MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

All New Stories

MAY
1/6
BRITISH EDITION

Bullets, Blondes and Mike Shayne

BRING BACK A CORPSE

in a turbulent novelet by

Brett Halliday

THE QUIET LIFE

A John J. Malone Novelet

By Craig Rice

Full Cycle—
New Birth

With publication of this first issue of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, my Miami character completes the full cycle in print. At the moment, I cannot think of any other publication medium through which Mike can reach readers in the British Empire, or in the ten foreign countries where his cases have been translated for many years.

I am both proud and gratified that the publishers in the United States and the British Empire liked Mike Shayne well enough to bring out a magazine in his honour. It is a project that I have held in my mind and heart for many years. We have waited patiently for the exact moment when the signs were right, when the many and varied elements essential to the production and distribution of a truly fine mystery magazine coincided to make the project feasible.

We are glad, now, that we waited for this moment. I sincerely believe that MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE is the finest periodical of its kind available to the reader to-day. I believe, also, that the stories between its covers are a fair sample of what you, the reader, may expect in future issues. We hope to make this the sort of magazine that the millions of Mike Shayne fans throughout the world want to read. Whether you feel that we have achieved our purpose or have fallen short, it is our hope that you will help us by writing a letter to tell us what you like or dislike about this first issue.

Mike has sold more than 14,000,000 copies in the United States. alone. We don't expect 14,000,000 letters, or even 14,000—but, for myself, I hope you break the mailman's back.

Brett Halliday

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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A New Michael Shayne Novelette by

BRETT HALLIDAY

Shayne didn't want to take on the job of finding Homer Wilde's vanishing business manager. But Lucy Hamilton was one of the great TV star's adoring fans. So, within fourteen hours, the red-headed detective found himself winging his way to New York on a Super-Constellation. Assignment—

Bring Back a Corpse!

MICHAEL SHAYNE had never seen his secretary look so happily flustered. She sat in her desk chair beyond the low railing, smiling at the telephone mouthpiece. She was saying, "But it's too early. Mr. Shayne never gets in before ten in the morning and I—"

Her head was pulled sharply around at his abrupt entrance. She swallowed hard and stuttered, "Just a moment, please. Mr. Shayne just came in," then cupped her hand over the phone and said in a small, awed voice. "It's Homer *Wilde,* Michael. Take it in your office quick."

Shayne crossed to the railing in two unhurried strides and leaned an elbow on it, grinning indulgently down at Lucy. "You talk to him, Angel. You seemed to be doing all right when I interrupted."

"Please, Michael," she begged. "Don't you understand? It's Homer Wilde himself. He wants to see you."

"For what?" Shayne shook a cigarette from a crumpled pack and stuck it between his lips.

"I don't know. But it must be awfully important for him to call *you* so early. He wants you over at his hotel on the Beach right after his broadcast to-night."

Shayne yawned and put fire to his cigarette and said, "The hell he does. Tell him to hunt up another errand boy."

Lucy Hamilton's brown eyes blazed at Shayne. Gurgling sounds were coming from the phone, and she removed her hand to say in a dulcet tone, "Yes, Mr. Wilde. I'm terribly sorry, but Mr. Shayne is tied up just for the moment. I'll have him call you right back, if you'll give me your number."

She listened to more gurgling

sounds, biting her lower lip anxiously. "I see," she said. "Of course. Just one second.

Again she covered the mouthpiece and turned her head to glare up at her red-headed employer. "He doesn't want you to call him. He just wants you to get over there before midnight."

Smoke wreathed from Shayne's nostrils and the irritating grin remained on his rugged face. "Tell him to go jump in the ocean," he said pleasantly.

"Michael, if you don't . . ." Lucy gritted her teeth and turned back, uncovered the phone to say, "Yes, Mr. Wilde. Mr. Shayne will be delighted. Suite Six forty-two? He'll be there." She slammed the instrument down and stood up to confront Shayne defiantly.

"Mike, I'll never, *never* forgive you if you don't even go over to see what Mr. Wilde wants. Maybe . . . I could even meet him in person, if he retains you."

Shayne's grin faded slowly, to be replaced by a baffled expression. "I never knew *you* were like that, Lucy. Wilde is nothing but—"

"Nothing but the most important and best-loved television personality in the country," she interrupted, bitingly. "That's all he is. Every girl I know would gladly give her right arm to meet him. That's all!"

Shayne said, "I'll be triple-damned." He clawed strong fingers through his coarse red hair, shaking his head in perplexity. "I never thought—"

"You just never think, period!" she interrupted again, more violently. "Well, I'm a female human being even if you don't realize it, Michael Shayne. If you don't go over to the White Sapphire Hotel to-night I'll never speak to you again in my life."

Shayne grinned again, this time with real mirth. He straightened his tall frame and leaned over the railing to crook his forefinger beneath Lucy's firm chin.

"The White Sapphire it is, angel. Shall I bring you his autograph?"

"You can tell him I'm one of his greatest fans and I'm dying to meet him," she responded promptly. "I do hope it'll be a long assignment."

Shayne shrugged and said, "Relax, Lucy. I'll go. Now, let's forget about Homer Wilde and get to work." But strangely enough, as the day went on, the detective found it difficult to keep Wilde out of his thoughts. He had never seen the television personality because he didn't even own a set, but he knew who Homer Wilde was, of course.

No one who read a newspaper could fail to know something

about him—especially in Miami, where the star broadcast his nationwide shows several times during each winter season.

But he didn't know what to expect when he entered the Miami Beach hotel suite at five minutes past midnight, though it certainly wasn't what he found on the other side of the door — a short, slender, curly-haired man with an engaging awkwardness of gesture and a face whose normal night club pallor was masked by a blistering red sunburn.

He gripped Shayne's hand firmly and lowered long lashes over his eyes with an odd, self-consciousness coyness as he exclaimed. "This is simply great of you, Shayne. It's Mike, isn't it? I know all about you, Mike. Read every one of those excellent books your friend Halliday writes about your cases. Great stuff. Say, now . . ." Stepping back to look up appreciatively at the rangy red-head, "How'd you like to appear as a guest on my show next week in New York, Mike? You'd kill the people. You'd really be a natural. How about it?"

Shayne shook his head and said, "Sorry, fellow. You stick to your last, and I'll stick to mine." His voice hardened. "That isn't why you got me over here, is it?"

"As a matter of fact — no. It struck me just now when I got a look at you." Wilde turned and strode up and down the thick carpet, thrusting hands deep into the pockets of his cream-coloured slacks.

"I'm in a jam, Mike. My business manager is missing. Ben Felton. Been with me for years. Just disappeared into the blue. You got to find him quick."

Shayne shrugged and moved over to a deep chair and sank into it while Wilde continued to stride up and down nervously. "Better try the police. They've got the organisation and it won't cost you anything."

"Damn the cost! No, I can't have the police in this, Mike. No publicity, see? If a word of this leaked to wrong people all hell would be on fire. Maybe you've read about this dinosaur deal I'm working on to set up a hotel syndicate here in the Beach. There's been a lot of stuff in the papers . . ." He removed one hand from his pocket and waved it vaguely, as a seal might wave a flipper.

Shayne shook his red head and said, "No. I carefully avoid reading any of that crap they print about TV big-shots. What's a hotel deal got to do with it?"

Wilde stopped in mid-stride with a pained expression on his beet-red face. "You don't read . . .?" Then he shrugged manfully.

"But I'm sure my secretary can fill me in. She's a terrific fan of yours."

"Is, eh?" Wilde looked deprecatorily pleased. "Perhaps she'd like a personally-autographed picture."

"I'm sure she would," Shayne said wearily. "Look. You were hot about me getting over here tonight. So I'm here. So what's the pitch?"

"You've got to find Ben Felton. This twenty-million-dollar deal is hanging fire until I get his signature on some papers. And it won't hang fire much longer. I think the —— ran out just to queer the whole pitch. He doesn't like it, see? He argued with me about going into it until I put my foot down and reminded him it was my own money. Then he disappeared. Find him."

Shayne said mildly, "That's not much to go on. If he's hiding out . . ."

"I don't know whether he is or isn't." Wilde snapped. "Frankly, I'd just as soon you turned up his corpse as not. But I've got to know, so I can get on with the deal one way or another. Cottrell's pressing me hard to finalise the thing."

Shayne sat up a little straighter and his left thumb and forefinger tugged at the lobe of his ear. "Would that be Copey Cottrell?"

"That's right. The big hotel tycoon from Las Vegas."

"Hotel Tycoon" was a new way of describing Copey Cottrell, Shayne thought. Ii his book, Copey was a vicious racketeer who had victimized Nevada businessmen for too many years, and the thought of him infiltrating Miami Beach, with his pressure and trigger boys and his sleek, streamlined modern racketeering methods, was nauseating to the detective.

"Here's a publicity still of Felton." Wilde held out a glossy print. It showed a lean, lined, weary face beneath straight black hair lashed with grey at the temples. "All my people are good news copy. You can get the rest of the dope on Felton two doors down the hall. We're using this whole half of the floor for office spacing during my broadcasts here at the Beach. Ask for Pinky Reach." He paused, murmured, "Beach—Reach," and chuckled to himself. "I'd take you down myself, but I've got to get out to Eglin Field early to-morrow a.m."

As if on signal, an inner door opened into the large sitting room and one of Wilde's myriad preoccupations strolled into the room. This one was a willowy brunette, wearing russet slacks and an eye-catching halter of the same colour. She undulated languidly close to

Homer, regarding the redhead with a speculative, heavy-lidded glance, and said throatily, "I'm sorry, Colonel — I didn't know you had anyone here."

"Colonel?" Shayne echoed in mild surprise. "Reserve?"

Homer Wilde flicked lint from his sleeve with a modesty as non-existent as the imaginary speck of white on his clothing. "Oh," he said, "the boys up in Washington threw me a bone for entertaining the fellows overseas."

He chuckled again and reached lazily for the girl, drawing her casually into the circle of his arm. "Honey," he said, " you better statrt watching your step. I just put Mike Shayne on the payroll. Mike, meet Monica Mallon, the purtiest little thrush this side of the Black Hills. You know, they always told me there was gold in them thar mountains."

"Mike Shayne?" The girl's lustrous dark eyes widened. "The famous private detective? Just to check up on *me?*"

Homer guffawed and squeezed Monica while he winked at Shayne. "Among other things, honey. Don't worry, chick — I've hired Mike to find Ben." And, his mirth falling away, "That reminds me, Mike — hadn't you better get cracking?"

There was, to Shayne, a distinctly unhealthy aura about the whole Wilde setup as he had seen it thus far — a definite sense of wheels within wheels, of things-aren't-what-they-seem. He said bluntly, "I'm not on your payroll yet, Wilde. I don't like the smell of this job."

Homer Wilde's mouth opened. His expression moved swiftly from disbelief, to alarm, to entreaty. For a moment, the redhead feared he was going to burst into tears. "But, Mike," he wailed, "I *need* you! I can give you more of my time as soon as I get my writers gassed up and going on next week's show in New York. To-night's show really broke my blisters. These Miami broadcasts are always brutal. But if you'll only start looking for Ben Felton now . . ."

He paused, then went on with, "It's this way, Mike. Ben walked out of this hotel yesterday morning and vanished into thin air. He didn't even leave a note, he hasn't called, he hasn't wired — and I've never been out of touch with the guy more than an hour or two at a time in over ten years. Now, of all times, when I need him more—"

Shayne grinned crookedly. "You *really* want him found?" he asked. "If you do, the police are your best bet. I'm not your boy."

"But, Mike," said Homer, "five

hundred a day, plus expenses, and a bonus if—"

"Just about what you pay your office boys in TV isn't it?" said the redhead. "You can take your job and shove it!"

As Mike strode to the elevator, a pale, weedy young man passed him, going toward Wilde's suite. Shane, still amused at memory of Wilde's astonishment, scarcely noticed the young man's stare. He drove back to his apartment in a glow of smug self-satisfaction.

II

Upon Shayne's arrival at his office the next morning, Lucy gave his one look and cried, almost tearfully, "*Mike!* You insulted him — I just know you did. I've seen that look in your eye before, and—"

"What's it like, Angel?"

"It's mean, and sort of conceited," she said. "If I—"

Mercifully, the telephone rang. Lucy grabbed it and said, "Michael Shayne's office. Just a moment, I'll see." She turned back to Shayne. "It's a Mr. Harry Tyndale calling from New York. He says he—"

"Well, I'll be . . ." Shayne cut her off and took the phone.

"Thank God I caught you!" came the hearty, familiar voice. "Mike, you've got to get up here right away. There's a one-o'clock plane. I'll have you met at La Guardia. I can't talk over the phone, Mike, but it's a real jam—a rough one."

Shayne looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten twenty-eight. He said, "I'll be on the one o'clock, Harry."

Harry Tyndale was one of the nicest guys Shayne had ever met — and one of the richest. A rare combination. The redhead had pulled him out of an attempted shakedown the previous season in Miami and they had become firm friends after it was over. If Harry Tyndale said it was a "real jam," Shayne knew it must be all of that.

Boarding the Super-Constellation two-and-a-half hours later, Shayne took a seat next to the window. Just before they took off, a pale, weedy young man slid into the seat beside him and said, "Mike Shayne, isn't it? I'm Greg Jarvis, part of Homer Wilde's zoo. Didn't I see you leaving his suite last night?"

"Maybe." Shayne was none too pleased. A private detective, unlike a TV star, is not pleased with a fame that makes his face known to too many people. But it took more than curtness to check Jarvis' garrulity.

"I'm one of the writers," he gabbled, "and, brother, is *that*

a rugged assignment! Homer is Nero and Simon Legree rolled into one large, economy-sized package."

He launched into an eloquent dissertation on the obnoxious professional character and obscene personal habits of his employer. Shayne listened fitfully, when he wasn't almost dozing, until, without warning, something happened that caused him to forget Homer Wilde and his companion's complaints alike.

A jet-plane came blasting out of a cloudbank, directly in front of them, less than a mile ahead. Shayne barely heard Jarvis stop in mid-sentence to utter a terrified, —— ——!"

With the planes approaching one another at a rate exceeding the speed of sound, there were but fractions of a second in which to prepare for the deadly collision that seemed inescapable. But somehow, in those fractions of splintered time, the jet slid downward, out of sight beneath them, and was gone.

Shayne slowly unclenched his fists and looked down at the red lines his nails had cut into his palms in so brief and deadly a moment. He again became conscious of Jarvis' voice in his left ear.

" . . . people wonder why we have trouble putting together sensible material for TV. Well, that stupid jet's the answer — just like this air-wagon we're riding in. The unities have been kicked all to hell and gone."

"What unities?" asked Shayne, wondering if Jarvis really had the faintest idea of how closely death had brushed them by.

"It goes back to the Greeks," said Jarvis condescendingly. "The Ancient Greeks, you know. They devised the unities and made them work better than any dramatic formula since. The gist of them was that nothing could happen onstage that could not happen in real life in the same space or the same length of time that the play took. You see what I'm getting at?"

"And now they're kicked all to hell and gone?" Shayne asked idly.

"You saw that jet-plane, didn't you? Beyond the speed of sound! Time and space are telescoped like an accordion. Anything can happen anywhere, in any time," the writer complained and paused to brood on the injustices of science toward art.

At La Guardia, Shayne bade him a brusque farewell as he was greeted by a liveried chauffeur. The redhead was frankly glad to have seen the last of Homer Wilde's "zoo," He was whisked into the city and up to an immense suite on the top floor of the

Wallston Plaza Towers, where he was met by Harry Tyndale in the huge master bedroom.

"Thank goodness you're here, Mike!" Tyndale was burly and grizzled, a deep-voiced bear of a man. At the moment, his heavy features showed unaccustomed lines of weariness and strain, and his voice throbbed with emotion and relief.

Shayne looked around the room and asked lightly, "What's up, Harry — corpse under the bed?"

"Not quite, Mike." Tyndale took him by the elbow and led him across the room to open a door leading into a bathroom — a silver-and-marble bathroom with a sunken tub big enough to float an outboard motorboat. Only there wasn't a boat in the bathtub . . .

Instead, Shayne stood staring down at the fully-clothed body of a dead man. A small man, stretched out neatly in the tub with his left temple smashed. There was a livid bruise on his jaw, and a smear of blood on one of the silver fittings indicated that he might have been slugged on the chin and accidentally suffered the fatal wound in falling.

But what interested Shayne most at the moment was the dead man's face. It was lined, well-worn by life, and his dead eyes stared up at the detective as though saying mockingly, "So you finally found me, eh? Even after turning down the job of looking for me."

Shayne had found him. The dead man was Ben Fulton, mysteriously missing from Miami.

Shayne straightened and backed out of the bathroom. Tyndale met him outside the doorway with a goblet half-full of Napoleon cognac.

Shayne drank half of it and demanded harshly, "How did he get there?"

Tyndale opened his manicured, muscular hands. "That's the hell of it!" He said. "I don't know."

"Come off it, Harry," Shayne told him. "You got me here. You know me. *Now talk!*" The last two words were a whiplash.

Harry Tyndale's face reddened —he was not a man accustomed to taking orders from anyone. He said, "Damn it, Mike, *I don't know!* I've sunk a small mint in a new colour photo-printing process that will revolutionise the field, but I've got other businesses to feed, and my hotels are in trouble. I need every bit of good will and publicity I can get. My public relations counsel said, 'Toss a party . . . a big one.'

"So I did. Last night. I opened up the whole suite and had a hell of a mob milling around all night. In the middle of the morning I came in here and flopped on the bed and passed out. Never did such

a thing before in my life. I have a good head for liquor. I woke with a lousy headache . . . just as if I'd hade a Mickey Finn . . . and there he was. Some of the guests were still in the other rooms tanking up. I haven't dared leave here after finding him. I phoned you, and I've been sweating it out ever since."

"What do you expect me to do, Harry?" Shayne asked quietly. He was convinced Harry Tyndale was telling the truth.

"I don't know," said Tyndale wearily, leaning against the foot of one of the twin beds. "If this gets out, and there's a big smell, it will ruin me. I'm way overextended until this photo thing is launched. But get me out of this, and you can name your own ticket."

"You should have called the cops and levelled," the redhead told him sombrely. "Now you're in trouble anyway."

"I'm not a complete idiot!" Tyndale's nerves, close to the snapping point, caused him briefly to lose self-control. "Don't you think I know that? But I didn't dare. I thought, that is, I hoped . . ."

"You hoped a character named Shayne, who got a broad off your neck in Miami last winter, could get a corpse out of your bathtub to-day," growled the detective. "Dammit, Harry, I wouldn't even try to do a thing like this on my own home grounds. And here in New York . . ." He paused to tug at the lobe of his left ear. "Tell me something, Harry. Have there been any TV personalities here? Actors, actresses, anybody like that?"

"Not that I know of — *I* didn't invite any," said Tyndale, puzzled. "This was a business party. There are women, sure—what's a party without 'em? You know the type —advertising girls, models, maybe an actress or two. This is a big wingding. But I wouldn't know a TV personality if I saw one—unless it was a newscaster or sports commentator. They're all I ever look at on TV."

He was interrupted by the opening of the door that led to the rest of the suite. Sounds of music and laughter entered, as did a beautifully stacked blonde in a green suite that matched her eyes, a blonde who managed to be attractive even though she was obviously a bit unsteady on her feet.

"Hi, yuall," she said in honeyed accents as southern as fried chicken and hush-puppies.

"What do *you* want?" Tyndale snapped at her.

"Shugah, ah'm jus' not sure." Her green eyes ranged from Tyndale's defiant bulk to the long, lean, muscular detective. "It's jus' *cood* be, ah wan' somethin' lak

him." She pointed a vermillion-tipped forefinger directly at Shayne.

"Later, honey, I'll buy you a dozen like him," said Tyndale. Moving into action, he propelled her gallantly but firmly outside and closed the door behind her. Turning to the redhead, he mopped a suddenly streaming brow and said, "That's about the sixth time she's come barging in here since I found that — *thing*. You see why I don't dare leave the room."

Shayne suppressed a grin. But the girl bothered him almost as much as Ben Felton's corpse, lying in the bathtub just beyond a thin wood door. Whatever Ben Felton had been, he was no longer. Whatever harm his body could do would be involuntary as far as he was concerned. But this green-eyed blonde — Shayne felt certain, from the wariness of her glance, that she had been sober. He doubted she was a genuine blonde. He was sure she was not a true Southerner. No Southerner ever said *cood* for *could*.

"Anybody else been in here today?" he asked.

"A few strays — but none as often as that one. What a *mess!*"

"How come your hotels are in trouble while you're all tied up launching this new gizmo? I thought you, of all people, knew how to protect your rear."

"I thought so, too," said the millionaire wretchedly. "It wouldn't have happened if a bunch of gang-backed sharks from Las Vegas hadn't picked this moment to move in on me. When operations get as large as mine, there are bound to be leaks. You can't count on one hundred per cent. loyalty — not from humans, anyway. The sharks have been giving me the full treatment, all the way from stock raids to bedbugs."

"Who's behind it?" Shayne asked warily.

"Ever hear of a smooth-talking, good-looking, dirty-minded, snake-moralled, twenty-nine carat rat named Copey Cottrell?" Tyndale asked. "He's a no-good, underworld swine, one of the Buggsy Siegal kind who can curl a pinkie around a teacup with an archduchess and beat up a hold-out whore on his string with a baseball bat half an hour later. Maybe you didn't know this, Mike, but I picked up the White Sapphire, in Miami Beach, three months ago. Seems, by their lights, I made a mistake. Seems they'd set their sights on it. So . . ." Again he spread his arms.

Shayne nodded. "I had no idea you were in the White Sapphire mess," he said. He was beginning to see why Ben Fulton should have turned up in Harry Tyndale's suite. "Harry, if I were you, I'd

go hunting for that leak with a monkey wrench."

"Don't worry," said Tyndale. I'm working on that. And don't worry about my handling Copey Cottrell and all his nasty little men —I've been in dirty fights before. What worries me is that . . ." He nodded again toward the bathroom door.

"It damned well ought to worry you," said Shayne. "It worries the hell out of *me* and *I* had nothing to do with it."

"You never say the guy before, did you?" It was a forlorn-hope question.

"Nope," replied the redhead truthfully. He paused to glance at his watch as the last pieces of a hare-brained, impossible plan fell together. "Have somebody get a small trunk — one of those steel foot-lockers they use in the army, with a grip on it. Have him get it here quick. I've got to be on the dinner plane for Miami tonight."

Harry Tyndale looked at if he couldn't quite believe it. His deep voice was a whisper as he asked, "Mike, what are you going to do?"

"Harry," the detective told him, "the less you know about it, the better. If I pull it off, you'll be getting my bill — a whopper. If I don't, it will cost you a lot more in lawyers' fees. Now, get going, or we're both up the creek without a paddle between us."

Harry got going. The trunk was ordered, the reservations made, the chauffeur called for before Shayne had time to finish another drink. Shayne sipped it, rather than gulped it, wondering if he had gone out of his mind. He was used to taking long chances, to calculated risks. He was used to getting away with them. But to fly Ben Felton's corpse back to Miami in a foot-locker and dump him in Homer Wilde's lap . . .

He could still hear the television star's musical voice saying, "I'd just as soon you'd turn up his corpse as not."

If the redhead pulled it off, Homer was going to get his corpse.

When the locker arrived, Harry Tyndale locked the room doors. Then, for twelve minutes, he and Shayne were grimly busy. By the time they were through and had washed their hands, the redhead had acquired a sympathy for trunk murderers he had never thought would be his. If the deceased had not been such a small man . . . Shayne poured himself a drink, told Tyndale to have his men take the trunk down to the waiting car, then poured a half tumbler for a newly grey-faced Tyndale.

"Okay, Harry, now take a reef in yourself and hope for the best."

"Thanks, Mike," Tyndale's handclasp was fervent.

"It's not over yet," the redhead told him. "Keep your fingers crossed."

III

Shayne made the waiting Super-Constellation with minutes to spare. He had to fork over an extra thirty dollars for overweight luggage and was again grateful that the late Ben Felton had been a small man. To say that he sweated the foot-locker through the weighing-in process was enormous understatement.

If anything went wrong — and he could think of a half-a-hundred possibilities without stretching his imagination — it meant curtains for Michael Shane, to say nothing of Harry Tyndale. But once Harry had called Shayne instead of the New York police, there was little else either of them *could* do.

Even if he got his strange cargo to Miami intact, there remained the little matter of arranging to plant it where it could do the most good for the team of Tyndale and Shayne — and the most damage to Copey Cottrell and his gangsters.

Why had Felton vanished? Why had he sought to contact Harry Tyndale? Had he been killed to prevent that contact? On the surface, the answers to all three questions lay in exactly two words — Copey Cottrell. Shayne had heard people call Cottrell good-looking. The detective found his eyes on his own right hand, which had, without conscious direction, balled itself into a fist. Perhaps, if Cottrell weren't so pretty . . .

For the first time, the detective allowed himself to ponder the identity of Ben Felton's killer. At a jamboree like the one Harry Tyndale was throwing, it could have been almost anyone. But for once, the identity of a murderer was not of supreme importance in a murder case. It was what was done with the corpse that mattered to Shayne now.

'Penny foah yuah thoughts," said a rich, feminine Southern voice, almost in his ear.

Shayne's self-possession was not merely a matter of pride — it had been, in hundreds of instances, a matter of life-and-death necessity. The redhead relied on his disciplined ability to withstand the most sudden shocks and never turn a hair. But this time, it took all his self command.

"You again?" He stared coldly at the beautifully stacked green-eyed blonde he had last seen in Harry's bedroom.

"Yaaas, little ol' me," she replied, pouting prettily. "Ah tol' yuah ah jess myught want something like li'l ol' yuah. Ah think it was right ryude of yuah to take

off without so much as sayin' gude byah to li'l ol' me."

He grinned in spite of himself, just as the engines of the Super-Constellation cut in, one by one. He said, raising his voice above their roar, "Well, I don't seem to have got away with it — you're here."

There was no more talk until the take-off. Then she said, "What was that yuah were tryin' to sayah?"

He said, amusement fading as he realised things had gone very wrong, "Cut the accent, honey-chil'. You're no more Southern than you were drunk back in Harry Tyndale's hotel room.

"My best friends never told me I could act," she said in a perfectly straight, rather pleasant Midwestern voice.

The damnable part of it, he thought, was that he rather liked this girl — or might have if she weren't such a dangerous unknown. At least, she represented more attractive company than Greg Jarvis, the writer, on the trip up, with his prattle of unities. Shayne took his time studying her, and she returned his gaze, point for point.

She was not quite as pretty as he remembered her — evidently, she was a girl who could project beauty without actually having it. She was also a little older — there were tiny hints of wrinkles around mouth and eyes that told the story. But there was disarming good humour in her not unhandsome face, and then that figure . . .

"Well?" she said. "Satisfied?"

He shook his head. "Far from it . . ." He raised his shaggy red brows a notch.

"Oh . . ." She understood the unspoken question. "My name's Carol Hale, and I'm not married."

He put it to her bluntly. "Carol Hale, why did you follow me aboard this plane from the hotel?"

The good humour became an afterglow, a memory, as she said with quiet determination, "Because, Michael Shayne, I wanted to know what you were doing with poor Ben Felton's body."

Shayne was stopped cold — but not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did he reveal the fact. He allowed a look of surprise, of bewilderment, to spread over his ruggedly cast features. Perhaps this girl was a poor actor, but the redhead was a good one when he had to be.

He said, "One of us must be crazy."

Mercifully, Carol Hale kept her voice low. She said, "I went to Tyndale's suite with Ben this morning. He went into that master bedroom and told me to wait for him, he had someone to see. I waited — the whole day, and I

couldn't find Ben. Then you came in, an hour or so ago, and went in there to talk with Tyndale. You won't deny that, I hope."

Shayne's answer was a shrug — there seemed nothing to say. The girl went on evenly with, "I decided to watch. You see, I knew who you were, though I didn't expect to see you in New York. I used to spend some of my winters in Miami. I wondered why you were there, and I got afraid. Then I decided to keep an eye on the hall. There was another door from the hall to that bedroom. I saw them bring in the trunk. Then I saw them bring it out. A moment later, you followed. I followed you."

Shayne sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid your imagination has caused you to take a trip for nothing — not that I'm not grateful for a charming, is somewhat zany, companion."

She shook her head, and her green eyes were like twin jewels — hard and cold. She said, "It won't do, Mike Shayne. Tyndale kept watch like a bulldog all morning on that room."

"If you were in there, you must know there wasn't a body there," the redhead told him with an air of patience. "Tyndale was waiting for me on a matter of business. As for the trunk, I'm taking some valuable papers back to Miami for him."

"Mike Shayne playing nursemaid to a bunch of documents?"

"Why couldn't your friend — Ben What's-his-name — simply have ducked out of the bedroom into the hall and gone down in the elevator? He's probably back at the hotel right now, wondering what happened to you."

She shook her head. "Not Ben Felton," she said firmly. "Ben wasn't that kind of a character. He'd have called me — *if* he was able to."

"Maybe he wasn't able to." The redhead was sparring desperately. The girl didn't *know* the corpse was in the foot-locker — but as long as she was with him, she was intensely dangerous. If she blew the whistle on him before he had a chance to reclaim the trunk . . .

"Maybe he wasn't," she said. "He told me the deal he was on could be dangerous — so dangerous he'd been keeping out of sight for seventy-two hours."

"Quite a story," said Shayne, feigning amusement. "And just what was your role in this dangerous deal, Miss Hale? You're not going to tell me your friend brought you along merely as window dressing — not that you wouldn't dress a window damned attractively."

"My role was — or is — very important," she replied serenely.

"Incidentally, believe it or not, it was not the sort of part I enjoy playing. But when you set out to destroy a rat, you can't always name your poison."

Shayne shook his head, puzzled. "Somewhere away back there, you lost me. But, now that you're here, what's on the docket?"

Her eyes studied him again "That," she said, "depends . . ."

It was exasperating. For the time being, there was nothing Shayne could do. He jerked his head toward the window.

"Hell of a beautiful sunset out there," he said.

Carol Hale said, "Isn't it lovely!"

They dined on excellent fried chicken, placed before them on trays by the inevitable trim hostess. They talked — about plane travel, about Miami, about New York, about a score of irrelevant things. But they never returned to the subject of the late Ben Felton, and she never revealed the least thing about herself.

Whatever element she represented in the deadly business, she knew he had the foot-locker aboard the plane and she probably suspected what it contained. If she had actually been with Ben Felton at Tyndale's suite, it was unlikely she was working for what Shayne was beginning to think of as the other side. But he had only her word for all that.

There was no sense in trying to ditch her, once they landed, and walk away from the airport, leaving the trunk to be picked up later. He couldn't risk checking a murder corpse in a trunk in the airport luggage room, and he felt certain Carol Hale would keep watch and discover any pickup he arranged. A girl who had come along this doggedly on a mere hunch wouldn't give up at that stage of the game.

