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SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

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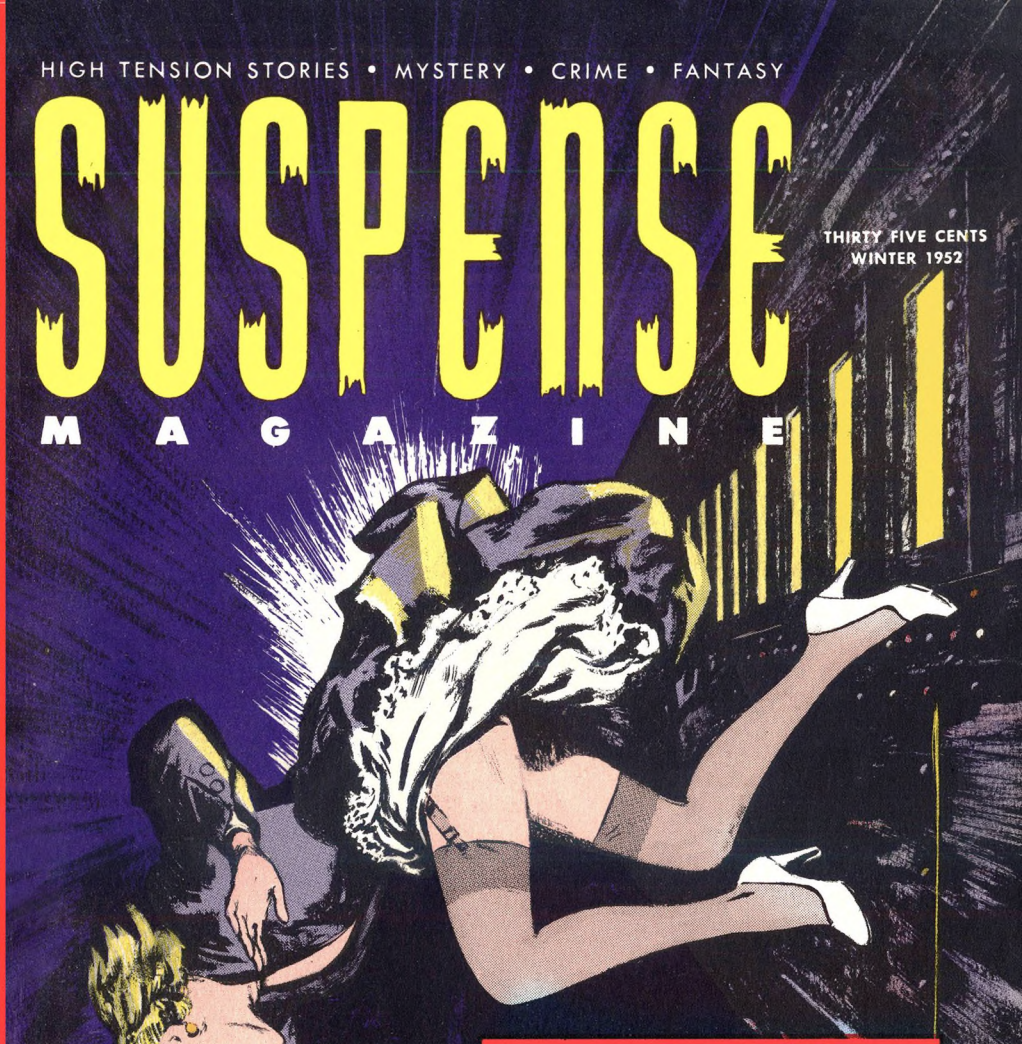
WINTER 1952



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SUSPENSE

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Her only skills were the gentle arts, so what could a little school teacher, alone in the city, do about a . . .

threat of

A clever author concocts his broth of subtle ingredients. Example: When we hear a radio quiz we identify with the contender. If she wins and then faces a threat to her winnings, we face it with her. If slowly the danger turns to deadly menace, it is we who are menaced. Now: If your contestant is a country schoolmarm, and your menace a city mob—you are R. J. Burrough, and you wrote this crafty yarn.

AND NOW, Miss Craig, for fifteen thousand, five hundred and eighty dollars in cash!" The emcee, Bill Buxton, pulled out a handkerchief to mop his face. "Are you nervous, Miss Craig?" Drops of sweat like pearl tapioca stood out on his forehead.

