Hills where he would take him for another walk. Although Vic's hours were long he hardly did anything at all. He was sure that he would be killed by boredom inside of six months if this was going to be all he had to do.

The one big advantage in his job as Vic could see was the fact that he could now afford to take Ellen out. For once in a long while he didn't have to worry about counting every dollar.

One night at the apartment Ellen leaned her head against his and whispered, "Vic, let me live with you."

Vic grabbed her, and held her at arms length. "What did you just say?"

"I want to live with you. You don't have to marry me . . ."

"What brought this on all of a sudden?" Vic asked taken aback. Ellen had never shown this much sexuality before.

"This isn't sudden . . . not to me," she answered. "I've been thinking of living with you for a long time

now. Let me Vic. I've never . . . I've never *done it*. . . ."

Vic tried to smile. "Is this some sort of experiment with you?"

"Please don't make fun of me. Just love me."

"I *do* love you, Ellen. You know that."

"Show it," she demanded. "Oh, Vic, I feel so damned immature. All the girls I live with have done it. And Gordon Blake wants me . . ."

"Why that bastard," Vic said between his teeth.

"Before you get too righteous he wants to marry me."

"Marry? Gordon?" Vic responded with disbelief.

"Don't be surprised. He's ready to settle down. He told me so himself. He makes a nice living, and he could support a wife in comfort."

"And do you want to marry him?"

Ellen pressed her face into his neck. "No . . . not really. I want *you* Vic, but you always draw away from me. I know you've had girls before. Then why not me too? Make me yours, Vic. Take me." She plastered her mouth against his and held it there.

Vic felt his easily aroused fires eating away at his will power. Ellen's virginity. It could be his by simply reaching out for it. It had been this purity about the girl that first attracted him to her. In an unclean world she was the one clean thing. Ellen was his hope and his tomorrow. He didn't want to destroy it

now. "Ellen," he whispered, "I know that I sound like I keep avoiding the subject of marriage. The only reason I do is because I'm not secure enough, financially. Once I get a good break then we can talk about it seriously."

"But you've got security. You got a good thing going with the studio. Besides, I told you you don't have to marry me to have me. I just want *you*, Vic.

Ellen kissed him again Vic fought against responding. He knew that if he gave in now he would give in all the way. He pushed her away suddenly. She looked at him with a stricken expression on her face. "Vic . . . you don't love me, is that it?"

"Ellen, you're the only one I *do* love!" Vic told her. Be sweet for me, darling. Stay sweet and clean for me for just a little longer."

She touched her fingers to her mouth to stop her lips from trembling. "Well, this is the first time I ever offered myself. It doesn't do my ego any good to be turned down."

Vic tried to say something but she turned away. "Don't worry, Vic," she said bitterly. "I won't molest you again."

Her heels sounded loud and angry as she strode from the room slamming the door behind her.

"I'll find the money to support you," Vic said softly to the closed door. "I'll make my own break this time."

When Vic went to Beverly Hills

the next morning he had his mind made up. He was going to ask Saks to use his influence at the studios to find him a job. All his life Vic had made a point never to ask for favors but now he was desperate. If he didn't marry Ellen he knew that she would walk into the wide open arms of Gordon Blake. He didn't want to marry her now on the strength of a dog-sitter's salary. He wanted that break that kept teasing at his fingers and then pulling away just when he thought he had it in his grasp.

Vic waited until the afternoon when Saks came from the races. He was in high spirits and Vic was glad that the mobster was in the proper mood. "Hi, Vic," he greeted . . . "How's the mutt?"

"Fine, Mister Saks," Vic answered and waited for him to settle down on a chair. Then he made his pitch. He did it simply and quickly without any hint of begging or servility in his voice.

Saks studied Vic for a moment and then spoke. "So you wanna marry that U.C.L.A. broad, huh?"

Vic was stunned. He hadn't mentioned Ellen. All he had asked for was the use of his contacts to get him a legitimate job. "How . . . how did you find out about her?"

Saks shrugged. "You don't think I don't investigate the people I have around me, do you? Like in the F.B.I. everybody had to have a clearance. I knew about Ellen before my boys picked you up that first day. They gave you a clean bill of

health. Why do you think I offered to let you work for me in the first place?"

"You went through all that trouble just to find a dog sitter?"

"Your job with the mutt has nothing to do with it. Remember, I told you I had other plans for you."

"But . . . I want to be strictly legit."

"Now who is *strictly* legit? Look, I'm not asking you to shoot someone or hold up a joint. All I want you to do, for an opener, is to keep Sara Summers company at a party I'll be throwing here."

Saks was in the habit of making sudden and unexpected statements that threw people off guard. He had done it again with Vic. Sara Summers was one of Hollywood's best known movie actresses and had been for years, ever since she had been discovered in a five and dime store by a talent scout. In her earlier years she had been known as the "Cardigan Girl" because of her ability to wear tight sweaters. After coasting along for a few years on this single talent she slowly developed into a really fine actress. In her remarkable career she had gone through five husbands and was, at present, single again.

"You want me to keep *Sara Summers* company?" Vic asked.

Saks looked impatient. "I told you before I mean what I say. Now, if you got a date with that little college broad of yours, forget it. Show up here tomorrow night in a tux. I want you to give Sara *all* the attention in the world, you understand?"

"Not exactly."

"Kid, do I have to draw you a diagram? You wanted a break and here it is. This Sara Summers helped more than one nice young *stud* to a place in pictures. *Now* do you understand?"

Vic did. He did only too well. So Saks was acting as procurer for Sara Summers and he was to be the procured one. Well, he had already stooped so low as to accept a job as a stag film stud, being one to a famed and beautiful actress wouldn't be any sweat at all.

Vic invested in the first tuxedo he ever owned. He also outfitted himself with three new white shirts and three black bow ties. With these glad rags in a box under his arm Vic walked out of the shop and waited for a passing taxi.

A late model sedan drove next to him and stopped. Murph stuck his head out of the window. "Hop in."

Vic glanced behind him nervously. Suppose one of Saks' men was watching? Could he afford to take a lift from his deadly enemy?

"Come on," Murph urged. "I can't wait here all day."

Vic slipped in the front seat besides Murph. He was curious about what had happened to his camera-man-screenwriter-director since the last time he had seen him. When Murph drove away from the curb Vic told him his new address. "I know," Murph responded. "You're living a little higher on the hog now."

"Don't tell me that you've been tailing me?"

"Personally, no. But Engi has a larger organization than you think and its growing all the time. You should come back to the fold, Vic."

"Look, Saks had his boys drag me and Opal onto their side."

"For someone who was forced against your will you sure as hell seem to be doing all right with the Saks bunch now."

"All I do is walk his dog, that's all. From what he is paying me for it I would've been crazy to turn it down."

"You'd be crazier if you stay on. Vic. I'm giving you a fair warning from Engi. He wants you and Opal back."

"Warning? What do you mean by that exactly?"

"Today I'm just a messenger boy. Engi is offering you two that *Jack and Jill* series still. He doesn't want anyone else."

"I'm flattered but I have other plans."

"Don't be too quick to answer. Sure, I know that Archie Saks doesn't want you back with Engi. He wants to keep the *whole* pornography racket sewed up out here. He can't do it. He's just not that big."

"Now I see why Engi is making such a big deal about me not working for him. He wants to show Saks what a big shot he can be too by taking people off his payroll when he wants to. That's it, isn't it?"

"Something like that. Sure, Engi

could easily get another couple to do the *Jack and Jill* series instead of you and Opal. But, if he did it would be the same as backing down to Saks. Engi doesn't want to back down one foot. If he did he would be finished out here. It's too bad that you had to be caught in the middle but that's the way things are. It's the principal of the thing with Engi."

"If Engi has principals so have I," Vic said angrily. "Tell him that I can be pushed just so far and then I draw the line. Tell him that I don't want any part of the racket. I just want to be left alone."

Murph stopped in front of Vic's apartment house. "I'll tell him that," he said. "And I can tell you this . . . he's not going to like it."

Vic got out of the car and watched it drive away. His anger now had cooled. In fact he was so cool now that he shivered.

The party was big, not in numbers but in who the numbers were. Vic rubbed elbows with the stars he had viewed from afar in the movies and on television. There was last year's winner of an Oscar. There was a big time director who was having the well publicized spectacular coming out shortly. There was one of television's favorite cowboys. Vic drifted through the crowd half blinded by the brilliance of so many stars. Yet, he couldn't see Sara Summers anywhere.

Archie Saks, the genial host, made his grand entrance with Archie Junior tagging along side him. The

crowd moved toward the little mobster in almost shameless adoration. Vic watched in surprise and disgust as stars, producers, directors and executives fawned over him as if he were some god. Vic had the idea that they all needed something from Saks, his backing, his O.K., his blessing, his smile.

Archie Junior leaped over to Vic and he knelt to pat him. The eyes of the crowd that had followed the bulldog now rested on him. Saks came over and put his arm around his shoulders. "Meet the only guy Archie Junior likes more than me!" he shouted.

Vic was ham enough to enjoy the center of attention especially from these, his idols. Saks began to introduce him around, just by name and not by profession. Vic was glad for that. He would have hated it if Saks let everyone know that he was merely the dog's walker and sitter. Thus Vic knew that there would now be an air of mystery about him with people asking . . . "Who *is* he?"

Saks didn't explain their connection but simply went from person to person, from group to group, introducing him. Vic could see that people usually took a mild interest in him but they treated Saks to slavish devotion. Just what kind of hold did he have over these important people, Vic wondered. Or was it merely the crude attraction that people of status always seemed to have for well known underworld figures?

Then, quite suddenly, Sara Summers was standing in front of him. "Sara," the mobster said using her first name as if he were used to saying it, "I want you to meet Vic Harper."

Sara Summers looked at Vic with obvious interest. "How do you do?" she asked and then moved on without waiting for a reply.

Vic looked at Saks in disappointment. If the actress was supposed to be his gateway to the big time it sure as hell closed pretty damned tight.

Saks winked at him. "She likes you."

"*Likes* me? I'd hate to have her hate me."

Saks patted his arm. "You don't get the picture," he said in a low and dirty voice as if he were trying to peddle him some dirty postcards. "A star like Sara Summers can't afford to be seen talking to a good looking nobody like you. She knows that she has a reputation for being a man eater and her studio wants her to live it down. That's why she took off right away. If you were somebody that she wouldn't be interested in she would still be standing here. Now, just take it easy. Don't press her now. She'll come to you on her own time." Saks walked away and was swallowed up by the crowd.

Vic went over to the bar and picked up a martini. He tried to see Sara Summers in the crush but couldn't. He wondered if Saks was right. Was the big time actress

actually interested in him? He sipped his drink promising himself he wouldn't louse up the deal by getting loaded.

He drifted around the party getting into conversations and getting out of them. He knew that he was way out of his class. Everyone seemed to be a wheel of some size and he felt like he was hardly more than a ball bearing.

Several of the people began to leave. The party was breaking up. He knew that Hollywood parties were run according to an unwritten protocol. According to their status people arrived and left, the biggest names had the right to come the latest and leave the earliest. To arrive *after* a name bigger than your own immediately classified you as an oaf and an egomaniac. To leave *before* a bigger name meant that you were crude and insulting in not staying to wallow in the presence of the people who had deigned to come to the same party with you in the first place. Vic realized that, according to this protocol, he had to stay around to empty the ash trays.

Naturally, Sara Summers had to be one of the first to leave. As soon as an important director left this was her cue to put on her fur coat. She shook hands quickly with some of the other guests and kissed Saks lightly on his hairy cheek. When she passed Vic she shook hands with him quickly without speaking or even looking at him. Vic wasn't disappointed. He felt a slip of paper

being pressed into his palm. He didn't look down at it and, he certainly didn't intend to read it right there.

As soon as the actress left Vic went into the gent's room and opened the piece of paper. It was written in a flowing feminine hand:

Let me see you tonight.