There was only one thing to do — play out the string, bluff all the way, and keep the girl with him. He shifted his head to look at her covertly. She was lying back in her seat now, eyes closed. She looked harmless and innocent as a — well, baby was not quite the word he had in mind. Quite unexpectedly, the redhead felt a pang of genuine regret that they had met under such circumstances. Otherwise . . .

The distant barricade of Miami Beach was ablaze with jewel-lights as the big Super-Constellation circled and came in for its landing. A glance at his watch told Shayne they were on time. He stirred, and she yawned dimpling prettily. He said, "Someone meeting you?"

She shook her head, warily.

He added, "I suppose you'll want to stand by while I claim the foot-locker?"

Her answer was, "What else?

And if you make one false step, Mike Shayne, I'll call the cops so fast you'll never know what—"

"You will?" Something in his voice checked her.

They were standing, side by side, at the luggage-claiming counter, when Shayne, after a quick glance around said, in a low voice, "Looks as if you won't have to call the cops after all, you double-crossing little . . ."

She said, "What are you . . .?" And then quick comprehension flashed into her alert green eyes. "It wasn't me," she whispered. Then, more loudly, "Thanks, Mike, but I can manage by myself. There are plenty of porters here. It was really very kind of you." Deftly, she took the claim-check from his fingers. "Goodnight, Mike, it's been fun. Hope I see you around."

"Lots of fun," he said grimly. "And more to come. 'Night, Carol."

The redhead tipped his hat and walked away — almost into the arms of an enormous plainclothesman, who was making his way slowly, purposefully, toward them through the small press of porters and passengers and their welcoming friends.

Mike said, "Hello, Len — what are you doing here?"

Len Sturgis, one of the ablest as well as the largest detective on Chief Will Gentry's Miami Police Force, eyes Shayne distrustfully. "How about you?" he asked. "Why don't you tell your friends when you take a trip to New York? We miss you around here, fellow."

Shayne was in no mood to endure heavy-handed humour. He said, "Two reasons, Len. One, I'm a licensed private detective, and my business is strictly between my clients and me. Two, I don't need to tell you characters what I do — you seem to find it out quick enough anyway. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing special," said Sturgis, looking hurt. "How was the big city, Mike?"

Shayne wanted nothing more at the moment than to get rid of the man. Out of the corner of one eye, he could see Carol Hale sailing serenely toward the cab-stand outside, following a porter who was trundling a pile of bags of various shapes and sizes, among them the brown steel foot-locker that contained the mortal remains of Ben Felton.

But Shayne couldn't break away now. He knew Len Sturgis was at the airport in response to a tip, and he knew the detective knew Shayne knew it. Cursing Harry Tyndale and the leak in his inner staff, Shayne tried to think of a way out.

Sturgis prompted him, "No luggage, Mike?"

Shayne took the cue. "Just a one-day trip. I went up on the one o'clock. Friend of mine needed a little help."

Sturgis regarded Shayne with an oh-yeah? look, but said, "Well, I guess there's nothing much doing here. Care for a lift to town?"

"Thanks, Len, but I left my own car in the parking lot outside." Shayne headed for the exit the girl had used.

But he was too late.

She had vanished . . .

IV

It was nearly four o'clock the next afternoon when Shayne reached his office. Lucy was in a state. "*Mike!*" she cried. "I've been half out of my mind! You never called me from New York, and I didn't know *what* was going on. Homer Wilde has been going crazy, too. He's been calling up, almost ever since you left. He told me to have you call him the moment you got in."

The redhead grinned as he skimmed his hat toward the rack. "Your idol will have to wait a few minutes longer," he said. His grin faded as he briefed Lucy on the events of the past twenty-four hours. "So there it is." He tugged at his left earlobe. "Somewhere in this city is a woman who calls herself Carol Hale. And with her, unless she's got rid of it already, is a small tin trunk containing the body of Ben Felton. I've been knocking myself out all day trying to find her. Not a trace, not a clue . . ." He sighed.

There was a glint of wry amusement in Lucy's brown eyes. "Mike, the damnedest things happen to you!" she said. Then, growing serious, "You say this woman — Carol Hale — was about my height, has a good figure, might be about thirty, with green eyes, and uses an atrocious Southern accent?" Lucy's own soft Southern voice flowed smooth as corn syrup.

"That's about it. Why? Any ideas?" The redhead was pacing the floor.

"And she's a blonde?" Lucy sounded disbelieving.

"She was blonde yesterday," he replied.

"I'd give a dozen pairs of good nylons just to have a good look at her," Lucy said meditatively.

Shayne stopped pacing. "What's on your mind?"

She hesitated briefly. "In the early days, when he was building his popularity, Homer Wilde had a girl in his show called Jeanie Williams. She couldn't sing very well, and she couldn't dance a lick, and, of course, she didn't have to act. She wasn't exactly

pretty, but she was nice looking and a marvelous figure.

"I liked her, and so did a lot of people. There used to be gossip about her being Homer's girlfriend. Oh—I remember, he used to kid her about her green eyes. *You* know, Mike, jealous monster and all that. Then, about three years ago, he dropped her flat."

"Not exactly a novelty where Homer's concerned from what I've been hearing," Shayne told her. "You think my Carol Hale sounds like Homer's Jeanie Williams?"

"Except for the blonde hair," said Lucy. "Listen, Mike, suppose she *has* something on Homer, and suppose Ben Felton went to New York and took her to Harry Tyndale so he could use her evidence, or whatever it is, against Copey Cottrell . . ."

"I'm way ahead of you, Lucy," said Shayne, quietly. "Now all we have to do is find Carol-Jeanie and Ben's body. And after that . . ."

The phone rang. Lucy's brisk, "Michael Shayne's office," cut him short. "Just a moment, I'll see." She looked up at Shayne and whispered, "Homer Wilde, again."

Shayne took the phone grimly and said, "Hello, Wilde, what's on your mind?"

"I've got to see you, Shayne. You can write your own ticket. Any fee you name. Can you come over to the White Sapphire right away?"

"I'll be there." Shayne's eyes were bleak as he put down the phone.

Driving over the Causeway to the beach, Shayne wondered if Homer had any idea that Ben Felton was dead. Surely he couldn't know that Shayne had found the body, brought it to Miami and lost it again . . .

Wilde was in his hotel bedroom, sitting beside the window looking out at the waters of the bay, silvered by the pre-twilight. The lush Monica Mallon was extended languorously on a chaise longue. She wore dinner pajamas of chartreuse satin, and flaunted a jade cigarette holder. Homer spoke as if she were not there.

"Look, Shayne," he said wearily without rising. "You've got me over a barrel. We're leaving for New York to-night at three A.M. I've got to find Ben before we go, and you're the only man who can do it. He must be somewhere here in Miami. If you find him before we take off, I'll give you a blank check. You can fill in the amount yourself."

"Fair enough." Shayne looked at his watch. "I'll call you before midnight."

"Great!" There was relief in Homer's voice. "And I have a

better idea. Come to our farewell party. It starts around midnight in the ballroom here and we leave for the airport at two-thirty a.m. Why don't you bring the charming Miss Hamilton? You say she's a fan of mine, and she certainly has a lovely telephone manner." This with a wink at Shayne, obviously designed to be seen by Monica. There was frost in her glance as Shayne departed.

This time, the redhead stopped at the other suite on the same floor which had been turned into a temporary publicity office.

There, Pinky Reach, the little man with large ears, wrestled with heavy leather-bound press-books until Shayne found what he wanted in an old one—a picture of Jeanie Williams. Her hair was brown and clubbed back with a bow. She looked much younger than the body-snatching blonde who had come back from New York with him, but she was unquestionably the same girl.

"Score one for Lucy," he told himself. Then, to Peachy Reach, "This girl—Jeanie Williams—looks like a nice kid."

"The most,' was the prompt reply. "Though poor Jeanie's not exactly a kid. She was around when I was breaking in four-five years ago. A sweetheart. We all used to get sore when we thought of her in the hay with his nibs. You know all about that, of course." This was with calm assumption that the redhead was up on all such gossip of the show.

"Homer used her—and I mean *used* her—for about seven years on his way up. Then he junked her like an old car."

"Wonder what's happened to her since," mused Shayne.

"Who knows?" This with a shrug. "Jeanie dropped from sight. But the story goes that Ben Felton went to the mat with the boss and made him pay off big. That's what started the trouble between them. Homer would have junked Ben, too if he could, I'm told. Boy, did he boil!" A pause, then, "You picked up anything on Ben? It isn't like him to run out this way."

But Shayne was out of ear-shot by then. In the lobby, Shayne called his office. He told Lucy that she could go home now, and that she was invited to Homer Wilde's party.

He interrupted her cry of, "Oh, Mike. What shall I wear?" to tell her, a little curtly, that he would pick her up some time before midnight, that by then, the case should be solved.

He drove back to his apartment, reasonably well satisfied. Lucy would be pleased at having guessed the identity of his plane companion correctly. And now, at least, Shayne knew whom

he was looking for. Everything was neatly tied up except for three large questions. Where was Jeanie-Carol? Where was the body of Ben Felton? Who killed Ben?

He was humming, off-key, a little tune as he went up in the elevator to his apartment. The door was ajar. He paused on the threshold and saw two men sprawled comfortably in two of the easy chairs. They were obviously not the sort of persons to be stopped by a mere locked door.

One of them, a lean, young-old man with a violent sports shirt and a badly broken nose that marred a gutter-handsome face, rose languidly and said, "You Shayne? The boss wants to have a word with you."

"By all means." Shayne matched the mocking courtliness of the intruder. Then, turning to the other, a squat, ugly character with a prematurely bald head, "Are you the boss?"

"Is he kidding?" the squat one asked, getting to his feet. Like his taller companion, he wore a lightweight jacket over a loud, open-collar shirt. The looseness of the jacket's fit did not conceal the pistol he carried in a shoulder-holster from Shayne's trained eyes.

"Shall we go?" said the taller hood politely.

They drove him, in a cream-and-blue convertible, to a palmetto-ringed, ultra-modern house that hugged the ground well beyond the mountain-range of hotels that gave Miami Beach its spectacular skyline. Shayne was escorted to a luxurious living room and left there, under the guard of the stockier and stupider of the two hoodlums.

He did not wait long before a compactly built, strong-featured man, who might have been a well-conditioned forty, entered the room. He wore bathing trunks and a brief towelling jacket, and, in spite of the lateness of the hour, there were traces of sand on his chest and stomach. He nodded at Shayne and went to a well-stocked bar.

"Martell, isn't it, Mr. Shayne?" he asked.

"Right," said Shayne, studying Copey Cottrell. The man was coarsly handsome and blandly corrupt. He poured himself a vodka highball and brought Shayne brandy. The two hoodlums had withdrawn to the far end of the long room.

"I've been wanting to meet you," Cottrell said quietly, "ever since Homer tried to put you on his payroll. At first, it didn't seem to me that you could do anything my boys couldn't do. But since yesterday, I've had to upgrade you."

"That's nice," said Shayne, amused by the affectation of urbanity.

"Mind you, Mr. Shayne," went on his host, "I was not in favour of having Felton killed. I deplore violence — it's much too costly a method of doing business. And Felton's death was by way of being an accident. My — associate — in New York lost his temper, which is regrettable — but not as regrettable as the fact that you brought the body back here with you. Ben Fulton, found dead in Tyndale's hotel suite in New York is quite a different thing from Ben Felton liable to be found dead at any moment here in Miami. Under certain circumstances, it could be embarrassing. I'm sure you understand."

"Pray elucidate further," said the redhead.

For a moment, he thought Cottrell was going to blow his top. He reddened, all the way from his hairline to the top of his trunks, and his eyes flashed flame. But the flare was brief, and Cottrell did not speak until he had regained self-control. Then he said, in the same quiet voice, "It was my idea, when I was informed last night that you were flying south with the corpse, to have the police take care of it for me. As a taxpayer, I believe in using public servants wherever possible."

He paused, a trifle smugly, then added, "But, in some way you managed to elude the excellent Chief Gentry's detective. This is exceedingly inconvenient. Mr. Shayne, I want that body, and I want it now."

"I'm sorry," said Shayne. "You can't have it."

Cottrell rose from the chair in which he had been sitting while he talked. Jiggling the ice in his glass, he said, "Naturally, I expected that answer. I'm a businessman, and I'm used to making deals. As I told you just now, I sincerely deplore violence. And I'm willing to pay for what I get. Why not? You took some long chances yesterday, but you got away with them. You have something I want. Therefore, I'm willing to pay. And whatever figure we reach will be given you in this room, in cash, once you have given me the information I want. You need not appear in it at all. My boys will take care of the — merchandise.

"What's more" — he paused again, delicately — "the Internal Revenue people won't hear a whisper about the transaction from me. You'll have five thousand dollars and be home free. How does it sound to you, Mr. Shayne?"

"It sounds absurd." Shayne drained his glass. "Even if I wanted to accommodate you, I couldn't."

"Make it ten grand," said Cottrell softly. "Will that do it?"

"I'm afraid not," said Shayne. "You see — I haven't got the body, and *I don't know where it is!*"

"Harry Tyndale would be touched by your loyalty." Cottrell was beginning to turn pink again under his tan. "But I have been told you are a man of such ethics as your profession permits. You've just been hired by Homer Wilde to find Ben Felton. Are you going to fulfill that contract?"

Shayne grinned. "Maybe. But when I found the police waiting for me at the airport, I lost my luggage check. By the time I managed to get Len Sturgis off my back, somebody else must have found it and claimed the trunk."

"Who?"

Shayne shrugged. "I don't know."

"Perhaps we can stir up your brain cells a trifle." Cottrell looked past him and said, "All right, boys. But keep him alive."

Shayne whirled as they came in behind him. The taller hood was swinging a sap lightly, and the half-bald one was drawing a shoulder-holster gun.

Shayne dropped his shoulder and lunged as he whirled. He caught the squatty one in the belly before he got his gun out, and they went to the floor together.

The gun skidded out of reach, and the man was out cold on the floor. The sap caught Shayne a glancing blow on the side of the head as he came to his feet, and he closed in with the taller man, driving his knee upward into the groin.

The man went down with a thin scream, and Shayne whirled from him just in time to see Cottrell swinging the barrel of a gun viciously. It connected solidly with the base of Shayne's skull, and he went down and out into blackness . . .

V

When Shayne returned to consciousness, his head throbbed with pain and the right side of his neck was stiff and sore. It was dark, and his hands were taped securely to his sides. His ankles, too, were tightly taped together.

He was lying on a bed, and there was a window through which he was able to see stars shining above the silhouettes of palmettoes. As a memory came back to him, he became aware that he must have been stowed away in a bedroom of Copey Cottrell's mansion. He lay there, waiting for his vision to improve, trying to figure some way out. On the side of the room away from the window, he could see a narrow line of light — a closed door with illumination beyond.

Shayne swung his legs over the edge of the bed and struggled to a sitting position. If it were a bedroom, he reasoned, there must be some sharp angle on which he could work the tape loose that bound his hands to his sides. Until he did that, he was helpless.

He had no way of measuring time, but it seemed to take hours before he finally located the corner of a dresser. It was too high, and he had to go down on his knees and work a drawer loose with his teeth. Then came the seemingly endless task of working loose broad-banded adhesive tape, professionally applied. He could feel the skin of his right wrist give way before, at last, he managed to loosen the tape sufficiently to get his right hand free.

He was sitting on the floor, freeing his ankles, when he heard the sounds of footsteps approaching from beyond the door, then the remembered voice of the broken-nosed hood, saying, ". . . like tangling with a herd of elephants, Louis. My gut will be sore for a week. Better take a look and see if he's croaked or come to. The swine can't stay out forever."

When he opened the door, inward, Shayne was waiting beside it. As the mobster appeared in the rectangle of light, the redhead moved swiftly, plucking a heavy automatic from the man's shoulder holster before he could raise his arms to prevent the move. The man cried, "*Louis! Look—*"

He had no time to utter another sound. Shayne backhanded him full across the face with the gun and felt the flesh and bone tear under the impact. Then he was in the hall, leaping over the falling body and laying the heavy pistol hard against the rocklike skull of the startled Louis. He paused only to strip Louis of his pistol before moving warily, angrily, along the corridor. He walked softly, on the balls of his feet, a gun in either hand, as he made his way out of the mansion. He did not see another living soul.

Outside, the cream-and-blue convertible still waited. The redhead slid behind the wheel, laying his arsenal on the seat beside him. He put the car in gear and got away from there fast. The rage within him was deep. By his watch, it was already past two in the morning, and he felt a sickening sense of time irreparably lost as he burned rubber toward the White Sapphire. He had to find Lucy, and he wanted to be in at the farewell party. There was a chance Lucy might have gone without him, and a possibility Copey Cottrell might be there.

He arrived as the party was breaking up. In one corner, an impromptu quartet was singing

Tamiami Trail close to a long service bar, which gave evidence of having seen much service. Men and women, looked slightly the worse for wear, were gathered in groups and clusters about the large private ballroom. There was a lot of Air Force brass in evidence.

The little publicity man with the large ears, waylaid him as he moved toward the other end of the room, searching for Lucy. Pinky Reach was a trifle unsteady on his feet and grinning amiably. He said, "You must be a whiz, Shayne. How come you're asking for Jeanie William's picture this afternoon? I saw Jeanie in the city this evening."

"Where?" the detective asked sharply.

"In town." The publicity man waved his glass vaguely. "She was with another dame — a real looker. They were coming out of a beauty shop. Antonelli, my assistant, was with me — he can tell you. Hey, Sammy."

Sam Antonelli ambled up and nodded when the publicity man repeated his question. "It was Jeanie, all right," he said solemnly. "Good old Jeanie. Talk about your dames."

"Some other time," said Shayne. "What did the girl with her look like?" He was getting a hunch, and the lobe of his left ear was itching.

"*Beautiful!*" said Pinky Reach rhapsodically. But, under deft prodding from Shayne, he managed to give a fairly accurate description of Lucy Hamilton. Then he said, mournfully. "Party's almost over. Got to get our bags if we're gonna make Homer's special plane at three."

"That's right," said Antonelli solemnly. "S'long, Shayne."

They wandered away, leaving Shayne frowning. So Lucy had found Jeanie-Carol — that was one load off his mind. But he'd have given a case of brandy to know where the women were at that moment. His speculations were broken when Homer Wilde came out of another room, surrounded by a coterie of Air Force and other brass, among whom Shayne spotted Cottrell. He lifted a hand in salute and had the pleasure of seeing the underworld boss look briefly distressed at sight of him. "But not as distressed as you're going to look," he told himself grimly.

Homer spotted Shayne and came over to him, hiding his displeasure behind a mask of geniality. "I'd about given you up, Mike," he said. "And where's that pretty secretary of yours?"

Monica Mallon, looking sleek and deadly beautiful in a strapless gown of black sequins, slithered through the crowd and slipped a shapely arm inside

Homer's elbow. "Perhaps your adoring little fan isn't quite so adoring as you thought, darling," she told Homer.

Homer ignored her and peered closely at the redhead. "Boy!" he said. Whatever delayed you must have had claws. You look as if you'd been in a battle royal."

"I was," Shayne snapped. "Ask Cottrell to tell you about it."

Homer, with a look of surprise, glanced at his partner, who shook his head slightly. Taking the cue, Homer raised his voice and said, "Come on! Everybody that's still here, come on out to the airport and see us off. There'll be champagne, and none of you free loaders will want to miss that." He moved on toward the exit.

Shayne found himself standing beside a trim, young Air Force brigadier, who shook his head and said to the detective, "I never thought I'd hear old Farquar" — indicating an older man with the three stars of a lieutenant general on his shoulder straps — "called a free-loader and smile. Confidentially, somethings I think Homer's a bit rich for the Air Force blood. Still, you've got to hand it to a guy who can put on a show the way he did last night and log three thousand miles of jet-flying before a late lunch the next day."

Following Homer, while the brigadier kept on talking, Shayne saw patterns resolve and reshape themselves in his mind's eye. He thought of an Air Force jet blasting out of a cloud bank and all but crashing into a north-bound Constellation as it left Miami — of Jarvis, the writer, complaining that modern scientific development had shattered the unities of the ancient Greek drama. For the first time, what had been mere playwright's patter, took on new meaning.

He said to the brigadier, "I had an idea Homer's reserve commission was strictly an honorary one."

"That's what *we* thought," was the reply, "until old Homer decided to make it for real. And once Homer makes up his mind . . ."

Shayne lost the brigadier and got into the back seat of one of a line of rented cars. A man got in beside him and said, "I was hoping you'd show up to-night, Mike. I've been wanting to have a talk with you. What held you up? Wilde told me he was expecting you."

It was Will Gentry, Miami Chief of Police, the redhead's old friend and occasional antagonist. Shayne said, "A character named Cottrell wanted the same answers you do, Will. And I couldn't give them to him because I didn't have them."

"So he held you?" Gentry asked the question lightly, but there was probing below the surface.

"He tried to," Shane told him.

Gentry said, as they swung for the drive to the airport, "Well, after all, Cottrell's a newcomer around here . . . Those questions Cottrell asked you — think you've got the answers now?"

"Some of them," the redhead replied slowly. "Not all — not yet."

"You know, Mike," Gentry mused, "you disappointed Len Sturgis last night at the airport. We didn't expect you to come in alone."

"I hated to disappoint Len," said Shayne.

"I'm sure you did."

A girl, in the front seat beside the driver, interrupted their colloquy by offering them drinks from a bottle she was carrying. Shayne was grateful for the interrupting. It gave him a chance to work out his startling new theory of Ben Fulton's death.

The champagne send-off was in full cry when they reached the airport. Shayne got out of the car and moved to the fringe of the celebration, following the revellers through the buildings, out to the ramps, where a big plane waited. He lost Gentry in the process, but he had not gone far when his sleeve was plucked and Lucy's voice said, "Mike! Thank God you're here!"

Shayne gave her a hug and she put her arms around his neck. He winced at she touched a bruise.

"You're hurt, Michael. What happened?"

"Not bad," he replied. "Couple of other people got hurt a lot worse. I hear you ran down Jeanie."

"She's over there — waiting," Lucy nodded toward a shadowy corner forty feet away.

"Waiting — for what?" asked Shayne.

"For Homer," said Lucy. "Mike, you have no idea of the deal he gave her. Ben Felton protected her for years, but now Ben's dead and . . ."

"I know," said Shayne. "Where's the trunk?"

"That's what she's waiting for," said Lucy. "After what happened to Felton, she's willing to confront Homer and implicate herself just to ruin him. She hates him, but she loves him. And she's *really* nice. Mike, you've got to do something before she . . ."

"Maybe I can," he said. "How'd you find her, Angel?"

Lucy's eyes glowed in the darkness. "You know that old story about the man who found the lost mule by pretending he was a mule and going where a mule would

go? Well, I tried to think what a girl like Jeanie Williams would do if she were planning to confront a man like Homer. The answer was — a beauty parlour. A brown-haired girl would never want to show herself to her old lover as a phoney blonde. So I just went to the beauty parlour show people use in Miami, and there she was. I've been trying everywhere to find you, Mike. How was the party?"

"It was over when I got there," said Mike. "Look out!"

Homer Wilde had seen them. He was moving briskly toward them. Out of the building behind him came a string of porters pushing luggage toward the waiting plane. Homer was effusive to Shayne's secretary.

"You let me down, baby," he complained, holding her hand in both of his. "I had a lot of things planned for you."

"I'll just *bet* you did!" The ever-watchful Monica appeared at Homer's side, breaking up the scene.

Homer laughed at her, and Lucy managed to get her hand free.

"There it is now, Mike!" she whispered, pointing at a load pushed by one of the porters. "She left it in the luggage room at the airport this evening, and got one of her old pals in the show to put it in with Homer's luggage when it got here tonight."

"Now I see what you mean by 'confront'," Shayne whispered in return. "Try to keep her out of this."

"I will, Mike." Lucy slipped away in the shadows.

Homer's eyes were on Shayne. He said, "Well, what about Fenton?"

"Your worries," said Mike, "are just about over. Or maybe they're just beginning." He moved toward the plane, calling, "Will — Will Gentry. Something funny here."

He reached the trunk and bent over it, as Will Gentry joined him. He pointed to a small spot of rust on the foot-locker. "Looks like blood to me, Will. Better open this one up."

Gentry gave Shayne a long, level look. "I'd saye it was rust," he said quietly, "But — under the circumstances . . ." The chief of police gave the order to open the trunk.

Later, at Police Headquarters, Gentry said, "Hell, Mike, we've got Homer cold — motive, opportunity, even concealing and trying to remove the corpse. Cottrell is caught, too, as a material witness. He'll be bailed out, of course, but he'll have to testify or take a powder. You know how characters like him hate the limelight.

Mike, you've done a good night's work."

He paused to fix the detective with a saturnine gaze, added, "Mind you, there are some elements I don't yet understand in this business. But the Air Force have asked me to soft-pedal investigation in certain directions. I'm not even going to ask you how you knew there was a body in that foot-locker, Mike . . ."

"Thanks, Will," said Shayne, reaching for his hat. "Maybe I'll tell you when you've got Homer put away for keeps."

Lucy and Jeanie Williams were waiting for Shayne at his apartment. Jeanie, much younger with brown hair, stood up with tears in her eyes. "You did a wonderful thing, Mike Shayne, saving me from turning in a man I once loved. It would have exposed my whole sordid story to the tabloids."

He grinned. "I ought to thank you, Jeanie Williams, for snatching that body for me. Did you know Ben Felton was planning to have it out with Homer Wilde in Tyndale's suite yesterday morning?"

She shook her head. "Did Homer plan to kill Ben there?" Her anxiety was evident.

Shayne nodded. "That's why Homer tried to hire me to find Felton the night before he took off in an Air Force jet-plane for Mitchel Field. I was part of his alibi. The Air Force brass thought he was just a reserve officer getting in some flying time when and where he could. Actually, he wanted to stop Ben before Ben got to Harry Tyndale, and he thought that I and the jet-flight together would give him an unbreakable alibi.

"Ben must have told Homer he was taking you to Tyndale's. When you were separated from Ben in the crowd left over from Harry's party, Ben met Homer and Homer took him into Harry's bedroom, knowing Harry would be dead to the world until noon after that drugged drink. Wilde hit Ben and killed him. Then he went back to Mitchel, where his plane had been fuelled and flew back to Eglin in time for a late lunch — and damned near hit the plane I was in, leaving Miami on my way to help Harry.

"That writer, Greg Jarvis, was right. Supersonic jet-planes have messed up all the unities, to say nothing of the alibis. It's almost possible for a man to be in two places at once now, and that's going to make life a lot harder for detectives."

Shayne sighed and reached for the brandy. *End.*

A Story of a Monster in Human Guise by

DE FORBES

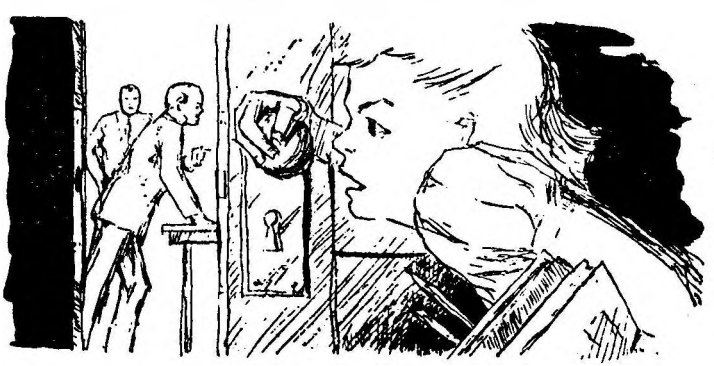
Two little girls in school were they—teacher's pet and teacher's problem. And only one of them had . . .

The Secret Secret Secret

KATHERINE HAD A marvellous new secret, all her own, a delicious, dark secret that she hugged tightly to her heart. She promised herself that she would never so much as whisper it to anyone else — not even if she had a best friend as pretty as Peggy Beal. It was Katherine's secret secret, and it belonged only to her.

Besides, Peggy Beal was a secret-teller. She was always tossing her yellow curls and taking the arm of some other little girl. "I've got a secret to tell you," she would whisper loudly, and they would run off to some corner of the playyard, their arms around each other. There, Peggy would talk, while looking over her shoulder to make certain no one was listening. "And that everyone was watching." added Katherine to herself.

But Katherine had never been invited to share Peggy's secrets. She certainly didn't intend to tell Peggy hers. Not even if Peggy begged her to tell, she wouldn't. Stuck-up Peggy Beal, with all her different coloured hair-ribbons, and her shiny shoes with straps. Stuck-up Peggy Beal, with her round



blue eyes, and her squiggly-wiggly curls.

Wouldn't stuck-up Peggy just die, if she knew that Katherine had found a secret place — where she could hide and listen. Where Katherine could hear every word—anytime she wanted to — that the teachers of Horace Man Elementary School said to each other. Wouldn't Peggy Beal just *die* if she knew?

Katherine had found it quite by accident. It was the day to pay milk money, and Katherine had spent part of hers on the way to school. The nearer it came to the time to pay, the worse Katherine felt. Finally, she turned red and hot in the face and cold and wet on the head.

"You'd better go home, Katherine," said Miss Page when she told her. "Can you go alone, or would you like to lie down in the nurse's office, until someone can take you?"

Katherine looked slowly around the room. Fifty-eight eyes were looking at her. That was twice 29 — she had figured it out by sub-tracting herself from 30 and multiplying by two eyes. Peggy Beal lived near her house, but she was sure Peggy would never walk her home, not even if she was dying.

"If Peggy would walk me home . . ." Katherine was surprised at how weak and sick her own voice sounded.

Miss Page looked a question at Peggy, who said loftily, "I'm sorry, Miss Page." The dimple in Peggy's cheek went in and out. "I'm not going home to lunch to-day."

"Oh dear!" said Miss Page.

"That's all right, Miss Page," said Katherine. "I'll call my mother, and she'll send the maid to meet me." Katherine was certain Miss Page didn't know there was no maid.

Miss Page looked unhappy. "Katherine, I—."

"I'll be fine, Miss Page." Katherine copied her father's 'last word' voice."

"All right, Katherine." As she went out the door, she thought she heard Peggy Beal giggle.

It was lovely out in the hall. There was no one in sight, and all the doors were closed. Katherine thought Horace Mann Elementary School was lovely—cool and dark and spooky. With the tallest fire escape — just right for playing School and Teacher, where you moved up a step for every grade.

Since there was no one around, and since she felt so much better, Katherine decided to explore closed doors that had long puzzled her. Doors that didn't open on classrooms, but to strange, dark squares that might hold anything. That was how she found the secret

in the broom-closet. It was a good-sized broom-closet, and there was an old mattress—it looked like the one on the cot in the nurse's office —rolled up in the corner.

Katherine couldn't really go home—if her mother were home, she might ask questions—so she unrolled the mattress and lay down. It was dark and quiet in the broom-closet—and restful. Before she knew she was sleepy, she had gone to sleep.

She awoke drowsily to the sound of the children in the halls, and she guessed it was time for recess. Doors were opening and closing. There were shouts and giggles. Katherine lay quietly and hoped the janitor was down in the basement, in his room next to the boys' toilets. She hoped he wouldn't need a broom until after recess. Everyone would think it strange, if they found Katherine hiding in the broom-closet.