She nodded, her hands gripping the desk top, fingers frozen to it. She felt the way she had felt years ago at the fair, when the chains had clicked under the shoot-the-chutes car being hoisted slowly up into the clear blue air to the first drop—and there was no way out.

"Believe me, Miss Craig, I'm more nervous than you are! Believe me." He plunged his hand into the glass bowl for a folded slip of paper.

"Oh, please God, let me know the answer!" she thought.

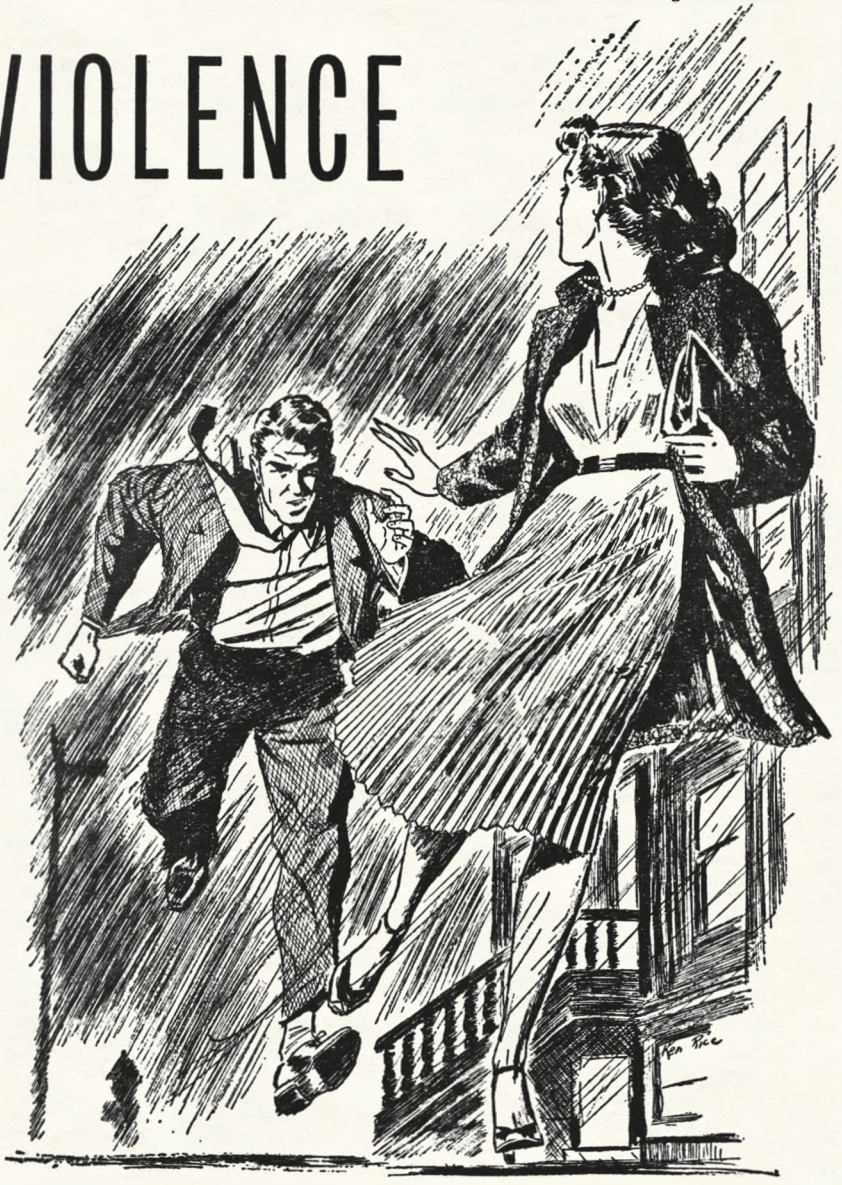
The audience, a vague bank of balloons off to the left, was silent, but it was a pulsing silence; they were for her, she knew. She had caught what one of them had whispered as she mounted to the platform into the hot glare of lights, "She's a natural!" Apparently a "natural" was a teacher of Latin, no longer young, who had lived all her life in a little Vermont village. In New York because her mother had had to undergo a serious operation here, she obviously needed the money—they wanted her to win it.