Come to back entrance.

Sara

Under the signature there was an address. It was in Beverly Hills and hardly more than walking distance from Archie Saks' place. Vic put the note in his inside pocket and walked out of the john looking like he had just won a week long battle with constipation. His smile lit the room.

When the last party-goer left Saks came over to Vic and slapped him on the shoulder. "So you really hit it off with Sara, didn't you? You're seeing her tonight, I hope."

Vic nodded. "I can't hardly believe it. Sara Summers of all people!"

"Well, don't let it go to your head. You still have to take Archie Junior for his leg-lifting hike before you go."

Vic whistled for the dog and he came to him. "Mister Saks . . . do you usually find men for actresses?" he asked. This was the one question he had been dying to ask all evening.

Saks looked up at him with his beady, brown eyes. "So you wanna know what my pitch is, huh? I'll tell you. You're a fringe benefit."

"A what?"

"I'm spreading my operations out into the movie business the legit end. I got the contacts and I got the dough. You don't need much else out here to get ahead. Those big shots you saw tonight all came to see me because they know I'm interested in backing movies. Once you let it out that you've got dough to spend the whole pack comes running. People can't wait to work for me, the top talent included. They all know that I give fringe benefits to the ones I like. There are broads for the guys and guys for the broads. Now you see what I mean?"

Vic smiled. "So I'm a fringe benefit. And you want me to be Sara Summer's is that it?"

"I want her for my first picture," Saks said seriously. "I hope you'll show her that it will be worth her while."

"I'll try, Mister Saks," Vic said. "I'll try."

The back of Sara Summers mansion looked better to Vic than the front of the places he was used to living in. In fact, the entrance itself looked better than most of the houses he was used to living in.

Even in the moonlight the mansion looked imposing. And all this just for the ability to stuff a sweater. It was one of the few times in his life that Vic wished he had been born a girl.

He knocked gently at the darkened doorway and waited. All he

could hear was his own excited breathing. He knocked again, louder.

"Yes?" a voice asked on the other side of the door.

"It's me, Vic Harper."

The door opened a crack and Vic could feel an eye run over him. Then the door swung open wide. Sara Summers was standing there in slacks and a loose blouse. She had washed all her make-up off and her face looked strangely plain. "I was just about to give you up," she said. "Come inside."

Vic crossed the threshold and found that he was in the kitchen. "I had to stay late. I'm sorry," he told her.

Sara gazed at him as if he were a specimen to be analyzed. "Just what *other* connection do you have with Archie Saks?" she asked.

Vic told her exactly what he did. She gave a small laugh. "Archie and that dog. It's the only thing he really cares for. It must be wonderful to be like him, though. Completely self-dependent." Her voice trailed off and she walked into the next room. Vic wondered if he should follow her. He waited for a moment and then her voice called to him from the recesses of the place. "Come on, don't be afraid of me."

He entered the room. It was completely dark. "Miss Summers?" he called back timidly.

"Don't call me *Miss Summers*," she said directly behind him. "You make me sound like an old maid

school teacher. And that is as far from the truth as you could possibly get."

She turned on a lamp. The room glowed yellowly showing its expensive and well cared for furniture. Sara sat down on a plush couch. "You're very good looking but I suppose you know that," she said.

Vic knew a signal to come and try for first base when he heard it. He moved slowly towards her, his feet like lead. Here was Sara Summers, star of the Silver Screen and idol of millions, offering herself to him. A few weeks ago he was starving in a Venice Beach rooming house, and now here he was in a Beverly Hills mansion with an actress he had always regarded as being as unreachable to him as the planet Mars. The whole situation had a dream-like quality about it that prevented him from reacting quickly to her signal.

"Don't tell me you're shy?" she teased. "You know why you're here and so do I. Archie's policy about keeping the stars happy isn't really new, you know. In fact, it's as old as Hollywood."

Vic managed to walk across the room and sat next to her on the couch. Without saying another word he kissed her on the lips.

"That was sweet," she said. "Just how old are you anyhow, Vic?"

"Twenty eight."

"Twenty eight. Hardly more than a boy, really. I'm forty two."

Vic didn't know what to answer. He had known her since it had been

mentioned in the papers every time she was divorced. Another woman of forty two would impress him as being middle-aged, but Sara Summers had a certain agelessness about her. She looked fully ten years younger with only a slight plumpness rounding out her original Cardigan Girl shape of twenty years ago. But her face did show the marks of age with the tell tale lines of crow feet flaring out under her eyes and the twin lines of sorrow etching down along the sides of her mouth shamelessly naked without their usual coat of carefully applied make-up.

"You're not so . . ." Vic stopped himself suddenly.

"So *old*?" Sara added. "Thanks for the compliment, back handed though it was."

Vic, knowing that he was getting off on the wrong foot, basically because he had just put it in his mouth, decided that action would, not only be louder than words, but safer, kissed Sara once more. This time it wasn't a sweet kiss. Sara Summers responded by letting her lips part and then her teeth. Wetly, darting **and** warm, her tongue pressed against his own. Vic's remarkable low boiling point had been reached and he embraced her passionately. Sara's body twisted and turned against his chest and he could feel her loose blouse undoing itself. He held her by the shoulders and looked down. Her breasts were exposed, the yellow light in the room turning

them to gold, the scarlet nipples to old Spanish coins. "Beautiful . . .," Vic gasped.

"Take a closer look," Sara told him, cupping her hands under her breasts and lifting them.

Now Vic could see what she meant. Under each breast there was a long but very thin surgical scar.

"I had a plastic job on them last year," she explained candidly. "The damn things were beginning to sag so I had them built up. Next year I'm going to have my face lifted."

"You don't have to tell me all this," Vic informed her.

"I want to tell you because I can't be deceptive. I just don't know how. I've always been honest with people and I expect them to be honest with me," she said with tears creeping into her voice as well as her eyes. "Now answer me honestly . . . do you love me, Vic?"

"Well, I've just met you," Vic answered uneasily.

"Don't hedge! The truth!"

Vic looked directly into those large blue eyes. "No," he said. "I don't love you."

Sara rolled across the back of the couch. "That's what I wanted to hear. I didn't want a phony, a damned creep who would promise me his soul when all he could offer was his . . . parts. I like you, Vic. No. I don't love you either so we can start off with a clean slate." She threw her arms around him and Vic could feel the rubbery, nakedness of her breasts against him.

“Mother!”

The room was suddenly lit from every lamp and every bulb in it. Standing in the doorway was a very tall but very young girl Vic judged to be no older than fifteen.

“Damn you, Mavis!” Sara Summers shouted. “Do you have to prowl around this house like a cat all the time?” She pulled her blouse over her naked breasts hurriedly.

“When will you stop bringing home these studs, mother?” she asked coldly. “And this one isn’t much older than I am.”

Sara looked at Vic with a frown on her face. “Let’s make this some other time, huh? Away from here.”

“Are you trying to make another date with that he-whore?” the girl asked, her voice not only cold but deadly. She walked over to Vic and looked him up and down. “At least your tastes are improving, mother,” she added. “This one doesn’t look like a gangster.”

The girl’s attitude was beginning to gall Vic despite the fact that he could understand how unnerving the sight of her mother, half naked on the couch, with a man was to her. “I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced,” Vic said curtly. “My name is Mister Harper.”

“Save your wise cracks and blow,” was her reply.

Sara took him by the arm and led him through the kitchen. “I’m sorry about this,” she said. “But Mavis is very high strung. I thought she would’ve been asleep by the time you

came but we must’ve woke her up. You *do* want to see me again, don’t you, Vic?”

“Naturally.”

“Then give me your phone number. I don’t want to give you mine because Mavis listens on the extensions.”

Vic wrote his number on the back of the same note she had given him earlier. She kissed him quickly. “Good night, darling,” she whispered.

As Vic walked away from the mansion he could hear some shouting and screaming inside. “Another stud! Another bum!” Mavis was yelling at the top of her lungs.

Another? Just how many others were there, Vic wondered. He strode rapidly out toward the street away from the screams and shouts. What the hell difference did it make how many others there had been, he concluded. Sara Summers was going to be his business, not his pleasure.

When Vic returned to Saks’ place to take the dog out for his final walk he was surprised to find the mobster waiting up for him. “Well,” he asked excitedly, “how did you make out?”

“I didn’t.”

“What do you mean, you didn’t?”

Vic explained everything including Mavis.

“That little twist,” Saks sneered. “She’s a nut. She’s been picked up a few times in downtown L.A. for hanging out in bars. Once she was even picked up for smoking pot.

Poor Sara has her hands filled with her. Everytime she puts the kid into some private school she runs away. She really belongs in some bug house."

"I never even knew Sara Summers had a daughter."

"That proves how much her studio managed to hide the news. They even managed to keep the kids troubles out of the papers. They don't want Sara Summers known as the mother of a crazy, almost grown daughter. She's supposed to be a sex symbol."

"Oh, she's a sex symbol to *me*," Vic smiled. "Of course I don't know where to bring her if I ever do get another date with her. I suppose her studio doesn't want her to be seen with a nobody like me."

Saks winked. "Don't worry about it. When she calls you tomorrow you can take her out to a little place I got in Benedict Canyon. It's a small lodge I use for private parties and when I want to get away myself." He crossed over to his desk and picked up a slip of paper with two keys attached to it and handed them to Vic. "Here's a map of how to get there. The big key is for the front door and the small one is for one of my cars, the Thunderbird."

"Well . . . thanks Mister Saks," Vic said slightly stunned.

Saks waved his hairy hand. "I'm doing this for my girl Sara. She deserves the best. That means you too, Vic. I hope you'll treat her right."

"I'll try **very** hard," he responded.

"Remember," Saks said jabbing him in the chest with his finger to underline every word, "if you play her along right she'll more than likely get you a part in her next picture. She's done it with other guys before."

Others. Again Vic had to ask himself . . . just how many others had there been before him? He shrugged trying to pretend indifference again. Then he took Archie Junior out for a tour of the lamp posts.

Sara Summers called Vic as soon as he walked into his apartment that night. Assuming that Saks would allow him to take the next day off in order to make a date with her Vic arranged to pick her up. He told her about the place that Saks offered them in Benedict Canyon.

"That's Archie for you," she breathed over the phone. "Always the Cupid."

Vic thought of the mobster as looking anything but Cupid and called him as soon as Sara hung up. He informed him about the date he had just made with Sara and asked if it were all right to take the time off.

"Of course!" Saks boomed happily. "Now don't get out to the lodge before two in the afternoon. I want to check first to see if anyone is there. I hand out a lot of keys to that joint."

Vic picked up Sara about noon the next day. She was wearing dark sun glasses and a scarf around her head

that covered most of her face. She was also wearing a simple cotton dress and looked for all the world like a housewife on her way to the grocery store. It was a good disguise. He almost drove past her in the Thunderbird Saks let him use.

As soon as Sara slipped in the front seat beside him she kissed him on the cheek. "This is so exciting," she said. "I just *love* these little intrigues."

Vic felt his temples throb. He was actually going to have the big name actress! "I feel pretty excited myself," he told her.

By following the map Vic reached the lodge after killing some time by simply driving around. It was two thirty in the afternoon when he parked in front of the place. It struck him as odd that it didn't have any windows but, rather, ventilators.

"I don't think Archie wants nosy people looking in," Sara explained.

That made sense to Vic. After all, a hideaway was supposed to hide away. When he opened the door he could see that the lack of windows added up to a total lack of sunlight. He found a switch and turned on two bright lamps.

Both Vic and Sara were stunned by what they saw. On one side of the room there was a double, no, triple bed in an alcove formed by floor to ceiling mirrors. There was even a mirror directly above the bed!

"Mirrors!" Sara exclaimed. "I just love to do it with mirrors! That Archie sure does have tastes."

"Yeah," Vic answered. He didn't want to say what he thought of how good or bad the mobsters taste in home furnishings were.