Then she heard the voices. Miss Cooper from the fifth grade and Miss Belliveau, the kindergarten teacher, another voice she wasn't sure of—and Miss Page. It sounded like they were talking right next to her ear. Then Katherine remembered the teachers' lounge—is was right next door.

"And I simply don't know how to handle the child." It was Miss Page talking. "She pretended she was sick — and maybe she was. Thelma Carey is away this morning, so I couldn't send her to the nurse's office. And I couldn't challenge her in front of the whole class. So I let her go home."

"I remember her from kindergarten," this was Miss Belliveau. "A strange child. Quite intelligent, but odd. She wanted to play with the others, but she just didn't seem to know how. Everything she did was wrong."

"I've written her mother several notes"— Miss Page sounded displeased — "but she ignores them. I suppose I should go see the woman. I owe it to the child, as her teacher. But if her mother isn't even interested enough to answer a note . . ."

The unidentified voice broke in.

"It's a sad situation. The mother is an alcoholic. The father seems to be a decent chap, but he's home only on week-ends. He travels for a tyre company. I suggested that he ask for a transfer of some sort, but he tells me he makes more money travelling. And, like most of us, he needs the money."

"Oh, Louise," Miss Page's voice was sad. "How tragic! I didn't know a bit of the family history. How did you get on to it?"

"The neighbours called Welfare. Seems the child was wandering around at all hours. Welfare got in touch with the school board, and I was assigned to check the

child's record. As far as her marks are concerned she seems quite bright. But with that background — what can you expect?"

"Honestly, it just makes me furious. They expect us to turn them into model citizens, and their families defeat our purpose before we even begin." Katherine could see Miss Belliveau, short and plump, puffing up like a pigeon in the park.

"Can't Welfare do anything about the mother?" Miss Cooper had a deep, serious voice. The older kids said she was awful strict.

The unknown Louise answered. "They're trying, I guess. If it doesn't get any better, they may take the child."

"How awful!" said Miss Page.

"Terrible!" said Miss Belliveau.

"Disgusting!" said Miss Cooper. "I don't relish inheriting her. It's hard enough to pound something into the heads of the adjusted ones."

Katherine found that her legs were cramped. She decided that, if she slipped out the street door and hurried around the block, she could enter the playground as though she had returned from home. She really wanted to go back to class—and, anyway, Miss Page had already collected the milk money. So that was all she heard that day. But she had found her secret secret place.

After that, Katherine found all sorts of excuses for going out into the hall just before recess. She would slip quietly into the broom-closet and lie on her special couch. And she would listen.

The speakers in the lounge were not always the same ones, and, sometimes, they talked about the dullest things, like government and the board of education and the cost of living. Sometimes, when Miss Page and Miss Belliveau were there alone, they talked about Miss Page's boy friend. His name was Bob, and Katherine found Bob very interesting. But the best conversations concerned the children and the things the children did — or might do.

"I had to be so careful. I didn't want to frighten them, but the situation could be serious." It was Miss Belliveau speaking as she came in the door.

Miss Page answered. "I felt the same way. It's easy for the older ones to get ideas—to make up all sorts of stories. One of my little angels thought up a really fantastic tale the other day. She said a man in a car with wings offered her a ride. And that he had an eagle sitting on his wrist."

"I can imagine which one dreamed that up. It's sad — you can't believe a thing Katherine

says. But if she weren't known to stretch the truth, then you might report the story, on the chance that it could be the same one. But you know the old bromide — consider the source."

"Of course I don't want to encourage such fancies, so I went all around Robin Hood's barn when I brought up the subject. First, I told them I was sure they had all been cautioned about accepting rides or presents from strangers. Then I said that, if a strange man approaches any child, that child should report him to his parents or teacher immediately."

"Well, of course, I had to be a little plainer about it. I guess the main gist of my message was— *run!* I wish they'd catch the beast. That's what he — a beast. The whole thing makes me very nervous," Miss Belliveau said.

"It makes me more than nervous," said Miss Page. "The man is obviously mental. Those two poor girls—one of them dead and the other still in coma. It makes my flesh crawl."

"The paper said both children's parents were positive their daughters would never go off with a strange man."

"That's what we all think," said Miss Page. "That' the danger. No one has the vaguest idea what he looks like, or how he gets the children to go with him. I only hope he doesn't show up around here. I'm afraid to let Bob go home early, as it is."

Miss Belliveau laughed. "That isn't why you won't let Bob go home early." Miss Page giggled, and Katherine had to put her hand over her mouth.

But just then Miss Cooper came in, and that ended the giggly part of the conversation.

The days after that grew long and golden, and Katherine spent more time playing at recess. But, one day, some of the children began to call her Granddaddy Longlegs, and she ran into the girls' toilet to escape their voices.

There she looked into the mirror. It was true her legs were long — and her arms, too. The rest of her was thin, and the arms and legs made her torso look unimportant. Her hair was all wrong somehow—brown and straight and square. Her eyes were not blue, like the June sky, but brown like the body of a June bug.

"You're ugly, Granddaddy Longlegs," she told the mirror and ran to her secret place.

"She is really quite a charming child," Miss Page was saying. "Of course, she's lovely to look at, but she has excellent manners as well. This morning she brought me a note from her mother, inviting me to Peggy's birthday party on the fourteenth. You'd have thought

she was a grown-up, the way she presented it.

"Birthday parties — such a nuisance," said Miss Cooper. "Of course, I recognise the necessity for them, but I try to keep my relationship with the children on a businesslike basis."

"But I feel I should go," said Miss Page, and it occurred to Katherine that she must be younger, much younger, than Miss Cooper. "She's inviting a good part of the class, and it will give me a chance to become better acquainted with the mother."

"Why should you care?" asked Miss Cooper. "School's almost out, and I'll get them next year, more than likely."

Miss Page sounded very prim and proper. "That doesn't matter. I feel that a teacher should have a real interest in all her pupils—past and present. And, besides, Mrs. Beal has been very kind. She sent me the prettiest stole from Peggy at Christmas."

Miss Cooper made a noise like a horse's snort, and Katherine left the broom closet. How exciting! Peggy Beal was having a birthday party, and most of the class would go to the big Beal house on the hill, where they had a swimming pool!

Katherine loved parties and had wanted for a long time to be invited to the Beals'. She wondered what she would wear. Maybe, when Daddy came home this weekend, he would buy her a new dress. A pretty pink one — long enough to cover her knees.

The bright sunlight made her blink, as she emerged from the dark hall into the play-yard. Peggy Beal was playing tag with a group of girls. Katherine smiled at her as she ran, her blonde curls flying. She wanted to go up to her and say, "Thank you, Peggy. Thank you for having a party." But, just then, the bell rang, and there was no opportunity.

Katherine's daddy bought her the dress — a lovely pale nylon with a stiff skirt—and a present for Peggy as well. The present was a plastic bag full of coloured ribbons for Peggy's hair. They had it gift-wrapped at the store, because Daddy thought Mamma wouldn't feel well enough to do it and it had to look just right.

Katherine was all ready for the party on the fourteenth, which was the Saturday coming. All she needed now was the invitation.

On Monday, she saw some of the other girls clustered around Peggy and talking and laughing. Some of them had little white envelopes.

On Tuesday, she noticed two or three of the boys pulling the same sort of envelopes from their pockets, the while protesting loudly that they "hated girls' parties."

On Wednesday, she heard Peggy describing the ice cream. "All made up in the shape of fruits and flowers." On Thursday she looked eagerly, but vainly, through the mail on the mantel, and, on Friday, she was sure the invitation would be lying on her desk at school. But it was not there, and, at afternoon recess, Katherine decided she would have to ask Peggy if it had gotten lost.

Peggy sat under the shade of the fire escape, playing jacks on the cement with two of her special friends. Katherine didn't want to interrupt her, but it was hard to get Peggy alone.

She stood on the edge of the circle, waiting for a chance to speak. No one said anything to her, and so, at last, she cleared her throat.

"Peggy, I didn't get my invitation to your party. Do you suppose your Mother forgot to mail it?"

"Oh my goodness!" said the birthday girl. "You made me miss. My mother never forgets to mail things. You weren't invited."

Katherine watched while she picked up the jacks and threw them down again. The other girls were staring at her with expressionless eyes.

"But I thought . . .,"Katherine heard her voice sound funny and stiff, "Why? *Why* didn't you invite me?"

Peggy Beal put her hands in her lap and looked at Katherine. Her eyes started at the top of Katherine's head and moved down to her scuffed sandals. Then they moved up again to her face.

"Because I didn't want to," said Peggy Beal. "It's my eighth birthday, and I wanted eight guests—my eight best friends."

Katherine made a rapid mental calculation. "But there's fourteen that I know of — fourteen invited. I could be fifteen. It wouldn't hurt. I've already got your present."

Peggy Beal threw the ball and began to pick up jacks. "Very well," she said, "I tried to be nice. There are eighteen invited, but you can't be nineteen. You look funny, and you act funny. My mother says your mother acts funny. We don't want you. And I don't want your present.

The other girls giggled, as Katherine turned away. "Peggy, you're so *funny!* You're a regular comic. You're as funny as Mickey Mouse."

"That reminds me," Peggy's cool voice came floating to Katherine through the hot summer haze, "I'm having a magician at my party. A real magician and, of course, a caterer."

Katherine heard no more. She went into the girls' toilet and was sick on the floor. Then she hid

in her secret place for the rest of the day.

She heard the bell ring, and the children leaving at the end of the school day. She waited until they had all gone, before she opened the broom-closet door and started down the hall.

As she passed the door of her room she heard Miss Page talking to someone. "Tell your mother, I'll be delighted to come. And that she can count on me to help in any way that I can.

"Thank you, Miss Page." It was Peggy Beal. "Did I tell you we're having a magician — and pony rides?" The sickness stirred in Katherine's stomach, and she hurried out into the yard.

The playground was deserted. A car passed by, slowed down and turned the corner. It was a black car with white wings, like angels' wings, painted on the side. *The Wing Company, Caterers,* it said in white letters. Katherine heard footsteps behind her and hurried to hide in the patch of trees by the fence.

Peggy Beal came out of the door and down the steps alone.

The car with the wings turned the corner, came by slowly and stopped. The man inside was smiling at Peggy Beal. He put out his hand and opened the door. Katherine couldn't see it now, but she knew there was an eagle tattooed on his wrist. She had seen it there the time he'd come before.

"Would you like a ride, little girl?"

Peggy Beale stopped on the cross walk. "No thank you. I'm not allowed to ride with strangers. Tomorrow's my birthday."

"I know tomorrow's your birthday." The man smiled. His teeth were not white like the toothpaste ads. The gums looked red and funny.

"I'm having a party," said Peggy, "with a magician."

"I know," said the man, and his smile was wider. "I'm the magician. That's why I'm here. Just get in and come with me and I'll show you my bag of tricks."

Peggy hesitated, and the man held out his other hand. There was a box of candy in it. "My birthday present to you," he said.

Peggy reached for the candy, and Katherine almost called to her. But then she remembered that, to tell Peggy about the man, would be telling her about the secret.

Katherine watched as Peggy got into the car with the wings and drove away. Katherine turned and strolled home in the summer sun.

"I know what I'll do," said Katherine to herself, "On Monday, I'll wear my pink dress to school—with a ribbon in my hair."

End.

A New John J. Malone Novelette by

CRAIG RICE

The little lawyer was suffering from humanity's most dangerous ailment—he was bored. Chicago was lamentably law-abiding, not even a blonde promised action. But then he met Sam the Finder and his brand new black eye, and before he could order another whisky, Malone had bid farewell to . . .

The Quiet Life

"THANK YOU very kindly, Sir, I am honoured," said John J. Malone, signalling the bartender. "Rye and a beer chaser, please." He turned around to thank the source of the unexpected invitation.

The voice has been smooth, mellifluous, even cultured. It had sounded as though it belonged to a Harvard educated judge, a British motion picture star, perhaps the model of distinction for a talking whisky ad. However, the dulcet syllables were the property of a smallish, nondescript-looking man, slightly bald, with a fringe of greyish brownish hair, pale blue eyes behind rimless glasses, and a prominent, pinkish nose. The smallish man's coat and pants didn't quite match, instead of a vest he wore a dingy brown buttoned sweater, and a faded knit scarf concealed whatever collar or tie he might have been wearing — if any. The drink-buyer was further adorned by a truly splendid black eye.

Malone recognised him immediately as Sam "The Finder" Fliegle. The little lawyer held out a cordial hand in greeting. By way of conversation, he uttered a few routine pleasantries about the weather and the coming fights, and tactfully refrained from asking questions about the colourful optic. One of the many things he had learned, in long years of practising criminal law in Chicago, was that a man's black eye was his own private business — also, that questions or comments concerning such a shaded lamp seldom created a friendly or pleasant atmosphere.

But Sam the Finder was not in a reticent mood. "Charlie Binkley gave it to me," he said, point-

ing to the royal purple orb. "He was trying to serve me with a paper."

Malone's eyebrows rose a half-inch. While Charlie Binkley was a most unpopular man, even for a process server, he had never been known as a belligerent one. Furthermore, whenever belligerence was involved, Charlie, like other members of his profession, was usually on the receiving end.

"So," Sam the Finder said, "I'm going to need your services, Malone." He added, "This time Charlie has gone too far."

The little lawyer's eyebrows rose another half-inch at that one. Lawsuits were hardly what he expected from Sam Fliegle, not in such a case. A thorough going-over in an alley with brass knuckles and saps, yes — a hair-combing with a baseball bat, perhaps. Sam had just the boys who could tend to such chores. But a lawsuit — never. Sam the Finder just was not the type.

"I know what you're thinking." Sam the Finder said, in that shockingly beautiful voice. "I'm not going to sue him. Charlie will be taken care of, never fear, but not in the courts of law. I want your services for something else." He smiled, and Malone, for some reason, didn't entirely like the smile. Sam the Finder added, "To-morrow morning, at your office?"

Malone nodded. A client was a client, especially just then. Not only were the John J. Malone finances plunging rapidly toward what threatened to be an all-time low, but life had been entirely too quiet of late. Besides, he liked the little man — even littler than himself.

"To-morrow morning will be fine," he said.

Malone finished his drink and put the glass down on the bar. He was bored with the Blue Casino, had, in fact, been regretting the treachery of fate that had brought him there in the first place when Sam the Finder had appeared. He had come with a party of five, a party that included a tender-eyed, slender-thighed blonde from a new show in town. His head had buzzed with plans, and his spirit soared with expectations for turning it into a party of two as the evening went along.

Fate in the shape of one of his companions — male — had tricked him, and things hadn't worked out that way. Hence, a party of one and very tired of it, he had been making up his mind to abandon the Blue Casino for Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, where at least he could be bored and lonely on the cuff.

Therefore, Malone said good-

night to his new client and moved toward the door. Sam the Finder trailed along, saying, in his impeccable accents, "I'm leaving myself, Malone. Delighted to drop you wherever you're going."

Malone, too, was delighted. Outside, it was a dreary, dismal night. Indeed, even in good weather, he preferred to confine his pedestrian activities to crossing sidewalks.

In spite of Sam the Finder's Skid Row apparel, the car that was brought around to the door by a uniformed chauffeur was a satisfactorily splendid black Cadillac limousine. Malone eyed it approvingly. This was the way he preferred to see his clients transported. He remembered, also with approval, that Sam the Finder was known to be anything but a miser. Certainly, Sam was not a poor man. His choice of clothing was therefore a matter of either preference or indifference. Malone considered it his client's own business, like the black eye, which almost matched the paint job on the Cadillac.

However, the eye became again the topic of conversation as the big car slid noislessly away from the curb. "Charlie poked it with the papers he was trying to serve," Sam the Finder said. For the third time, Malone looked at him with mild surprise.

"He's been chasing after me for two days, trying to serve me," Sam continued. "Finally, he decided to do it the easy way and came out to the house and rang the doorbell. I opened the peephole to see who was at the door. He got very smart indeed, rolled up the papers quick and shoved them through the peephole — right in my eye!"

"Legal service," Malone said. "The papers must touch the person of the party being served."

Sam the Finder flashed him a quick glance, then said, "The law also states that the party serving the papers has to be able to depone, or testify, that they reached the right person. Which Charlie cannot do. I could see him, but he couldn't see me."

Malone thought that over, decided Sam the Finder was right. "What are you planning to do about it?" he asked.

"Nothing," Sam the Finder said. "That's the whole point. When the hearing comes up tomorrow, to decide whether or not Harry Brown got a bad deal when Mike Medinica sold him the All-Northwest Chicago Boxing and Wrestling Club, I'm not going to be present."

"Legally—" Malone began.

"Legally, Harry Brown can't prove a thing," Sam the Finder said. "I'd be out of Chicago right

not, except that I've got a little business to tend to first." The big car slid to a stop in front of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar. "I'll be in your office in the morning, and then I'm leaving on a business trip —a long business trip."

The shabby little man opened the Cadillac door and smiled amiably at Malone. "Don't worry," he said. "It's a simple little matter, easily handled. I just want to leave certain things in the hands of a lawyer when I go on that business trip."

Sam the Finder might at least have made it "good lawyer," Malone reflected wistfully. But he managed to smile an equally amiable goodnight as his new client drove away. This was no time to argue with a client, new or otherwise. Besides, Sam the Finder was not a person to argue with an anytime anyway.

Joe the Angel noted the size and splendor of the car that delivered Malone. He, too, smiled amiably and said nothing about the size of the bar bill.

"Sam the Finder," Malone said, saving Joe the Angel the trouble of a question. "Wants me to handle a little matter for him. I'll take rye."

"A big man," Joe the Angel said with a certain reverence.

Malone nodded gloomily, and sighed deeply over his whisky. He was worse than bored, he was bored with being bored. The recent quietness of life, with its consequent, concomitant lack of clients and equally concomitant lack of funds, was getting on his nerves. Not so much the lack of funds — he was used to that problem and would inevitably find a way to meet it.

There was, for instance, a poker game to-morrow night at Judge Touralchuk's duplex apartment that ought to help materially. It was the very quietness itself that bothered him. Malone to be happy, needed a certain amount of action around him.

He thought about Sam the Finder. A strange little man, and Malone remarked as much to Joe the Angel. Joe the Angel went on polishing glasses and said, "My cousin Louie says Sam the Finder learned to talk so good from his father, a college teacher."

"Your cousin Louie should go soak his head," Malone said amiably.

It made, he thought, a pleasant story, that Sam the finder's father had been a professor of English who discovered, during Prohibition, that bootlegging to his students offered far greater profits than guiding them through the intricacies of Henry James' subordinate clauses. Actually, Sam the Finder had been born back of the

yards, just like John J. Malone.

He hated to disillusion Joe the Angel, but truth was truth — outside of a courtroom. He said, "Sam got hold of a correspondence course in better English on a bad debt, and didn't want to waste it. So he studied it himself, including the phonograph records."

Not, he reflected again happily, that the little man was a miser. Sam the Finder had a large, luxurious suburban home, as well as a huge country place in Wisconsin. His lovely young red-haired wife wore diamonds as good, and at least as large, as any lady in town. It was a known fact that there was not merely the one, but several Cadillacs. Sam dressed the way he did because he always had, and because his apparel had come to carry, at least in the wearer's eye, a certain mark of distinction on a level trademarked by Brooks Brothers suits and Countess Mara ties.

Malone was still meditating on Sam the Finder's personal life, habits and fortune, with a certain emphasis on the amount of the retainer he would probably get in the morning, when the telephone rang. The call was for Malone. The caller: von Flanagan — a decidedly *anguished* Captain von Flanagan.

"Malone," he said in tones of pure desperation. "I'm in Harry Brown's apartment. Get over here right away. There's trouble."

Malone asked what kind of trouble.

"I can't tell you over the phone," von Flanagan replied curtly. Then, in a lower voice, "There's been a murder."

"Call the cops," Malone said with a certain irony.

Von Flanagan didn't appear to notice the thrust. He said earnestly, "I'm going to, soon as I hang up. Malone, I need you—*now!*"

Malone hung up, reflecting that things had come to a pretty pass when the head of the Homicide Bureau summoned a lawyer to the scene of a murder before he called the police. He inspected his wallet, borrowed an extra five from Joe the Angel for mad money, hailed a taxi and was on his way.

II

A police car screamed up the street behind him as he crossed the sidewalk toward the unpretentious brick apartment building, but Malone beat the cops to the self-service elevator.

On a sudden thought, as he stepped out of the lift on the sixth floor, he left the door carefully disconnected. He didn't know what was going on, but it occurred to him that von Flanagan just might want a few minutes of privacy before the law — the rest of the

law, Malone corrected himself — arrived on the scene.

The door to Harry Brown's luxurious apartment stood open. Charlie Binkley, the process server, lay dead on the floor, his head in a pool of blood and a bullet hole through his right eye.

Harry Brown sat in an easy chair, slumped down and looking dazed. Captain Daniel von Flanagan stood in the centre of the room, looking frantic and rolling of eye.

"*Malone!*" von Flanagan gasped. "How is this going to *look*? I was *here!* When it happened! How is it going to look in the *papers?* What am I going to *do?*"

"*What* happened?" Malone asked.

"That's just it," said the Homicide chief desperately. "I don't know. Malone—"

"Shut up," the little lawyer said, but pleasantly. "There isn't any time to talk." Or, it occurred to him, for thought either—though it didn't take much thinking to comprehend the uncomfortable nature of the the spot the big police official was in. He asked, "Was your being here a factor in—"

"My being here had nothing to do with this," von Flanagan interrupted hastily. "Or with *him.*" He pointed to the body.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the hall. "Don't say anything," Malone advised, fast and in a low voice. "You just got in here in one hell of a hurry that's all. Any questions that come up right now —just tell them that *I* called *you.* We'll work the rest out later."

The look in von Flanagan's eyes went far beyond mere gratitude. It promised infinite favours for Malone, favours in times to come.

The heavy footsteps reached the door. A loud and angry voice wanted to know just who the hell had left the elevator door ajar and jammed the cage. For the moment it appeared this was of greater import than Charlie Binkley's body on the floor.

No one admitted knowing anything about the elevator door, and the subject was dropped for the moment. The two policemen nodded respectfully to von Flanagan. They told him they'd gotten to the scene as quickly as they could, that the technical boys were on the way. They appeared to assume that von Flanagan had been summoned independently after the killing, that he had promptly called headquarters, that Malone's presence was a matter for the captain's discretion.

For the time being, Harry Brown was the focus of attention. The dapper little man in the pinstriped suit sat nervously tapping a cigarette with his long, slender fingers, occasionally passing a

hand over shiny black hair which Malone had always suspected was dyed. Harry appeared to be having difficulty finding the right words.

He finally got his story out. Charley Binkley, he explained, had come to see him on a matter of private business. Under pressure, Harry admitted, that the "business" had to do with the hearing to be conducted on the morrow. He was anxious to learn whether or not certain papers had been served on one Samuel J. Fliegle. *What sort of papers?* A summons. *What sort of hearing on the morrow?* The hearing over the fraudulent sale of the All-Northwest Chicago Boxing and Wrestling Club. *And what did that have to do with murder?* Harry Brown grew a little irritable on that point.

"You stand here nagging," Harry Brown said, "and the guy who cut Charlie down may still be in the building. We—" with a quick look at the embarrassed von Flanagan— "that is, I chased after him, but he got away down the stairs. Could be he's still around."

What did this vanished HE *look like?* Well, it had all happened pretty fast. But he had worn a tan overcoat and a dark hat. And he was tallish. Harry added, "I didn't see his face."

One of the policeman left to search the building, looking weary, doubtful and generally morose at his assignment. The other stayed on for the questioning, continuing to take notes while von Flanagan sat and occasionally wiped his brow.

"We'd finished talking," Harry Brown said. "I was over by the TV set and he was just about to go home. Somebody buzzed the buzzer. I said, "See who it is, Charlie,' and he looked through the peeper. *Wham!* Somebody shot him right through the eye."

He dropped his unlighted cigarette, started to pick it up, took out another instead, continued with, "I ran across the room and opened the door. It took a few seconds to get it open, because I had to shove Charlie out of the way. I was just in time to see this character in the brown coat go down the stairs. I chased after him, but he had too big a lead. I tried to get the elevator but it was on another floor. By the time I got it, it was too late." He added, half-apologetically, "I guess I got excited."

The police officer muttered something unkind about self-service elevators.

Did Harry Brown have a gun? He did. He produced it without protest to be taken for examination.

That was his whole story. Malone breathed a little easier and observed with wry amusement that von Flanagan did likewise. All

the same, von Flanagan was on a hook. And, for that matter, come to think of it, so was John J. Malone.

It would be a simple matter to explain his session with Sam the Finder, who didn't want to appear at the hearing and had no desire for Charley Binkley to swear — even without legal proof — that the papers had been served. It would be a simple matter for Malone to tell the story of the black eye, which was all too obviously direct inspiration for the method of Charlie Binkley's murder. This story, Malone was sure, Sam the Finder had hardly, under the circumstances, confided to anyone else. With these facts educed, and a pick-up order sent out for Sam the Finder, people were not going to ask embarrassing questions as to von Flanagan's presence on the scene of the crime.

Despite innumerable differences of opinion, von Flanagan had been Malone's friend since the homicide captain had been a rookie cop, and the famed criminal lawyer working his way through night school by driving a cab. Now, von Flanagan was on a spot.

On the other hand, Sam the Finder was a client.

It was an ethical problem that could hardly be settled in the limited time at his immediate disposal. So Malone compromised.

He signalled von Flanagan with an eyebrow and managed to have a private word with him. "You can tell the press," he said, both confidingly and confidently, "that you know the identity of the murderer, and that you'll have him in custody by noon tomorrow."

Von Flanagan's grey eyes lighted with hope. "You wouldn't fool me, Malone?" His voice was a plea.

"I'll deliver him myself," Malone said firmly. It was a promise, and they both knew it. Moreover, both men knew Malone made a habit of keeping his word. He added, "That's all I can tell you right now."

Not much — but it was enough. Von Flanagan breathed his relief. "Believe me, Malone, my being here didn't have anything to do with this," he said earnestly. "It was — well, a personal matter. I wanted to find out something."

"You don't have to tell me," Malone told him.

Von Flanagan ploughed ahead. "It don't matter — now. It's about this hearing deal. One of my in-laws has some dough tied up with Mike Medinica and he got worried. He knew I knew Harry Brown, and he thought maybe I could ask a few questions — innocently — and find out if he stood to lose it."

Malone nodded sympathetically.

Trust von Flanagan's in-laws to have money involved in a shady deal. He thought over what he knew of the All-Northwest Chicago Boxing and Wrestling Club — ANCBAWC for short — and its sale. Sam the Finder had set up the sale, from Mike Medinica to Harry Brown. Now, Harry Brown was howling that he'd been robbed, to the extent of a cool hundred grand in hard money, because certain stipulated concessions had not been delivered.

The concessions were supposed to represent various respectable and legal contracts. However, the private bark around town was that a considerable amount of fight fixing and protection was the real issue, promised by Mike Medinica through Sam the Finder, whose highly profitable profession consisted of setting up shady deals. These "concessions," the bark had it, had failed to materialise once the sale was completed.

Shooting little Charlie Binkley over the comparatively minor matter of Sam the Finder's appearance at the hearing seemed to Malone rather drastic method of settling things. However, Sam the Finder had been known to take drastic steps when sufficiently annoyed. The black eye caused by Charlie's novel delivery methods might be deemed sufficient annoyance, especially since Sam the Finder was also a proud man.

There was comparative calm in the apartment, a calm that Malone knew was unlikely to endure long. He took advantage of it to ask von Flanagan for further details of the events leading up to the shooting.

"Harry and I were talking," von Flanagan said. "I was just trying to find out if my cousin-in-law's dough was safe, Malone. Then this guy, Charlie Binkley, knocked. Harry Brown said it was a private matter, and would I mind waiting elsewhere. I said I wouldn't, and I was very happy to scram into the bedroom. I wouldn't want it to get around, Malone, that I was up here seeing Harry Brown. It wouldn't look too good. You know what I mean . . ."

The little lawyer nodded in perfect understanding.

"So I went into the bedroom. I was looking at a copy of an old *Confidential* when I heard the shot. Naturally, Malone, I put down the *Confidential* and looked out. I didn't exactly rush out, Malone, until I saw what was going on — I mean, what *had* been going on."

Malone said, "What *did* you see?"

"I see this guy, Charlie Binkley, dead, just like now, Harry Brown is running down the hall after some other guy, so I go along to help.

But the other character, the one in the tan overcoat gets away. So I come back and begin to worry about what to do. I tell Harry Brown to shut his trap about me being here, and think a little more. Then, I start calling you and got you at Joe the Angel's on the second try."

"A very wise move," Malone told him. He started to add, automatically, "Keep calm, and I'll do the talking." Then he remembered, just in time, who von Flanagan was. He substituted a hearty, "Don't worry, Chum."

"Malone!" von Flanagan said anxiously, "You're sure — I mean, absolutely sure—you can deliver the killer by to-morrow noon?"

"I never felt so sure of anything in my entire life," Malone said. Curiously enough, he meant it.

The calm vanished, as Malone had expected, and confusion again took over with the arrival of more officialdom and the press. Malone stood silent on the sidelines, chewing on an unlighted cigar, while Harry Brown, still nervous, re-enacted what had happened.

The little lawyer tagged along, half disinterestedly, while the police again searched the apartment building. Something was bothering him. Moreover, he couldn't put a mental finger on it, which made it bother him the more. Perhaps, he told himself, it was the sense of responsibility toward an old friend that made the whole affair seem important, out of proportion to reality, and that was the only thing wrong. However, this line of reasoning didn't relieve his anxiety in the least.

III

Finally, the excitement was over. Harry Brown was taken to headquarters to sign his statement. The late Charlie Binkley was removed to the morgue. No one remained on the premises but a policeman assigned to guard the apartment overnight and Malone.

The little lawyer had declined von Flanagan's invitation to come along, along with offers of a ride downtown made by various friendly reporters. Nothing impelled him to stay save that vague sense of something wrong, plus an even more vague impulse to search the building on his own, an impulse to tried unsucessfuly to talk himself out of. Then there was an unpleasant prescience of impending trouble.

Eventually, Malone gave up the struggle and, beginning at the top of the building, worked his way down. The seven floors were exactly alike, composed of two apartments with a long, gloomy hall between, a flight of stairs, a trash drop and a mail drop.

Malone paused at Harry Brown's apartment on the sixth floor to

pass a pleasant word or two with Sergeant Zubich, the officer on duty, followed by a brief prowl around the murder premises which told him nothing except that Harry Brown lived exceedingly well, up to and including an assortment of girl friends with expensive tastes in what could best be termed leisure wear.

The basement was a gloomy hole, and by that time Malone was tired, thirsty, and thoroughly sick of the whole business. However, having progressed this far, he decided to take a final look around.