Buxton unfolded the paper, then grimaced; he did not like the question.

DEADLY DANGER

R. J. BURROUGH

VIOLENCE



"Oh, let me know the answer!"

"Here's your question, in the Classics category, Miss Craig, and the best of luck to you. For fifteen thousand, five hundred and eighty dollars. . . ." He cleared his throat and read hoarsely, "There is a well known quotation—'Easy is the road to Hell.' Give me the two lines which immediately follow that quotation!"

The audience groaned in dismay. Before, at each question there had been hissing whispers, which she hadn't heard. But there were no whispers now; they didn't know the answer. They sat motionless as figures on a painted backdrop.

"Did you get that, Miss Craig?" Buxton asked anxiously.

"Yes," she cried, elation leaping in her. She should know that—she would know that. "The quotation is from Virgil—*'Facilis descensus Averno.'* The next two lines are—" She hesitated a second, then launched swiftly into, *"'Noctes atque dies patet atri janua Ditis. Sed revocare'*—A free translation would be, 'Night and day we are subject to temptation, but to retrace our steps and mount once more to the stars, that is effort, that is struggle!'"

Buxton looked inquiringly at the judges, who nodded. "Right!" he shouted. "Miss Craig, you win fifteen thousand, five hundred and eighty dollars!" he cried, over the cheering, whistling, stamping. "How about that! Imagine knowing that!" He waved his arms frantically at the orchestra which blared into "Happy Days Are Here Again."

She leaned heavily against the desk, smiling. You don't die from happiness; at least, she hadn't. Fifteen thousand dollars!

Buxton gestured the audience into silence, then said, "Miss Craig, it's raining rain outside, but it's sure raining happiness inside. Too bad your mother didn't hear you. Are you sure she's not listening?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure. There isn't any radio in our hotel room, and, besides, she doesn't know I'm here."

"Well, she'll know soon enough. Is there anything you want to say, Miss Craig?"

"I just want to say, thank God I knew the answer, and thank you all very much. I've never been so happy!"

Buxton cried, "It was truly a pleasure to have you, Miss Craig. You're a wonderful, wonderful person." He leaned over and kissed her.

Once again the audience exploded into whistles and cheers. Buxton's hands raised to quiet them. "Now, Miss Craig, go over and get your check; it's ready for you. Oh, and don't forget your toaster—don't forget that."

"I'll not forget." If she hadn't won the money, her consolation prize would have been the electric toaster—it was beautiful, but she and mother much preferred toast made on the wood stove.

Buxton shouted, "Isn't she wonderful, folks?"

They went off the air in a blaze of glory and congratulations.

Later, the check safety-pinned into her bag, she sailed up the theatre aisle and made for the phone booths

to call her mother. Only a few stragglers of the audience remained, and these were drifting toward the lobby. The house lights were on; the cleaners had come from the lower regions and were waiting with their brushes and vacuums to take over. Already, in the deserted balcony, brisk ones were ranging to and fro, banging up seats.

One of the three phone booths was empty and, aglow with joy, she dialed the hotel number. The booth was stuffy and while she waited for an answer she half-opened the folding door with its glass panels. She could hear the ringing at the other end—probably the switchboard operator, who doubled as elevator man in the hotel—was on the car.

Fifteen thousand dollars! Or, rather, fifteen thousand, *five hundred and eighty* dollars! She smiled gaily to herself.

As she sat there, handbag resting on her folded coat, toaster on the phone shelf, she thought what the money would mean—all their debts paid—and then? They wouldn't run wild, but the one thing which they had always wanted could now be theirs—a great glass window for the kitchen, so that they could have a panoramic view of the mountain rising beyond their pasture. Happy, she saw it in spring, nodding with wild flowers, in autumn ablaze with fire, and in winter its pines and hemlocks and cedars buried in snow. Of course such a window would pose a little heating problem, but the big wood stove was equal to it.

Patiently she waited, clutching her bag firmly. Though of course no one but her could cash the check, still—best not to lose it.

The phone had been ringing a long time—a very long time. There was a chance she had dialed the wrong number. She hung up, collected her money, reinserted it and dialed again. It was a hotel. There had to be somebody.