Sara turned and stared into Vic's eyes. "Let's *keep* the lights on."

Vic swallowed hard. "Sure . . . why not?"

They walked over to the mirrors and looked at each others reflection. Sara took off her sun glasses and scarf. Then she kicked off her shoes and undid her dress. It slipped down to her ankles. She was naked underneath. "Well, Vic?" she asked.

Vic sat on the bed with his back to the mirrors and stared at her.

Her body.

Her multi-million dollar body.

All he could do was swallow hard.

"I hope you're not going to just *sit* there?" she teased.

As Vic began to take off his clothes with clumsy fingers he could see that Sara admired her own body as well as he did. She posed and postured in front of the mirrors with delight and satisfaction written all over her face. Then she did a few bumps and grinds. Vic felt his blood pressure rise and turn his face to fire.

When he was naked Sara sat on the bed next to him. Silently their hands explored one another. Then Vic grabbed her and placed her back against the bed. It was very soft and gave under their combined weight. They met as two flames would meet, burning, devouring, consuming. Suddenly Sara took the aggressive part of their love making and Vic

found himself looking up at the mirror on the ceiling. He saw his own lust-marked face. And he saw the movements of Sara's lush, white buttocks.

Now Vic knew why her five husbands had left her. She was insatiable! No man could stand *that* much sex. A good man was hard enough to find but, the kind of man Sara needed, just didn't exist.

Vic closed his eyes against the reflection above and lost himself in Sara's demands.

The next day Saks greeted him, not as an employee but an honored guest. Vic was surprised to find Opal in the apartment with a big smile on her face. "Hello, Vic," she said.

"Hi, you're looking well."

"Not anywhere as well as you did last night," Opal answered, her smile widening.

"What?"

"I'll show you what," Saks responded with a bellowing laugh. "Follow me."

Vic entered a tiny, bare room just off Saks' private office. There was a portable screen placed against one of the walls. Several feet away three of Saks goons, the same ones who had picked him up before, were standing behind a movie projector.

Saks nodded his head and one of the goons turned the projector on. Vic followed the beam of light that came from it until it reached the screen.

There, on the screen, were Sara

Summers and himself entwined in the world's most popular position.

"The lodge! Those mirrors!" Vic screamed. "You had a cameraman behind them! Of all the rotten . . ." He ran toward the projector and tried to grab it. A fist caught him between his eyes and went sprawling on the floor. As he tried to shake the shooting stars out of his head one of the goons placed his heavy foot against his chest and held it there. "Don't try to get up," he warned.

The projector was turned off and Saks looked down at Vic. "Nice performance," he said. "You photograph well. Sara too."

The rage in Vic left him. He knew it would be no use in fighting. He should have known that Saks would have something like this up his sleeve. It was his fault for walking up to that lodge like an idiot. "Blackmail, is that it?" he asked.

Saks nodded to the goon and the heavy foot was taken away. Vic sat up. "It *is* blackmail, huh? That's what the whole set up was for."

Saks lit a cigar. "I told you I wanted to have Sara Summers in my first picture. I don't mean this one either. But, once she sees it she'll be only to glad to sign up on *my* terms."

Vic stood up and looked down at the mobster in contempt. "Show her this and you'll be overplaying your hand," he told him. "If Sara's studio can repress the news about her daughter they can repress the news about this film. I've heard of cases like this before. You can't shake her

down in the first place without putting your own neck on the block either. Another thing, how *well* do you think Sara will act in the movie for you if you force her with this film? She can make you sorry you ever hired her. She can turn the most expensive production into a turkey by just not trying to act. She . . .”

The mobster took the cigar out of his mouth and shouted. “Enough, already! Don’t you think I’ve thought about this? I’m not stupid, Vic. I know exactly when to press Sara and when not to. I know exactly what I can do with this little picture the boys took yesterday.”

“And just what *do* you intend to do with it?” Vic asked.

“That’s none of your business. And don’t you question me. You’re on my payroll. You do as I say.”

“I walk your dog and that’s all I’m paid to do.”

“You’re mad because I’m not cutting you in on this?” Saks asked waving toward the screen. “Well, I’m paying you for it. You got the key to the Thunderbird, keep it.”

Vic wondered if he heard right. “Keep it?”

Saks twisted his lips into a sneer. “Oh, I can see how your attitude is changed now. Like everybody else you’ve got your price.”

“You can’t buy me. If you knew that you would’ve let me in on the scheme in the first place. No. You knew I wouldn’t go for trapping Sara Summers you had to trap me too.”

Archie Junior rubbed against Vic’s legs. He petted him. Seeing this a softness crept over Saks’ harsh face. “The mutt likes you. He sees that your in trouble and he goes to you. Me, he doesn’t come to.”

For the moment the mobster seemed oddly pathetic. The one creature he cared for in the world avoided him. Vic found it hard to sound angry but he forced himself. “So you’ve got what you wanted,” he said. “I’ve got a right to know what you’re going to do with that picture.”

“If you’re so damned nosy I can tell you that I can sell it for 50 grand.”

“Sara won’t buy. I can tell *you* that.”

“Who says anything about her? I’ve got a few contacts that would climb over each other to bid on this film. There’s a lousy ex-king, for instance who would pay anything to see his favorite blonde movie actress doing what come naturally. I don’t even have to let Sara know about the picture to make a pile of dough on it.”

“Then you don’t *have* to show it to her, is that right?” Vic asked urgently.

The cigar in Saks’ mouth drooped. “What the hell is the matter with you? Are you stuck on her or something?”

“No. I just don’t want to see her hurt, that’s all. Especially since I would have something to do with *it*.”

Saks shook his head. "I don't get you. Here you were willing to make stag movies for Murph and Engi for a few hundred bucks but, when you can pick up a three thousand dollar for doing the same thing . . ."

"It's not the same. Opal *knew* what she was doing. She wasn't being trapped like Sara Summers. As for the car, you can keep it. I quit!"

Vic stamped out of the room.

"Nobody quits me!" Saks shouted after him. "I've got you tied hand and foot."

Vic turned in the middle of the room. "How do you figure that? You can't shake me down with that picture."

"Can't I?" Saks shouted. "I can either sell the picture or show it to Sara . . . its up to *you*."

"Up to me?"

"Sure. I want to make as much as I can out of it. You don't have to tell me that trying to shake down Sara Summers would be risky. I don't like to take risks. I'd rather that she sign a contract with me for a movie at my rates without me forcing her. But . . . *you* can talk her into it."

"I see," Vic responded. "If I don't convince her to take a lot less than her regular salary to make a movie for you you'll blackmail her into it."

"Your're a bright boy," Saks told him. "Just tell her that I've got you signed to an exclusive contract and that, if she wants to make a movie

with you it would have to be at my rates."

Vic's head began to spin. Everything was going too fast. "Make a movie . . . ? With Sara Summers . . . ?"

"You won't be a lead, of course. But Sara would want to help your career by starring in the same movie with you. Are things getting a little clearer?"

Vic sat on a chair and whistled. "I've got to hand it to you, you really know how to operate," he said. "Even if I could convince Sara Summers to star in your movie for my sake you can still make money of that same bit of film you wanted to blackmail her with. Either way you win."

"We *all* win," Saks told him. "Sara gets you, you get into a movie and I get money. Everybody is happy. All the dogs get bones. Now you don't want to louse it all up by walking out on the deal and forcing me to blackmail Sara Summers?"

Vic got out of the chair weakly and walked toward the door. He had to admit that Saks had him tied up. He hated this feeling of helplessness. He hated Saks. One of these days he may have to kill him.

"Well, are you with me or not?" Saks asked.

"I'll think it over," Vic answered leaving the room.

"Wait, Vic!"

When Vic turned he saw Opal running out of Saks' place towards

him, her heels clicking noisily on the street.

"Did the big man send you out to talk me into it?" he asked.

"What if he did?" Opal snapped. "Look, Vic, if we don't cash in on this racket, someone else will. Besides, you can't kick yourself too much. You didn't know that there was a cameraman up at the lodge?"

Vic slowed his walk and looked at Opal. "Just what has Saks lined up for you?"

She dropped her glance. "The same kind of thing," she answered.

"You mean you are going up to that place with some guy *knowing* what will happen?"

A sudden wave of anger washed across Opal's beautiful face. "Don't get so damned high and mighty with me! You were willing to do the *Jack and Jill* pictures with me. This isn't that much different. And the pay is a hell of a lot better too. You got a car out of the deal so far, haven't you?"

Vic waved his hand tiredly. He just didn't feel like arguing. "All right, let's drop the subject. Just tell me one thing . . . who are you going into the lodge with?"

Opal told him. It was the name of names.

"I wonder how he'll take to blackmail?" Vic asked.

"He can afford it. After all, he's known as the King of the Box Offices. Anyhow, Saks told me that he will sell him the negatives. Another operator would bleed him for years."

"What is Saks going to ask him for?"

"A choice. He'll either have to pay fifty grand or be willing to work in one of Saks productions for almost nothing."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Saks wants him as Sara Summers leading man," Vic said bitterly. "Opal, why don't you quit this crummy racket?"

"And go back to Engi? No thanks. I always run with the winners and Engi is going to lose this war no matter how many bombs he intends to throw."

"What's this about bombs?" Vic asked. "I hope you're only using that as a figure of speech."

"No I'm not, Vic. You've been so busy with that Summers dame you just don't know what's been happening lately. Engi sent Saks the message that if he doesn't give him a piece of the action out here he's going to throw a few bombs at him."

"Engi must've been junked up at the time," Vic told her. "There's no accounting for what a junkie tells you. I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"Saks is. He knows Engi better than either of us."

"And what does Saks intend to do now?"

"Just sit tight. If Engi starts something he'll fight back in the same way. You know that Saks isn't the type to take things lying down."

"No," Vic said with a sneer, "he expects us to take things lying down though."

“Speaking of the lodge how about driving me out there to take a look at the place. I want to see what I’m getting into.”

“Okay, Opal. I’d like to see just how that joint is set up myself.”

When Vic got to the lodge he couldn’t believe that such a pleasant looking building could hide such unpleasant facts like hidden cameras. Inside he saw the mirrored alcove and the outsized bed and blanched. Memories crowded in on him. He thought of Sara Summers blonde-goddess body.

Opal went directly to the mirrors and stared at them. “I’m trying to see *through* them, Vic,” she said. “I’ll be damned if I can see any camera.”

“There must be an opening somewhere,” Vic said examining the nearby walls.

“Maybe the cameramen have an entrance on the outside,” Opal suggested.

“That must be it.”

Vic went outside and began to encircle the lodge looking for a doorway. At the back of the building where the alcove was, there grew a great green bush that reached the roof. Leading to it Vic could see the light outline of footprints. The bush parted easily. There was a small door on the wall. Vic pushed it and it gave way soundlessly on well oiled hinges. He found himself in a small dark room but, at one end of it, there was a glow of light. Vic

walked towards it and turned a sharp corner. There was Opal staring right at him!

“Opal,” Vic said, “how did you get in here?”

Opal didn’t answer. She didn’t seem to hear him. Vic realized that he was looking at her through the other side of the mirror. The small room he was in was completely sound proofed. Little wonder that he hadn’t heard the gentle hum of the cameras the last time he was here.

It was as if he were looking at the main room of the lodge through a wide open door. The view was that large and clear. The view of the bed was especially good and Vic could imagine the kick the cameramen got out of this performance with Sara. He couldn’t find any cameras. He was sure that the men who used them brought them anytime they had to take pictures and then removed them afterwards.

Vic watched Opal turn her back to examine the seams of her stockings. If there was a Heaven for Peeping-Toms this must be it, he thought.

Suddenly Vic saw a figure pass the entrance of the lodge. He peered deeply into the room again. Yes, there was a man. Opal, still concerned about her stockings, didn’t see him. Then the man edged closer. It was Murph! In his hand was a shiny metal tube. With an abrupt motion Murph threw it. A ball of whiteness exploded in the room cracking the mirrors in many places.