It was in the trash bin that at last he struck oil, in the form of a recently fired .32, almost completely concealed by the waste papers it had slipped through when it landed at the bottom of the trash chute. Malone picked it up gingerly with his handkerchief, looked at it thoughtfully, finally slipped it into his overcoat pocket.

Obviously, proper procedure was to take it straight down to von Flanagan's office. On the other hand, by this time, von Flanagan might very probably have closed up shop and gone home. However, the gun was highly important evidence and ought to be in the hands of the police.

But it was late — well after midnight — and Malone's sense of civic duty could be stretched only so far. Nor was it going to do any harm to delay announcement of his discovery until after his conference in the morning with Sam the Finder.

Malone sighed, buttoned his conscience and overcoat tightly and walked up the basement stairs, pondering the matter of how the gun had gotten into the trash bin. Obviously, the fleeing man in the tan overcoat, hearing Harry Brown racing after him— Harry Brown, and then von Flanagan—had been moved to dispose of the gun in case he should be overtaken.

Malone decided that it was his own sub-conscious half-notice of the trash-chute drops in the hall that had caused his undefinable sense of worry. Or was it? Something else, something equally indefinable, still eluded and disturbed his usually imperturbable sense of well-being.

Oh well, he decided pragmatically, this, too, would come to him in time. Malone stood for a moment, shivering on the sidewalk in the damp, chill mist, wondering which direction along the dimly-lighted street would take him most rapidly to a telephone and a taxicab. He began to regret the proffered rides he had spurned.

Then, miraculously, it appeared that he was going to get a ride after all. A big dark car slid up to the curb, and its door opened silent-

ly. Mike Medinica's voice said, "Get in, Malone."

Malone complied gratefully. Not only was he glad to get out of the damp chill, but a few words with big Mike Mendinica seemed entirely in order. He stole a glance at the handsome blonde giant who sat relaxed behind the wheel. Mike was a free and easy spender, who dressed on the sharp and snappy side and was reported to be ardently pursued by whole regiments of females between the ages of six and sixty. *His occupation?* Malone supposed the word *promoter* would do as well as any.

The little lawyer sighed nostalgically. Things were different from back in the twenties. The big boys were getting refined. He preferred big shots who wore their true colours outside as well as in. But this, alas, was no longer the way of the world — or the underworld.

He leaned back, lit a fresh cigar, glanced out the window and exclaimed, "Hey! You're going the wrong way, Mike."

"No, I'm not," Mike Mendinica said serenely.

"But *I'm* going downtown," said Malone.

"No, you're not," Mike Medinica told him. "You're going out to Sam the Finder's farm."

Malone thought that over and made no comment. There seemed none to make.

"Just to spend the day," Mike Mendinica added persuasively.

The little lawyer protested mildly. "That's — kidnapping," he said.

"Call a cop," Mike suggested. He sounded amused.

Malone thought that one over, too. There didn't seem to be any truly practical way of getting out of the car, either.

"Nothing personal," Mike Medinica said a mile or so further north.

"Now, look here . . ." Malone began, a little feebly. He paused to consider, added, more feebly still, "You can't do this."

This time Mike Mendinica chuckled. He said, "Sue me."

Malone was silent for another mile. "Understand," he said at last, "it's a lovely night for a drive, and all that. But, Mike, I've got an appointment with Sam the Finder himself, to-morrow morning at my office."

"Changed," said Mike Mendinica, laconic as ever. "Sam's out at the farm now. Waiting for you."

"But . . ." Malone stopped. He had almost added that he also had an appointment with von Flanagan in the morning, to say nothing of his promise to produce Charlie Binkley's killer by noon — a promise that involved Sam the

Finder. Mike Mendinica seemed hardly the person to discuss this highly delicate matter with.

However, Sam the Finder was a reasonable man. Malone decided to wait and talk things over with him, get everything straightened out — omitting all mention of the murder, of course — and then get back to town. As for transportation, he'd have to worry about that when the time came. Sam the Finder's farm was out near Libertyville. Malone hoped he had train fare on him. He wondered if Mike Medinica knew about the murder. He wondered, too, just how he was going to find this out in what had to be apparently casual conversation.

Finally, Malone decided that this was no time for small or other talk, and settled down to being merely miserable. The thin drizzle was still coming down, and Mike Medinica drove his big car carelessly over the slippery roads, without apparent concern for curves or traffic. Malone was tired, he was cross, and he was worried.

All in all, he was heartily relieved when Mike turned in through the ornate gateway that led to Sam the Finder's simple little twenty-two room country cottage. He felt even better when he was ushered into the cheerful warmth and light of the big living room by Olive Fliegle, Sam the Finder's highly ornamental red-haired wife.

Sam the Finder sat by a comfortably glowing fire, wearing an old-fashioned blanket bathrobe and a pair of carpet slippers. He didn't look downright grim, Malone reflected, merely a shade less genial than usual. But he rose to greet Malone with a fine warmth of cordiality, bade him to let Olive hang up his hat and overcoat and showed him to the comfortable chair.

"Now, listen, Sam," Malone began. He paused to rearrange his thoughts once more and reached in his pocket for a cigar.

Sam shoved a handsome humidor across the coffee table. "Be my guest," he said generously.

In more ways than one, Malone thought bitterly. He tried it again. "Sam, much as I'd enjoy staying overnight, I have a number of things to attend to in town, come morning."

Sam the Finder shrugged his shoulders and waved a careless hand. "Take care of them by telephone," he suggested. "Make all the calls you want. Long distance if you want to. Be my guest."

"But, Sam . . ." Malone managed, by the thinnest of margins to keep sheer desperation out of his voice.

"Make yourself at home. My house is yours." Sam the Finder remained inexorably expansive.

Olive smiled at Malone winsomely from her chair and, for a fleeting and tingling moment, Malone wondered exactly how far Sam intended his hospitality to go. Then he reminded himself that this was enforced hospitality, although the ugly fact had not actually been brought into the open — yet.

It was Mike Mendinica who finally brought it to the surface, after a long and awkward silence. "We trust you, Malone," he said, by way of reassurance. "Hell, everybody trusts you. But right now, we don't want to take no chances. Sammy never should have told you how he got that black eye."

"A client's confidences are always sacred," Malone intoned stiffly, "no matter what their nature." That he realised, went for the murder of Charlie Binkley, too, if the conversation touched that highly explosive matter. "So there's no real necessity for this . . . " He had been about to say, "outrage," but hastily changed it to, "invitation."

"Malone," said Mike Medinica "this is positively no reflection on your character in any way and we do not want you to take it as such. But there is entirely too much money involved to take any chances that some damn fool thing might go wrong."

The little lawyer was, in a way, relieved that Mike had confined the reason for his genteel snatch to mere money.

"Besides which," the big promoter added, "there is the very likely possibility that if Sam the Finder should take the stand, certain little incidental items might be mentioned in the questioning, irregardless of the fact that Sam the Finder would naturally keep his trap shut. Certain of the finer points of the deal might be brought to the public attention, points we consider are none of the public's damn business." Mike drew a long breath and smiled at Malone with revolting amiability.

Little incidental items, Malone thought, *certain of the finer points of the deal* — such as protection for fixed fights and vicious gambling activities. He wondered if Mike Mendinica even knew what had happened to Charlie Binkley. In any event, John J. Malone wasn't going to be the one to bring up the subject.

"So," Sam the Finder put in, "to-morrow night, we will drive you back to town. In the meantime, enjoy yourself, Malone. Have yourself a ball."

It was no time for argument, Malone decided. Somehow he was going to have to get back to town by morning, but surely something would turn up. Something was going to have to. This was one time

he couldn't afford to let down von Flanagan.

"It's not that we don't completely trust you," said Mike Medinica. "It's just that we wouldn't want to have anything happen to you. So we know you don't mind if one of us shares a room with you."

"Not at all." Malone lied valiantly, still hoping something would turn up. He decided to drop the subjpect and ride with the punches for the time being. He glanced idly around the room. "Is that the peephole where you got the black eye, Sam?" he asked casually, looking at the heavy door.

Mike Mendinica shook his blond head. "It was in town, at Sam the Finder's penthouse apartment." He added, "Same type of peephole, though."

Mike might be the eleventh best-dressed man in America, Malone observed to himself, but he still carefully put the word "penthouse" in front of the word "apartment," underlining it ever so little. Ah, vanity . . .

Malone inspected the peephole. It was a standard type, of a sort installed on a great many doors, a tiny affair that could be slid open to permit a resident to peer out and see who was ringing the doorbell, without being seen by the ringer outside. A role of papers, though, would slip through very earily. *Poke* through, he corrected himself — as, of course, would a bullet. And this peephole was a facsimile of the one installed in the door of Harry Brown's apartment.

Suddenly he knew he had to get back to town, and as soon as possible. Study of the peephole had caused him to remember what had been eluding him at the scene of Charlie Binkley's murder.

He strolled to the fireside as though he didn't have a care in the world. He sat down. His hosts, he noticed with satisfaction, appeared to be pleased, even a little relaxed, at his easy acceptance of enforced confinement.

Olive broke the silence by suggesting a drink. Malone agreed that a drink would be both refreshing and timely. An idea had occurred to him. It might not work, and it was going to take almost incredible stamina to make it work but, at the moment, it was the only idea he had.

Mike Mendinica flashed a white-toothed grin, chuckled and said, "And you don't need to worry, Malone, that Charlie Binkley will up in court and swear that he served the summons on Sam the Finder. He's already been taken care of."

Malone opened his mouth to speak and closed it again, a gesture that made him feel like a goldfish. The subject was not one

he cared to pursue — at least, not just then.

Drinks were poured, and the conversation lagged. At last, Olive rose, yawned and stretched sinuously, and announced that she was going to bed. One drink later, Sam the Finder solicitously asked Malone if he weren't getting tired. Malone smiled cheerfully and said that the hour was far too early for him, that he had never felt more wide awake in his life.

Conversation dipped to zero. Finally, Mike Mendinica yawned and suggested a little game to pass the time. Malone allowed himself to brighten slightly. However, Sam the Finder, it seemed didn't play cards. Parchesi, now . . .

Malone decided he could learn parchesi. He regretted that he hadn't brought much money with him, but . . .

Sam the Finder, waved objections away. He said, "Your credit's good here, Malone, and we'll play for very small stakes."

Malone said that that would be fine, and how about putting the bottle on the table, so they could all reach it.

IV

The sky was growing perceptibly lighter when the little lawyer leaned back in his chair and reflected ruefully that he'd had no idea there were so many intricacies to the parlour game of parchesi, or that it was possible to lose quite so much money at a child's game in the space of four hours.

However, he had accomplished his purpose. Mike Mendinica sprawled on the davenport, one shoeless foot dragging on the floor, his mouth open and snores emerging from it at regular intervals. Sam the Finder had lasted half an hour longer, but now, at last he was slumped forward on the table, his head, on its final nod, having just missed the overflowing ashtray at the table's edge.

Putting both men in slumberland had required four hours and a little over three bottles — but neither of them was going to stir much for a while. Malone grinned happily. As for himself — well, he'd know better when he stood up, but at least his head was reasonably clear.

He scribbled an IOU for his $439 losses of the night's play and propped it up on the table. The money didn't worry him much. After all, Sam the Finder was a client, and there was going to be an implausably large fee involved, under the circumstances.

He rose and tiptoed — quite unnecessarily — to the closet. There he retrieved his hat and overcoat, put them on and realised for the first time since he entered Mike Medinica's big sedan, that

he had had a gun in his pocket all along.

Oh, well, he thought, things were better this way. It was hardly considered gentlemanly for an attorney to point a gun at a client. No, not even if the client kidnapped said attorney. Things were much better this way — much better. And it had all been a lot of good, more or less clean, fun, too.

He opened the door quietly and slipped out into the chill, early morning air. His first breath sent his fumed head reeling, and he grasped the doorpost for support. It was just, he told himself firmly, that he wasn't used to so much fresh air so early in the morning. It had nothing to do with his having had to keep abreast of his hosts throughout the night.

Somehow, he managed to make his way down the driveway, through the soft, wet slush underfoot, weaving only slightly from side to side. At the gatepost, he paused and looked back. The big neo-Colonial house looked and sounded reassuringly peaceful.

It was going to be several hours before anyone woke up and came downstairs. Still, the occasion called for haste, not loitering. Malone wondered what time it was. His watch had stopped hours earlier, and the grey sky told him nothing.

"It gets early very dark out these days," he remarked aloud. He began slogging bravely along the highway.

The sound of a car in the distance brightened him with prospects of a lift at least partway back to civilisation. Then another thought smote him — there was a possibility that Olive Fliegle might have awakened early. She didn't look like the type of redhead who would awaken early, but you never could tell. If she did, if she came downstairs, she just might have set out after him, to bring him back. That would never do, Malone told himself. It would never, *never* do.

He looked around hopelessly for a place to hide. There was a slender fence running along the roadside, and one very small tree, the latter a considerable distance away. This left nothing but concealment offered by the ditch, and Malone was damned if he'd get back into that again. He decided to take his chances like a man. Besides, Olive looked reasonably frail. Frailly reasonably, too, which was even more comforting to think about. He giggled at the word switch.

The car, however, turned out to be no Olive vehicle, but a small pick-up truck, its rear covered by a dingy tarpaulin. It slowed down. The driver surveyed Malone and finally stopped for him.

Suddenly, Malone realised that he was in no condition, in appear-

ance or otherwise, to meet the public. Especially not after his last tumble into the ditch. Most particularly, this was no time to encounter small town cops, or civic-minded citizens. But it was too late to do anything about such mischances now.

The truck driver, a thin, weatherworn man leaned forward. "Had an accident?" He opened the car door encouragingly.

"You might call it that," Malone said manfully. He didn't need much encouragement to climb aboard and slam the door before the driver could take a closer look at him and, if he was sensible, change his mind about offering a lift.

"Going far?" the man asked.

Malone opened his mouth to say, "Chicago," and then merely nodded. Finally, he said, "To the nearest cabstand." Then remembering where he was, he decided the remark must have been the wrong thing.

His benefactor drove in silence for a while. Then he said, "You must have come from that Mr. Fliegle's place."

This time, Malone confined himself to nodding.

They turned into what appeared to be a main highway, and Malone felt a little better. He only hoped the truck was headed toward Chicago and not for some alien distance downstate. After a while, he reached into his pocket for cigars.

"Don't smoke," the truck driver said, shaking his head at the proffered perfecto.

Malone put his cigar away. They were quite damp and a little bent anyway.

Thereafter, the drive continued in silence that seemed, to Malone, to bear a mildly unfriendly overtone. Occasionally the truck driver glanced at his passenger out of the corner of an eye.

The little lawyer wondered just what his driver thought of Sam the Finder and his friends, then decided he'd probably be happier in the long run if he didn't inquire.

V

Suddenly, a crossroads loomed ahead, complete with filling station and a roadside diner. The truck swerved into the filling station and braked to a stop beside a gas pump. The driver got out silently and went inside.

The little lawyer thought fast. He doubted that the pick-up truck was in need of gas this early in the day. He doubted, too, that the driver had stopped merely to pass the time of day with the gas-station attendant. Then instinct took over, and he slipped quickly out of the truck and looked around for a place to hide.

Malone realised almost at once that there was no cover except for the truck itself. Filling station and diner stood on a bare patch of ground, and there was nothing else, not even a tree in sight. He trotted hastily around the truck, keeping it between himself and the two men in the filling station. Then he climbed into the rear and under the tarpaulin. He was, he discovered, nesting among a sack of potatoes.

A few minutes later, he heard voices, and lay very still.

"He's beat it," the truck driver said.

There was mild speculation as to Malone's whereabouts, but not much excitement. For this, the little lawyer was grateful. Finally, the truck driver said, "Well, 'taint none of my business anyway. The cops have his description now, and I've done my duty. Guess he was just another bum."

Malone valiantly resisted an impulse to leap out and beat the pair of them to a pulp. Only his promise to von Flanagan held him back. This was no time for delays of such frivolous nature, even though his honour was involved.

He settled down as comfortably as he could among the potatoes, and worried. *Where was he?* He had not the foggiest notion. More important, where was he being driven? He peered out from under the tarpaulin, but saw nothing save dreary looking fields and dirty, melting snow. He wondered what time it was. He sighed and wished he dared to smoke a cigar — also that he had one, dry and unbent. He longed for a number of things, putting a hot bath, a shave and a clean white bed close to the top of the list.

Breakfast, too, would be a joyous fulfillment at the moment. He envisioned, without trying, fluffy scrambled eggs, fried eggs with yolks like golden moons, rosy-pink ham, a mound of lavishly buttered toast — but, he made up his mind firmly, no potatoes. Not this morning — perhaps he would never like them again. His waistline would appreciate such an allergy.

Malone never did know just how long the journey lasted. Afterward, he was to proclaim the journey a matter hours, and long hours at that. There came a time when the truck slowed down, and there were the sounds of traffic around him. Malone peeked out again, saw crowded cars and began to hope for the best.

Finally, the truck stopped altogether. Malone waited. He head the door in front open and slam shut. He waited a discreet while longer, then lifted the tarpaulin a little. He was, he discovered, on some sort of business street.

There were a few pedestrians strolling by, and he spotted a lunchroom, a drugstore, a shoe-repair shop and a dime store. No one noticed him.

I can see them, but they can't see me, he thought. The concept seemed important, perhaps the most important idea he had ever had in his life. The only trouble was that he wasn't entirely sure as to its application. However, it spurred him to immediate action. He slipped out from under the tarpaulin, jumped down from the truck and sped across the sidewalk to the security of the lunchroom. He perched, breathlessly, on the stool furthest from the front and ordered four cups of coffee and two cigars, fast.

The first cigar of the day, plus the coffee, improved not only his physical wellbeing but his wits. He pushed the though of breakfast into the back of his mind, as something to be attended to later.

He walked back into the washroom and regarded himself thoughtfully in the mirror. True, his hair was hopelessly tangled, he was woefully unshaven, there was a slight bruise on one cheek, his swollen eyes were red-rimmed and his clothes were spotted with mud. Yet it was quite plain to see that John J. Malone was still a fine, upstanding figure of a man. *Call him a bum, would they!* It was too bad he didn't have time to look up the truck driver and attend to settlement of his honour just then.

There were, however, more important matters to be attended to, and there was not time to waste on pure pleasure. He dug out a handful of coins, located a telephone and called von Flanagan.

The police officer's voice had a *thank heaven! quality,* at sound of Malone. The little lawyer said, "I'm keeping my promise, chum. You might get hold of Sam the Finder and Mike Mendinica, out at Sam the Finder's country place, and have them waked up and brought into town. And meet me at . . ." he paused, added, "at Harry Brown's apartment. Never mind where I am." For that matter, he thought, *where am I?* Not, he hoped, in Milwaukee. Or somewhere in the Indiana flatlands.

It developed, when he examined the cover of the phone book, that he was merely in Evanston, and he breathed a sigh of relief. From the borderline between Evanston and Chicago to Harry Brown's apartment was a reasonably fast taxi ride. He looked out cautiously for signs of the pick-up truck, saw that it had gone and went in search of a taxi.

The cab driver, when he found one, looked at him sourly and with suspicion. "That's a fairly long trip."

Malone indignantly waved his remaining nine dollars under the driver's nose and seriously considered taking a poke at it. No cab driver in Chicago proper would be so lamentably lacking in manners. But on this of all mornings, he had no time for lessons in etiquette, either. He brooded about it all the way into town, to the point of seriously considering giving the driver a ten cent tip. Instead, he handed him the entire bankroll and regretted it immediately.

There was no sign of von Flanagan outside Harry Brown's apartment and, for a moment, Malone considered waiting. There was just one question he wished he had remembered to ask the Homicide captain over the telephone. But that didn't matter now. He knew what the answer would be, because he knew what it had to be. The peephole in Sam the Finder's front door—the taupaulin on the potato truck—*You can see them, but they can't see you* — it was as simple as that.

He took the elevator to Harry Brown's apartment and rang the bell. It was several moments before he heard the peephole being opened, another before the door was opened.

"It's you," Harry Brown said joylessly. He looked tired and haggard. "Well, come in. Come in!" He slammed the door after Malone, added, "Nice of you to come all by yourself."

Malone suddenly began to wish he hadn't come sans escort.

"I suppose you figured it all out," said Harry Brown, regarding the little lawyer sourly.

"I found the gun . . ." Malone began — and knew immediately that he had made a mistake. He tried to move fast, but Harry moved faster, chopping down Malone's arm with one quick hand and plucking the gun from Malone's pocket with the other.

"Nice of you to bring this along with you," Brown said. A smile appeared on his thin mouth, but it didn't make him look any more pleasant to his guest.

Malone began thinking frantically and hopelessly of ways to stall for time. Von Flanagan was bound to arrive momentarily. He said, "I suppose Charlie Binkley told you he'd sold out . . ."

"I got no time for talk," Harry Brown said. "March, Malone."

Malone marched, still desperately trying to think of a way out. He felt numb.

"We're going to ride up in the elevator," Harry Brown said, almost gently, "I'm going to leave you there and walk down. I'm going to leave the lift door open, so the elevator is going to stay up there, with you in it. It will be

the same gun that shot Charlie Binkley, only this time there won't be any Malone to find it. By the time anyone gets up, I'm going to be gone a long way away from here, and it's going to turn out that I haven't even been near here this morning."

He closed the elevator door. Malone wasn't even trying to think anymore. The numbness had crept into his mind. Harry Brown extended a thumb toward the *Up* button.

At that instant, the elevator started down with a sudden jerk. For a split second, Harry Brown was thrown off balance and, in that split second, Malone dived for him, his numbness forgotten. The gun went off, and Malone didn't care jut then whether he had been hit or not — for Harry Brown had miraculously become the truck driver, the filling station attendant and the cab driver, all rolled into one. The little lawyer fought them all, savagely and joyously.

With a sudden bump, the elevator stopped. Malone's head struck the floor just as he heard the door flung open, and he almost blacked out.

"*He's killed Malone!*" von Flanagan yelled.

Malone sat up. "Not entirely," he said in an indignant whisper. Then he lapsed into dignified unconsciousness . . .

VI

"Stop fussing," Malone said crossly. "There's nothing the matter with me — nothing that a bath, breakfast and a drink won't fix right up." He glared savagely at the physician von Flanagan had hastily summoned.

"Shock and exposure," the doctor murmured. "A number of contusions and a nasty crack on the head."

Malone gave him a furious look, told him to go to hell and demanded to know if there was any rye in Harry Brown's kitchenette.

There was, and the alcohol made made him feel rapidly better. He soon was able to sit up on Harry Brown's sofa and ignore the doctor. An anxious von Flanagan murmured something about a hospital. Then something about Malone's lying down again. Malone ignored him, too.

Sam the Finder and Mike Medinica sat across the room, and Malone was pleased to see that they looked considerably worse than he felt. Von Flanagan had done a neat, swift job of getting them to Harry Brown's apartment. It was not that their presence was absolutely necessary to Malone any longer, but they were still on his client list. Besides, the little lawyer liked an audience at such times.

Von Flanagan finally sent the doctor away. He gave Sam the Finder and Mike Mendinica an uncomfortable look. "Harry Brown won't . . ." he began. Then, "I mean, nothing must come out, but—"

"Stop worrying," Malone said, cutting him off, "My pals here won't say a word about your being here when Charlie Binkley was shot. In return for which, I'll never tell you, or anyone else, how Sam the Finder got his black eye." He observed the wan, unhappy grin on Sam the Finder's face.

Malone looked at von Flanagan. "I had everything figured wrong. First, I figured you'd seen the shooting. Then I realised you'd only heard it. You picked up the description of a tallish man in a tan overcoat from Harry Brown." There was a faint pink on von Flanagan's face and Malone added hastily, "Just like witnesses always do."

He lit his second cigar of the day and puffed on it happily, then resumed with, "I didn't know what I was hunting for when I searched the building—I just had a feeling something was wrong. Then I found the gun. I still figured Sam the Finder had killed Charlie Binkley — in spite of the tall man in the tan overcoat, which certainly wasn't Sam, and in spite of the fact Sam wouldn't have ditched the gun."

Sam said, in a tone of injured innocence, "I never carry a gun anyway, Malone. You know that."

"You're among friends," Malone said. "Besides, Sam, the point is you didn't carry *this* gun." He paused to puff again happily on the cigar. "I finally spotted the flaw in the whole set-up. If someone had shot through the peephole, he wouldn't have known who he was shooting, because he couldn't see in."

He paused again, this time for dramatic effect, added, "Get it?" Then, "That meant someone could have been after Harry Brown as well as Charlie. And any number of people might have wanted to shoot Harry, including Sam the Finder and Mike Mendinica."

He waved down their protests, went on with, "But the point is, if the shot was fired *through* the peephole, whoever fired it wouldn't have known who he was shooting. And it didn't seem likely that anyone would shoot indiscriminately through a peephole in the hopes of hitting Charlie Binkley, or Harry Brown, or whoever happened to look out the door."

Von Flanagan said, "But when I came out in the living room . . ." his voice trailed off as comprehension dawned in a rosy flush of embarrassment.

"You saw Charley Binkley on the floor," said Malone," "lying in front of the doorway. The door was open, and Harry was halfway down the hall — *past* the trash chute, by that time — supposedly chasing a murderer. Which was just what Harry Brown wanted you to see."

Von Flanagan growled, "It could have happened to anybody."

"Happens all the time," Malone told him cheerfully. He drew a long breath. "Charlie Binkley had been bird-dogging for Harry Brown for a long time, in addition to his being a process server. But this time, he decided to sell out to the other side." At this point, Malone remembered the question he had wanted to ask von Flanagan earlier. He said, "Did Charlie Binkley have any money on him when your boys went through his pockets last night?"

"More than two grand," von Flanagan replied promptly.

Malone nodded. "That was what Mike Mendinica meant when he told me Charlie Binkley had been taken care of and wasn't going to testify that he'd served the papers. I should have known it all the time."

Mike Mendinica cleared his throat and said, "Of course, *this* is just between friends."

"Of course," von Flanagan echoed. He added, "The hearing doesn't come under my department anyway."

"So Harry Brown," Malone resumed, "having several reasons for wanting to get rid of his ex-bird dog, saw a heaven-sent opportunity. Charlie Binkley had told him how Sam the Finder got his shiner. That was another point. His murderer had to be somebody who knew about Sam the Finder's black eye, and that narrowed the field. Von Flanagan was in the next room, and setting things up was easy for Harry Brown." Malone sighed happily, picked up his glass and said, "Just like finding out what happened was easy for me."

There was a brief silence. Malone thought of the breakfast he was going to have, and the sleep. And there was the pleasant little matter of money . . .

Sam the Finder spoke up as though he'd been reading Malone's thoughts. He said, "You'll have a handsome fee for this, Malone. You not only accomplished what I had in mind, but you disposed of the hearing once and for all." He smiled. "Though I must admit — you certainly did it the hard way."

Malone yawned, stretched and smiled back. "Oh, well," he said. "Things were getting so dull . . ."

End

A New Short Story by

LOUIS TRIMBLE

Jake Parker had an accurate throwing arm, though not as accurate as Farmer Teel, which was probably a good thing, since Teel's carnival throws caused his murder. But then, neither of them knew that he was making—

A Pitch for Murder

I DIDN'T LIKE the assignment. Not just because it was strictly a cheap job, but because it could backfire. I can think of little worse for a private detective, just starting out in business, than running afoul of the local cops.

However, it wasn't a matter of choice, so here I was strolling between the sideshows and the "games" as the carnival called them. I had twenty bucks in my pocket. It represented my advance for the job. It represented, also, every dime I owned.

The head office in Seattle had hired me as branch representative east of the mountains. They paid the office rent and gave me a cut on any case they assigned me. But that was as far as it went — the rest was strictly up to me.

So far, the rest wasn't much. The agency had a good enough reputation, but I was an unknown as far as the local cops were concerned. The city boys weren't so bad, but Grimsby, the sheriff, didn't like private detectives — including one Jake Parker — myself.

Besides my difficulty with Grimsby, I was becoming financially embarrassed. I had started on a very threadbare shoestring. It had reached a point where I was tying knots in it to keep eating when the carnival hit town. Much as I disliked the job that Jim Nicholas, the owner, offered, I had to take it or quit the business. So I took it.

The locus of my assignment was a "game" booth, but I was under orders to be inconspicuous, so I eased my way up there via the sideshows. Being inconspicuous was a little difficult for me. Sixty-five inches, two hundred and ten pounds and a face marked by twelve years of pro football are not easy to hide.

Like any other yokel, I stopped to gawk at the half-man, half-woman show, then drifted away. In succession, I studied the bearded lady, the genuine Hawaiian dancer

and the human skeleton. By then, I was at the end of the row. I began to work my way back up the other side where the game booths were located.

There was quite a crowd gathered before one booth. It was very, very hot under the steaming sun, and the smell of roasting peanuts and sawdust mingled with a strong attar of sweating farmers. The cracked skull that had finally put me out of football was beginning to object to all this. I made things a little easier by pushing to the front of the crowd. Here I was out of the sun, under an awning.

The reason for the crowd became quickly apparent. A long, lanky farmer was being urged by his friends to pitch baseballs at pyramids of wooden milk bottles. The pitchman was giving him a good spiel, too, but the character seemed reluctant.

The pitchman was a little man, skinny, with a big adam's apple bobbing up and down along a half-shaved neck. He wore a straw hat and showed a lot of gold teeth. They glittered in the sun when he opened his mouth to give out with the spiel.

"Knock off one set of bottles, and win a doll," he chanted. His cane waved at the prizes shelved on either side of the booth. "Three balls for a dime. Knock off two sets of bottles and win a beautiful, luscious, tender, sugar-cured ham. Knock off three sets, and win one of those superb big-name radios, gents."

The "superb" radios were little kitchen models in plastic — about ten inches long, six inches wide and six deep. There were three on display, two white and one brown.

The farmers were still urging their pal to throw when the pitchman saw me. He gave me a wink with his little, black-pea eyes, "Here's a man who'll try! Here's a man who looks like he could throw a mean baseball. Step right up!" He gave me the wink again.

I didn't quite get the deal, but since this booth was my assignment, I stepped up. Besides, I thought, a radio would be a welcome addition to my two-bit office.

The pitchman took my money and handed me three baseballs. The bottles were stacked on a wooden tub with three as a base, two on top of them and one at the peak. It *looked* simple. It *was* simple — for me. I had pitched enough baseballs and footballs in my time.

My first toss hit pyramid centre, with enough spin to clean the table except for one bottle lying on its side. I got that with the second pitch. The little guy set them up again, and I knocked them down

again. I hesitated between taking the ham and trying for the radio, but decided the radio would last longer. I needed three balls to clean the table the last time.

The pitchman reached up and brought down the brown radio. I said, "How about a white one, pal?"

His eyes turned funny. He stood very still for a moment, then shrugged and started to turn around. I said, "Oh, hell, this is good enough," took the radio and stepped back.

My performance seemed to have inspired the farmer. He laid down a dime and picked up three baseballs. I leaned against the counter to watch. Whatever went on here wasn't on the surface. I had the feeling the pitchman had been expecting me, from the way he handed me the wink. But that didn't make much sense — yet.