The ringing began again. She pushed the door of the booth a little wider open, and the figures of those standing nearby were reflected in the glass. She watched the nearest ones idly, two young men staring intently at the booth she was in, probably waiting for her to leave so that they could use the phone. But no—the booths alongside her were empty now.

The men kept watching her; they could not know she saw them.

A sudden feeling of uneasiness seized her. But that was ridiculous. Everybody knew she had been given a check, not cash. No one except herself could use it.

There was still no answer. She gave herself ten more rings, then added ten more for good measure. She waited them out with growing impatience. Then she hung up, her fingers stabbing twice for the hook. This was nonsense. She gathered up her things, gripping the handbag and the toaster even more firmly, and came out of the booth, giving no hint that she noticed the men, vague figures standing there, in the way of the cleaners who were humming vacuums over the rug.

And yet, she could not shake off

her nervousness, foolish though it must be. Still, there was a way she might find out if they were actually watching her. She went quickly down the spacious corridor and through a discreetly curtained doorway into the women's lounge. It was deserted except for two girls combing their hair.

Hurriedly she put on her coat, thrust her glasses into their case and whisked out, her appearance changed.

She gave no hint that she had noticed the men—they were very young, flashily dressed—but she was aware, with a sudden chill, that they had moved closer and were now staring at the curtained doorway of the lounge. However, as she came out, their glances swept over her without recognition.

Were they waiting for her, or for the girls inside?

She did not know, but, anxious to lose herself in a crowd, she turned toward the lobby, just as a young woman about to enter the lounge hesitated, then cried, "Aren't you Miss Craig—the lucky lady that won the money?"

She smiled and hurried on. But the damage—if it were damage—had been done; the men's attention had been attracted to her.

Yet she still wasn't certain—it might just be casual interest in someone who had won so much. Perhaps she was being foolish; she might have been listening to too many crime programs on the radio, and they had made her suspicious. All the same, just as soon as she had picked up Mother's prescription, she would take a taxi back to the hotel.

The last of the audience was flowing into the stormy street. Umbrellas opened to join the stream of bobbing black mushrooms gleaming under marquee lights. The avenue was bouncing with cold rain, splashing as taxis whooshed arrogantly by over oily pavements splotched with yellow and green. Everywhere were whistles; some near like the policeman's, others faint with distance, as frustrated people tried vainly for cabs.

Lances of gray rain pounded her umbrella, but she did not mind storms, and this one had given her the chance of the broadcast—she had to wait an hour until the prescription was ready, so she had gone to the broadcast theatre.

Not looking behind her, when the light flashed green she crossed the rain-swept avenue in the knot of people who picked their way over roaring gutters, and went into the drug store. It was full of babbling voices, the smell of coffee, perfume and wet clothes, a hurlyburly punctuated by the steady ping of cash registers.

She resisted glancing over her shoulder to see if she had been followed, and went to the drug department. Not many were here—she would be waited on quickly.

Now she had to know if they were here. She laid her toaster on the counter and with apparent unconcern turned to survey the store humming with life. If it hadn't been for that stupid girl recognizing her—calling attention to her—

Then she felt as if a hand had squeezed her heart. She began to breathe more heavily. That girl hadn't been so stupid—she was here with one of those men. Apparently they knew each other. They were waiting at the soda fountain. Where was the other man? Had they seen her?

But they weren't paying her the slightest attention. As a matter of fact, the girl's back was even toward her; she was making up her face with the aid of a large compact mirror, while she and the man waited for a place at the fountain.

"Yes, madam, what can I do for you?"

"Oh!" Startled, she turned hastily to the drug clerk. "My prescription—Craig is the name."

He disappeared behind the wooden latticework partition.

She would slip out the side entrance. If they came after her, she would go to the policeman, tell him her story, foolish or not. Blindly she rubbed at a rain spot on her bag; her black kid glove was clammy and sodden.

When the clerk handed her the change, she dropped the wrapped bottle of medicine into her bag, picked up her toaster and made for the side door.

They weren't even looking at her; the girl was still busily powdering her face.