Opal screamed. She ran towards the mirrors to get away from the quickly spreading flames that began to devour the lodge. Vic kicked at the mirrors from his side and they began to give. Opal screamed again.

"It's me, Opal!" Vic told her. "Get away from the mirrors!"

Opal walked across the bed to get away from the shiny glass that splintered under Vic's wild kicking. A hot blast filled the small, dark room behind the mirrors as one section of the walls gave way. Opal rushed into it embraced Vic quickly. Grabbing her hand Vic led her through the room and into the air, shoving the big brush aside completely.

"Vic . . . what happened?" Opal gasped.

"It was Murph. I think he threw an incendiary bomb. It looks like Engi wasn't kidding. That hop head must be running wild."

Opal fainted. Vic grabbed her and placed her gently on the ground.

The lodge behind them was going up in flames so rapidly it looked as if it were being rubbed out with a great, red eraser of fire. Since Los Angeles County was in the midst of one of its usual rainless seasons everything was as dry as dust. Vic picked Opal up and brought her to safer ground. He could smell the odor of singed hair rising from her and he could see that parts of her hair and clothes were burnt. Luckily she had escaped injury. If she hadn't been in that alcove at that moment Vic knew that she surely

would've received the full force of the bomb. Her vanity had saved her. Then Vic's face became pale. And if he had been in the room with Opal at the time . . .

Opal murmured and her eyes flickered open. She looked about her in a daze. "Vic . . . ? Where am I?"

"The classic question," Vic smiled. "It was a good thing that you ran into the alcove."

She watched the flames reaching skyward from the lodge. There was a loud rumble as the roof gave way. "Well," she sighed, "there goes my five hundred."

"Five hundred?"

"Yeah, that was what Saks was going to pay for taking the King of the Box Offices out here later on."

Vic sat on the ground beside her. "You'll be all right, Opal. You've come out of it completely undamaged, brains and all."

"Vic, look!" Opal screamed pointing.

The dry bush around the lodge became a wall of flame. Brush and forest fires was one of Los Angeles County's biggest headaches in the dry spell and this one was off to a roaring start.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Vic told her and grabbed her hand.

They ran towards the car. On the road behind them a tree exploded into flame. Vic stamped his foot on the gas. The car spurted off. He knew how dangerous a flash fire could be. One minute there would be a safe exit from the forest and the

next minute would turn it into a sheet of flame.

Vic took a turn on two wheels and kept going, pressing the gas pedal as far as it could go. One each side of them the trees caught the wind-borne sparks and their green became a deadly mixture of red and yellow flames. "Why couldn't this damn wind be blowing in the *other* direction?" Vic shouted.

"The whole forest is on fire!" Opal cried. "Hurry!"

The speedometer climbed past 80. Behind the car a long trail of dust rose obscuring the flames. Far off Vic could hear the wail of fire engines. He gripped the wheel. He had to get out of the area before the firemen arrived. Some inspector would eventually find out where the fire was caused and what caused it. The two-way mirrors would be especially interesting to him. Vic knew that he couldn't afford to be caught now.

He leaned forward against the wheel, his mind hot with hate. *Murph!* He hoped that he could survive the forest fire if only to get his hands around the scrawny pornographer's neck.

Now the whole air seemed to be filled with sparks that raced ahead of the car, touching a bush here a tree there. Vic pushed the speedometer as far as he dared and, finally, he reached the safety of the highway. Some fire trucks passed him but, the area was so thick with smoke that he knew none of the firemen could

see him clearly enough to identify him later on.

Opal wanted to go back to Saks' place and tell him what had happened. Vic drove her there and they both went inside the mansion. When the mobster heard of fire-bombing he was lost for words for the first time Vic could remember. He took a cigar out of his mouth and stared at it. Finally he was able to speak. "Well, let's hope that lodge is completely destroyed and I mean *completely*."

"Is the lodge in your name?" Vic asked.

"Hell, no," Saks breathed with relief. "I had a guy I know put it in his name. It will be traced back to him. I'd better call him and tell him to keep his mouth shut." When Saks reached for the phone he was his old dynamic and vulgar self again. After making the call he issued orders to some of his goons. One of them was a not too gentle request to get Murph, preferably in a fatal condition.

"But, you're talking about murder," Vic told him.

"So? They tried to kill you and Opal didn't they? Those Engi bums wanted a war and now they got it. I wanted to be fair but they wouldn't let me. I can't let them get away with this bombing. If I do I might as well pack up and let them have my whole operation. Now I'm going to return Engi's calling card."

When Vic had been barreling out of the forest fire the dearest thing he

wanted was revenge on Murph and Engi. But now, when their murders were being spoken of in cold blooded terms he couldn't bring himself to hate them. "I don't think you should go too far," Vic said.

"I think he should," Opal snapped. "Look at what those bastards did to my hair. It'll be months before I can be seen without a hat."

"That's the spirit," Saks laughed. "She has more guts than you, Vic."

"You just don't know what will happen," Vic told her. "This is a gang war shaping up."

"So its a gang war. No one tries to kill me and get away with it. Mister Saks, why not bomb some of Engi's places in the east?" She named the *Happy Times* bar and the photography studio in Union City.

"I know *all* of Engi's joints," Saks informed her. "By the time I'm through there will be a few less of them."

Archie Junior walked over to Vic and rubbed against his leg. He looked down at the bulldog's face. It was the kindest one in the room. "And they call animals brutal," he whispered under his breath.

As Vic knew, the cause of the blaze was uncovered and the man whose name the lodge was in was questioned by both police and fire inspectors. Some newspapers associated Saks' name with the man and reporters started coming around to his Beverly Hills home. Saks was always good copy. He enjoyed the

limelight no matter how dangerous it was to his position. He catered to the reporters and always saw to it that his interviews were well stocked with sandwiches and booze. In a way it payed off. The press usually showed Saks in a romantic light. In the Hollywood circles even the mobsters knew the value of public relations.

When Sara Summers heard about the fire and read that it had started in the lodge she joked to Vic about it. "I know what started that fire. All that love-making we had out there was soaked into the wood and made it overheated."

The crisis about the fire was passing quickly. The man whose name the lodge was in was released from questioning. Saks hinted at paying off some higher up in the fire department. Vic believed him, Saks was capable of corrupting anyone.

The fire didn't change things for Vic. He still had to get Sara Summers to sign a movie contract with Saks. He saw as much of the actress as possible, meeting in out of the way places and going into motels heavily disguised. Vic would have enjoyed their relationship more if only he didn't realize what it was based on.

While Sara Summers had to keep making excuses for her absences to Mavis, Vic had to make his to Ellen. Vic kept claiming that he was always being tied up with work at the studio and he felt that Ellen never

quite believed him. He lived in constant fear that Ellen would find out about his relationship with the actress . . . and the mobster. Finally, in a motel room sixty miles outside of L.A., Vic made his first pitch about the movie that Saks wanted her for.

Sara looked at him and smiled. She blew some cigarette smoke in his face. "So, it came at last," she said.

"What came?"

"The reason why you've been so, shall we say, *attentive*?" Sara answered with a bitter smile. "So he wants me to sign a contract with him. I can guess for how much."

"You've known all along?"

"I've known since that first day Archie told me he had an interesting young man for me to meet . . . you. Archie never gives away anything free, especially sex. I was just wondering how long it would take you to bring up the subject of pay-off."

Vic inhaled deeply. The actress just didn't know what kind of hook she was on. She didn't know that Saks had her in a little movie of his own already. "Will you sign a contract with Saks?" he asked.

Sara took a puff of her cigarette and inhaled thoughtfully. "Of course . . . if the script is good and the money is better."

She sounded so definite that Vic knew that he could never talk her into lowering her demands, the financial ones in particular.

"You look disappointed, Vic," she

said. "You didn't actually think that I thought so highly of your bedroom manners that I'd do whatever you . . . or Archie, wanted? Well, don't be so sad. I told you I'd be willing to work for Archie and that's a great deal to offer right there. After all, I do have many offers from many producers. My name on a picture is like money in the bank. Now Archie can't expect me to put money in his hand *and* do it at a smaller salary too, does he?"

"You don't know Saks, he's the greediest man I've ever known."

"And what about you, aren't you as greedy?" she asked. "What was your cut going to be?"

"Don't put it that way."

"Oh, then you're doing this as a favor for Archie Saks?"

Vic looked away from her. He couldn't bear her gaze. "I like you, Sara, I really do," he told her lamely.

She reached over and ground out her cigarette on the wall directly behind him. "I'll bet you do. You like me like all the others like me. You're not the first and, damnit, I don't think you'll be the last of the golden young men with strong arms and willing bodies. I've met your kind in Hollywood, Rome, Paris and a dozen other cities, all the handsome young studs who were willing to be mine if . . . and there is *always* that if . . . I would help them out in some way. What is it that you want Vic, money?"

Vic shook his head silently. He couldn't lie to her and yet he couldn't

tell her the complete truth. "Please, Sara . . ."

"Oh, the sensitive kind. That alone makes you different at least," she said with a slightly softer tone. "I suppose, being an actor, you'd like a part in my next picture. All right, you have it. I have enough pull at the studios to get you some kind of speaking role. It won't be much but it'll be enough to get you started."

Vic was too depressed to show excitement. He was being offered the break he had been working towards for so long and yet he didn't feel anything.

"Well, no thank you?" Sara asked. "Don't tell me you expected more from me? Oh, I remember. Archie Saks sent you in the first place in order to get you to convince me to take a salary cut. Yes, I almost forgot about that. Well, you can tell Archie, the rat, I'll sign with him only on my terms. If he has any business head at all he should jump at the chance. Now, is there anything else you wanted to tell me, Vic?"

Vic tried to tell her about the lodge, the mirrors, the cameramen behind them but the words just stuck in his throat. He shook his head again.

Sara patted him on the cheek. "Good. Since we both cleared the air let's go back to bed."

"I'm quitting, Mister Saks," Vic told him. "That's final."

Saks looked up at him from his

desk. "Don't give me that. You're part of my organization whether you like it or not."

"I don't think so, not after I tell you that I've failed with Sara Summers." He then told him about her offer to sign a contract but only on her terms which included her usual rates and script approval.

Saks didn't answer. He looked at Vic blankly. "Some lover you are," he said at last. "I thought you were a lot better when I saw that picture you took with her. Maybe I should show her that to convince her what a big lover you really are."

"I thought you said you could sell it for fifty thousand." Vic reminded him.

"I've already have."

"Then you got what you wanted," Vic said smiling. "You don't need Sara anymore."

"You don't think I haven't got a copy of that film, do you?"

"And I thought that for fifty grand your seller was entitled to sole ownership?"

Saks shifted in his chair. "Don't tell me my business. You're just another punk I can pick up for a dime a dozen."

Vic tightened his face and glared at the little mobster. "And I thought you let the dogs keep their bones," he continued in an even colder voice.

This remark seemed to touch Saks. He was always proud of what honor he had left and now it was being questioned. "It's this way, Vic, I need the money. I've got to spread

it around the right people to get things done. Blame it on that hop head Engi. He's making me spend it."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course not. You wouldn't know. You don't know anything about my business. I need money for *this* . . ." Saks shoved clippings from a New York newspaper in his face. The top one was a news photo of a burning building. He recognized it as the *Happy Times* bar. The next clipping was a story of a theatrical agent being killed by a hit and run car. The agent was Monty Ferguson. Union City.

"You . . . had Monty killed?" Vic gasped.

"Don't tell me you're sorry? I thought you hated his guts."

"But what did Monty ever do against you?"

"He's a part of the Engi crowd, that's what he did. I wanted to get Murph but he's in hiding. I hope Engi gets the idea that I don't push easy."

The clippings dropped out of Vic's limp hand. "This is going too far. I never expected that . . ."

Saks slammed his fist on his couch. "No, you're too soft! Sara likes soft guys but I can't stand them. You'll stick around, soft boy, until I'm finished with you."