So I stayed, looking as casual as I could, and watched the farmer, whose pals called him Teel, show professional baseball form. He clipped off three wins faster than I had, and got a nice white radio for it.

"Martha'll sure be pleased to have this in her kitchen," he said. He started off and came back. "Maybe I ought to get another one, so she can give it for presents."

His friends backed him up in that. The little pitchman didn't look too pleased, but he shrugged and nodded. Teel wound up and let go. The ball was perfect, cleaning the table. The little guy set up the bottles again and Teel knocked them down the second time.

The pitchman waved his cane. "How about a nice ham, brother?"

Someone laughed. "Teel's got a smokehouse full of hams."

"I want another radio," Teel said.

"Three in a row twice is hard to hit."

"It ain't hard for him," someone said. "He fanned twenty Sunnyvale batters last Sunday."

I got a laugh out of that. The pitchman didn't, though. He wasn't enjoying the prospect of facing the local baseball hotshot. His stock could go fast against a set-up like this.

Now the little guy was looking over the crowd, past my shoulder. I saw his eyes widen, then swing to me. They were small eyes, very dark, and suddenly there was a mean look in them.

He said, "How about resting while someone else tries?"

"I feel like pitching," Teel said.

A man of about my width, but a head shorter, pushed forward. I recognised him as an unsavoury bar-bum I had seen drifting around town at times.

"Lemme pitch a couple," he

said. "You been here all afternoon, bud."

Teel looked down at this character and away. He resumed rubbing the ball he held. The heavy-set guy gave him an elbow. "I said, move over."

The farmer wasn't giving any. "I got here first."

There was a nasty look on the wide man's face. It was a slightly battered face, like mine. But where my nose was bent twice, his was flattened to one side of his face. His ears were cauliflowered, too. He looked as if he would enjoy getting tough about it.

"Bud, you just step aside . . ."

The whole group of farmers shifted their weight, and a soft sound, like a sighing wind, rose from them. They began to close in. It was very nice teamwork. I thought, *You guys aren't smart. Farmers haven't been yokels for thirty years now.*

It was obvious to me, and evidently to the farmers, too. The heavy boy was a shill, and the attendant wanted him up there very badly.

The attendant wasn't quite as stupid as he looked. He said, "Let him shoot, friend. He says he's hot." Their eyes met, and the wide boy nodded and stepped back. The sigh went through the crowd again, and they relaxed a little. The farmer wound up and pitched.

It was perfect, just like the first one. The bottles jumped and rocked, but when they had settled, two still stood, one on either end. It was like a split in bowling. The farmer blinked and spat and took another ball. He wound up and got a strike on the left one. It just leaned over, wobbled, and came back. So he had one ball left and the same split to work on.

"You see that!" one wag said. "Jumped off and right back on. You got 'em trained, Mister?"

"Tough luck," the attendant said. "One ball to go."

I leaned over the counter. I caught the pitchman by the front of his shirt and lifted him six inches off the ground.

"Friend," I said softly, "give the man two balls and take your hand off that magnet."

His little black eyes popped out and the meanness narrowed his mouth. "Who in hell are you?" I thought he looked a little sick.

I shook him, but not too roughly. "Want me to say it louder, chum?" I said. "Set the man up a square table this time."

The little attendant opened his mouth and breathed stale beer at me. Before he could do anything cute like yelling, "*Hey, Rube,*" I pushed a gentle hand against his face. "Now behave," I told him.

The heavy-set character was beginning to ease my way. I heard

the crowd stir again. I jerked the attendant up a few more inches. "It's thirty against two here, chum."

He was beginning to look worried, but then he must have seen something over my shoulder. He shook his head sideways, getting free of my hand, and bawled.

Someone conked me from behind. I dropped the little guy and folded over the counter, rolled, and came up with my back to it. My head hurt in the old way, making me sick to my stomach, but I was sore, too — a little too sore to know exactly what I was doing. A roustabout was there, swing a big stick. The heavy boy had closed in on the other side.

I made a grab for the guy with the stick. He swung again, thumping my shoulder. I had two hands on his neck when the shill jumped me. The farmers got into action then. All I could see were feet and knees and swirling dust. I was on the bottom, hanging on to the guy who had sapped me. But from the sounds, I knew it had turned into a general riot.

Someone blew a whistle then, and a siren screamed nearby. I lay there, after knocking my man silly and using him to cover me from random feet. After a while, the mob thinned and daylight began to appear. When the dust had settled, the cops were in control.

This was outside the city limits, so the sheriff's office had the say. I saw Grimsby, old Poo-bah himself, and wished I was somewhere else. Just as I feared, the job had backfired.

"I should have known," he said, "*you'd* be in this."

"They pulled the magnet gag on some farmer," I said. "I objected."

The pitchman and his shill were backed up against the counter, looking very unhappy. The remains of the farmers, about twenty-five were lined up at right angles. About a dozen carny helpers were there, too. Finally, a dapper little man in ice-cream pants came clicking up.

"Here, what's the trouble, officer?"

This was Jim Nichols, the man who had hired me. It was his twenty bucks I carried in my pocket. He spotted me, but his eyes said they didn't know me. I returned the compliment.

The dust had settled, most of it in my mouth from the way it felt, and things were beginning to clear in my mind. The wallop on the head hadn't been quite as tough as I had thought. I stepped forward and repeated my story to Nichols.

He turned on the rat-faced attendant. "That's twice I've had complaints about you, Ormes. Is this true?"

The sheriff said, "Don't you know how your own games are run?"

Nichols bridled like a nipped dog. "Sheriff, I rent out these concessions. I am not responsible for the actions of these men."

Ormes, the pitchman, said "This farmer got greedy. He won a radio and wanted another. I can't let no rube Bob Feller clean out my stock, can I?"

"If he wins on a game of chance, you can," the sheriff said.

I shook my head to get the last of the buzzzing out. "I suggested he let the farmer do that second one all over again."

Grimsby looked from Nichols to Ormes. "If you ain't beat him up too bad, let him try."

Ormes looked like he wanted to squawk, but one glare from Nichols stopped him. When Grimsby added, "Or we lock you up," he set up the bottles.

I went right after him and checked them. It *looked* all wood, this table. But a closer check showed iron insets painted the colour of the table top. Some of the bottles had iron insets, too. I showed the set-up to Grimsby.

The farmers didn't like it a bit, but they cheered when the sheriff found the electric cable that ran from the stand to the push-button on the counter. He gave a yank and disconnected the works.

"Now throw, Teel," he said. He was grinning, too, pleased with himself. "Make like that's Sunnyvale up there."

Teel was still in one piece, as long and as lugubrious as ever. He wound up, pitched and got a strike. The bottles flew off their table on the first pitch. He stood there after he had made it and looked at Ormes, not smiling.

Ormes reached up and got the last radio, a white plastic one. He handed it over, not happily. Teel tucked both radios under his arm and moved off. "Thanks," he said.

He turned and came back to me. "You, too, he added. His sun-faded blue eyes were speculative. "But I don't know why you did it."

"I don't like to see a man cheated," I said.

He pointed to a bruise on my face. "No more do I. Come on and have a beer on me."

I did, carrying my radio. This carny was no place for Jake Parker at the moment, anyway. We found a tavern on the edge of the grounds and, with about five other farm boys tagging along, went inside. It was cool and pleasant. So was the beer.

Teel seemed pleased with his prizes. "I'd have liked a brown one," he said. "Then Martha could choose which colour she wanted to keep."

I took the hint. "It doesn't matter to me," I said, and swapped for one of his white radios. That done, I thanked him for the beer and went back to my office.

I had done my job — maybe not with the finesse Nichols wanted, but I had done it. He had offered me fifty to find out what was wrong with Ormes' pitch — twenty down and thirty when the job was finished. I had thirty bucks still coming.

Nichols walked in, not an hour later. I was smoking a six-cent cigar and winding up another beer when he clipped into the room. He looked as dapper as usual, despite the heat.

He also looked mad. "You sure messed hell out of things," he said.

My hand was out for the thirty bucks. I pulled it back, empty, and laid it on the desk top. "I found out, didn't I?"

Nichols snorted. "Found out he used magnets. That's an ancient gag. Do I pay fifty bucks to learn that?"

"You said, 'Find out what he's up to'," I reminded him.

"Find out — yes," he squawked. "And why. Would he cause a riot to save a ten-buck radio?"

"You want a lot for your fifty," I said.

He rocked back and forth on his toes. "If you can't do it, I'll get someone who can."

That thirty bucks due me looked very, very big. The twenty I had would help for a while, but I need to eat. I also needed a little rep. as a good detective. Starting a riot wasn't doing it. Not with Grimsby.

"All right," I said.

Nichols marched out. I leaned back, wearily, to check over what I knew and try to fit it into a sensible answer. Why would a punk like Ormes raise such hell over a lousy little radio?

I took the radio I had won and gave it a good going over. There was nothing inside but cheap tubes and wiring. I plugged it into the wall and it played — not good, but it played.

At dark, I went out to eat. I came back, thinking so hard about it that I was inside the office door before I realised anything was wrong. I remembered the odd way Ormes had acted over the radios, but it didn't make much sense, no matter how I twisted it in my mind.

What I stepped into *did* make sense. The office was dark, but I wasn't alone in it. I had one hand reaching for the light switch when I heard the footfall, a light, near-inaudible sound.

I dropped my hand away from the wall and went for my gun. Something hard rammed into my belly, driving me backward. I clawed and got nothing. I rolled over as I hit the floor and came up

swinging. For the second time that day, someone conked me. This time it was a good job. I sensed it coming, but couldn't duck fast enough. Lightning exploded in my brain. I went down and out.

I came to, feeling like the wrong end of a six-day drunk. I was still in the office. Carefully, I got to my feet and wobbled to the door. I turned the light on this time and made it to the washstand. Cold water helped a little, and I staggered to my desk. A shot of whisky from the bottle in my drawer helped a little more. After a while, I could look around and see what had happened.

It was senseless for anyone to knock over my office. There had never been anything in it. I made a quick check. My few files were still intact. My desk hadn't been disturbed. Everything was the same. Then I got it . . .

The radio was missing!

I remembered that Nichols had said — that Ormes wouldn't have started a riot over a ten-buck radio. But Ormes had — and he had carried it one step farther. My aching head was proof of that.

Still, I was no further along than I had been. The big *why* was still unanswered.

At ten o'clock, I was still sitting there, still as far as ever from an answer. The agony in my head was subsiding, however, and the rattle of the doorknob only made me groan. I got up and answered it.

Grimsby came in, looking sore as hell, "I hear you saw this farmer, Teel."

"He bought be a beer."

"Was he drunk?"

I said, "No. He wasn't that kind. He wanted to get home to his Martha with the radios." Grimsby's pulled-down mouth worried me more than usual. "What's wrong?"

"Teel didn't get home," he said. "He killed himself halfway there."

That was like getting a third conk on the head. I stared at Grimsby, my mouth hanging open. He fed the details to me in capsule form. Teel had got his pick-up truck and headed over the hills for home. Halfway there he had to drive down a gravelled hill and cross a wooden bridge. He had evidently lost control of the truck and hit the bridge railing. The car had crashed through, dropping thirty feet into a pothole in the river. Teel had drowned.

Grimsby concluded, "That guy drives that road week after week, snow or rain or what have you. It don't make sense."

But it was beginning to make sense — at least for me. For the first time, I was getting some ideas. They began to come quick and

fast. I almost said something aloud, and then I realised Grimsby hadn't come up here just to tell me about Teel.

Instead of blurting out everything, I said, "Why come to me?"

"You," Grimsby said, "started the riot."

"I told you about that."

He ignored me. "Some of the farm boys told me how you waltzed in and won the first radio. Were you shilling for Ormes, maybe?"

"Hell, no! I just wanted a radio."

Grimsby grunted. I knew what was biting him. He didn't like me to begin with, so he was hoping to connect me with this trouble some way. He came right out and said it. "I got ideas," he told me. "If I find you're hooked up in this, Parker, you're through around here."

He turned and strode out, still sore. I listened to his footsteps recede, then I grabbed my phone. I was connected with the "trouble," all right — more than I liked, perhaps. But if what I thought was the truth, I wasn't going to let Grimsby, or anyone else, scare me away. I was getting good and sore myself.

I called the head office and gave them instructions, telling them to wire the answer. If this was a cold lead, they'd take the expenses out of my hide, I knew that. But it had to be done. I hung up. Then I got my hat and set it gingerly on my aching head. There were still a few things I wanted to know.

I walked carefully, to make sure Grimsby didn't have a tail on me. As far as I could tell, I was clear when I got to the carny grounds. The show was still going strong. I found Nichols in his railway-car office and went in. He looked worried and unhappy.

"Did you hear?" he asked me.

"I heard," I said. I sat down and studied him. "You've pussyfooted long enough. I want to know just why you had me put the bite on Ormes." I was sore.

Nichols got up nervously and checked to see that his shades were drawn. When he sat down, he was sweating, and not quite so dapper. "Trouble," he muttered. "Nothing but trouble! In every town, it's some little thing. But this is the worst. We're jinxed, Parker. This winds it up — a suicide."

I let that last item pass. "Give me a list of these troubles," I said.

Nichols was vague. Troubles, to a carny man, are nine-tenths superstition. He could read an ingrown toenail as a bad omen. But I got enough to know he was scared of his own shadow—enough to give me a lead.

I said, "I can clear it up for you, but it'll cost another zero on

that fifty you hired me for." He squawked, but I hung on. "I'm sticking my professional and personal neck out," I told him. "Take it or leave it."

He took it — and paid half in advance. I went out fast after that. Getting in my car, I headed out the county highway. In about two miles, it turned from concrete to gravel. Three more miles, and I came to the top of the long hill. Here I stopped. It was all silent below, though, so I drove on.

The bridge rail was still shattered, and a red warning lantern glowed alongside. That was the only sign. Pulling the car off the road, I got my flashlight and made a quick survey. I saw where they had worked, going for the body and the car. What I needed, I thought was a nice cooling swim.

I stripped in the bushes, along the riverside and dived into the pothole. The water wasn't too bad, and I kept on diving. It wasn't much fun, feeling around in the dark water, but when I clamped my hand on the first radio, I knew it was worth it.

Despite the cool water, I was sweating a little when I got through. I had a whole shore full of stuff to look at. There were a lot of groceries, and the two radios. These were all that I wanted. I squatted there in the dark and turned my light on them.

For a minute, it didn't register. They were just two white plastic radios. And then it hit me and I almost let out a whoop. I was on the right track.

Dressed, I took the radios in the car and drove back to town. There was a fat wire under the office door, and I spread it open after locking myself in. What I wanted to know was there.

The carnival had hit twelve good-sized towns on its summer-long trip. Ours was one of the last. At each stop, there had been a nice heist. The details were all there. In one place, it had been jewels from a charity ball, in another, a fancy store had been knocked over. In another, a bank messenger had been found rolled in a ditch. On it went, and every one was still listed as unsolved.

It was fifteen minutes to midnight. I barrelled out to the carny and got to Ormes' booth just under the wire. He was there. A last customer and his girl friend were walking off with a kewpie doll. The midway was almost empty. The barkers were silent, and the peanut machines had been stilled. The merry-go-round still tinkled away in the distance, but it sounded tired.

I said, "Give me three, Chum."

Ormes recognised me, and his eyes narrowed. "Check it," he said

shortly. "You done enough damage for one day."

I smiled at him and picked up the baseballs. He opened his mouth. I lost my smile. "You really want to make trouble?" I asked him. "Maybe I should get Nichols over here — or the sheriff again."

His mouth shut. I wound up and started pitching. There was no magnet this time. I was tired, but by being careful, I racked up three wins. "A radio," I said.

There were two on the shelf. Ormes reached up and got one, a brown plastic job. I said, "Not that one." He shrugged and got the other. I said, "No. I want one just like the number you swiped from my office."

I could hear his quick inhale. He swung around, in a swift, cat-like pivot, and pitched the radio at my head. I ducked and started over the counter after him. He slipped aside and hit a light switch with his hand. The booth was clamped by darkness.

I went after him, but he made it through a door into the rear part of the stand. I got in myself when the gun blasted. His answering shot kicked dirt into my face. I returned the favour and heard him swear.

Then all hell broke loose. I stood up, my hands high, as a big deputy walked in and levelled a gun on me. Grimsby was right behind him.

They hauled Ormes upright. His right shoulder was shattered, but that was all. He was still alive. Grimsby looked from him to me.

"This about winds you up, Parker," he said. I must have looked stupid, because he added, "Thank we're suckers? I've had a tail on you all the time. I don't know what you and your pal here fought about, but I'll find out soon enough."

It was my turn to talk and fast. I said, "If you want the answer, look in some of those boxes marked *radios*." I lowered one hand long enough to fish out the wire I had got. I gave it to Grimsby.

I went on, "Don't you get it? Ormes and some friends are in the fence racket. They move into a town, the jewels, or bills of big denomination, are stolen. Then Ormes puts them in dummy radio tubes. At another town along the line, a hand-picked shill steps up and wins a radio — one of the specials. He takes the dummy tubes out and puts in real ones. Any check on the radio shows nothing wrong. But when he breaks the dummies open, he has the loot from the heist job back down the line. He fences it for the organisation."

Grimsby studied the wire. Then he studied me. Finally, looked at

Ormes. The little pitchman wasn't saying anything. But his eyes were hating me plenty.

I said, "The shill here was a guy with a battered face. When I walked up, Ormes thought I was the one. So, when I won a radio so easily, he gave me the special. He caused a riot because the real shill walked up then, and Ormes realised I wasn't his man after all. He wanted to swap sets on me under cover of the noise. But the farm boys moved too fast for him. His next best bet was to swipe it out of my office before I got wise to anything.

"The only trouble was, he didn't know I'd swapped my brown set with Teel in exchange for a white one. When he found that out, he added things up and went after Teel.

"There," I said, "is the guy who sent Teel off the bridge. He hid in Teel's truck. When he saw his chance, he clipped Teel and took over. Maybe he wasn't planning on murder, but that's the way it turned out."

"Sounds nice," said Grimsby, "but can you prove it?"

What a thick skull he had! "Sure," I said. "When I went diving, I brought up two radios — both white plastic. But Teel had started home with one white one and the brown set I gave him. Ormes, here, did too good a job, trying to make his murder look accidental."

Ormes cut loose then. He took a swipe at one of the deputies' guns, got his hand on it and set a shot at me. He was off balance, and the bullet only nicked my leg. I lowered my hands and went for him. Grimsby's gun made a flat sound. By the time I hit Ormes, he was already going limp.

Grimsby had nothing more to say. He began breaking open radio boxes. In every third one, we found dummy tubes. In the dummy tubes was the finest collection of diamonds and emeralds and thousand-dollar banknotes a man would ever want to see. When the stuff was all laid out, we could only stand and stare.

Grimsby took a deep breath. "You win, Parker. I wasn't wrong about private cops, but I guess maybe I was wrong about one of them."

I thought of what could have happened if he hadn't tailed me and been there when the shooting started.

I said, "If it's okay with you, Sheriff, just keep right on not trusting me. I'm beginning to like having cops for bodyguards."

"In that case," he said, "I'll take you home myself."

I took a good radio along. I figured I'd earned it. *End.*

Murder Problems of a Multiple-Bigamist in a new Novelette by

KENNETH FEARING

Drink was no problem for Brown—his troubles were slow horses and women too fast at beating a path to the altar. But it was his spouse's unforeseen fondness for cyanide cocktails that plunged Brown into the alphabet soup.

Three Wives Too Many

RICHARD C. BROWN gazed in contented speculation across the breakfast table at the plain but pleasant face of his wife Marion. He was aware not only of her companionable silence, but savoured also the cozy perfection of the tiny alcove, in fact, the homey restfulness of the entire bungalow.

For a moment, he almost regretted the need to leave this suburban idyll on the outskirts of Camden, and Marion, in order to reach his home in Newark by nightfall, and to be with Bernice, his fourth and most recent wife, at the usual hour. But he knew that domestic peace, to say nothing of his own safety, depended upon the most rigid adherence to his fixed routine.

Bernice, a natural and vivacious blonde, was much younger and very much prettier than Marion, whose tightly combed hair showed an unmistakable tinge of gray in its otherwise inky darkness. Marion, in fact, was the wife Richard had who was as old as himself. When he married her, he had rather felt he was making a reckless gamble.

But now, after four years — no, come to think of it, five years — he felt she had turned out extraordinarily well. Whereas Bernice, he had to face it, still couldn't cook, after almost a year of marriage. Her cooking, like her disorderly housekeeping, would probably never improve.

Still, she was lively, and decorative, though by no means as gorgeous as the ripe, still magnificently cream-skinned and red-haired Lucille. Lucille was his first wife, and although nowadays she was showing more and more ill-temper, especially when she drank, he was still very fond of her, and they still maintained their original home in Hartford.

He would be seeing her, on schedule, three days hence. After that, came the turn of the dark, brood-

ing, capricious Helen, his second, in a suburb of Boston. Helen was a little extravagant. She always had been. But what were a few faults? They were only to be expected. After all, he probably had a few, himself.

So Richard C. Brown speculated as, he often did, weighing the pros and cons of this life he led.

Had he chosen wisely in selecting matrimony as his profession? Richard frowned, faintly, and softened the harsh phraseology of the question. He hadn't *chosen* it, exactly. He had drifted into it, beginning as an ardent, even a romantic, amateur. It was so easy to get married that he had not even thought of that vulgar word, bigamy, until some time after he had already committed it.

But after two ceremonies, with a third impending — his match with Marion — yes, by then he had realised he was launched upon a special type of career, one that might have certain risks attached, but one that also, with care and prudence, offered rich rewards.

"Richard? Is that what's worrying you?"

Richard returned his attention to Marion, suddenly aware that her voice echoed a whole series of remarks he had not quite caught. Richard smiled, genuinely surprised.

"Worrying me, dear?"

"For a minute, you were frowning. I thought perhaps your mind was on that offer to buy the house and lot. It was such a *big* price the broker offered, I could hardly believe it. I thought maybe you regretted turning it down. I wonder if you did it just on my account, even though you thought it was really a mistake to pass up the chance. Was *that* it, Richard?"

Richard was still more surprised —honestly surprised, and deeply touched.

"No, nothing's worrying me," he said, in affectionate rebuke. "Least of all, that proposition to sell. I'd forgotten all about it."

Marion, pouring him a second cup of coffee, pursued the subject to its logical end. "Because, if the offer is still open, and you think we ought to sell, I'll sign. Our joint title to the deed, I mean. Perhaps you thought I sounded unwilling before. But that was only because I didn't really understand what a wonderful price we were being offered."

Richard was mildly amused, but still more moved. The offered price had been quite good, certainly, but by no means high enough to justify the nuisance of finding or building another place, then moving and getting established.

"No," he said, firmly. "I'm quite happy here, and we won't think

of selling, unless you've changed your own mind, and that's what you want, yourself." With large and patient generosity, he emphasised the point. "Since I have to be away so much, on business, I've always felt any decision about the house should be mainly up to you. That's why I insisted, from the first, that title to the property should be in both our names."

He did not add, though he privately noted the fact and gave himself a good mark for it, that this was one of his fixed rules for lasting success in marriage on a mass basis. Never play the domestic tyrant, he often told himself. Let the little woman — whichever one it was, though Lucille and Helen were hardly little — make most of the household decisions, or at least imagine she made them. It kept her happy and, whenever he had to make an important move, made her all the more amiable in deferring to him.

Sometimes, at moments like this, Richard wished he had some friendly, professional colleague with whom he could talk over the finer problems of, say, quadruple and concurrent matrimony. But this could never be. Richard did not doubt that superior operators, like himself, were in existence. But they were not readily to be found —any more than he himself was.

There were only two types of repeaters the public ever heard about, and Richard disdained them both. On the one hand, he was no idiot Romeo who married seven or eight pretty but penniless young things, usually in the same region if not the same city, and inevitably came to grief on some absurd but mathematically predictable mischance. Love was the key-word to describe this type, love and carelessness.

Then there was the other well-publicised practitioner, the sinister Bluebeard who, having married for money alone, then proceeded to do away with . . . No, this gruesome technique so revolted Richard he shrank even from thinking about it.

Marriage should be undertaken only for money *and* love. Richard imagined himself giving this sage advice to some earnest young man who might appeal to him for guidance, before choosing this specialised vocation as his own life-work. Marry for money *and* love, and never relax one's careful attention in fostering each, that was what Richard would tell the acolyte.

Quite carried away by the thought, Richard crumpled his napkin and slapped it down beside his breakfast plate in brisk, executive encouragement. Of course, there were hundreds of other facets to such a career, minor perhaps, but highly important. There was

the choice of employment one should pretend to have, for instance, the changes of identification that would never overlap, and . . . Richard sighed, abandoning these thoughts as idle. After all, there was no young man seeking his counsel. In the nature of things, as long as he remained successful, there never would be.

"Richard? Don't you want to look at it? Just to be sure before they install it and lay the cement?"

He realised that Marion had again been talking for some time, unnoticed. It irritated and vaguely frightened him that he was not observing his own precept to pay careful attention.

"Of course, dear." He groped, but expertly. "Why, aren't you satisfied?"

"Oh, I suppose the furnace people ought to know the best place for it. They must install hundreds of auxiliary fuel tanks. But if you'd just look, to make sure. Maybe you'll think it ought to be somewhere else."

He remembered now. It was a domestic trifle, an improvement in the heating system. He nodded, glanced at his wristwatch and stood up.

"I'll do it right now. Then I'm afraid I've got to be going."

"Do you have a lot of calls to make to-day, Richard?"

"Lots," he said, cheerfully, and proceeded to overwhelm wife number three with a torrent of details. "Elite, Paragon, Acme, three or four Eat-Rites, two Welcome Inns. That's just between here and Trenton. I hope I'll reach there by evening. But with the list of restaurants I've got to see—about twenty-five to thirty a day — I'm not sure just where I'll be to-night. Or, for that matter, in the next ten or twelve days. Eleven days, to be exact," he added thoughtfully. "Now, let's see the tank."

On the way to the basement, Richard collected his hat, overcoat and suitcase. He set the suitcase down in the kitchen, then followed Marion through the door that led downward. At least, he went two-thirds of the way down the wooden steps, intending, from that barest possible display of interest, to give full approval to her arrangements.

Standing on the lower part of the stairway, he could see most of Marion's basement. This basement belonged to Marion, because all of its appointments were hers, whereas the Hartford basement had a bar, which made it both his and Lucille's. Besides the assorted laundry machines, and the door of the small partition that formed Marion's photographic dark-room — her one hobby — he saw that a slit-trench affair had been drilled through the cement floor and dug

out of the dank earth beneath. Beside it stood the new tank, not yet lowered into place, and a bulky unopened sack of some ready-mixed cement.

Richard had now seen enough to give either his approval or criticism, is any, with suggestions. He still inclined toward approval, as easier and quicker.

"It looks all right to me," he said.

Marion peered up at him, anxious and pathetically helpless. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Richard's reply was a little short. As a matter of fact, there was a hazy something he did not like at all, seeing Marion like that, innocent and greying, a little too trusting, standing beside that gaping hole.

"Quite sure. It's just where I would have—" He broke off, acutely disturbed by the phrase he seemed to be using, and without knowing why. He changed it to, "It couldn't be better if I'd chosen the place, myself."

He turned quickly and went back up the stairs, with Marion following. Somebody, Richard darkly felt, was being in rather poor taste. But who? That mound of loose dirt, and the bag of cement besides. There was something about the scene that was not only vulgar, but oppressive.

He had placed his suitcase down beside the kitchen's outside door when Marion reappeared. She smiled brightly, but his spirits did not lift. Unaccountably, he, had another obscure association of ideas. For some reason — for no logical reason — his mind turned to a certain crude, lurid, seamier side that less successful members of his calling undeniably used, to the shadowy half-world of Lonely Hearts clubs, Matrimonial bureaus, and throbbing exchanges. Let there be a particularly messy explosion in the realm of matrimony, and the odds were even that one of those Lonely Heart clubmen, or club-women, was in back of it.

Richard held such strong views against agencies of this type that he couldn't abide mention of them, not even in jocular vein. It was one of few subjects upon which he had, at one time or another, quarrelled with several of his wives. With all of them, in fact. About divorce, too, he was quite strict. It could easily undermine his career.

"Have you got your sample case, Richard?" Marion asked.

"It's in the trunk of the car," he told her. "I've got everything. You don't need to come out."

"Well . . .?"

"This is the fifth," he reminded her. "I'll be back for dinner on the evening of the sixteenth. Meanwhile, I'll phone you from time to time and, if anything comes up,

you can reach me through the New York answering service."

"All right, Richard. Have a good trip."

"Thank you, dear. Take care of yourself, and above all, don't worry that beautiful head of yours about trifles. Just relax. Let *me* do all the worrying."

They kissed, warmly. Then he picked up his suitcase and went down the driveway to the garage. It was a fact, he reflected, that all the worrying *was* left to him. Marion probably did not appreciate just how much worry there was.

Neither did Bernice, nor Lucille, nor Helen — none of them. But, under the circumstances, he couldn't ask, he couldn't even hint, at the credit he really deserved for the many detailed responsibilities he bore.

However, these added cares were not too heavy — they were hazards of his career. Backing his coupe down the driveway, Richard's moodiness was already gone. In front of the house, he looked up and waved to Marion, now standing in the open doorway, her striking figure undimmed by a simple house-dress. She waved affectionately in return.

His was a full, engrossing life, he decided as he drove along. Some people might even think it fascinating, if not too much so, imagining it filled with dreadful risks. There *was* a small element of danger, of course. But this only added zest. It offered the faint, tang-laden pinch of adventure, without which, really, his regulated life would be unbearably placid. It was long since far too-well re-hearsed.

II

Three hours later, shortly before noon, Richard C. Brown passed temporarily out of existence.

The loss of identity required less than a minute. It took place in a busy railroad checkroom in Philadelphia. It required only the time to check in his salesman's sample-case and order-book — Speedie Sandwich So., Automatic Cutters, Precision Knives. Then, all that was needed was to take out a similar sample-case and order-book for his next incarnation, as a salesman of cosmetic novelties.

He had entered the checkroom in the name of Richard C. Brown. Under that name, he had actually made three lackadaisical stops at three widely separated restaurants that morning. At one of them, he had actually been forced to make a sale, as his order-book showed.

When he came out of the checkroom, he was Robert D. Brown. In that identity, he would make two or three torpid calls at drug-stores during the afternoon, plus a few more during the next three

days. That was part of the schedule — the most tiresome part, of course. It was a waste of time. But it was time indispensably given up, he felt, to protect his best interests in so many roles.

The business concerns for which he sold — or, at any rate, with whose products he travelled—were small and specialised. No high-pressure salesmen competed for their exclusive territorial rights. The owners of these companies might wonder what type of paralysis affected the slow-motion Brown, but, from their standpoint, paying him only on a commission basis, even a few sales were better than none.

As for Mr. Brown, he had other fish to fry. Far more important matters demanded his time and intelligence.