With a gusty sigh of relief she edged into the revolving door. She had just been foolish. See what having money did to you? A taxi was waiting at the curb. Was it taken? She had built this whole thing out of nothing—those crime programs—imagining that back in the theatre the girl had called out her name to warn the men that she was slipping past them.

She stepped out into the pounding rain. This side street was very dark. Traffic still flowed up and down the avenue, but there was only an occasional pedestrian here. The taxi's flag was down; not for hire, so she'd have to walk. Tucking her toaster under her arm she bent over, and started to open her umbrella.

"Here's your cab, lady."

Someone—oh, dear God!—the second of those two men, the big one, had stepped from a doorway and was speaking to her. "Don't make any noise. Just get in the cab."

"No!" She turned quickly to dash back into the store. Her way was blocked by the other man, and the girl.

"Inside the cab, lady."

They jockeyed her—looking desperately for help, but there was no one—across the rain-swept sidewalk and into the taxi. The big one gave an address to the driver, then got into the jump seat, blocking any view the hackie could have. The leather seat squished as she was pushed into it, between the girl and the other young man, who felt her handbag inquiringly. The glass was up, so the driver could hear nothing; the steamed windows of the cab put them in a world apart.

The taxi started to move; vague blurs of yellowish light slid past on either side as other cars splashed by.

"What do you want?" The voice didn't sound like her own. "I haven't any money." Could these be robbers, kidnappers, murderers? Could this really happen to Miss Craig?

"Get *her*," the girl said impudently.

She heard the shrill of the policeman's whistle almost outside—could she attract his attention before—

"Don't try nothin'" the big young man warned. In the grayish light his unlined face was ugly. "You're stayin' with us tonight, cash the check tomorra and hand it over, then be on your way."

They were going to take her money! All her dreams of security for her mother would be gone. The window—and all it meant—nothing left.

"I can't go with you," she cried. "My mother is all alone and old. If I don't come back she won't know what's happened to me—she won't know what's happened to me—she won't know what to do!"

"I'm cryin'." He took out a battered pack of cigarettes. "Doris here's gonna give her a ring, tell 'er you met an old friend and are stayin' with her tonight, but you'll be back with your old lady by ten a.m." The cigarette waggled between his lips. He sounded as if he were repeating a memorized lesson.

"But that's fantastic!" she cried. "Mother knows I'd never leave her all alone!"

Rain pounded the roof of the cab.

The thin young boy with an evil face said softly, "Better do just like Pete wants, lady, or I'm to take care of her—good. We know where she's at."

Her heart faltered; they had figured out her vulnerable point.

"But you're taking a terrible chance! This is kidnapping!"

The three looked at each other and grinned. "We been takin' chances all our life, lady. Don't worry none about us. Just do like you're told."

All their lives—they were only babies—no older than some of the boys and girls she taught—but these were vicious, evil children. She asked quickly, "Then at least won't you phone soon?"

Pete blew a smoke ring into air already choking thick. "I said we'd phone, did'n I, on account of we don't want her queerin' the pitch. Doris can sound real refined. Can't you, baby?"

"Yeah," she said glumly.

He laughed, a reckless boyish laugh, clapped her on the knee. "Make like a lady, Doris."

"Get your paws off my dress!" she cried. "Don't crease it worse'n it is—the only rag I got."

"After tomorrow you'll have all the rags you can wear, babe," he promised, jubilation mounting in his voice. "Fifteen grand split five ways."

"Ah, shut up!" she said wearily. "Anyways, the boss'll win it all away from you, ya big dope. And stop wrinklin' my dress!" She kicked him fiercely in the leg; he had been gripping her knee.

He grinned. "O.K., baby," he soothed. "Just picture you sailin' through them stores."

Miss Craig sat silent, swaying with

the motion of the cab. 'A hostile people sailing the Tyrrhenian sea' . . . the line of Virgil flashed into her mind. She gripped her handbag tensely. Was there any way she could attract the driver's attention, yet not have them see her—to get word of what was happening? She had heard that taxi drivers look their cabs over after each fare, to make sure the passenger had forgotten nothing. Could she scribble some message and leave it behind?

In her bag there was a pencil, and white paper around the medicine bottle. Slowly, but with the imperative need of hurry, she worked the catch open; it was black, and her gloves were black.