Vic wasn't angered by Saks' remark. He was still thinking of Monty's death. He had been a bastard but he hadn't been *that* bad a bastard.

When Archie Junior came over to him Vic automatically picked up the leash and walked him outside. He was reminded of some writer who once said, "The more I see of men the more I admire dogs."

The evening was cool and damp. Some rain, at last, was on the way. Vic took a deep breath. And the more he was in Saks' house the more he admired the street.

Vic hadn't gone more than ten feet from the place when the front door opened. Saks and two of his goons came out. "See you're still my dog walker, Vic," Saks called after him.

"Force of habit," Vic answered quietly.

A large, black sedan drew up to the curb and one of the goons opened the door for Saks. Just then another car sped down the street. As it passed by the windows belched fire and noise. Vic flattened himself out on the ground, holding onto the dog. Behind him he heard a scream of pain. The speeding car screeched around the corner. When he looked up he saw one of the goons spread across the sidewalk. His face was all blood. Saks was pointing toward the corner the car disappeared around. "It was Engi! himself!" he yelled.

Vic held onto the dog and waited to see if the car might encircle the block for another try. He was sure that the gun blasts had been meant for Saks.

Saks suddenly bolted back into his

house. The other goon knelt beside his buddy. There was a stillness about the body on the street that had death stamped all over it in capital letters.

People began to pour out of the nearby houses. Even in Beverly Hills violence demanded a crowd. Vic picked up the dog and darted into the house like a football player carrying the pigskin for the final touchdown.

"Get hit?" Saks wanted to know.

"I didn't get a scratch."

"I mean the mutt!"

Vic examined the dog quickly. "Nothing." It was hard to believe that Saks was more interested in the dog being hurt than a human being having his head shot off.

The police came inside of seconds it seemed. When there was a report of something happening in Beverly Hills they didn't waste any time. When Vic thought that it would be best if he made himself scarce it was already too late. He not only had to give his version of what had happened but inform the police that he was hired by Archie Saks as a dog walker.

The newsmen followed the police and a photographer took pictures. It was too late for anything now. Ellen was going to learn what he really did for a living. And Gordon Blake would know. What a laugh that bastard would get out of this whole deal, Vic thought.

Vic tried to leave the place but the police detained him. Archie

Saks, as usual, played up to the press. After all, it was *his* attempted execution. "I think I know who tried to kill me," he quipped. "It was the F.B.I. and the Internal Revenue. They been trying to get something on me for years so they figured this was the only way they could close out their files on me."

The reporters laughed. Good old Saks, he was always good for a laugh. They began to eye the liquor cabinet. Almost on cue the butler began to distribute the drinks. Saks soon succeeded in turning the interview into a party. Vic took advantage of the occasion to slip out of the door.

There was a splash of blood on the sidewalk in front of the building. They had taken the body away. Behind him Vic heard Saks laughing.

Vic didn't go back to Saks' place the next day and was pleasantly surprised that the mobster didn't call to complain about his desertion from his dog walking job. Since the papers were still filled with his attempted murder Vic figured that he was just too busy to notice his absence. Perhaps, Vic thought, he might be able to escape the net of intrigue, blackmail and murder that he found himself in.

The next morning Vic moved to a cheaper apartment in Santa Monica. He sold the Thunderbird that Saks had given him for his services. He needed the money since none was going to come from dog walking. Besides, the car was just too ob-

vious. Saks and his boys knew it.

Vic then set about beginning his career again. He made the rounds of the casting offices but he soon found that things were just as hard as ever. There were just too many actors and too few jobs. He thought of Sara Summers and the "in" he had with her. There was always the possibility that she would find him a part in her next picture.

He knew that contacting her again would be dangerous because it would be the same as contacting Saks and his crowd. Yet, if he played it close to the chest, maybe he could be able to use Sara Summers without Saks interfering. It might even be in his favor to Sara if she found out that he had broken with the mobster.

Vic took a chance in calling Sara's private number, picking a time he thought her daughter, Mavis, wasn't home. Vic was in luck. Sara answered the phone. "Vic, where have you been?" she wanted to know. "When I called your place I found out that you moved."

"I know. I'm through with Saks, I wanted to get away."

"Archie is mad at you for leaving."

"You . . . you've met him again?"

"Yes, I had to tell him that I'd be willing to work in his movie . . . only if he came to my terms."

"How did he take it?"

"How did he take it when you told him?"

"He didn't like it."

"Well, he hadn't changed his opinion. For some reason he still thinks he can get me for peanuts."

Vic gasped audibly over the phone.

"Did I say something wrong, Vic?" Sara asked.

"No . . . nothing." Vic was sure now that Saks intended to blackmail her. "Sara, I wouldn't have anything further to do with Saks either," he went on. "Do me a favor and don't see him again."

"Oh, Vic, don't be such a sourpuss. Archie amuses me. He's so wonderfully crude."

"You just don't know how much," Vic said under his breath.

"By the way, Saks wants to see you. He told me that if you ever contacted me to let him know."

"And, are you?"

"I'm no stoolie," Sara laughed. "Vic, can't we get together someplace?" she added with a deep voice. "You can pick me up at that corner in your car."

"I don't have the car anymore. I sold it."

"Are things that bad for you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And so you've come back to momma."

Vic wanted to hang up but he controlled himself. After all, since he was offering himself to her for sale she had a right to make that comment. "I've come home to momma," Vic agreed with her.

"All right then," she said crisply.

"Now that we know where we stand

now you can come over . . . back entrance."

Yes, Vic thought, the "service" entrance.

For the next week Vic saw Sara at her place by picking the times Mavis would be out. He felt that Sara enjoyed having him "heel" for her like a homeless dog. Yet their relationship was unique in the fact that it was above board in the respect that each one knew what they wanted from each other. Sara wanted sex and he wanted a break in show business. They did not have to lie to each other. Vic kept only one secret from her . . . the film Saks still had.

Vic never pressed Sara about furthering his career. He didn't want to appear that his only interest in her was her name other than her body. Still he realized that they couldn't go on like this in a kind of Limbo. He couldn't go on sneaking into her bedroom like a tom cat in heat. There had to be an ending, or a beginning or a change.

The change came fast enough when Mavis found out about their meeting in the house. "You promised never to bring any of your men here, mother," she cried. "This isn't a whore house!"

"Don't get excited, Mavis," Sara told her tiredly. "Vic is going to Mexico with me on my next picture."

This came as a bigger surprise to Vic than it did to Mavis.

"So he's going to be in your next movie," Mavis snapped. "Does that mean it's all right for you to shack up with him here?"

"I don't know where the hell you get your language," Sara told her. "Look, Vic and I have an understanding . . ."

"I'll bet you do," Mavis said with a sneer.

Sara took Vic's hand. "Let's go. Let's go anywhere."

As soon as they got out of the house Vic asked, "Were you kidding about Mexico?"

"I knew that's all you would be thinking of. Yes, it's true. Archie agreed to let you have a part even though you ran out on him after the shooting."

"You mean Saks . . .?"

"Yes, he's backing the picture. Of course he wants to be billed as the producer too."

Vic didn't know what to think or say. "He . . . accepted your terms without arguing?"

"Don't you know by now that Archie wants a new public image? He wants to be known as a respectable business man. If he could have his name on one of my movies as a producer he'd have his own name made. That's why I knew that he would eventually come to my terms."

Now things made more sense. Saks liked money but he liked having people look up to him even better. It must have been a struggle with him to give in to Sara's de-

mands but he had. Vic smiled for the first time in weeks.

Archie Saks, movie tycoon, moved into high gear. He gave lavish parties to the press and the publicity people to advertise his first venture into the film industry. The combination of gangster and actress was tailor made for the tabloids. They gave their joint venture reams of publicity before the movie was even begun. Some of the press released mentioned Vic's name as one of the actors in the picture and pointed out the fact that he had been on the scene when Saks was almost shot to death.

Now Vic could see Sara Summers more publicly. After all, they were fellow thespians preparing for the same movie. Vic tried to improve his relations with Mavis and made a point out of inviting the girl to restaurants when he was with her mother. Sara objected but Vic managed to convince her that, this way, no one could accuse them of being secret lovers. Mother, daughter and mother's gigolo simply never made a threesome.

While Vic improved his relations with Mavis his relations with Ellen decayed. The girl stopped calling him and didn't return his calls. She knew only too well that he had to step into a bed before he stepped on the ladder of success.

The golden day that Vic had looked forward to for so long was drawing nearer . . . the day he was

to leave for Mexico with the location crew. Sara looked forward to the start of the movie too. She couldn't bear not working as she couldn't bear sleeping alone. She was a public creature and a private one and demanded that both her lives be filled.

Mavis didn't look forward to the beginning of the picture at all. Sara wasn't going to bring her on location as she had promised. She was to be left behind under the care of servants.

Two night before they were to leave Mavis was in tears. "But, mother I want to go. You promised."

"I promised that I would take you on location *someday* but not now," Sara told her.

Vic couldn't bear the girl's tears. She seemed so pitifully young despite her size and her womanly fullness. "Look, Sara, why not take her along?"

"Don't tell me what to do with my own daughter, Vic," she shouted. "You're only one of the hired help."

Vic clenched his jaw. Sara never had made a remark to get him so angry. Still, realizing that he *was* only hired help, he kept his temper. "I just wanted to point out that Mavis would enjoy the trip. Besides, it's only to Mexico."

"You seemed to have warmed up to my daughter," Sara said with a dark undertone. "Are you sure that you don't have any private reason for wanting her on location?"

Anger cried in Vic's throat for re-

lease. He loosened it with care. "You know better than that, Sara. Why she's only a child."

"If I ever found out that there was something between you two I'd . . . I'd *destroy* you, Vic." She said this with such deliberate cruelty he knew that she meant it.

Vic was afraid to speak for fear that he would not be able to control what he had to say. He merely turned his back and left the room. He went directly to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a giant drink to drown his giant emotions.

Several minutes later Sara joined him. "I'm sorry, Vic," she said kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"You should be. How could you actually believe that I would look upon your daughter as . . . as . . ." Unable to go on he drank.

"I was mad that's all. Now let's have a drink and go to bed."

Vic poured her a drink. In his mind he already planned to drop her. He would wait until the picture was in the cans and then he would cut out. He just couldn't go on being Sara Summer's bedroom pet. Once the picture was made. . . .

"Now let's go to bed," Sara all but ordered after finishing her drink.

That night their lovemaking was passionate but short. Both were just too tired for anything more than an animalistic meeting of flesh. Sara fell asleep first. Vic held her in his arms, letting his hands massage her naked body. Soon he drifted off to sleep.

He could have been sleeping an hour or several hours, Vic didn't know. He found himself awakening slowly. In the thickness of his sleepiness he felt hands on his body, caressing him, calling to him. Vic turned to the nakedness beside him almost in a daze. "Sara, why don't you let me sleep?" he mumbled.

The body pressing against his own began to arouse him. He clutched it to his own, beginning an act of love. Then something kept nagging at the back of his mind, forcing his sense to wake. The body simply didn't *feel* like Sara's. It seemed smaller, more slender . . . younger.

Mavis!

Vic got up quickly and turned on a lamp. There was Mavis, naked on the bed with her naked mother.

"Turn off the light, Vic," Mavis said. "Finish it. Do like we've been doing all along."

Sara's eyes blinked open and then became fully awake. "What the hell is going on here?" she shouted. "Mavis, put your clothes on!"

The girl ran over to Vic and embraced him. "Let mother know. We don't care anymore, do we, Vic?"

Then Vic realized what Mavis was doing. She was taking her mother's promise to destroy him if she could prove any sexual relationship between them to heart. Mavis was providing her mother with that proof. He pushed her away violently. "Damn you!" he shouted.

"We can't hide it any longer, Vic," Mavis cried, **her eyes** mocking him.