As always, when he made the change from one identity to another, he paused before the first mirror that caught his eye. The hesitation was brief, hardly more than a flicker — it was as though he half-expected to find revealed, literally, a new and totally different man. It was as if he expected to see features even more forceful and magnetic, if that were possible, than they had been before.

This time, the mirror was a rectangle in a vending machine. Robert was a little disappointed that the reflection showed no marked change. His face, in spite of its forcefulness, was smooth, oval, a little asymmetrical, just as Richard's had been. The magnetic eyes that peered back at him from beneath wisps of sandy eyebrows were still pale-blue and grey, much like those of an alert rooster. Even the hair—he removed his hat to make sure—was a downy pink, and still scarce.

Robert D. looked like Richard C. He also looked like Raymond A. Brown of Hartford, and Reynold B. Brown of Boston. In any identity, for that matter, he knew that he resembled a great many men people find it hard to remember.

Then what made him so irresistible to women?

Robert shrugged, puzzled but complacent, and moved away. Probably, he decided, when he stared hard at himself in the mirror, his inner personality simply went into aloof, sensitive retirement.

It was convenient, of course, that his appearance was not too remarkable. It was much, much safer, to be inconspicuous. He looked like any respectable, married, thirty-nine-year-old businessman, hard-working and moderately successful—and why shouldn't he? The description was true.

There was only one detail in this picture of himself that did not

quite satisfy him. His success, in a highly speculative investment field, was far too moderate. At least, it had been thus far, in the fifteen years since his first marriage, when Lucille's financial assets gave him the means to begin dealing on a large scale in his favourite securities.

The securities he bought were betting slips, in the horse-racing market. Brown—all four of him—did not exactly play the horses. It had long ceased to be play. He studied, he computed, he doped according to the rules of his system, and then made shrewd investments. It was full-time employment, too. No system is so perfect it can't be improved, he often told himself, after which, he set about computing and doping some more, seeking to plug up all possible leaks, leaks that stubbornly reappeared in his formulae.

On his way to lunch, the real start of his business day, he bought every form-sheet and newspaper with information about the fluctuations that would take place that afternoon, as soon as the tracks opened. In the quiet restaurant where he dined, he was a familiar figure, with his charts, his notes, his record-books.

The waitress who set his place asked him, "Feeling lucky today, Mr. Brown? I could certainly use a long shot, myself, if you've got something sure."

Questions like this made him wince, inwardly, as hopelessly amateurish. How could anyone speak of luck, a long shot and a sure thing, all in the same breath? But he smiled amiably and tried not to sound condescending.

"Maybe. If I find something really hot, I'll let you know."

But the waitress scarcely heard him, her mind skipping ahead on a more facetious tangent. "What I wonder about customers doping the horses. Well, maybe you can. But I'd like to see you try something tough, like making book on people. Be honest, Mr. Brown, sometimes you can't even figure your own wife."

Brown began a firm reply. "On the contrary," he said, and then just as firmly stopped.

Without even asking, or caring, *which* wife the waitress had in mind, the subject was taboo. It was a sore point, besides. He had been about to state that just the opposite was true. His wives ran true to form, he had found, and he only wished—how deeply and painfully he wished!—he could say the same for horses.

But the subject was too distressing to talk about. It would be unwise to speak with too much authority. By this time, the wait-

ress had given him a menu, and gone.

It was a fact, though—and a sad one—that, as Raymond A. Brown, he had suffered reverses in his first two years of marriage with Lucille, and they had cost him nearly all of the 27,000 dollars with which she had opened their joint bank account. Joint bank accounts, like joint ownership, of property, Brown regarded surely among man's finest invention. There had been a dark period when, if Lucille had thoughtlessly written a cheque, it was quite possible that their marriage might actually have exploded.

Fortunately, he had grown very fond of a new and recently widowed acquaintance, a lady well worthy of becoming his wife. This was Helen, and she had brought a comfortable 40,000 dollars to her joint bank account with Reynold B. Brown. The name, like the initial, was chosen as an orderly help to Brown's memory—at that time, he had had no intention of working his way through the alphabet. So, with Helen's unconscious but timely backing, he had recapitalised and re-financed all around. Naturally of course, he had devoted his own added insight toward a few final, vitally necessary improvements in the system.

These improvements had helped—but not enough.

His losses had been considerably slowed down. Investments that showed splendid results almost equalled those that failed. There was one year, indeed, when his accounts showed that he had broken practically even.

All the same, his resources were again depleted when he met Marion, and she, too, was welcomed into the firm—though not in those exact words. Her 18,000 dollars contribution to a joint bank account with Richard C. Brown had been modest, but timely and, for a while, it seemed as though the tide had finally turned.

But it hadn't turned enough—not quite. He met the gay, ornamental, chaotic Bernice, and there came a day—the day he learned she had recently inherited 20,000 dollars—when he asked her, too, if she would like to be his helpmate. This was how he became Robert D. Brown, sitting among the financial guides and investment paraphernalia spread out on the table of a quiet Philadelphia restaurant.

This was why he regretted that his success, thus far, had been so moderate. The tide had now, at last, definitely turned. But there were still precarious days, uncertain weeks, ahead.

This was why, while he concen-

trated on his chops and salad and coffee, he also pondered the mysteries of the alphabet. Would there ever be a Rudolph E. Brown? If so, what would the fellow's wife be like? He couldn't help wondering.

He finished lunch and, afterward, went on with his calculations, making the serious decisions of the day. When he had them, as he paid the bill and tipped the waitress, he remembered something.

"Bold Magician in the sixth at Bowie," he told her. "That's today's best."

"What?"

It was apparent she had forgotten their earlier talk. Brown merely repeated the name of the horse, smiling with professional reserve.

He had a lot to do that afternoon. Place his bets—collect on yesterday's single winner—call on three or four drugstores with those tiresome cosmetics. This last he considered a waste of time, save for use as an alibi he hoped he would never need.

III

It was seven o'clock that evening when Brown arrived at the big, solid apartment building in Newark, where he and Bernice had established residence. He did not like it, though he felt no fear, at sight of a police prowl-car, an ambulance and other official cars, drawn up before the entrance with a knot of spectators gathered in solemn curiosity on the walk outside.

But he could not down a wave of uneasiness when he exchanged a nod with the elevator man, then received a sudden, startled glance of recognition, quickly veiled and averted. The attendants usually spoke after one of Brown's trips —and his suitcase showed he was just returning from one. Now they ascended in silence to the fourth floor.

He saw why, when he stepped out. The door of his apartment was open. Beyond it, he saw men obviously in authority, men in uniforms, men in plain clothes, even one man in white. Something unscheduled had occurred, and that alone spelled danger. But this was more than unusual—it was grim. Fright followed his first consternation, then panic, then dread.

Rigidly controlling himself, he walked through the small foyer of the apartment and halted in the middle of the living room. A uniformed police lieutenant looked at his suitcase, then at him. The lieutenant's stare was sympathetic, but, at the same time, it openly and carefully studied his face.

"Mr. Brown?" he asked.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid. It's your wife." The lieutenant paused, letting this register. Brown gave no reaction, except to put down his suitcase, then urgently and fearfully wait to hear more. "I'm Lieutenant Storber. Your wife is dead."

Brown gave a stunned, disbelieving echo. "Bernice dead? She *can't* be. What happened?"

The lieutenant made indirect reply with another question. "Did your wife have any reason to commit suicide, Mr. Brown?"

"Suicide?" Brown's astonishment was a spontaneous, total denial of the idea. "That's impossible. It's silly. Why, she just bought another . . . No, it's out of the question."

"She just bought another *what*, Mr. Brown?" the lieutenant asked him gently.

Brown answered mechanically, but his features began to come apart. "Another cook-book. Would a person who did that ever think about . . . ? It was a thick one, too."

"We know. We found it in the kitchen."

Brown's knees seemed to become unfastened, and the lieutenant helped him as he sagged into the nearest chair.

"I tell you, there must be a mistake," he insisted weakly. "You haven't investigated thoroughly enough. You'll have to look around some more. When did it happen? *How?*"

The lieutenant sighed, took out a notebook. An interne emerged from an adjoining room, one used as a lounge and library. Not seeing Brown, he spoke to two men in plain clothes who were giving the living room a cursory inspection.

"D.O.A.," said the interne. "It looks to me like a stiff dose of cyanide in a cocktail, probably a sidecar. That's up to the medical examiner's office. But I'd say she drank it quick, and death was practically instantaneous. At a guess, it must have been six or seven hours ago. Around noon."

The interne went out, and the lieutenant sighed, flipped open the note-book, found a pencil.

"That's about it, Mr. Brown." The perfunctory words were filled with commiseration. "We just got here ourselves, following a telephone call from some woman, probably a friend or neighbour we haven't yet located, and that's what we found. Your wife in the next room, with one empty glass —hers! Out in the kitchen, where she must have mixed it, cyanide in the bottle of brandy. No sign of a visitor. Nothing disturbed, apparently. She left no note, which is a little unusual. But

you'd be surprised how often they don't."

"I don't believe it," Brown protested hotly. "She didn't kill herself. She coudln't. *Never!*"

The lieutenant sighed again, and his voice was soothing. "I know how you feel. But that's the way it hits everybody, when it's close to them. Because, if you realise a person is depressed and despondent, then something is done about it, more likely than not, and it never gets as far as this. There are other times a person gets into a suicidal frame of mind and doesn't tell anybody. When that happens, naturally nobody believes it, at first."

"I'll *never* believe it," said Brown firmly. "You've got to look into this. This is something else. It's *got* to be."

"Oh, don't worry, we'll dig into it," the lieutenant assured him heartily, but without much personal conviction. "We won't drop this until we're completely satisfied. Now, where have you been this afternoon, Mr. Brown?"

Brown's surprise was genuine. "Who—*me?*"

"Yes, you. We'll begin with you. Where were you around twelve or one o'clock, for instance?"

"Having lunch in a restaurant in Philadelphia," said Brown readily. He supplied the name of the place. "I was there for almost two hours. The waitress ought to remember me—she asked for a tip on the races, and I gave her Bold Magician. After that, I made several business calls at drugstores. My order book is in the car downstairs. It shows where I stopped."

The lieutenant was nodding, making only the briefest of notes. In spite of his shock and grief, Brown realised that the schedule to which he had adhered so rigidly was indeed paying off, in a serious emergency. He had never anticipated an emergency quite so drastic and dreadful. But now that it was upon him, the plan was there, a safeguard against the exposure of his illegal marriages, against even the possibility of suspicion in this present trouble.

Local newspapers, the next day, carried three- and four-paragraph stories on inside pages about the apparently impulsive, macabre suicide of Mrs. Robert D. Brown. There were pictures of the twenty-eight-year-old Bernice. One caption read: *Beauty Drinks Death Cocktail.* Stories mentioned Mr. Brown, who had not been at home, as a salesman travelling for Glamor-Glo Cosmetics.

Bernice had two older sisters, one of them married. These, with the brother-in-law, helped Brown with the few arrangements that had to be made. The brother-in-

law confided in Brown, and Lieutenant Storber.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not surprised. Bernice was always moody and different. Most people wouldn't notice, but there were little things gave her away, to anyone who had his eyes open."

She was buried on the third day, at a quiet service. Brown came back to the apartment afterward, but there was nothing for him to do. He made arrangements to have the furniture stored and to terminate his lease. Then he packed his personal suitcase. It was the third day. He was due in Hartford that evening, at seven o'clock. Lucille would be expecting him—as Raymond A. Brown, salesman for a firm that manufactured smokers' accessories.

Brown felt better after the change-over. Lucille might have her faults, but, tactfully handled and ignoring her sudden outbursts of temper, she could also be a wonderful tonic for the nerves. Bruised and shaken as his were, after the last three days, he needed an influence that would restore his normal poise and self-confidence.

Therefore it was strange, and more than frightening, when he arrived at his modest, two-storey Hartford home that evening, to find a police prowl car parked in front of it, along with others whose official look he knew too well. The newly familiar scene was only too familiar.

He felt that this was a motion picture he had seen before. He hadn't liked it the first time, but now he was plunged, in a single moment, from uneasy disbelief to numb horror. This couldn't be happening—not again—not to him. But it *was* happening. It didn't help, for some reason it was only worse, much worse, that this time he knew all the lines by heart, including his own.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Mr. Brown. It's your wife. I'm Lieutenant-detective Todd. Your wife is dead."

"Lucille? Dead? She can't be. It's impossible. It's silly. This whole thing is silly. What happened?"

"Did your wife have any reason for taking her own life, Mr. Brown?"

"Lucille kill herself? *No*—absolutely not. That's out of the question." Brown's repudiation this time, came from more than spontaneous grief. There was black suspicion behind it. "There's no chance she committed suicide, Lieutenant. None!"

The lieutenant's sympathy was partly habit, but he showed a trace of real curiosity, as well.

"Why do you say that, Mr. Brown? How can you be so sure?"

Brown opened his mouth to tell him why. It could not be coincidence that two of his wives, unknown of each other, had died by their own hands within a matter of days. But he checked himself in time. The mere existence of his surplus marriages, if exposed, spelled ruin.

"It wouldn't be like her," he said lamely. Then he collected his shattered wits and marshalled the solid facts of his alibi.

They were good enough for Lieutenant-detective Todd. The widower had been having lunch in a quiet restaurant, fifty miles away, at the hour Lucille drank a cocktail, an old-fashioned this time, loaded with cyanide. She had been alone in the house, in the downstairs bar. The bottle of liquor used in the drink also held cyanide.

An old, dusty tin of the substance had been found among the hand-wrought bracelets, brooches and costume novelties in which Lucille dabbled, as a hobby. Again, there was no note. But Lieutenant Todd told Brown that this happened more often than most people thought.

Three days later, the same iron-clad story satisfied Detective-inspector Casey of the Boston police, who was inquiring into the bizarre suicide of Mrs. Reynold B. Brown, housewife, of that city. Though hard-boiled, Casey and his fellow-officers were deeply touched by the protests of the bereaved husband that Helen couldn't, wouldn't and didn't knowingly drink that deadly old-fashioned. Again! Their investigation would be thorough, but did Brown have any cold facts to support his refusal to accept suicide as the obvious conclusion? Anything at all except his intuition?

Brown did, indeed, have one overwhelming fact, but he was not in any position to offer it. Some unknown party or parties had a profound grudge against him and his wives, and was methodically carrying it to the extreme limit. But who? Of more immediate importance, who would be next?

The answer to the last question was simplicity itself. When they buried Helen, and Brown tried to pull his tangled thoughts together, he was at least able to perform a problem in elementary arithmetic —subtractions, unfortunately. By ruthless annulment—he hated to call it murder, in an affair so personal—he had only one wife left, Marion, in Camden.

As to the method used in breaking up his happy homes, Brown had little doubt. Some inconspicuous person, a casual

friend, even a complete stranger with some plausible tale, had in each case called upon the victim when she was alone. At some point, the hostess would suggest cocktails, and, when she had poured them, her attention must have been diverted long enough, or, perhaps, she had been decoyed from the room, while the fatal drink was prepared.

After that, it was easy. Thoroughly wash, then replace the second cocktail glass. Put some more cyanide in the already open bottle, then unobtrusively depart. To the police, each case was no mystery, because it stood alone. Only Brown knew there were three, that they were linked and what the link was. Only Brown and —a murderer.

But who had such a fanatical resentment against Brown, the happy home-builder, and his uncomplaining wives? It occurred to him that he might somehow have come to the notice of an avenging misogynist. Some crank who hated not only women but marriage, especially wholesale marriage. That, he thought, might well be it. Brown, personally, had few close friends. He had, as far as he knew, no enemies.

After Boston, his regular schedule called for a restful, relaxing two-day trip back to Camden and now, in spite of serious misgivings, he set out for the city on the Delaware. He was worried about Marion, among a lot of other problems. He had forgotten to phone her, immersed as he was in so many tragic details. He wondered if he should call her now, with a peremptory warning not to drink any cocktails with anybody, no matter who?

He decided against it. For one thing, Marion never drank cocktails. He had never known her to drink anything alcoholic, not even beer, and she ought to be invulnerable to the only technique the killer seemed to know.

For another thing, if he did phone, any strange injunctions of that sort would be awfully, awfully hard to explain.

IV

At seven o'clock on the evening of the sixteenth, the day and the hour he was expected, Brown rolled to a stop at the kerb before his house in Camden. It was with relief that he found room to do so. The street was curiously empty of police and other too-familiar official vehicles. Marion met and greeted him at the front door, just as he reached it.

"Richard, darling!" she said, with warmth.

Even as they kissed, he spoke without thinking, from habit. "Yes. What's the matter?"

"Nothing—why should there be? Did you have a nice trip?"

Brown recollected himself almost with a start. He shook his head and, at the same time, nodded, achieving a circular motion that might mean a lot, but was intended to signify nothing. He went on into the living room and, for a moment, stood in the middle of it, looking around. It, too, seemed rather empty, unpopulated as it was by hard-eyed but sympathetic detectives.

Could it be, that the nightmare was over? He wondered. Though the riddle might never be solved—and Brown realised all too well that an official solution would be most inconvenient—the devastation, at least, might have ended. A simple armistice, in fact, with no more casualties, might be the best, the most congenial, finish possible, all around.

Brown's eyes were caught by an array of pamphlets, magazines, circulars, brochures, he had never seen before, certainly not on the table of his own living room. But their titles told him with ghastly clarity what they were—*Harmonious Hearts, Why Wait for a Mate?, Cupid's Catalogue, The Widow's Guide.* Literature from a host of Lonely Hearts Clubs, that blight of amateurism upon a loftly profession. What were they doing here? Who put them there, in the first place?

He took a deep breath to bellow an enraged question, but changed his mind. He looked at Marion, who smiled brightly in return, as composed as ever. Tonight, however, she seemed even more composed. Suddenly, Richard did not want to hear the answer to his unspoken question. At least, he did not want to hear the right answer, and he was almost certain this was the answer she would give.

Let the little woman have her secret foibles, Brown decided. Silence was truly golden.

"Are you tired, Richard?" she asked. "Shall I mix us some cocktails?"

Us? Brown sagged into the nearest chair, missing the firm, encouraging support of Lieutenant Something-or-other, in Newark. But he managed a nod, even ventured a cautious query.

"Thanks, honey. Only I thought you don't drink?"

Marion's reply was forthright and cheery. "Oh, I do now. It came over me, maybe I've been missing something. So I forced myself to experiment with a cocktail here and there, just now and then, these last few days. And I found I enjoyed them. A little drink never hurt anyone, at least,

not me. What would you like, an old-fashioned? A side-car?"

Brown was not aware that he had any preference, but Marion had already moved to perform the mixing. While the sound of ice-cubes, glasses and a serving tray clattered pleasantly from the kitchen, he thought hard about some of the phrases she had used. They were poorly chosen, no doubt about it.

Unless, of course, they were well-chosen, and intended to be. Had she meant, actually meant, a certain nerve-wracking interpretation that could be placed upon her words? An old-fashioned—or a side-car. These suggestions all too closely resembled bull's-eyes.

He looked at the table, again read a couple of obscene titles. *The Widow's Guide.* What widow? *Why Wait for a Mate?* This had a horribly impatient ring.

Brown remembered something suddenly and stood up. Marion emerged from the kitchen, bearing the tray with glasses and shaker as he entered it, like a sleep-walker, and crossed to the basement door. He went down the wooden steps and looked.

Sure enough, the hole for the fuel tank was still there, unfilled. So was the bag of cement. But the new tank was gone. There was the door to Marion's small but well-stocked darkroom. Didn't photographers often use certain potent chemicals?

From upstairs, through the floor of the living room, he heard the muffled, steady rattle of ice in a shaker. After a full minute of thought, he turned around and went back up.

The drinks were poured and waiting, and the scene, to the eye alone, was a study in domestic peace. Marion sat in the centre of the lounge, before a low stand holding their drinks. Opposite her was the large chair he favoured, when at home in Camden.

"I made old-fashioneds," said Marion, superfluously. "Try yours, Richard. Tell me if it's just right."

Just right for what? Still standing, Richard glanced once at the glass placed next to his chair, then at his packed suitcase, resting where he had left it beside the door.

"Tell me all about your trip," Marion coaxed. "Don't look so upset. After all, nothing terrible happened, did it? To *you* I mean?"

The question sounded both leading and commanding. He answered it. "No."

"You look positively haunted. Relax, Richard. Sit down."

He sat down, but he didn't relax. The horrible picture she had

painted was—or could be—far too logical.

"It's that job of yours," Marion declared, maternally. I think you ought to tell them that, hereafter, you'll confine yourself to just this area—our area. Don't *you* think you should—Richard?"

Richard guessed, from the tone of her voice, that a nod was expected. He delivered it. But what he was actually thinking about was the tap of a cop's hand on his shoulde, arresting Raymond-Reynold-Robert Brown for the murder of three wives.

"And I'll keep all your books and accounts for you," Marion informed him, with relentless kindliness. "Those petty details can be a burden. Hereafter, you can let *me* do all the worrying about them."

For a moment, Brown wondered whom she was quoting, but then he envisioned the vast scope of her co-operation and the disaster it spelled. He would not only have to sell those confounded gadgets, but close scrutiny of his accounts would disclose, and foredoom, any further operations of the whole Brown speculative system.

Now she was off on some other subject altogether. It was strange, Marion never used to be much of a talker.

". . . . so that's what I told the men from the company. They should take back the fuel tank until you finally decided, and, in the meantime, leave things the way they are. Have you tasted your drink, Richard? Come on, try it." She lifted her own glass, and exclaimed, with spirit, "Bottoms up."

Did he really have that dismal choice, between hopeless flight and his own basement?

"No thanks," he said, desperately, making the choice.

"Oh, don't be silly! Here, try a sip of mine." She leaned forward, as though to proffer a taste, and the next moment he found she had pressed her glass into his hand. "*You* keep it. I'll take yours."

It was a most understanding gesture, a most reassuring gesture —temporarily. Marion drank with zest. Richard took a sip. Nothing happened to either of them.

Minutes later, Marion was demanding his attention again.

". . . so, if you decide differently, Richard, any time you want, you can change your mind," said Marion.

"Decide?"

"About that hole downstairs."

"Oh, yes."

"Whatever you want. It's up to you." End

A Hitch-hiker Brushes Murder in a Short Story by

JOHN E. HASTY

Desire for vengeance is a sickness—all the psychiatrists agree on this. But so is doing time for the crime of a so-called friend. Gladden burned to wipe out the wrong with a bullet, for his soul refused to file it as—

Unfinished Business

THE CLOSER to Los Angeles, the tougher it was to hitch a ride. Everybody seemed to be in a hell of a hurry. Since the Navy truck dropped him near Oxnard, Gladden figured he must have walked eight or ten miles—the largest continuous stretch since he'd left San Francisco at four o'clock that morning.

It was now two in the afternoon, with the fury of the sun pouring down on him, and the pavement scorching the soles of his shoes. He felt hot and tired, but curiously he was not hungry, although he hadn't eaten since he'd started. It was a good thing, though, not being hungry. He was going to have to go easy on meals. He'd need most of what little money he had for return bus fare. The idea was to get back fast—kill Mac, then get back fast.

With luck, he'd be in San Francisco by to-morrow, the day after at the latest. Then he'd buy a half pint of cheap whisky. With the smell of it on his breath and on his clothes, he'd come stumbling into the crumby little skid row hotel where he lived, stinking, dirty, unshaven, looking like any other bum who'd been on a binge.

He'd hit the sack, and pretend to sleep it off, and wouldn't remember anything beyond drinking with a couple of winos on Howard Street. Not that anyone would question him. Who'd bother? At the end of the week, he'd report to the parole officer as usual.

The green Chevvie that picked him up south of Oxnard took him all the way to Hollywood. He uncramped himself from the seat, got out, thanked the guy, and stood there in a hot glare of late afternoon sunshine, watching the departing Chevvie lose itself in the flow of traffic. Automatically, his mind began working on the problem of how to find Mac.

In almost any other city—in

New York or Chicago or Detroit —you begin trying to locate a man by looking in the phone book. But in Hollywood, people in show business considered it strategic to have unlisted numbers. An unlisted number made you appear important, big time. As long as Gladden had known Mac, the telephone directory had never listed Lyle MacComber.

Mac's last address known to Gladden was the Sereno Apartments, near La Cienega Boulevard. It could do as a starting point. Mac had moved there from the little shack they had occupied together, because he had hooked up with a combo playing in a La Cienega nite spot, and said he wanted to be closer to the job.

"With me out every night," he had told Gladden, 'and snoring in all keys during the day, while you're trying to paint in the next room—well, it just won't work out. We'll keep in touch, though. And here—here's a couple of twenties, enough for another month's rent. Pay it back when you land a job with Walt Disney. Otherwise, forget it."

Mac had been kidding about the job with Disney. But a funny thing—two days later, the Disney studio had phoned Gladden and had expressed interest in the sketches he had submitted. They had wanted to talk to him on the following morning. Gladden hadn't kept the appointment. That evening, the cops had come in, searched him and the shack.

They had found a bottle of liquor from a store that had been robbed, along with the twenty-dollar bills. One of the bills had had a mark on it, a blob of purple ink. The old man who owned the liquor store had remembered it. So had the bank teller who had given it to him, not many hours before the stick-up.

When the police had questioned Mac, he had denied everything. If they had found a bottle of liquor, it belonged to Gladden. Mac had removed all his belongings when he moved. He had moved, because he couldn't get along with Gladden. Gladden? An oddball, a character who just wasn't right.

Mac had laughed about the twenty-dollar bills. Did that make sense? Going around giving away twenties? Besides, at the time of the stick-up he had been in another part of town, working out an arrangement with the piano player of the combo. The piano player confirmed it.

Although the store owner, under cross-examination, admitted having been knocked over the head before getting a good look at the stick-up man, he had clung tenaciously to his identification of

Gladden as the assailant. He couldn't describe the man in detail, but he could describe him closely enough. And the description did fit Gladden. So did the bottle of liquor and the bill with the purple blob on it. The jury had taken less than two hours to return a verdict of guilty.

At times, these events possessed for Gladden a faded, nebulous quality, as if they were part of a vaguely remembered dream, or a The only reality had been the reality of prison. His return to moving picture seen long ago. Hollywood brought fuzzy memories back into sharp focus, so vividly clear that they dimmed the actuality surrounding him. People passing him on the sidewalk, cars moving, now swiftly, now slowly, along the street, were without substance and meaning. He turned and walked in the direction of La Cienega Boulevard, thinking of the morning he had first met Mac.

Hollywood had been a new and exciting adventure then. On his way to deliver some art work to an advertising agency on the Sunset Strip, Gladden had stopped at Schwab's Drug Store for coffee. The counter was crowded with late breakfasters, as Gladden slid into the one vacant seat, alongside a big, broad-shouldered blonde character who wore sports clothes and a scarf knotted around his throat. He looked like a movie actor or, according to Gladden's conception, a director. Over coffee, they had exchanged a dozen or so words. Then Gladden had left.

Their second meeting had also been at Schwab's. It was dinner time — early — about five-thirty. When Gladden came in, Mac had been sitting alone at the end of the counter, a copy of *Variety* propped up in front of him against a sugar shaker. He had glanced up and said, "Hi! How's the art racket?"

Gladden had looked puzzled, and Mac had laughed. "I noticed those cartoons you had with you the other morning," was his explanation. "They were real George. Yours, or are you agenting for somebody?"

"Mine," Gladden had said, "and I wish some of these ad agencies thought as well of them."

"Hell, whatta you wasting your time on those chiselling fifteen percenters for? You oughta be with one of the big studios, doing animations. You got a touch."

"That's what I keep telling myself, but so far I haven't even got inside a studio gate," Gladden had replied.

This time they had talked all through a leisurely meal. Gladden learned that his new friend

was neither an actor nor a director, but played trumpet with a band on a television show. His name was Lyle MacComber, and he knew his way around Hollywood. With easy familiarity, he had dropped places and names, some of the latter so important that even Gladden recognised them.

"You know Al Corvak over at Paramount?"

"The art director? I've heard of him."

"Al's an old buddy of mine. During the war, we were in Special Services together. A prince. Say, what about me setting up a lunch date so you can meet him? It won't do you a bit of harm. How about next Thursday?"

"That'll be fine with me." Gladden had tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"Okay, I'll call Al and arrange it, and then phone you. What's your number?"

"Sunset 2-6421."

MacComber had scribbled it on the margin of his copy of *Variety* and said, "Great! I'll get in touch with Al tomorrow."

When they left Schwab's Gladden had picked up MacComber's dinner check.

He had heard nothing from MacComber for almost three weeks. Then, late one night, the phone rang, and the voice over it had sounded familiar.

"Johnny?"

"Yes."

"This is Mac."

"Who?"

"Ol' Massa MacComber. Lyle MacComber. Ah been havin' me a whole hatfulla trouble, son. Damned Yankees done run me off the plantation." He had made Gladden laugh, as he was always able to do. "No foolin', Johnny, I'm in a spot. Had a hassel with my landlady, and she gave me the heave-ho. Think you could put me up for to-night? Wanta see you anyway. Just had a talk with Al Corvak—he's been out of town, but he's back now—we'll get together with him and rig that date."

After Mac arrived, they had talked until almost daylight, mostly about Gladden's prospects. If nothing came of the get-together with Al Corvak, well, Mac had other connections. Solid, too—real solid. Before they went to bed, plans were made for Mac to move in with Gladden and share the rent.

He seldom did—nor did any of his connections pay off. Yet, somehow, Gladden hadn't resented this. Mac was always a lot of fun. Gladden liked him. A long time had passed before Gladden got Mac really pegged. A

long time—and three years of that time Gladden had spent in prison.

Three years—thirty-six months! A thousand and ninety-five days of steel and concrete and antiseptic odours. Gruelling work in the jute mill, which had ruined his hands so that he might never be able to paint again. As he walked the palm-fringed sidewalk, he thrust his hands in front of him, opened and closed his fingers, now too stiff to manipulate a brush. But not too stiff to take care of Mac . . .

In his imagination, Gladden had lived that scene again and again. He'd be waiting for Mac in the darkness of Mac's apartment, perhaps in the shadows of the empty street outside the home of Mac's newest girl friend, perhaps in the dim, deserted parking lot where, after a late show, Mac would come for his car.

When Mac appeared, Gladden would say softly—oh, so softly, "Hello, Mac. Remember me? Johnny Gladden?" He'd let Mac experience one agonising, fear-congealed moment. Then he'd press the muzzle of the little gun into Mac's belly, and squeeze the trigger. The little gun that hardly made any noise . . .

He walked on.

The Sereno—actually El Sereno—was not an apartment house but a motel—two rows of bungalows, each with a garage, set in a U shape around a central concrete area. Sere and dusty-looking palms flanked the driveway leading into the area on which several cars were parked. The first bungalow to the right bore a sign reading *Office*. Gladden decided he must play this cautiously, make his inquiries about MacComber seem casual. He went on in.

An elderly, undersized man, wearing khaki trousers and a sparkling clean white shirt, moved aimlessly behind the desk. He had watery blue eyes and melancholy moustache. He was listening to a small radio with the volume full up. He turned it down a trifle before he said, "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"What are your rates here, Pop?"