Joe said, "Keep your hands out in the open, lady, where I can see 'em."

"I want my handkerchief," she said coldly.

Rain, turning to sleet, rattled on the roof.

They were out of traffic now, travelling darker streets. Only an occasional street lamp blurred for a second across the steamed windows. The querulous hoot of a tug came faintly—they could be nearing the Hudson—the address she had caught was West Sixty Something.

The driver, vaguely seen, began looking for the number.

Pete rubbed a clear patch on the glass and peered out. Rapping on the window he shouted to the driver, "O.K., stop here," and said hastily to Joe, "Throw the guy a buck, then you an' me'll hustle the dame inside. Doris'll be in back of her. You lady—" he turned to her—"grab your junk. That toaster, too. Don't try wisin' the hackie."

The cab swung in to the curb, tilting a bit as it went over a mound of debris. There was a crack and crunch of glass as a bottle broke.

The taxi slowed to a stop. Joe, hitching to one side to get at his money, warned, "Al said see she don't leave nothin'." He reached for the door handle. "All set?"

"Yeah. Get goin'."

Joe jumped out, the gale whipping into the cab. Pete followed, head ducked against the stinging sleet. "C'mon, lady."

Crouching over, Miss Craig stepped out warily. Would the driver notice something was wrong?

But he was intent only on avoiding more broken glass as he drove away, red tail-lights winking.

"Hurry it up." They grabbed her by the arms, hustling her along the dark sidewalk, slipping and sliding, though her galoshes gave her better footing than did their leather soles.

The nearest lamp was out, but she glimpsed down-at-heel tenements with a few lights scattered through them, a tiny grocery, dark, no bigger than a crossroads' store, a billboard with a torn flapping poster whipped by wind that kept Betty Grable kicking violently.

From an upset garbage pail a cat shot away into the night.

They had reached a brownstone that squatted like a mushroom between boarded-up tenements. "Here's the dump," Pete growled. "What the—" A drunk sprawled on the steps, his upturned hat like a cup for

the freezing rain. Pete kicked him. "Joe, drag the stew down a coupla doors. We don't want cops nosin' around here. Gimme a hand with the dame, Doris."

"I'm capable of walking," Miss Craig protested. "I can keep my footing far better than you. I'm used to ice."

"Stow it." They convoyed her up slippery steps into a black, foul-smelling vestibule. Ahead was a door, its upper half glass, with a pinpoint of light deep inside, glimmering through a sleazy curtain. She could not help the sudden shiver that seized her—the miserable place had such a desperate air. As the odds against her mounted, it seemed more and more certain that by tomorrow all she would have left of her good fortune would be a black frustrating memory. They had planned so well, lying in wait for whoever might win that fifteen thousand dollars. Anyone who won. . . . Then, suddenly, another thought came. Would there be any memory? Would they let her go at all? Why should they? Wouldn't they, instead. . . .? She broke that thought off, and found she was trembling.

Joe was back, whipping his soaked hat against his legs. "What a stinkin' night."

"An' I gotta go out again to make that lousy phone call!" Doris whined. "It's so slippery I could break my neck!"

"Al will break it for ya, if ya don't stop whinin'." Pete rapped on the glass three times, waited, then rapped three times again.

Through the dirty curtain, Miss Craig saw light spill suddenly into a narrow hall, as a door on the left opened and a short fat man came waddling towards them.

Pete called out, "It's us, Al. We got 'er."

"Make sure you ain't been tailed." The voice was muffled.

"I a'ready made sure, Al," Pete protested, but he ducked obediently to the top of the steps, looked up and down the stormy street. "It's O.K.," he reported.

A key turned, smooth as butter in the lock, and the door was opened by a man in his twenties, grim-faced, powerful-looking. "Inside," he ordered quietly.

They shuffled in like obedient children; the door was locked behind them.

"She didn't get word to nobody?"

"No, Al."

"Good. We can't take a chance on losin' this sweet little hideout." He looked bleakly at Miss Craig. "Just do like you're told or your old lady gets it—zzt." He clicked his thumbnail against the nail of his pinky. "Dorry, get 'er upstairs; she'll bunk with you. When you get 'er set, lock 'er in, then you go make that phone call. We'll be in here—let you know what to say." He glanced up the dark stairs. "Pete, go on up an' light the lamp for 'em. C'minside, Joe, gimme the new decks—I wanta get 'em shuffled nice an' hot."