"It's true! Vic, you dirty bastard!" Sara screamed rushing at him.

Vic grabbed her arms and pushed her back across the bed. He held her tight, their naked bodies meeting but not for love. "Can't you see what she's doing?" he shouted. "She's making this up. It's an act she's putting on for your benefit!"

Sara's body moved violently under his. "Why should I believe you? You're just another man. I have many men but only one daughter!"

They struggled on the bed, Vic trying to prevent her from lashing out at him. In desperation she bit him on the shoulder. Vic screamed with pain. In more of a reflex action than in anger he struck her. She fell back, holding her jaw.

"Don't you dare hurt my mother!" Mavis cried.

The girl ran towards him. In her hand was a knife. Vic jumped back in time as the point of the knife scratched along his stomach. Another fraction of the inch could have made all the difference in the world.

Once again the girl came after him with the knife. This time Vic was ready for her. He grabbed her wrist and twisted the knife from her hand. It fell to the floor with a dull thud. Vic still held the girl's wrist. He twisted her hand all the way behind her back until she cried in pain. "Now tell the truth, you little bitch! Tell your mother that we've never so much as kissed."

"No we did *more* than just kiss!" Mavis shouted.

Vic twisted her arm further. Again she cried. "Tell the truth, damn you!" he shouted letting his anger have full play at last.

"All right! All right! I was lying!" Mavis wept aloud.

Vic tossed the girl at her mother like so much discarded meat. Mavis fell into Sara's arms and wept. "I didn't want you to leave without me, mother," she said.

Sara held her tightly. "I just don't know what to do with you, Mavis," she sighed as if the girl did nothing more than forget her homework.

Vic pulled on his clothes.

"And where do you think *you're* going?" Sara asked.

"Don't tell me you want me to stick around tonight after what's happened? First, you threaten to kill me and then your daughter tries."

"Now, Vic, this is all just some misunderstanding," Sara told him calmly. "I know now that you and Mavis weren't up to anything wrong."

"Thanks a lot," Vic said shoving his feet into his shoes. "I almost had to be knifed to prove it to you."

Mavis put her hands on her mother's face and turned it toward her own. "Let him go mother . . . please. We used to have so much fun together."

"Take your daughter's advice," Vic said. "Swear off men for a few months. It'll do you all the good in the world."

When Vic rushed out of the room

Sara called to him. He ignored her and kept walking. When he got outside in the street he heard the sounds of slapping and Mavis crying.

"Damn you, little bitch!" Sara was shouting. "Why did you lie to me? I'm going to teach you to tell the truth!"

Vic shook his head in wonder. Who said that Sara Summers wasn't a good mother?

Sara didn't call him all that next day and Vic spent it trying to mend the rift with Ellen before he left for Mexico. He wanted Ellen to come back to. She was the one person to make all he had been going through worth while.

Ellen was cool to him but at least she didn't shut the door in his face completely. Gordon, sensing a breach, put his oar in. He offered to take her out in front of Vic and she accepted. Vic told himself that Ellen was only doing this to spite him and not because she felt any attachment to Gordon. Mavis and Sara had taught him more about women in a few weeks than he had known all his life. He learned that, even in the sweetest girl, there was something of a bitch. In the two months that Vic was going to spend on location in Mexico he hoped that the bitch in Ellen would become a lady once again.

While Vic was packing for the trip south of the border there was a knock on the door. When he opened it he was surprised to find that it was

one of Saks' boys. He grinned stupidly and pushed his way in. "The boss wants you to come to a party tonight, formal. He wants me to bring you so get dressed."

Vic was about to object but he couldn't see any point in it. After all, Archie Saks was his boss too.

He got into his tuxedo while the goon watched silently. "What's the party for?" Vic asked.

The goon shrugged. "Call it a farewell party. Bon voyage and all that crap."

Vic expected something like that. This would be the last time in the next two months Archie Saks could grab himself some headlines as a respectable business man. One big, black tie, blow out to send the movie production crew on its way.

As soon as Vic entered Saks' place he knew something was wrong. For a party there seemed to be an awful shortage of people. In fact, he was the only one there besides the usual compliment of goons. Archie Junior greeted him with an uplifted paw and Vic shook it. "I'm glad to see that *someone* has manners," he whispered.

Then Saks himself walked into the room. He was in a rumpled and informal suit and he had a drink in his hand. "Vic, glad to see you," he smiled.

"I didn't get the invitation wrong, did I?" Vic asked looking about him.

"No, this is going to be a private

party," Saks told him. "I'm sure that you and Sara don't want to be trapped by a lot of boring people on your last day in town."

Vic was more on edge. "That's nice of you, Mister Saks," he told him.

Saks looked at his watch. "I suppose our actress friend will wait until she thinks she'll be the last one here. I'll give her a buzz."

The mobster went over to his well-telephoned desk and called Sara Summers. By the sound of his voice Vic could see that Saks was anxious to have her come. He sounded pleading and submissive. Vic got the idea that he had really been beaten to the ground by Sara's contract demands. He was sure that it was one of the few times in his life Saks came out on the short end of the stick.

After Saks put down the phone he winked. "She'll be right over. Sit down, Vic. How about a drink?"

"I'll wait for Sara."

"Good idea. I'm glad that you two hit it off so well. And I'm glad you're finally going to get what you always wanted," Saks told him.

Vic didn't like the sound of Saks' voice. It was too mild and agreeable. He was convinced now that the mobster was up to something. He was the kind not to stay on the short end of the stick very long. The whole "party" had the faint smell of intrigue about it. He had come in the first place assuming that it was going to be a large get together and so had Sara.

"You don't have to worry about Engi any more," Saks went on. "He's . . . gone."

Vic had visions on Engis being encased in cement and dumped into the nearest river ala old James Cagney movies. "You mean Engi has been killed?" he asked coming directly to the point.

Saks laughed. "You've got too much imagination, Vic. No, Engi has finally seen the light and crawled back to the east coast. Even junkies know enough to save their own lives."

"I hope you're right."

Saks slapped him on the shoulder. "The war is over, Vic, and we've won".

Vic objected to the use of the word "we" but didn't press it. "Well, that solves your major problem out here then," he said.

"Not exactly. My major problem is money, always has been. I've finally got the west coast sewed up good and tight but the thread is very expensive. This is one of the reasons I can't give you and Sara the send off you both deserve . . . I'm broke."

"Then how about backing for this movie?" Vic asked. "Do you have enough to . . . ?"

"Let's not talk shop," Saks told him. "Let's enjoy the party even if its going to be small."

Sara came a few minutes later. It was almost as if she had been dressed and ready, but was waiting until she could make a properly late entrance.

She greeted Saks with a kiss. Vic had to look away. What did she find so attractive about the slobbish mobster anyhow?

"Archie, where's everybody?" Sara asked. "Over the phone you told me everybody was here already."

"Everybody *is* here."

Sara looked nonplused for a moment and then smiled. "Why, Archie, how romantic! Why didn't you tell me that it was going to be a private party? I wouldn't've gotten into this evening gown."

Saks tucked her under her elbow. "So, we ain't worth dressing up for?"

For the next half hour the three of them sat on the couch drinking while the goons made themselves scarce. Despite the loosening qualities of the liquor Vic was still spring-taut. Any minute now Saks was going to drop a bomb.

"And now," Saks said getting up, "you two follow me. I have something to show you."

Sara giggled. "Oh, I love surprises."

They all went into the small projection room off Saks' office. Four goons slipped in with them. One of them went behind the movie projector.

"Movie time," Saks smiled wickedly.

"This sounds like a bus-man's holiday to me," Sara told him with a pout. "This isn't any surprise."

"This is going to be a little *spe-*

cial," Saks answered and signaled toward the man behind the projector.

Vic's stomach turned. *It can't be that . . . Saks wouldn't dare!*

The small screen in front of them flickered into life.

As Vic suspected it was the picture that had been taken at the lodge.

"Hey!" Sara shouted.

The actress was silent for a moment and then she understood. "You bastards!" she cried. "That lodge! Those mirrors!"

Vic stood up. A picture of Sara's attractive breasts loomed large across his back. "Shut it off!" he demanded.

"Vic," Sara told him. "We were tricked! These bastards had it all arranged."

"Sit down," Saks ordered, "before I get the boys to help you down. You're blocking the view."

Vic sank to his chair weakly. He covered his eyes with his hands not daring to look at the screen. He glanced over at Sara Summers. She was sitting forward not quite believing what she saw. There was a stunned expression on her face as if she were witnessing a terrible accident.

"I can't stand this!" Sara cried out suddenly. She got up and ran towards the back of the room. Angrily, she pulled the projector forward and it crashed to the floor loudly. One of the goons grabbed her and she struggled against him. "Let me alone!" she screamed.

"Let her alone," Saks ordered quietly. "She's seen enough. She

knows how the picture ends anyhow."

The goon let her go and she stood glaring at Saks. Her eyes burned hate. "What is it you want?" she asked.

"That's my old Sara," Saks responded pulling out a cigar and pointing it at her. "I always liked you when you came right to the point. I'll do the same. Give me fifty thousand and your studio will never know what kind of movies you make on the side."

Sara's face paled. "The studio? You wouldn't send it there?"

"Won't I? Just call my bluff."

"Fifty thousand," Sara said almost to herself. "That's almost what I agreed to do the picture in Mexico for."

Saks shook his head. "It's fifty thousand times more than what you'll be doing that movie for."

"You mean . . . you want money *and* free acting services?"

The mobster put the cigar in his mouth but didn't light it. "Exactly. Now, if you had been a good girl to begin with and accepted my terms you would've never been in this trouble."

"As long as you had that picture I would've *always* been in trouble with you," she answered.

"Then take the picture . . . at my price. I know you can afford it" Saks told her. "Besides, you can have Vic here as a gift. I don't need him anymore. He's all yours."

Sara looked at Vic with sad eyes.

"You . . . you didn't know about the lodge, did you?"

"I didn't know," Vic told her honestly. "It came as a shock to me too."

"Well, I'm glad to hear *that*, at least," Sara said bitterly. "If you were in on the trap that would be too much to take."

"He didn't know about it until the *day after* this little picture was made," Saks injected.

Sara looked aghast. "Vic, is that true? You've known all along?"

"I didn't know about the lodge," Vic explained. "When we went up there . . ."

"But you knew about the picture soon enough. You knew about it all the times we've been together!"

Vic looked to one side. He did not speak.

"You could've told me!" Sara screamed and rushed at him with her fingernails outward like claws.

Saks grabbed her before she reached him. He pushed her against the wall hard. "Let's cut the dramatics!" he snapped. "I want the fifty grand before you leave for Mexico tomorrow."

Sara bared her teeth. "You dirty little degenerate! You won't blackmail me!" She ran out of the room. Vic heard the front door slam.

"She'll need time to think it over." Saks informed him. "She'll come around because she knows I'm not kidding about ruining her reputation."

"I don't think so," Vic told him

coldly. "You've overreached yourself. Sara won't pay you and she won't make a film for nothing."

The mobster took the cigar out of his mouth and pondered it. His face was flushed. "Talk to her, Vic. Catch up to her and explain I'm not bluffing."

"I'll talk to her but I'll do it on my own. You've given me your last order."

Saks grabbed him by the jacket. "Look, you crumb. I'm the one who gave you a break. I'm the one who bought you this tux. Don't look down your pretty boy nose at me. I can have you off the picture in Mexico right now."

Vic took the mobster's hands off his jacket. "Saks, wake up. There isn't going to be any movie. You've just blown it. You've ruined your own break to be a big shot movie producer."

"It's all set up," Saks said desperately. "I've got a production crew down there already. I'm in hock up to my eyeballs. Sara just got to make this picture."

Vic took keen delight in the mobster's pain. "There is only one way to make Sara do the picture," he said. "That is, if I can talk her into it."

"How?"

"Give her this film you took at the lodge and go back to the original terms you agreed to in the contract." "Impossible! You're asking me to give in. She's the one who has to give in. I have her in the palm of my hand."