"Single?"

"That's right."

"Six dollars a day."

"*Oh*-oh! That's too rich for me. I figured it might be, just from the looks of the place. A friend of mine recommended it. Guy named MacComber. He still around, or has he moved someplace else?"

"If you mean Lyle MacComber, he's moved to Las Vegas."

"Las Vegas?" The words came explosively.

"I think he said Las Vegas.

Might have been Reno, though. Anyhow, Nevada. Landed a big job up there. Been gone for more'n a year now."

For a moment, Gladden had the insane urge to laugh. So this was the end of it! All his plans were dissolved into nothing. The long hitch-hike had been useless. Mac wasn't in Hollywood.

Suddenly, the total fatigue of all the miles that stretched between Hollywood and San Francisco blanketed upon Gladden. He felt as if something inside him had collapsed and with it, his strength. He discovered that his hands were clutching the edge of the desk, that the old man was looking at him curiously.

"Say, you're all right, ain't you? Not sick or something?" he asked with concern.

Gladden pushed his hat back from his forehead and let himself lean against the desk. What difference now what the old man thought about him? What reason to be cautious? He didn't reply until the old man repeated, "You all right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm tired, that's all. I hitch-hiked four hundred miles to-day to find a guy."

"MacComber? You know, I sorta figured you was pretty disappointed. When I told you MacComber wasn't around. What'd he do—owe you money?"

Gladden let the question go unanswered. In a moment the old man went on with, "Say, if you're busted—look, I just work here, and I'd catch hell if the manager ever found out—but a couple of fellas checked out of Bungalow D about twenty minutes ago, and it won't be made up till the night gal comes on at eight o'clock. If you wanta lay down in there and rest for a spell, go ahead. There's a shower, too."

The word made a picture in Gladden's mind. A cold, brisk shower, pelting against his body, washing away the heat and the weariness. He said, "Thanks, Pop. That would be swell. Thanks a lot!"

"That's okay. Maybe some day somebody'll do a favour for me. You look real done up."

He walked Gladden to the diminutive porch and pointed out the bungalow. "That's D—the one with the door open. Don't worry if you drop off to sleep. I'll be around a little before eight o'clock and wake you up."

Bungalow D consisted of a single room and bath. The twin beds were unmade, the pillows rumpled, the bedding tossed back and dragging on the floor. There were two chairs, a bureau, a small table marked with cigarette burns, rings left by damp tumblers. Gladden went into the bathroom,

closing the door behind him. He removed his coat, tie and shirt, closed the lid of the john, and sat on it to take off his shoes.

The effort seemed more than he could manage, and he had to pause and rest. He had never imagined he could be so tired. From outside, drifted the sound of a car, the soft throb of a motor, rhythmic, drowsy, blending into a reverie in which he saw a long stretch of pavement, flooded with sunshine and extending on and on between brown, heat-scented hills. Then both sound and image faded.

He was awakened sharply by the opening and closing of the outside door, the slam followed by voices, male voices engaged in a desultory argument.

"It's gotta be in here."

"Why didn't you think about it before we checked out?"

The two men, apparently, were the former occupants of the bungalow. Gladden sat very still, wondering, half fearfully, what he'd say if they should discover him and what would happen to the old man.

The voices went on. "A lousy cigarette lighter."

"It cost me forty bucks. And it's got my name engraved on it. Supposin' somebody finds it and hooks me up with MacComber?"

"How's anybody gonna hook you up with MacComber? Who knows we come here to get him?"

"That old guy in the office knows. You asked him about MacComber, didn't you?"

"I didn't ask nobody about nothin'. I found out MacComber ain't here, and I found out where he is. Or anyhow, where he'll be to-night at nine o'clock. Now stop yattin', and look for your lighter."

The sound of a dresser drawer being pulled out, then, "All the way to California to rub out a guy. We coulda rubbed him out in Nevada."

"Don't be a schmo. You know the set-up in Nevada—no killings since Buggsy. If the jerk had only stayed there, he coulda laughed about not payin' his gamblin' debts, but now—*cripes, Look!* There's your lighter, on the floor by the bed."

Silence. After that, the opening and closing of the outside door, then the fluttering explosions of a car starting.

Blood pounded beneath Gladden's temples as the meaning of what he had heard seeped through him. Mac had come back to Hollywood. He was back, and these two men had been sent to rub him out.

Gladden's initial reactions were instinctive. He began dressing rapidly, filled with a wild, unreasoned urge to do something.

What? Perhaps issue a warning—tell the old man in the office—do *something.*

He was fully dressed, standing outside the bathroom, before he realised he was thinking crazy. The old man would call the police. There'd be questions—questions only Gladden could answer—first, about the two men, then about himself. Who he was, where he was from, what he was doing here. They'd check his replies, find out he was violating his parole by leaving San Francisco. He'd be sent back to prison.

The two men were taking care of Mac. That wasn't the way Gladden wanted it, but that's the way it was. That's the way it had to be now, with him keeping strictly clear of it. He opened the door and looked out. The old man had his radio up to full volume again. The concrete area was deserted. Gladden moved across it to the sidewalk. As he reached it, he heard—or thought he heard—the old man call out to him. He did not look back—just quickened his pace and walked on.

He began to get panicky and his mind shouted conflicting orders. Running away like this was an even worse mistake. When the old man read in the papers about the MacComber killing, he'd remember Gladden, he'd remember this incident. He'd notify the police.

"Young fella—tall—dark hair. He was here last evening around seven o'clock, looking for MacComber. Acted sorta nervous and peculiar. No, he didn't give me his name or say where he was from. Hey, wait a second! He did say he'd come four hundred miles to find MacComber. So Wherever he's from, it's four hundred miles from here."

Then the teletypes would start clicking, and the bulletins would go out. Eventually, they'd pick him up for questioning. Name, Johnny Gladden. Criminal record, assault and robbery. Violating parole. Identified as the man looking for MacComber at the latter's former residence, only a few hours before nine o'clock, the night of the murder.

He was walking rapidly, his thoughts churning. *Take it easy. Slow down. Try to concentrate. Try to think this thing out.* The two men—if, somehow, they could be stopped. He could phone the police from a pay station—give a fake name, tell them about the two men. Tell them *what?* A fantastic story involving two guys you hadn't seen, couldn't describe.

The police would think him a crackpot. Even if they believed him, they'd want to know where he overheard these men. When

he answered that question, there'd be a squad car on its way to the motel, cops all over the place, listening to the old man's story.

All right, then, what about an alibi. He could arrange to be some place where people would see him. He could stay there until after nine o'clock. Better yet, he could be on the next bus headed for San Francisco. He could prove, then, that he wasn't anywhere near MacComber. Oh, great! At the same time, he'd be proving parole violation and would soon be on the return trip to prison.

The thing to do was to find Mac—find him, and warn him. He was somewhere in Los Angeles. *Somewhere!* Somewhere in a city that sprawled over an area of more than four hundred square miles.

Gladden was stepping off the kerb as the traffic light went red. He drew back, waited. When the light changed, people straggled past him, but he did not move. Weariness again hung upon him like leaden weights. His mind refused to work, retreated as an animal retreats, bruised and sullen, after vainly flinging itself against the barriers of a trap. All he could do was stand there.

Then, without apparent mental effort, it came to him. Schwab's Drug Store! Schwab's had always been Mac's hangout. He'd be certain to show up there. Somebody there would know where he could be found.

Gladden took a long, deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He was a long way from Schwab's but he began walking in that direction . . .

Nothing had changed. The magazine racks up in front, the glass showcases, crowded together, leaving narrow aisles that led to the phone booths in the rear. One of them occupied now by a girl. There were two waitresses behind the lunch counter. Gladden sat down, and the larger girl, wearing a white uniform that fitted her all too tightly, came toward him and flipped a menu in front of him.

Gladden shook his head. "I just dropped in to look for a friend of mine—Lyle MacComber. Has he been around recently?"

"I guess I don't know him."

"A trumpet player. He's on television. A tall, blonde, good-looking guy. He hangs out here."

"If he does, I ain't specially noticed him." She called to the other waitress. "Marge, you know anybody who comes in hereby the name—of . . .?"

"MacComber," Gladden said. "Everybdoy calls him Mac."

"Never heard of him."

So all this had been useless, a

waste of time. He thought, *I can't just sit here. I have to do something.* But all the energy seemed to have drained out of him. He remained in his seat, his shoulders hunched, his elbows resting on the counter. His gaze travelled to the reflection of a clock in the back-counter mirror. The image was backward—it had to be figured out. It was ten minutes of eight. At nine o'clock, in just seventy minutes, Mac would be dead.

Gladden went tense, his stomach tightening as if a hand had reached inside and squeezed it like a wet sponge. He'd never find Mac in time. There wasn't a chance. He slid off the stool, stood indecisively. The girl, emerging from the phone booth, set up a train of thought. In the old days, Mac had gone with a girl named Rita Logan. In spite of his lies, his two-timing, the condescending way he treated her, she was crazy about him. Rita might know where he was.

As Gladden moved to the phone booth, his legs seemed no longer to belong to his body. They threatened to give way and collapse him on the floor. He grasped the edge of the booth door, pulled himself inside. A dog-eared phone book hung there, and he began fumbling through the pages. He found the name—*Logan, Rita*—The same old address.

He deposited a dime and dialled the number. At the other end of the line, the telephone thrummed with that peculiar intonation from which you, somehow, are aware it's ringing in a deserted house, an empty room. She wasn't at home. She wasn't there. A dozen rings brought no answer.

Then, there was a sharp click, followed by a woman's voice. "Yeah?"

For an interval, Gladden could find no reply, and the voice said sharply, "*Hello!*"

"I'm calling Miss Logan. Is she there?"

"This is Rita Logan. Who'r *you?*" The words were slurred and halting. The woman was obviously drunk.

"I'm a friend of Lyle MacComber, from out of town. I wonder if you could tell me where he lives now, or give me his phone number."

"Watcha callin' *me* for? You got gall, botherin' me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know who else to call. Mac's often mentioned you, and I thought—"

"Oh, he has, huh? Well, that don't give you no right to call me up when I'm busy. I got friends here."

"Look, I'm only asking you if you can tell me how to locate Mac."

"Sure, I can tell yuh. Sure, I

can—if I wanta. But I don' wanta. I ain't no information bureau for every bum that comes to town." She began abusing him, screaming at him, overriding him when he attempted to speak. He felt sweat trickling down his face. He hung on, he *had* to hang on. There was so little time left.

Then, abruptly, the voice ceased. All at once, there was no sound, no dial tone—nothing. Gladden kept saying, "*Hello—hello — hello!*" *Frantically!* — louder each time, until he was shouting. Finally he stopped. Still holding the phone, he slouched against the wall of the booth, and rested.

A man's voice over the instrument jerked him to wakefulness. "*Hello!* Who is this? What's it all about?"

Gladden straightened, and tried to make his own voice sound polite and respectful. "I'm sorry if I caused any trouble. I'm a friend of Lyle MacComber. I thought maybe Miss Logan could tell me how to get in touch with him."

"MacComber's band is playing at the Rancho on the Sunset Strip. Now lay off, will ya?"

Gladden hung up. The Sunset Strip began just outside of Schwab's. The Rancho could be only blocks away. He left the booth and walked out of the drug store into the soft inflowing dusk.

On the plaster façade of the building had been painted in script the words, THE RANCHO. Underneath, in smaller letters, *Mac MacComber and His Vegas Vagabonds.* Gladden opened the synthetically weathered door, went inside, stopped. The front area was a bar. There was not much of a crowd. A young couple sat at one of the small tables. A group of three men stood at the bar in muted conversation with the barman. A brick wall with an archway separated the bar from the restaurant beyond. On the restaurant side of the wall, someone was noodling softly on a piano. A big man with black lacquer hair, wearing a sloppy Tuxedo, appeared from somewhere.

"Yes, Sir." His voice was smooth and oily. "Table for one?"

"No table," Gladden said, "I want to see one of the guys in the band."

"Oh? Well, we haven't a band."

"I mean the Vegas Vagabonds."

"They closed here last Sunday. So you'll probably have to go all the way to Las Vegas."

"There's somebody playing back there."

The big man smiled sarcastically. "That happens to be a piano." He put a hand on Gladden's shoulder. "No band — that's all, chum."

Gladden drew away. "If you don't mind, I'll take a look."

The big man grasped him by the shoulder again, spun him around. "I said *that's all!*"

Something quite apart from Gladden took over. It was as if he were standing aside, watching himself, watching his back and shoulders stiffen, the fingers of his right hand tighten together. This was not happening to Johnny Gladden, but to someone else. Then he felt pain across his knuckles. The big man reeled backwards, crashing against one of the tables.

The young couple, sitting nearby, stood up swiftly. The girl made a little sound in her throat. One of the men from the bar strode across the room. He held a police badge cupped in his palm. He took Gladden's arm and said, "All right, tough guy, I guess you and me'll take a ride to the jail house."

Gladden knew now that, from the start, all this had been foreordained. He saw, with startling clarity, that he had never really had a chance. He had been moving, not of his own free will but according to the subtle design of malevolent fate, fate that had permitted Mac to beat him again. Mac was safe in Nevada — Johnny Gladden was on his way back to prison.

The cop was walking him out through the doorway on to the sidewalk. At the curb was parked a bright red Jaguar. A man was climbing out of it — and the man was Mac. Mac was heavier than Gladden's recollection of him, his complexion more florid, yet he was still dashingly handsome in his dark brown slacks and shaggy, cream-coloured sports coat.

Gladden's throat tightened for an instant so he could not call out. When the call did come, it was lost in the blast of gunfire and the roar of a black coupe that sped westward along Sunset.

MacComber drew himself up straight. He stood quite still for a moment before his legs gave way, and he sank to his knees, gripping his belly. Then he toppled over sideways and lay on the sidewalk, the tiny pink bubbles breaking between his lips.

Almost instantly, a crowd gathered, forming a tight, dense circle around Mac and the cop, who was attempting to take charge.

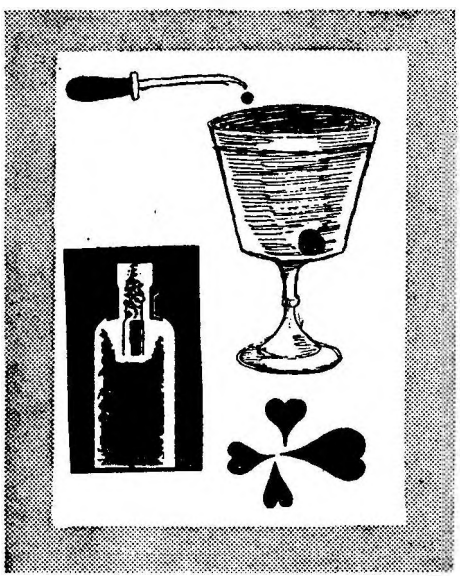
Gladden moved away from the scene, walking slowly until he turned off on to a side street, then more briskly. In spite of his fatigue, he felt elation and new confidence. The fatigue would pass — and so would his parole period. He knew now that, someday, he would be back in Hollywood, that he'd be working for Disney after all. *End*

Diary of a Man Driven to Kill by

MARGARET MANNERS

I was not the marrying kind—in fact, all women made me afraid. Sybilla should have know she was signing her own death warrant when she led me into the trap!

Hard Way Out



HER PRESENCE ALONE would be enough to disturb me, but, adding insult to injury, Sybilla insists upon being devoted. I cannot believe that this horror has happened to *me.* I have come to the conclusion that there must be witchcraft in it, or something of the sort. I have never cared for women very much, anyway. I naturally distrust and fear the female of the species, but certainly delicate, pale blondes, with large green eyes, have never attracted me. I find the type basically upsetting.

How did it happen? I really cannot remember any of it very clearly.

Living on a more than adequate income, which I had the good fortune to inherit from my parents, and having no job to go to every day, makes it all the more trying. True, I have my collection of prints, my books and coins, the articles I write. Then, too, I have accomplished one thing — I have my retreat.

My "den," as Sybilla calls it, is inviolate. She never crosses the threshold. But I can feel her patiently waiting for me to emerge, so that she can welcome me with one of her enveloping smiles. She is so discreetly long-suffering. She never complains about the long

hours I spend by myself. It is insufferable — I cannot call my soul my own.

Even in my sanctum, she makes her presence felt. *She* gave me the desk I am using. I could hardly refuse it, and it is really a beautiful piece, not at all the sort of thing I should have expected her to choose, but she *mercilessly* studies my tastes.

A very expensive gift for Sybilla, whose own income is something less than adequate. Fortunately, the locks are excellent. I keep this journal in one of the drawers, and the key is always with me. Without this means of letting off steam, I think I might go beserk and start smashing things.

It was all very strange. I first met Sybilla at a party, and her long interested sidences flattered me. She is an extremely clever woman. Most of her sex cannot listen, can never keep quiet, Sybilla's wide, absorbed gaze was very soothing. I drove her home. *Home!* A miserable furnished apartment, that hesitated between gentility and bohemianism, with a cooking arrangement in a cupboard.

Any woman who could prepare the meals Sybilla prepared in that cul-de-sac is a formidable adversary. Brave and chintzzy, it was, and utterly, utterly depressing. I suppose that I felt sorry for her. Anyway, there were a few concerts and drives in the country — and merely one or two kisses, which were prompted by curiosity. I very much wanted to learn if I attracted her.

It all culminated in a night I shall never forget, yet, ironically enough, can never quite remember. It was late, and there was a moon. An enchanting night — the acme of insipid sentimentality—so tritely romantic that it made one uncomfortable. One felt that the whole universe was trying to reproduce the final scene of a musical comedy and succeeding all too admirably. Over everything, hung a faint echo of papier mache. Sybilla, who was thirty-five, looked about eighteen.

Then I had a lapse that memory will not fill. The absurd words jumped into my brain from some hidden source. "Will you marry me?" I'm almost sure I didn't say them. How *could* I have? My own voice — I would surely remember the sound of my own voice!

All I remember was my horror at hearing Sybilla say, "Of *course* I will, darling," very gravely and seriously.

I was stunned. It was impossible. I had been tricked. But how?

She reached up confidently, obediently, and kissed me — the gesture of a woman who knows she has won. On the way down,

I stumbled and staggered like a man who is ill. I wanted to say she had made a mistake, that it was quite out of the question.

As if she could read my mind, she took my hand and said, "I promise you won't regret it. I'll never be a nuisance." And then she laughed, a little soprano trill of laughter that made my blood run cold. I was hooked, as the saying goes.

I squirmed on the hook, to be sure, but there is a quiet strength in these patient, understanding women that leaves mere man as weak as jelly. Like a man in a dream, I was married, and, like a man in a dream, I brought home my bride.

At first, I waited in fear and trembling, ready to defend myself against all furniture-moving, re-arranging, habit-breaking. But Sybilla was far too cunning for that. Her goal was deeper. She was after my innermost soul. There were no overt attempts to change anything. I was left feeling deflated — a soldier, who had spent himself accumulating ammunition against an enemy that never attacked.

She was subtlety itself. "You must let me know just what you like, my dear — I don't want to make any mistakes." She was much too wise to give me any cause for complaint.

From the start, I made a point of separate rooms. I had to preserve some semblance of human dignity. On the wedding night, I left her at her bedroom door, with, "You are tired, Sybilla — rest well."

What control these creatures have! Her lips brushed my cheek. "How thoughtful, dear — good-night," she murmured. The door closed before I could depart. I felt idiotic.

Later on, in my room, I seemed to remember a look. Was it amusement, pain, wistful longing? I cannot bear to inflict pain. I capitulated and went to her room. Later I knew that I had made a grave mistake.

Her air of quiet domestic satisfaction at the breakfast table was insupportable. I locked myself in the "den" the rest of the day. It was the only defense I had. From the window, I could see her doing things in the garden and, once, I heard her singing.

At dinner I was cold and forbidding. The food was excellent. Is there nothing they will not stoop to? Even exploiting my weakness for souffles! After dinner, I complained of a headache, took a walk and retired early to my room. She was gently sympathetic, did not fuss to much. I was like a man beating against air, imprisoned by invisible walls.

At length, I have come to the end of my strength. I can bear it no longer. I have decided to act. I am writing this, not only as an outlet, but as a means of proving to myself that there is no other way. Writing demands a certain objectivity that thinking alone does not.

I have questioned her closely but casually, and have elicited the information that she could never go back to the life she lived before. I believe it — cooking in a cupboard! I know she would not accept money and divorce me. Sybilla never seems to care about money — she prefers to have me.

She put it one evening, quite simply and quietly. "You are my life, dear." Then she went on calmly sewing. It appalled me.

I do not want to hurt her. The only possible solution seems to be that Sybilla should 'cease upon the midnight with no pain, as the poet sings. It would be the kindest thing for her and I would be free of an intolerable existence.

I have made my plans. I have a supply of sleeping medicine on hand. I am a sensitive person, and, whenever I am nervous or upset, I cannot get to sleep without taking something. Lately, I have had to take it often.

I am allergic to most of the popular new remedies, so my doctor has had to fall back on an old standby that is very efficient. There is one drawback, though — the stuff is incredibly bitter.

But I have thought of a way. I have introduced the nightcap cocktail, my own invention, a drink before bedtime. And what odd mixtures I roguishly concoct and proffer for her approval. They have been getting more and more exotic, and, while Sybilla says she likes them, I think that is only to please me. No matter, as long as she drinks them. I have been saving the best for the last. It will disguise anything and will, I am sure numb the tastebuds for hours afterwards . . .

It will be soon. To-day I discovered Sybilla in a serious act of disobedience. She has flouted my authority. Hitherto, she has been too clever for me, but I know now that my instincts were all too sound. I am really glad to have this final proof of her perfidy. It is true that a man cannot call his mind or soul his own, with such a woman in the house.

Yesterday, I went to the city to see an editor of one of the periodicals I write for. It was a business trip. There was no reason why I should take Sybilla. Besides, I needed to get away alone, to assert myself. I told her that I would stay in town overnight at a hotel and come back late to-day.

Instead, I returned this morning

— and I caught her. As I walked into the house, she was just coming out of my den!

She was frowning, and, when she saw me watching her, she turned quite pale, then blushed. I said nothing. I just looked at her.

I had to admire her. Her voice faltered, but only for an instant, as she said, "I thought I ought to see if the drapes in the den needed cleaning, Horace."

I fingered the desk drawer-key in my pocket. What a blessing that I am always careful, and never forget to lock that drawer!

I did not return her smile. "Mrs. Tibbet will take care of such things, my dear, as she always has," I told her coldly.

Mrs. Tibbet is old and wiry, with whiskers on her chin. She is unlovely, but clean, indefatigable and taciturn. She comes in every day and leaves after the dishes are done in the evenings. She has served me thus for years.

Sybilla tried again. "I thought perhaps you might like *me* to . . . since you don't *like* your den disturbed."

The inference being, of course, that I would prefer her in my sanctum, poking about, instead of the ignorant Mrs. Tibbet, who has no interest in anything literary and can barely read!

I made myself quite clear, saying, "We'll leave things as they are. I'm used to Mrs. Tibbet, and *she* is completely trustworthy. Besides, I have no wish to offend her."

Sybilla's hand was in the pocket of her dress, and I could see that she was clenching it tightly. Then she asked me something that astonished me. "What was your mother like, Horace?"

"She was a fine woman," I said, and then — God knows why — I blurted out. "She managed me!"

"But I don't, you know." Sybilla said.

For the first time, I felt that I was really reading the expression in her eyes — a mixture of patience and pity. It is, I know, a woman's way when in the wrong, to pity the man who is in the right!

I went into the den. Of course, the first thing I did was to unlock the drawer. Everything was as I had left it — and the drawer *was* locked. Sybilla may be a witch, but I doubt that even she can open a lock by incantation.

I am horribly shaken. I cannot believe that I have done it at last. The night has not yet passed, but I feel as if I have aged years in these few hours.

Before bedtime, I made the cocktails, one for her and one for me. I was careful about hers. I gave her enough to put her to sleep forever, but not so much that the possibility of an acci-

dental overdose would be incredible. Afterward, I planned to remove all traces of the cocktail and substitute for it a glass rinsed out with a little of the sleeping medicine. I would tell the doctor, quite frankly, that she had been in the habit of borrowing it lately, as she had not been sleeping well.

Sybilla drank every drop. There was a cold hand on my heart, as I watched her. But I had to go through with it. I could not afford to weaken now — it was too late. The mixture did all I had hoped for — there was not a shudder, not a grimace. She did say, which I thought rather odd, "This one should have an oriental name."

I asked her why.

"An aroma of rose petals," she said. "How did you manage that?"

I smiled wisely — but it certainly was an odd remark.

I persuaded her to go to her room immediately. I was suddenly filled with compassion. I wanted her to drop of pleasantly in bed. No horrors . . .

I went into my room, to wait. That hour was a lifetime I could not live through again. I began to think that I had been a fool, that I would never get away with it. I saw myself being tried, I heard the jury bring in the verdict of guilty.

Then I grew calmer — there was no palpable reason, no motive. I *had* married her, presumably, because I wanted to. *I* had the money, not she. Why should a man rid himself of a wife whom he can hardly have had time to tire, and whose death would not materially enrich him? I can't find the answer to that, myself. It would sound silly to say I was afraid.

And so, having waited longer than was necessary to allow Sybilla to fall into her deep sleep, I went back to put that glass I had prepared beside her bed. I looped the belt of my bathrobe around it, to protect it from my fingerprints.

I opened the door. Her light was on. *Sybilla was sitting up in bed, reading!*

We stared at each other. There is a little table in the hall, just outside her door. I had barely enough presence of mind to put the glass down on it. My voice sounded cracked and strained. "Not asleep yet?"

"No, Horace — but how sweet of you, dear! *Do* come in."

I couldn't understand it. She must, I thought, be one of those rare people who react slowly. I stood there like a fool.

It was she who offered me a way out,with, "You look ill — is anything the matter, dear?" Her voice was full of wifely concern.

Of course, I looked ill. Actually, at that moment, I *was* ill! I murmured something about the

cocktail having disagreed with me, and asked for one of her indigestion tablets. Before I could stop her, she rose out of bed to get it for me. I was horrified lest the effort caused her to fall on her face, but nothing untoward happened.

"Would you like me to come and sit with you until you fall asleep?" she asked gently.

Briefly. I was stunned.

"*No!*" I almost shouted it. Then I added that I preferred to be alone when I was feeling unwell.

She nodded and smiled affectionately. "My unyielding bachelor," she said and touched my forehead with her lips. "Go back to bed, dear. You're in a cold sweat!"

Of course, I was in a cold sweat! Anyone in my position would have been.

I remembered to pick up the glass from the hall table and brought it back to my room with me. I must take care of it early in the morning. I can't return for it now — I *can't!* What a night! I shan't sleep a wink.

Sybilla is dead . . . Sybilla is dead!

How can I pick up this narrative now — this narrative, that belonged to a different man, and continue it? For I *am* a different man. I have re-read what I wrote years ago, and I can scarcely believe that it was my brain, my hand, that conceived and put down those words.

I am suffering from shock. Even though I expected it, death is always a tremendous shock. It is so final, so complete — one can never go back. It has been a long time, and these pages look strange to me, yet I feel forced to finish them. It would not be right to leave them as they are.

I can shut my eyes and go back to that night, like a man outside of myself, see that man that I was and register all his thoughts, those thoughts that are no longer mine . . .

When dawn broke, I went back to Sybilla's room. She was in a deep sleep — but her breathing was as natural and even as a child's How long it took—I was amazed. Just as I lifted her hand to press it around the glass, *she awoke and sat up in bed!*

"Why, Horace, dear, what is it?" she asked me.

I thought I was going to faint.

Sybilla was all solicitude. I told her I hadn't slept and, in order to explain the glass in my hand, said that I was going to take a sleeping draft. I had come in to tell her that I would not be down for breakfast, and did not want to be disturbed.

Apparently, the dose had had no effect upon her whatsoever.

She looked bright and well-rested. Her respiration was normal.

I went back to my room in a daze. I would have to pretend to sleep until the afternoon. I was tired, absolutely exhausted, spiritually and mentally, but I knew I could not sleep. I decided to do just what I had said I would do. I went to the bathroom, took down the jar of crystals and mixed my regular dose. Since the stuff is so bitter, I always tossed it off in one gulp, like straight whisky.

It almost paralyzed me. But, although it was revoltingly unpleasant, it was *not* bitter. It was sickly, heavily scented, like perfume.

No wonder, Sybilla hadn't . . . But, at that moment, my stomach muscles rebelled, and I returned the nauseating mixture I had just swallowed.

I heard her voice at my elbow then. I had been making so much noise that I hadn't heard the door, or her footsteps, through the bedroom.

She filled a glass with water. "Rinse out your mouth immediately," she said.

When I could do so, I looked at her. She seemed very much upset. Her words tumbled out, humble, worried, apologetic. "I'm so sorry, Horace! But I had just waked up and didn't think to tell you—then I just didn't remember. Sorry, I was too late."

My God! I thought. *She's poisoned me!*

"It was silly of me," she went on, "but you do get so annoyed if I touch your things. The other morning, I was tidying up in here and — well — I had an accident. The bottle didn't break, but the top flew off, and the crystals spilled all over the place. I had to sweep them up and throw them away. I didn't want you to notice. I was going to get the doctor to give me a prescription, so that I could replace it, but meanwhile . . ."

"What is it?" I gasped. "What have I taken?"

"Oh, it can't hurt you, dear—just my bath salts. They were the only thing I had that looked enough like the other stuff. It was just temporary, of course. I didn't think you'd take any before I . . . I'm so sorry.

I had to get out of the house. So, murmuring something about a walk and fresh air, I dressed and left.

My head was in a turmoil. Was it possible. Could a bottle fall in a tiled bathroom and not break? Would the top fly off, so that all the crystals spilled? Unlikely, certainly—but could I be sure it was impossible? If not that, then she must have deliberately—but how had she known that just at that time . . .? No, it must have

been as she said. She *might* have thought I wouldn't notice the substitution. It *was* true that I invariably made a scene if anything of mine was touched.

It was at once plausible and improbable.

The answer was awaiting me, when I returned to the house. I went into the sitting room. Sybilla was the picture of distaff bliss, with a sewing basket beside her. But she was not sewing, she was reading, or rather, turning the pages of a book.

Her voice was anxious, a little nervous, as she asked—"Are you feeling better? Would you like some breakfast after all?"

I had to begin somewhere. I asked her what she was reading.

"Just a thriller," she replied.

"Trash." I said.

She blushed. "I suppose so, but it's rather clever — you know, psychological?"

I waited.

She went on. "I was reading a book the other day on psychology. I learned a lot. You know, children will often fight their parents, fight what is good for them, fight what they *really* want because they resent the power the adult has over them. They will say and do the most dreadful things. Wish their father was dead — act it out, killing a doll, or just pretending, even having a *funeral*. The Parents have to understand that the child *really loves* them but he has to get it out of his system."

"Claptrap!" I told her. "Nonsense! Children like that should be spanked."