Doris said fawningly, "Don't win all their dough, Al, boy."

He slapped her fanny affectionately and went back into the room.

"Hurry it up, Pete. I'm lucky tonight."

Pete asked, "You don't want I should stay with 'er, Al, while Dorry's gone?"

Al glanced over his shoulder at Miss Craig. "She won't try nothin'," he said contemptuously. "She knows we'll finish off her old lady, if she does. Besides, she couldn't get two feet down them squealin' stairs before us hearin' her."

"O. K., Al, I'll be right back," Pete promised, hurrying up the stairs behind Doris, who was humming loudly, "Happy days are here again," and Miss Craig, who stumbled ahead in sudden blind panic. Frantically she was piecing things together. Al had said he could not chance losing this hideout. But, if they let her go tomorrow, after she had cashed the check, they could only expect that she would go to the police. The police would immediately swarm down on this place, and their hideout would be discovered.

But if Miss Craig were killed before she could get to the police? Somehow she was aware that she had known this before—known it almost all along. And now, in all its terror, the knowledge was confirmed. Their plan was for her to lose not only her money, but also her life. At thought of her mother, left alone, she pressed her knuckles against her mouth.

At the top of the flight Pete led the way into a pitch black room, and lighted a kerosene lamp—a white lamp with red roses twining around it—which showed that the tiny room had no window, only a small wire-covered skylight against which sleet was thundering. There was no way out except by the door. A few cheap dresses hung from a nail pounded into the wall. The only furniture was a sagging cot, a table on which a lamp stood, and two orange crates. On one was a pitcher of water, a glass and a basin; the other was obviously the chair—it stood alongside the table.

From downstairs Joe shouted, "Hey, Pete, Al's waitin'."

"O.K." He wiped greasy hands on his handkerchief. "Babe, when you come down. . . ." he was already half-way out the door . . . "make sure she's locked up good."

"Go on, stupid. . . . Go down and lose all your dough," Doris said.

Chuckling, he closed the door behind him.

Doris took off her wet coat. "That jerk won't have a red cent left outta his share by tomorrow. Take a seat, take a seat," she ordered, pointing to the crate.

Half-dazed, Miss Craig put her bag and the toaster on the table.

She must get away! But how could she hope to escape? The odds confronting her were fantastic . . . four young snarling children, viciously wise, against a middle-aged teacher. She could not hope to meet them on their own ground—yet, attack she must—history showed few examples where timidity succeeded. "Launch out bravely, by guile, if strength avail not." Desperately she tried to figure out some way based on their weakness. But what was their weakness?

And fast, fast—it must be fast, for

Doris was saying, "I gotta change this dress or I won't be able to get in it tomorrow if it gets any more soaked—the only decent rag I got."

Miss Craig drew a shivering breath. She had thought of a way.

"Before you do," she said weakly, "please give me some water—I want to take my medicine." Once committed, there could be no retreat!

Doris grimaced, poured water into the glass and brought it to her.

"Thank you." Miss Craig's hand shook as she took the glass. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she cried.

Doris jumped back. "Look out, stupid! You spilled it all over me! Of all the dumb old—" Furious, she bent over to see the damage to her precious dress.

With one smooth motion Miss Craig seized the toaster and crashed it against Doris' head. The girl's mouth opened, but she made no sound as she went down, Miss Craig easing her to the floor.

Now! She grabbed her handbag, turned the lamp out and felt her way to the door. Listening, she heard nothing above the rattle of sleet against the skylight.

She inched the door open and from the darkness peered down the dimly-lit stairs. Through a layered haze of cigarette smoke a sliver of light shone from Al's room; she heard the click of chips, the mutter of voices, then a jubilant guffaw.

For a second she faltered, icy with fear. But she could not stay here; her danger was mounting with every minute's delay. She would not get a quarter way, if she tried to creep down that creaking flight. "Launch out bravely!"

"Oh, dear God help me!" she whispered, summoning all her strength. Then humming loudly "Happy days are here again," she clattered down the stairs, past the room and straight to the front door.