"I don't see her," Vic said. "I told you before that she wouldn't give in. You're timing is way off to begin with. She knows as well as you do that you can't replace her in the movie at this late date . . . especially after making yourself such a big shot with the publicity."

This seemed to hit Saks where it hurt. As always, his pride meant more to him than money. He just couldn't afford to replace Sara Summers now. "Find her," he told Vic in desperation. "Tell her that it was all a mistake. Tell her that I was only kidding. Get her back on the picture!"

"I'll try," Vic said.

When Vic rang the front doorbell of Sara's place there was no answer. He noticed that the house was entirely dark and he wondered if anyone was in at all. He walked around to the back and noticed that there was one light on. Sara's bedroom. He listened and heard some movement in that room above him. "Sara," he called. "It's me, Vic. Everything is going to be all right. Let me in and I'll explain."

Sara's figure appeared in the only lighted window. Her evening gown was off and she was standing in her slip. "Get away from me!" she cried.

"Please, I'm not joking. I've talked Saks into . . . Even though the neighborhood was silent and empty Vic didn't want to shout. "Just let me in to explain."

Sara pulled the window up and

threw something. Vic stepped away just in time to miss a liquor bottle that smashed on the ground two inches from his feet. The smell of whiskey rose in the air. "Do you want me to call the police?" she shouted. "I will. I'll tell them *everything*. I'm not afraid."

Vic ducked into the shadows and he heard the window close. Obviously, Sara was tying on a quick drunk. He couldn't blame her. He couldn't blame her for chasing him away either. Still, he had to talk to her and get her to listen to reason. If she did give up on the Mexican film project entirely and make Saks lose money the mobster would ruin her out of revenge. And maybe more than her name. Yet there was still a chance for her to destroy the compromising movie Saks had in his possession. All she had to do was fly to Mexico tomorrow and make the movie.

Vic tried the back door. It was locked. He went around the house trying the windows. Above him he heard Sara weeping and shouting drunkenly to herself. He never heard a woman use such obscenities before.

The only way to get into the house would be to break in, Vic knew. Since Beverly Hills was one of the best protected sections in the nation he realized that he would have to be careful. It would be a hell of a time to get arrested for breaking and entering.

He returned to the rear of the

house and selected a ground floor window that was hidden by the darkest shadows. He took off his jacket and held it tight against the pane. He then punched it with a hard, fast jab. The glass gave way almost soundlessly beneath the jacket. He reached through the broken pane and unlocked the window. Pulling it up he stepped inside the room.

Sara's bedroom was directly above and he heard her weeping and swearing aloud. She hadn't heard him entering the house. He put his jacket back on and tip-toed up the stairs.

Her bedroom door was open. Standing in the hallway he looked in. She was sitting on the bed in her slip. In her hand was a bottle of whiskey and she kept drinking from it between curses.

"Sara," Vic said softly.

She turned quickly. Her face was streaked with tears and eye make-up. "Where the hell did you come from?" she demanded.

Vic walked into the room. "Sara, you must listen to me," he said being firm and gentle at the same time. "You don't have to worry about that picture anymore. Saks is going to destroy it. He knows now that he went too far."

"Never mind him!" she snapped. "What about you? You've slept with me knowing. You could've told me."

"I should have," Vic said. "But, it's too late now. The only way out is to go to Mexico and . . ."

"No!" Sara screamed getting up. "I will do nothing for Archie Saks! he can rot!"

Vic held her by the shoulders. "Listen, Sara. You don't know what he'll do if you back out on him now. Sure, he's a bastard. But you've got to make this one movie for him . . . at your terms. Otherwise he'll hurt you. He might even kill you. He's that kind."

"And what kind are you? Here you come crawling to me like Archie's pet dog . . ."

Vic shook her shoulders violently. "Stop that! I'm not with Saks anymore. I came here on my own."

"Oh, good for you," Sara sneered breaking away from him. "You came here to talk me into going back on the picture, right?"

"Yes."

"You can't bear to miss your big break, right?"

"It isn't that at all. I'm thinking of you."

"That's a laugh. You're like all the rest. All you can think of is yourself. I thought you were different. But you're just another hustler out for himself." Suddenly she threw herself in Vic's arms. "Why couldn't you be different? it would've been so wonderful." She began to cry and Vic held her.

"Things will be wonderful," Vic told her. "Just you wait and see."

Sara sobbed for a full minute. Then she turned her wet face upward. "We'll be happy together, won't we, Vic?"

Vic brushed her hair back. "We will," he smiled. "After we make this picture . . ."

She suddenly pulled away. "The picture! *That's* all you came here for, the picture! You weren't worried about me at all."

"Look, Sara . . ."

She brushed past him into the dark hallway. "Mavis is right about you, just another hustler, another stud."

Vic caught up to her in the dark. "If I could only get through that drunken skull of yours!" he shouted losing his temper. "If I could only get through to you and . . ."

"I know what you're trying to tell me. I've been in this business since you were a snot nosed kid going to grammar school. So, I do this picture. Then what? Will things be wonderful afterwards?"

Vic grabbed her. "Yes, things will be wonderful. All Saks wants is this one movie. Then we'll be free."

"And we'll be together?"

"Yes. Yes."

"We'll be married?"

Vic paused. His grip loosened on Sara. "M . . . married?"

"That's what you were leading up to, wasn't it?"

"Well, frankly . . ." Vic's voice trailed off.

Sara let out a long laugh. "Even this punk turns me down!" she shouted.

She ran down the night-blackened hall.

"Sara!" Vic yelled.

There was a scream followed quickly by a series of thuds going downward. She had fallen down the stairs!

Vic ran towards her. She lay in a heap on the ground floor. She was very still. He turned on a lamp and saw that her beautiful face, the face that had been seen by millions in a thousand theatres was one purple and bloody mess. Vic called her name a few times softly but there was no response.

The entire house seemed very quiet now after so much shouting and noise. He could even hear the wind play gently along the windows. He didn't know whether or not she was dead and he was afraid to reach for her pulse or try to find her heart beat. It would be too hard to accept the reality of her death in the first place.

Vic called the operator on the telephone and told her that this was an emergency. She, in turn, connected him with the nearest hospital. After Vic had ordered an ambulance he sat on the last step of the stair and gazed at Sara's body. It was obvious now that she wasn't breathing.

He looked at the broken window and back at Sara. Suddenly he realized what kind of position he was in. He had broken into the house and he had been the only one in it when Sara had fallen. Who would believe him? And, if she were dead, he was sure to be under suspicion of murder.

Panic began to well up inside him

like rising lava. The police would want to know everything leading to Sara's fall down the stairs. They would want to know why he had found it important to break into the house. What could he tell them? How could he avoid implicating himself? What story must he prepare?

There was a far off sound of a siren. Police or ambulance? Had some neighbor called the police hearing all the noise and Sara's scream?

Vic bolted for the door. If Sara were dead there would be nothing he could do. If she were alive the ambulance would pick her up. There would be no use hanging around now.

The siren was coming fast. He finally made up his mind and ran out the front door. Several blocks away he could see a flashing red signal coming towards him. He ran. He turned the next corner and darted down the dark street.

Behind him the siren screamed in the night. The red flashing signal light was following. It was the police and they had seen him. The squad car pulled in front of him and stopped. A police officer jumped out of the car with a drawn gun. Vic halted and threw up his hands. "I can explain," he said breathing hard. "It was all an accident . . ."

The charge: Suspicion of Homicide.

Vic expected that. He couldn't blame the detective at the Beverly

Hills police station for not believing him. His story sounded phony even to himself. Actually he told the police the truth or, rather, the half truth about what had happened the night Sara Summers died. He told them that he had an argument with the actress and that he had gone to her place to make up. When she wouldn't let him in he broke in. Sara's fall down the stairs had been the result of their continued tension. The half of the truth that Vic left out was the real reason for the argument, the attempted blackmail after the showing of the compromising film.

When the detectives wanted to know what the cause of the argument had been Vic thought quickly. He had to remind himself that the police would probably use the lie detector test on him so, again, he told just enough of the truth. "Sara was mad because I refused to marry her," was his plea.

When the detectives pressed him for more details Vic clamed up demanding the single phone call he was entitled to. He knew that the police would be picking up Saks anyhow because of his well publicized relationship with both Sara and himself so he called him more as a warning. Saks would have to get him off the hook with his expensive lawyers. After all, he was one of the very few who knew about the real cause of Sara's death.

Saks came armed with lawyers. His face was ghastly white. When

one of the lawyers tried to arrange for bail there simply wasn't any. Only a hearing or a court trial would free Vic now.

Some of the detectives then brought Saks into one of the rooms for questioning. Vic hoped that the mobster wouldn't concoct any story to contradict his own. The lawyer Saks assigned Vic took him off into another private room. As soon as the door closed he asked, "All right, why did you kill her?"

"I didn't! I told the police the truth!" Vic cried.

"You were caught running away from the place," the lawyer said counting off the points on his long, dark fingers. "You broke into the house to begin with, there is the bottle that Sara threw at you to keep you out, there are no other witnesses . . ."

"You don't have to tell me how it all looks. And, since there are no other witnesses the police will have no other choice but to believe me."

The lawyer nodded. "That will probably be the only thing that will save you. If this goes as far as a court trial you will be released on lack of evidence."

"Do you think it'll go that far?"

"I hope not. This is pretty damned messy. Saks is mad enough to kill you . . . a figure of speech, you understand."

"Yeah," Vic sneered. "Just tell Saks to get me out of this jam. He got me into it, do *you* understand?"

The lawyer curled one corner of

his mouth. "Just say that I know enough to realize that getting you off would be of *mutual* benefit to both you and Mister Saks."

Vic didn't have to probe the lawyer any further. He did know that Saks had tried to shake down the actress. Out of sheer self protection Saks had to get the charge dropped. "You can also tell Saks that I'll cooperate with him as long he cooperates with me," Vic went on underlining his message. "All our reputations are at stake here, his, mine and Sara's. It's no use letting the public know more than they have to, right?"

The lawyer nodded. "I'm glad I don't have to point that out to you. Just put yourself in my hands and do *exactly* what I tell you. Since you've already told the police your version of what had happened at Sara's place you'll have to stick to it. To change even a part of it will be suspicious. Luckily, you were smart enough not to make it too complicated. From now on Sara's death will be an accident resulting from a lover's spat."

"Believe it or not that's what it was. She did want me to marry her."

"And when you refused she ran away from you, blinded by tears and disappointment, confused by drink, maddened by rejection, only to stumble and fall ending all her misery. Is that it?"

Vic looked at him with respect. "That'll sound wonderful to a jury, Mister . . . ?"

"Reisman, Arnold Reisman, at your service."

Now Vic realized he was talking to one of Hollywood's most famous lawyers. He had defended such notables as the actor accused of statutory rape and the producer who knocked off his wife's lover. In both cases he got them off. Vic dared to hope again. "I'm glad to meet you, sir," he said shaking his hand.

Reisman's hand was as limp as cold mush. "I can't say the same for you. You've caused a lot of trouble. The picture must be cancelled."

"All movies are insured against the death of the principal actors," Vic said. "You know that better than I."

"Yes, but what I obviously know better than you besides is that the insurance company will not pay for the loss of the picture due to the principal being *murdered* by one of the feature players."

"I repeat, I didn't murder Sara Summers."

"I believe you. The trick is to get the court to believe you. You may not know this but there is two million dollars riding on you. If you're acquitted Saks will get that much from the insurance company. If you're convicted he'll lose almost as much."

Vic whistled. "Then I better be acquitted."

"It's not as easy as you think. Mister Saks has many enemies in Hollywood and Sara Summer's was the movie industry's most beloved

stars. This is going to be a tough combination to beat.”

“Even if I’m innocent?”

Reisman looked at him coldly. “You’re not *that* innocent and we all know it,” he said softly. “I don’t have to tell you how important it is not to reveal too much of what happened tonight.”