She looked a little worried. "Perhaps, a little, sometimes — but mostly they should be loved — loved and understood. You know, Horace, I'm not very good at explaining things, but I *do* understand."

What was she trying to tell me?

"These thrillers," she went on, like someone who is desperately trying to make conversation. "Trash, as you say, but clever. This one had quite a good idea. A man thinks someone is trying to kill him, and he finds evidence of these intentions in a diary. He makes a photostatic copy and deposits it in his lawyer's safe with instructions that it is to be given to the District Attorney in the event of his death. Then he lets the would-be murderer know what he has done."

I was literally choking, but I had to speak. "It's a worn-out device," I said. "Been used dozens of times."

"But effective, I think, Horace."

Then I saw the key lying on top of her open sewing basket. I knew every convolution, every notch of that key! I remembered the day I had gone to town and

returned to find her in the den.

Sybilla's voice came from a long way off. "Oh, yes, dear, I intended to tell you. If ever you lose the key to your desk — there were two, you know. I kept this one for you, just in case."

I saw it all. She had been reading my journal. She had removed it and had a photostat made. She knew! The bath salts — oriental rose petals, indeed!

I saw that she had let me know that we were to go on as if nothing had happened. She considered my plan a child's fantasy, one that I must get out of my system . . .

That was when I began to change. Not immediately, but it happened. After all, for some reason I *had* married her, and Sybilla seemed convinced that, despite myself, I had wanted to.

We were married just over ten years. Sybilla has just died, quietly in bed, after a long illness. I miss her — miss her as I never missed anyone.

I admit that, at first, it was the thought of that sealed envelope in the lawyer's safe, *To be opened in the event of my death.* I had to be sure that Sybilla didn't die. I worried if she sat in a draft. It became second nature to me to look after her and watch over her. There was nothing else to do. We had to live together.

I began to appreciate her cooking, her intelligent comments, her comeliness, her quietness—the way she had of always being there when I wanted her, or of disappearing when I wanted to be alone. Sybilla was a perfect wife.

Just before the end I thought of the lawyer's safe. It was a selfish thought. I had nothing to fear. The cause of Sybilla's death was clear. But to have that horrible thing read by any human eye — to have it whispered about . . .

I bent over her, "Sybilla. Can you sign a request so that — the papers with the lawyer?"

She looked at me once and smiled. "*Darling!*" she said, and that was all . . .

There was nothing in the lawyer's safe, nothing but a few family papers. There had never been anything. Was it all coincidence? An accident? The bath salts? The key? I hope so. But I think she knew and did not care. It was not herself she wanted to save, but me. *End.*

A Brief Tale of a Woman's Deadly Dilemma by

ROBERT E. BYRUM

Liz had shot the husband she didn't love and lost the man who loved her. So what was a widow to do?

Papa Knows Best

LIZ BUTLER was a young woman who took deep inner pride in her ability to co-ordinate her thoughts and feelings toward an intelligent goal, even under extraordinary circumstances. It was an integral part of her heritage as a daughter, on both sides of her family, of long lines of hard-drinking, hard-riding, hard-loving Virginia aristocrats.

Therefore, as she looked at the body of her husband, stretched out in the flower-blanketed bronze coffin, in front of the white-panelled altar in the lovely little eighteenth-century chapel, she was was dismayed by the vagrant irrelevancies of mind and emotion that prevented her from feeling grief.

Looking at him, dead, it was incredible to her that she had ever loved Len Butler sufficiently to have married him and borne him three children. There he lay, a waxen-faced stranger, a man she had lived with for over seven years — even since she was nineteen.

Carruthers, the undertaker, had done a good job, she thought. The folded white napkin draped with meticulous casualness across his forehead, effectively concealed the hideous mash the full charge of buckshot, from her prized silver-mounted Belgian under-and-over shotgun, had made of his upper skull.

It reminded her of Papa when he had one of his bad hangovers, and insisted on having Parmalee his bodyservant, put ice on his head. Trust Papa not to use a regular ice-bag — Carter Lansdowne, her sire, had a phobia against permitting rubber to come in direct contact with his skin.

"Rubber cuts off the air from the pores," he liked to say, usually moving his right fist slowly back and forth to obtain a gentle clink from the ice in the glass it held. "*Thunderation!* The skin's got to breathe!"

Liz glanced at her father, tall, thickset, ruddy of face and still fair of hair, blue-eyed, more than handsome. Beside him, in order of their years, were the three children —his three grandchildren—Penny, who was six, Margo, four, and little Toby, two. With their round, uncomprehending blue eyes, they reminded Liz of the three bears.

She looked once more, for the last time, on the unfamiliar face of the man who had been her husband, who had fathered her children, the stranger she had killed, only three days before, while out on the quail shoot.

"Damn it!" she said to him silently. "Why did you have to stick your head right in my line of fire?"

Poor Len had tried, with all the whole-souled earnestness of his Yankee ancestry, to convert himself into a Virginia sportsman — but it simply wasn't in him. He had paid for his effort with his life. Curiously, as she turned away, what Liz felt was relief — and hatred of herself for feeling so.

There was still the burial service, in the ancient, green-sodded little churchyard behind the chapel. There was the gathering at Tivoli, the red-bricked white-pillared Lansdowne ancestral mansion poor Len's Yankee money had done so much to restore. There was Len's mother, the hurt of losing him in her fine eyes, putting an arm around Liz' shoulders in the seclusion of a bedroom upstairs, saying, "It's *you* I feel sorry for, Liz — losing Len like this. You mustn't let it keep you from living."

And Liz, unable to say the dreadful thing in her heart — that now, perhaps, she was going to begin living for the first time — and mouthing, "No, Mother Butler, it's your son — my husband — we must pity. And the children we must care for."

Then there was Rick Hopkins, tall, grave, bronzed and handsome. Rick had roomed with Len at college, had been best man at the wedding, had flown from the West Coast as soon as he learned of the tragedy, and brought Mother Butler down from New York. His eyes were enigmatic as he held Liz's hand in farewell.

He said, softly. "You ought to get away for a while, Liz. I'm going to stay on East a few months. Maybe I'll see you in New York.

"Maybe," Liz said, deliberately vague. Even at such a time, she was woman enough to sense the invitation underlying his casualness. She had suspected — ever since her first meeting with Rick on the eve of her marriage to Len — and now she knew. She added, "There's such an awful lot to be done with Len gone — the children . . .

Then they were all gone, and the children were in bed, and it was just Papa and herself, sitting alone in the gracious, dignified, white-panelled living room, with its fine Georgian furniture and oddly primitive old portraits of Lansdownes and Hoopers and Killingworths and Metcalfs, and all the rest that had made Liz whatever she was.

Carter Lansdowne made the ice clink gently in his glass and regarded his daughter with an almost-amused glance. He said, "Liz-honey, I hope you realise you're rich."

She said, "Shut up, Papa — I know. You'll never have to worry about anything again."

He took a long sip, then said, "You know, Liz-honey, I'd been getting a feeling of late that poor Len was about ready to pull up and pull out of here — taking you and the children with him, of course. I never could have endured that — you belong here, just as I do."

He paused to shake his head and add, "But Len Butler never did. He was just an outsider. I used to have to call, *'Covey!'* so he'd know when to stand up and shoot. Not that he ever hit anything."

At such moments — there had been a number of them in the course of Liz's life with her father — she hated Papa. She longed to say, "You think it's a nice thing to be left a widow with three children at twenty-six, to be left with the knowledge you killed your husband?" She longed to say a number of other things, like, "If it weren't for this 'outsider' you wouldn't even be living in Tivoli," or, "It was Len who made the sacrifices — he never really liked it here — so you could play the ancestral gentleman."

Yet she didn't say them — there was no sense. Papa wouldn't have understood. His obtuseness infuriated Liz at times, just as his callous selfishness frightened her. But everyone adored Papa — the children, the neighbours, the servants, even the animals. Like herself, all were hopelessly trapped in the toils of his charm.

She rose, abruptly, and went alone into the gunroom. He knew better than to follow her there. Ever since she was a little girl, in jodhpurs and pigtails, whenever Liz was emotionally disturbed, she had turned to the things she loved and trusted the most — her guns. She found relief in oiling the beautifully machined steel barrels, in polishing the engraved silver mountings and fine wood stocks, in tending them and cleaning them until they shone spotless as jewels.

Liz was a Diana — by birth, by heritage, by her father's training. In

her middle teens, she had won a National junior title in skeet-shooting, and would have been women's champion in due course had not marriage and the arrival of Penny kept her out of competition. For Liz, there was something fine in the patience of the long tramps behind the dogs, the long waits in cover, the sudden flurry of animal action, the shot itself, the clean kill. They left her cleansed of all inner aggressions.

So she polished her guns and thought about Papa, and about poor Len, and about the, to her, inexplicable awkwardness in the field that had caused him to blunder into the path of her shot. She thought about Papa some more, and then about the children, and then about Rick Hopkins and the invitation in his light brown eyes. Then she put the gleaming weapons back in their cases and went up to bed, alone.

She flew to New York a week later, refusing a number of invitations to visit from girls she had gone to school with at Fermata and Warrenton, and took rooms in a quiet, upper-East-Side hotel. For the time being, she wanted to feel free.

She had a good time — so good a time that her conscience bothered her a little when it had opportunity to take itself felt. There were theatres, luncheons, dinners, cocktail parties, week-ends in Connecticut or on Long Island. There was shopping — and there was Rick.

He was with her as often and as long as she would let him. He was, unexpectedly, as much of an outdoor sportsman as poor Len had been the reverse — with a casual, loose-leaf California approach that Liz found herself increasingly liking and responding to. After ten days, he asked her to marry him.

"Naturally," he said over a cigarette, in a quiet little restaurant whose food was as softly palatable as its violin music, "I don't want to rush you, Liz."

"Then what would you call what you've been doing to me?" she asked him, feeling glowing and alive as she could not remember ever having felt.

He laughed softly, and one of his strong hands captured hers. "I wish I'd seen you first — I've been waiting a long time for this."

She withdrew her hand. "But the children, Rick — It wouldn't be fair to ask you to take on such a load."

"That's easy," was his reply. "We'll just turn them loose on the beach at La Jolla and let them grow into water-babies. It's the healthiest, happiest life for a child in the world. I know — I had it."

"But not right away . . ." Thus she consented.

She was supposed to break the news to Papa when she got back to Tivoli. But Toby came down with German measles the day after her return, and then one thing seemed to follow another so that, somehow, she never quite got around to it. She tried to explain to Rick over the telephone.

"Okay, Honey," he said, "then I'm coming down and break the news to Papa myself. After all, a man in love as I am with you has some rights."

That evening, for the first time since the funeral, she polished the guns. When she came out, Papa was sitting in his big chair, holding his big drink, in the living room. Regarding her with amusement and a flash of keenness, he said, "Something I've done, Liz-honey?"

Impulsively, she kissed him, almost causing him to spill his drink. "You've been darling," she told him. "No — it's Rick."

"If he's been dealing off the bottom of the deck, I'll horsewhip him." Papa's frown was ferocious.

"Oh *no*, Papa!" Liz said quickly. "It's nothing like that — he wants me to marry him."

"A little quick, isn't it?" Carter Lansdowne asked. Then, cocking his handsome, Roman head slightly on one side, "Still, he's been waiting a long time, Liz-honey. He's a bachelor, and a gentleman — at least he has the earmarks. I can't say I'm surprised."

"But you don't understand, Papa!" Liz almost wailed. "It's, oh — anyway, he's coming down here for a visit."

"Glad to welcome him," said Papa. "Nice to have another man around the house for a change."

Rick arrived the next afternoon. He brought presents for the children, some very special whisky for Papa, a seven-carat diamond ring for Liz, hung on a gold chain. "So you can wear it around your neck, out of sight, until we make this properly official," he told her.

He fitted into the Virginia life as if he had been born to it. He shot almost as well as Liz, rode almost as well as Papa. The children adored him.

One afternoon, when Liz returned from a household shopping drive to Warrenton, he said, "What are we waiting for, Darling? I've been talking to your father about it. I know some people who'll be delighted to take the place off your hands. They'll pay a good price, too. Then we can all go out to La Jolla. Your father is all for it — says he's been needing a change for years."

"He *is?*" Liz couldn't believe it. He *does?*" Then she embraced Rick passionately and said, "Oh, *Darling!*"

The next afternoon, when she got back from a visit to one of the neighbouring houses whose owner's wife was trying to start a local PTA movement, Rick was gone. Papa was enigmatic, apparently as puzzled as she.

"The damned cad didn't so such as say good-bye," he said, frowning.

"But I don't understand," she said. "I don't understand at all."

She waited three days for word from him, but none came. Then she packed up the seven-carat diamond and chain and mailed them to his address in La Jolla, with a stiff little note.

His answer came a week later. He wrote—

This is a most difficult letter, Liz, because my feelings for you remain unchanged. I shall always love you. Therefore, I wish you had kept the ring as a small token of what mere words can never express. But, since you're the fine person you are, you would feel you had to send it back.

This fineness of quality is what made your father's revelation all the more shocking. Naturally, it had never occurred to me that poor Len's death was not accidental. Even knowing the truth, I cannot find it in my heart to blame you. Remember, I roomed with him for a year, and I found him pretty irritating much of the time. As for being married to him, as you were, well . . .

But, just the same, under the circumstances, I do not feel that I could have acted in any other way . . .

There was more — but she didn't need to read it. She folded it neatly, thrust it away in her saddle-stitched handbag, went into the gun room. She understood all too clearly now — and with understanding came horror. *Papa!* It was he who had manoeuvred her into marriage with poor Len. It was Len's money that had restored Tivoli, and Papa had no intention of giving it up.

What was it that he had said, the evening of the funeral, when he was well into his cups? At that time, the words had meant nothing to her. Now they returned to haunt her.

". . . getting a feeling of late that poor Len was about ready to pull up and pull out of here—taking you and the children with him, of course. I never could have endured that . . . just an outsider. I used to have to call, 'Covey!' so he'd know when to stand up and shoot . . ."

She recalled Papa, that ghastly afternoon, standing to one side, watching her closely, as he always did when she shot — watching her, she had thought until now, with pride. She could hear his

cry of, *'Covey!'* — just before Len came blundering up from cover into the path of her double-charge. The memory remained vividly the same, but the pattern was altered — horribly, unbelievably altered.

She rubbed harder on the gun in her hand, wondering what she should do. There was no sense going to Rick — Papa had fixed that, as he had fixed every threat to his beloved way of life. No matter what she did, the monstrous lie would be always between Rick and herself. Besides, she could hardly call Papa a murderer when she, herself, had fired the fatal shells.

She hefted the gun she had polished until it gleamed and sighted it through the French windows overlooking the lawn. Papa was out there, playing some game with the children, who clustered around him, their golden little faces bright with interest and love. Cooly, Liz lifted the gun, felt the reassuring smoothness of the stock on her cheek.

She calculated the distance — less than fifty feet — and made allowance for the wind, which was high. She brought the ruddy flesh of his face in alignment with the sights. Then she squeezed the double trigger.

She heard the *click-click* of the hammers falling on empty chambers. Then she put the gun away, as carefully as ever, lit a cigarette and went out to join the others on the lawn. *End.*

A Story of Modern Youth on a Wild Kick by

MANN RUBIN

Only Harold The Pusher knew what was in the smokes he sold—but the reaction they got was really *gone!*

The Gold Ring

THE PUSHER'S NAME was Harold. He was a small, ugly guy, always grinning and wearing thick glasses and smelling bad underneath a dirty tweed coat. We'd meet him every Friday afternoon behind the Soldiers' Monument on Riverside Drive. He kept the cigarettes in a tin box he carried in a pocket of his coat. The price was twenty-five cents apiece. He wouldn't talk much, just the grin on his face and a hand with dirty fingernails, collecting the money quick.

Me and Arnie Kraft discovered him. Me and Arnie Kraft gave him his start in the neighbourhood. Up to the time we began doing business with him, he was nothing. Nobody else in the crowd knew he existed. Most of the kids just talked about marijuana, and a few pretended they knew junkies, but it was me and Arnie Kraft who created action.

Only it wasn't like we talked them into anything — that wasn't so! Everybody wanted to ride the broomstick. It was the fad of the times, the natural thing. The papers were running daily editorials,

and boards were being set up all over the city to combat juvenile delinquency, and everybody wanted in on the act. The summer was coming, and the girls were wearing tight dresses again, and there had to be something. Hell, we were sixteen!

The first time, it was me and Arnit Kraft alone. We bought two butts each and went to his apartment. Arnie lived on West End Avenue. He was eighteen floors up, with big rooms, deep carpets and a television set. Another good thing was that his mother was always out playing mah-jongg.

We pulled the shades down and kicked off our shoes and sat on the soft couch in his living room and lit the stems and waited. At first there was nothing, only a crazy smell and thick, grey smoke coming out in every puff. We kept inhaling and looking at each other and wanting the good things to happen.

After awhile, I started to laugh, and I thought that was it, but I was wrong. It was just that I was nervous and cued up and anxious to meet the pitch. Arnie put on some jazz records, and we listened to Fats Waller wrestling with a fast piano. We watched each other and smiled, and the grey smoke gathered and circled against the ceiling.

It was Arnie who reached it first. He was beating his hand against the side of the couch in time to the music. It was a thing he always did when he heard music because he's a rhythmic kid, and sometimes, when he wants to, he can Lindy as good as any professional. Only now he was beating a little too fast, and his voice was wailing off key, and his eyes were moving all over his head. Suddenly he stopped and began inhaling real fast on the butt and rubbing at his cheeks.

"Zazu Pitts," he said. He got up and stood over me, with the cigarette hanging from his mouth and some ashes spilled on his sweater. He rubbed at his cheeks and said, "Zazu Pitts, Zazu Pitts," over and over. Suddenly he slapped with his hands and screamed at the music and closed his eyes tight so they wrinkled.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've got it!" He screamed. "I've connected. I'm linked." He dropped to the floor and tried a somersault across the carpet, but he couldn't get his legs over. He flopped on his stomach and lay there scratching his fingers into the fuzz.

Right then, I started receiving my own joys. With me, it came with a dizziness and then cleared into a beautiful technicolor movie. Everything was technicolor—Arnie, the apartment, even the music draining out of the phonograph. I

sat and waited for something else to come on. The technicolor stayed and became locked.

I jumped up on the couch and began swaying back and forth, because I knew I had it good and nothing could take it away. Arnie joined me, and we started laughing and pounding each other on the back and being very proud of our common bond. In between congratulations, we described sensations and chain-smoked into our second cigarettes.

It was a mad afternoon. First we raided the ice-box and ate dill pickled with our fingers and drew pictures of women on the kitchen floor with a whip-cream sprayer. We tossed a baseball around his living room and then flung it down his courtyard to see how many stories it would bounce. We also made phone calls. I called a girl I hated and disguised my voice and made a date for a formal dance I never intended to go to.

Arnie tried getting hold of a French teacher in our high school who was going to flunk him. We were going to tell her she was fired, but Arnie got a hard time from the information operation, and we had to give up in desperation. It would have been a scream if he got through, because Arnie is very talented, and he can change his voice to any range. The old woman would never have gotten wise, but, like I said, we couldn't get through.

That was the first time. We talked about it the rest of the week and told a lot of guys who didn't believe us. By the itme Friday rolled around again, we had four new fellows interested. We met Harold at the same spot and gave his business an increase. The shindig was repeated at Arnie's house, and this time the kicks were even greater.

After that, it became the rage. Everybody in the neighbourhood knew about Harold, and soon all the girls were pestering like hell to be included. We brought five girls along on our third excursion. They added a lot of colour. They were all regular except for one deadhead, who smoked three butts and said she didn't feel a thing.

All she did was sit in a corner, complaining about the smoke and calling it nonsense when anyone reached a peak. The rest of the girls were swell and took to the weed like ducks to water, but the other one was never invited again. Nobody likes a wet blanket.

We formed a club after the fifth session — nothing social or fancy with dues or jackets or secret handshakes. Just a fraternity among ourselves when we held our regular Friday smokes. Someone suggested calling ourselves the "Junkies" and the name stuck almost immediately.

The girls organised too and branded themselves the "Junkettes." Pretty soon, there were as many girls at the smokes as there were guys. We tried to meet at a different house each week, so that every one had to kick in a little service, like soda and music and a living room where we could dance and have fun.

No one was ever sick from the butts — that was the best part of it. You could go home to your own house and do your homework or watch television or listen to your parents quarrel, and nobody would ever know what you had done or how high you had gotten so quickly.

Harold never let us down. He would be at the Monument each Friday, the grin pressed on his face and his hand in his pocket ready for business. Usually, only one of us, either me or Arnie, would buy the cigarettes for the whole crowd. He always has as much as we wanted, and then he would ask how it was going and how the girls enjoyed his products.

You could see the hard-up way he was about girls by the way he spoke and the way he looked after them whenever one passed. You could see he spent his profits on sexy magazines.

Then, toward the end of school, someone brought up the idea for a big farewell party before we scattered for the summer. The idea spread like soft margarine, and, before long, everyone was discussing the feats, and some girls were going around collecting a dollar from each standard member. It was going to be up at Arnie's house.

Arnie was pretty good that way. His mother was on vacation in Canada, and he had the whole apartment for himself, except for a maid who never bothered anyone. He wasn't handsome, but he had a lot of personality, and everybody liked being around him, and anyway his house was the birthplace of our kicks.

We bought a big supply from Harold for the special night. He figured it was something different and tried to jack up the price another quarter, but Arnie conned him into selling the cigarettes at the usual rate on the condition that Harold could attend the party. When this was mentioned, his eyes got wide behind his glasses, and his lips spread in a thick smile, and you could see that's what he was hoping for all along.

The party was held on the last Saturday in June — a cool, blue night with stars and a moon and black clouds. The crowd started showing up at eight-thirty — about fifteen people were invited, but about twenty-three shoved their way in. Nobody minded.

Harold came a half-hour later,

carrying the goofers in a briefcase. He got a cheer as he came through the door. He grinned the big grin, took off the tweed coat and stood around in a blue jacket that was worn at the sleeves and elbows. Nobody paid any attention to him after the first minute.

Arnie started playing his jazz records to get the party off on the right beat. Some guys brought bottles, and we were drinking cokes with shots in them, but everybody was waiting for the main event. The windows were closed off in the living room, to prevent too much smoke from getting out, and, after we were settled in our places, Arnie started handing out the butts.

The lights were down low to create a mood, and, slowly, the loud talk dwindled away, and the smoke drifted through the room. First one cigarette got lit, then another, then another. It was a beautiful sight — the people sitting quietly with the smoke blue and white against the darkness rising up to the ceiling, and the small dots of red spaced evenly across the floor.

Almost everyone was coupled off, each waiting for the butt to click, waiting for the grey happiness to take over. The smoke got heavier, and, in the background the jazz music cried out its sad lament, and Harold sat alone on the piano bench, looking toward the moment when his creations would make magic within us all.

I guess everybody caught the gold ring at the same time. If there was a first, no one could claim it separately. It belonged to all of us — the music reached a climax, and someone started to laugh, and soon the whole room was a carrousel of movement, colours and noise. Boys reached for girls, and girls reached for boys.

We necked — only it was on a temporary basis. That had been agreed on before hand. It was too good an evening to spend in one particular pair of arms. Everyone had the restless feeling. We were going to make the most of the opportunity.

After a couple of minutes, the lights came on again, and singing began, and most everyone was reaching for a second helping of heaven. The smoke was curling against the ceiling, and the apartment was warm, and nothing was real except the knowledge that everyone was feeling the same joy. That's when we started playing the game.

It was called "Truth." One of the girls got it going, and all the other girls started squealing their approval. You know how girls become comrades when they think something's cute as hell. Before you can say King Farouk, we're

sitting in a circle, and a cigarette is being passed from one person to another, and everyone had to take a puff and pass it on. The one dropping the ash has to get up and tell some intimate detail about his life.

It was a crazy game, but it passed time, and it made the girls happy, and it meant another cigarette. Harold was sitting on the piano bench, and nobody had eyes for him anymore, except maybe me, because I usually notice lots of things, no matter how high I am. He was still grinning and watching the girls, and then one of them made the ash fall.

She stood up in the centre of the circle, screaming that she couldn't think of any truth to tell, but she was wobbling and giggling so you could tell she'd eventually come around. She walked and screamed in the circle, pretending she was real gone, but her eyes were alive, and, pretty soon, she remembered a truth.

She told about catching her father one night with his private secretary down at his office, and how, ever since, her father gives her plenty of clothes whenever she asks him. The way she told it, she was screaming and wailing that he'd never forgive her if he was found out. But you could see she was enjoying the limelight, and was proud of her achievement.

Another girl dropped the ash, and she told how she hated piano lessons as a kid, so she told her family her teacher was always caressing her when she practised. The women was fired and driven out of the community, and the girl didn't have to practise ever again.

The game got so good they were passing around two cigarettes in opposite directions, and the ashes started falling much more often. One guy told about his mother being an alcoholic, and another guy told how he walks in his sleep. Still another guy told . . .

That's when Arnie stood up and shouted, "*You're* the one!" in a falsetto voice and got a terrific laugh.

After that, all the confessions were anti-climatic and soon we were passing the fumes again. Arnie and a girl rolled up a rug and began doing a wild Lindy, while the rest of us sat around cheering and holding our women. I looked up, and there's a girl making a pass at Harold. Just for a gag, of course, but it was a riot. She started talking to him, and, moving on to the piano bench, she circled his head with her arm and began patting his face.

The goofy guy stammered and turned all colours and tried to answer back. We, in the know, almost died, trying to keep back the laughter. She continued to

stroke his face and told him how handsome he was. He sat there, taking it all in, sweating and trying to draw away. but looking into her eyes through the thick glasses like he was a lovesick cow that never had a chance.

It was the greatest. She was another Theda Bara, and the way she vamped him, telling him he ought to be in movies. The rest of us were bursting at the seams, watching him squirm. It was the greatest, the greatest, and then the doorbell rang, and it was the doorman and there was a cop with him, and some fool had thrown an alarm clock out the window. They came in before we could ditch the smokes, and the air was heavy with the smell, and that's how they found out about us.

Then it was like a rain spoiling a big picnic. They drove us all down in a wagon fifteen minutes later. Everybody was sore at everybody else, and all the girls were crying and sniffing, and the butts were wearing off fast. About six cops surrounded us, and the people of West End Avenue must have gotten big charges sticking their heads out the windows and seeing us taken away in the caboose.

It was like the ending of a crime picture, only there was no fade-out, and no lights coming up reminding you of the illusion. This was real, this was the Law. No rough stuff or handcuffs, just the fright, just the blue uniforms staring at you like you're a convict.

They lined us up in night court, the girls weeping and blowing into wet hankies, and the rest of us trying to act tough and nonchalant and angry at the bum rap. The court was full of drunks and seedy-looking characters, and the judge looked the toughest of all.

He sat on his bench, drinking a white medicine from a bottle near his side and giving us the once-over as we marched in. One of the cops went forward and discussed our case, and soon a woman cop was taking all our names and phone numbers, and the girls are crying louder because it means their parents have to come and get them.

Harold was dragged to the front of the court, and the judge looked down on him like he was a disease and yelled at him in language real suave. Harold whimpered and began shaking, and it took the two policemen holding him to carry him back to his place. They seated him and took his address, and one cop left to pick up more evidence in his room.

Ten minutes later, the first parents started to arrive. They came in with their faces tight in anger and helplessness, looking like they'd

been disturbed from Saturday night sleeps.

My old lady came down in a nightgown and a coat thrown over her shoulders and her hair still up in a bun. She looked scared and white, and, when she saw me, she wailed it was my own fault, and I hung out with the wrong people. She tried to reach over and slap at my head, but the matron wouldn't let anyone near us.

Every time a new parent arrived, some girl would sob and try to run across the court. They were all pretending the same game, playing like they were innocent bystanders seduced into sin by slick playboys. Girls are chicken when the chips are down.

The judge heard three drunk cases before he got to us. He lined us up in front of his bench and looked at each of us and asked our ages and how high we were in high school. He wanted to know why we smoked and how we first got the habit. No one tried to explain. I felt their eyes coming around to me, and I figured I better make it good.

I sort of stepped forward and raised my hand, like I wanted to make a heavy confession. I explained how Harold kept following me from school every day, trying to get me started. I told how at first I resisted, but how he kept up the sweet talk and finally got me me going. I told how the habit came over me and how I couldn't break off, no matter how hard I tried.

Arnie stuck by me and confirmed the story of Harold and how he was always soaking us for more and more money when he knew he had us hooked. W started to cry and pointed to Harold as the one responsible for the whole mess.

It went over big. The judge was boiling and screamed this menace would never harm children again. The parents yelled that no term would be too stiff, and even the people sitting in the back of the court booed and shouted until the judge had to rap for quiet.

They dragged Harold to the bar again. He was moaning and shaking and trying to fall down against the floor, but the two cops held him good. The judge let him have it with both barrels. The court became silent under the judge's angry voice, and you could feel all the tension disappearing — the parents stood by, ready to claim their wayward kids, and the rest of us started breathing a little easier. And then the policeman, the one sent to collect more evidence at Harold's address, came back.

He walked down the aisle, carrying a mountain of loose tobacco in a soiled white shirt and holding

it by the sleeves. Harold screamed when he saw it. The detective brought it to the front of the bench and handed it to the judge as exhibit A, the shirt filled with the tobacco, and a hand machine for rolling cigarettes.

The judge stopped his speech and looked over the new stuff and then he listened as the cop whispered in his ear. When the cop finished, a strange look came over the judge's face and he dipped his hand into the tobacco and examined it in his fingers. Everybody was watching him, even the attendants at the doors, and he must have appreciated his audience because he spent a long time studying the evidence.

Then, like there was no one around he casually took one of the cigarette papers, filled it with tobacco and slid it into the roller. He rolled a cigarette and, when it came out the other end, he picked it up and called for a match and then put it in his mouth.

A policeman came forward and handed him a light, and he bent forward and took the first puff. One of the girls let out a small whimper, like she remembered the mistake she made, and a couple of us yelled. "*No, no — don't!*" But he paid no attention. He puffed and inhaled for a long time, like he's part of a television commercial. He looked down and beckoned to one of the fathers, and, when the man came forward, he handed down the cigarette and insisted he smoke.

That's when all hell broke loose. The parents started hollering, and the girls started wailing again, and the judge was rapping on his gavel so hard his bottle of medicine fell over. They finally called Harold again, and all he did was nod his head and corroborate their new story. He was sent to spend the night in jail, and then all the parents were allowed to grab their kids, and the case was dismissed.

Can you understand what happened? Can you understand my humiliation, my disgust with life and people?

It came out that Harold was a phony. He picked cigarettes from the street, grimy little butts that he kept in his dirty pockets. He took them home and squashed them together, added some Turkish imports and rolled them into new cigarettes.

They were stained and contaminated and unsanitary. He was taking our money and giving us nothing in return. We could have gotten diseased. The swine, the phony swine! Did you ever hear of anything so terrible? *End.*

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