“I’m not an idiot. You can trust me.”

The lawyer bowed briefly. “Just keep that attitude in mind,” he said.

Reisman was right about the opposition Vic would have to face. It seemed that the whole movie industry wanted him to pay for Sara Summer’s death accident or not. If Archie Saks wasn’t involved the case would’ve gone no further than a hearing but all of the big enemies Saks had made over the years knew that here was a chance to get at him through Vic. Because of the great pressure built up by the press and the movie industry Vic had to stand trial. At least that’s what Reisman told him. The lawyer also explained that the insurance company had approached him with an offer to have his client plead guilty to involuntary manslaughter and thereby getting off with a suspended sentence. In this way Vic wouldn’t have to run the risk of being found guilty of murder. And, naturally, it would also mean that the insurance company would be off the two million dollar hook the case had put them on.

At first Vic was glad when Reisman turned the offer down. He couldn’t see lying to just to save the big fat-cat company a fortune. But, as the trial began to shape up he wondered if it had been a mistake. There was no doubt about it. The prosecution was out for his blood and, in turn, Saks’ blood too.

“Don’t worry,” Reisman assured Vic, “you’ll be acquitted. Our loyal opposition is strong enough to force this case into trial but they can’t force you into the gas chamber.”

“That’s comforting,” Vic answered dully.

Reisman kept the trial simple. He first proved that Vic and Sara were lovers by questioning Mavis on the stand. The girl, believing that she was hurting Vic, stated that he kept forcing his attentions on her mother. This proved that the actress had received his attention willingly or not . . . at first.

The worst the prosecutor could say of Vic was that he was an opportunist who had wormed his way into Sara Summer’s affections deliberately for his own career’s sake.

With all the noise and the tabloid publicity about the trial it still boiled down to the simple fact that there had been no witnesses at the time of Sara’s death except Vic. Like it or not his word had to be accepted because there was none to deny it. The jury was out no more than ten minutes to bring back a “not guilty” verdict.

Vic couldn’t get out of the court

quick enough. He ducked the news- men and went directly to Ellen's apartment. She hadn't tried to contact him all during his arrest and trial. When he got to her apartment he soon found out why. She had eloped with Gordon Blake.

Vic knew that she had married Gordon out of reaction against the trial. She could not bear the fact that he had been exposed as an opportunist who would use sex to further his ends. So the opposition in Hollywood had finally made him pay. He was free but without Ellen.

It didn't take Vic long to find out just what kind of price Hollywood was extracting from him. To begin with no studio would touch him. He was poison. Vic thought of seeing Saks for a favor. After all, he had kept quiet and won two million dollars in insurance money for him. But Vic felt he didn't need the favor that bad. It would be one paid for by Sara's death.

Vic went back to his apartment and packed. He didn't know where he was going but only cared so long as it was out of Hollywood. In fact, he thought it would be best if he gave up show business . . . for awhile anyhow. He would find a job somewhere as a logger up north. He would find someplace where he wasn't known and people didn't give a damn about show business and all its sins and scandals. Yes, that's what he'd do. Leave, rest and recharge. Then, maybe after a year or so he would come back to the

business with a new name. Time was the best healer of all. In time people would forget.

A new sense of life and well being filled Vic. After spending so many months in jail with the threat of the gas chamber over him life took on a new sweetness. It no longer seemed important whether he became a success or not. The main thing was that he was alive and free.

There was a knock at the door.

Vic opened it a crack. One of Saks' goons was standing in the hallway. "Go away," Vic told him.

Just as he was about to close the door the goon pushed it in causing Vic to fall on the floor. "Saks sent me to get you," he said.

"I don't want to see Saks. Now, beat it."

The goon pulled out a gun lazily as if he were taking out his wallet to buy a bag of pop corn. "You're not going to argue with me," he said.

Vic looked the goon over, gun and all. "No, I guess I'm not."

Saks was in a happy mood. He puffed at his cigar like an Indian sending smoke signals. "Vic, why the hell haven't you been around? Didn't you get my messages?"

"I did," Vic answered.

"My boy here tells me that he got you just in time. You were all packed. Where were you going?"

"Away," Vic responded tightly.

Saks looked slightly less happy. "You need money to go away. Why didn't you come to me? I owe you

something. In fact, I made more from Sara's death than I would've made from the picture."

Vic drew his breath sharply between his clenched teeth. He cocked his fist and stepped towards him. One of the goons judo chopped him in the stomach. Vic doubled over in pain.

"You should know better than to try a thing like that," Saks told him.

"You're a bastard, Saks," Vic gasped.

"So I'm a bastard. It's the only way to get along in this world. You were always a little too soft for it."

"Is that why you had me come here?" Vic asked. "Just to tell me how soft I am?"

"I wanted to see how you were. I know how this town is closing up against us. I can survive it but, you . . ."

"I'll manage and without your help. I just want to get away. Now can I go?"

Saks pulled out a roll of bills. He peeled off several of them and shoved them into Vic's jacket pocket. "Here's five hundred. That'll give you a start."

Vic opened his mouth to say he didn't need it but he couldn't say it. Five hundred bucks was five hundred bucks. And that was almost five hundred dollars more than he had on him. "Now can I go?" he asked.

"Sure, I'll give you a lift part of the way. I was planning a little vacation myself too."

"Thanks, but, no thanks."

Saks acted as if he hadn't heard him. He whistled for Archie Junior and the dog bounded past him into Vic's arms. The bulldog licked his face with his red, wet tongue.

"I'll be damned," Saks sighed. "The mutt still remembers you. Come on, Vic, I'll drive you back to your apartment, at least."

Vic was just too tired to object. He followed Saks and two goons into the car. Archie Junior bounded into the back seat between him and the mobster. The car pulled away from the curb.

"By the way, Vic," Saks added "were you approached by any insurance people?"

Vic patted the dog that curled in his lap. "No."

Saks narrowed his eyes. His good mood was completely gone now. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why would any insurance people want to talk to me?"

"They have two million reasons. They're not going to give that money up so easy. Look at how they wanted you to cop a plea just so they wouldn't have to pay."

"I didn't, did I?"

"No, but that was because they were dealing with Reisman. Now they can deal directly with you."

"I still don't know what you mean. The case is over. They have to pay."

"Oh, they'll pay. They'll pay you as high as a hundred grand."

"Pay me?"

Saks patted the dog. His face was close to Vic's as he leaned over. "So, I guess they just haven't gotten around to you yet. Well, the deal they're going to offer is this . . . you confess that you pushed Sara down those stairs, in the heat of argument, of course, and they'll make it worth your while. That's simple enough to understand, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't. Why should I confess to something I didn't do especially after I've been acquitted of it?"

"A hundred grand. That may seem like a lot of money but it's a hell of a lot less than the two million they would have to pay me. All you would have to do would be to swear that you killed Sara, accidentally. The police couldn't do anything to you because you can't be tried for the same crime twice. With your confession the insurance company wouldn't have to pay me. Are things a little clearer now?"

Vic stared hard at the road in front of him. "I can't believe that they would go that far. Are you sure of all this? They plan to make me this offer?"

"I got it from Reisman himself. After he turned down their first proposition to him he was sure that they would make a separate one to you so he put a spy in the company. He just found out about it today. That's why he wants to see you."

Vic suddenly realized that he wasn't being driven back to his

apartment. The car was headed out of Los Angeles altogether. "Say, what is this?"

Saks shifted his weight in the back seat. "Take it easy, Vic. You're going to be put on a slow boat to China. I'm not fooling. Reisman has it all arranged. You're going on a freighter tonight for Hong Kong."

"What?" Vic cried with disbelief. "You must be joking. Look, I don't want any part of this. I'm not going to sign any confession and I'm not going to Hong Kong either."

"You didn't hear me out," Saks told him. "I'm following Reisman's advice. Since the insurance people are willing to spend a hundred grand to save two million so are we."

"You're going to give me that much money just so I won't be tempted by the insurance company's offer?"

"I'm not, Reisman is. You know me better than that. I squeeze a dollar until its ashes. No, this is Reisman's plan. He wants to send you on cruise around the world so that the insurance company will never find you. He's even willing to give you a pile of dough just to keep your mouth shut."

"He doesn't have to worry about me accepting the insurance company's offer and neither should you, Saks. You can let me out right here." Vic put his hand on the handle of the door.

Saks gazed at him in amazement. "I knew you were soft but I didn't think you were soft in the head too,"

he said. "Don't you realize what Reisman is offering you? It'll be a year before this insurance thing is finally settled. Until then you'll be traveling around the world with your pockets filled with dough."

Vic shoved his hand in his jacket pocket and pulled out the five hundred dollars. He flung it into the mobster's face. "Here's what I think of your damned blood money! I don't want a cent of it. Maybe you have to be a bastard to survive but I'm not so much of a bastard that I'll take money made by Sara's death."

The goon next to the driver reacted by pulling out a gun. Saks waved his hand weakly. "Calm down," he said. "Vic is just an attack of conscience."

"At least I have one."

"I know. That's why you'll never get anywhere. And that's why I can't trust you. You're too unreliable. One of these days you'll have another attack of conscience and spill everything."

The car was now past the outskirts of Los Angeles. They were in a deserted, heavily wooded area. The car turned off the paved road and onto a dirt one. "Is this the way to Reisman's?" Vic asked weakly.

"No," Saks told him in a gentle tone. "He trusts you but I don't."

Vic brought the door handle down sharply. The door swung open and he jumped out of the car. A sharp pain shot through his left leg. He rolled down a short embankment. He lay at the trunk of a tall tree for

a moment listening to the car brake to a stop and back up. He tried to get up but he cried out in pain. His leg was broken.

"He's down there!" Saks screamed pointing in his direction.

The woods Vic was in was very thick. Trees and bushes grew wildly forming a blanket of green leaves and shadows. He crawled rapidly, cutting his face and hands on the thorn bushes. He all but burrowed through a tunnel of branches formed by the undergrowth. Behind him he heard Saks shouting at the goons. "We've got to find him! He knows too much!"

Saks and the other two men blundered like elephants all around him. Then he heard them tramp loudly away from him. None of them knew that he had broken his leg and wasn't running. None of them realized that he was hardly more than ten feet away from the car in the middle of a big thorn bush.

The car!

If he could only drag himself into it in time. It wouldn't take more than a minute to crawl over there, another ten or twenty seconds to drive out of firing range . . .

Vic waited and listened. He heard Saks bellowing further and further away. He heard the tramping of feet fade. They were far enough away now. In a moment they would back track.

Vic crawled out of the tunnel in the undergrowth. His leg was one large agony. He bit his lip to keep

from crying in pain. He dragged himself up the embankment and over to the car. The front door was open and he grabbed onto it, dragging himself up on his good leg. Then Archie Junior barked happily.

"Get away . . ." Vic begged. He flung himself on the front seat and the bulldog jumped on his back and licked his face. Vic sat up quickly and threw the dog off of him. The dog barked in a mixture of surprise and anger. Off in the woods Vic heard men running towards him. He slid behind the wheel. The key was still in the ignition. Yes, there was still a chance.

Just as Vic reached for the ignition key the dog bounded in front of him. He was barking even more loudly.

"I'm not playing you rotten

mutt!" Vic yelled desperately.

"That's no way to treat Archie Junior," Saks said in hard panting breaths. He was standing at the car door, a gun in his hand.

Vic put his hand up in front of his face. "Saks . . . no . . ."

The two goons rushed into view. Both of them had guns. One of them pointed his directly at Vic.

"Not in the car, stupid!" Saks shouted.

Hands reached in and grabbed Vic. He felt himself being pulled out and he fell to the dirt road. Again the hands grabbed him and rolled him down the embankment. The first shot whistled past Vic's ear. The second was a little closer and Vic didn't hear it. Nor the next, nor the next. Nor did he feel Archie Junior licking his face for the last time.



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