"Hey, Doris," Al called—the slap of cards went on—"C'min here. I wantta tell you what t'say."

She had the door open. "I know what to say." Wind whined into the hall.

"That's not Doris!" "What the—" Chairs crashed over. Shadows lunged for the hall.

Slamming the door she dashed into the vestibule. "Help! Help! Help!" Screaming, she scrambled down the steps.

Someone shouted, "What's the trouble lady?" A flashlight beam swept over her as the policeman bending over the drunk two doors down, straightened up, sleet rattling on his slicker.

"Oh, help! Help!" she kept crying, slipping downhill towards him, her cries waking the dark street.

He had his gun out as the first of them, Pete, took the icy steps on his back with a yell of pain, and the night burst into a bedlam of confusion that mounted at ever-increasing tempo—shouts, the shrill of whistles, people milling into the storm, sirens wailing nearer as prowl cars converged on her, headlights glaring the dingy street into the brightness of a block party.

Less than a half hour later the heated patrol car, chains grinding for

purchase, pulled away from the curb at Headquarters where she had identified the kidnappers. The two officers escorting her back to the hotel began congratulating her. "But you sure took an awful chance—those babies are killers!"

She folded her hands on her bag—the check was still pinned safely—and took a deep breath, feeling free and happy once again. "I had no choice—you know, *'Una salus victis, nullam sperare salutem'* " And when they looked a little blank—"Freely translated that could mean—things were so bad they couldn't possibly get any worse; my only chance was to do something."

The two policemen grinned at each other. "Maybe you'd better join the force."

She shook her head, smiling. "All I want now is to sit in our kitchen, in my rocker, and look out a window. Just—look out a very special window!"

CHILLER THRILLER

Who ever believes a child?

Especially if she keeps hearing . . .

the SCREAMING *woman*

RAY BRADBURY

Master interpreter of human emotions, Bradbury is the most popular living writer of science fiction, and only a trifle less notable for his small gems of horror. He brings to this tale of suspense a depth of realism, a quality of sheer shock that makes it, in our opinion, the finest thriller we've seen in many a year.

MY NAME is Margaret Leary and I'm ten years old and in the high fifth at Central School. I haven't any brothers or sisters, but I've got a nice father and mother except they don't pay much attention. And anyway, we never thought we'd have anything to do with a murdered woman. Or almost, anyway. When you're just living on a street like we live on, you don't think awful things are going to happen, like shooting or stabbing or burying people under the ground, practically in your back yard. And when it does happen you don't believe it. You just go on buttering your toast or baking a cake.

I got to tell you how it happened. It was a noon in the middle of July. It was hot and Mama said to me, "Margaret, you go to the store and buy some ice cream. It's Saturday, Dad's home for lunch."

I ran out across the empty lot behind our house. It was a big lot, where kids had played baseball, and broken glass and stuff. And on my way back from the store with the ice cream I was just walking along, minding my own business, when all of a sudden it happened.

I heard the Screaming Woman.

I stopped and listened.

It was coming up out of the ground.

A woman was buried under the rocks and dirt and glass, and she was screaming, all wild and horrible, for someone to dig her out.

I just stood there, afraid. She kept screaming, muffled.

Then I started to run. I fell down, got up and ran some more. I got in the screen door of my house and there was Mama, calm as you please, not knowing what I knew, that there was a real live woman buried out in back of our house, just a hundred yards away, screaming bloody murder.

"Mama," I said.

"Don't stand there with the ice cream," said Mama.

"But, Mama," I said.

"Put it in the icebox," she said.

"Listen, Mama, there's a Screaming Woman in the empty lot."

"And wash your hands," said Mama.

"She was screamin' and screamin'. . ."

"Let's see now, salt and pepper," said Mama, far away.

"Listen to me," I said, loud. "We got to dig her out, she's buried under tons and tons of dirt and if we don't dig her out, she'll choke up and die."

"I'm certain she can wait until after lunch," said Mama.

"Mama, don't you believe me?"

"Of course, dear, now wash your hands and take this plate of meat in to your father."

"I don't even know who she is or how she got there," I said. "But we got to help her."

"Good Gosh," said Mama. "Look at this ice cream. What did you do, just stand in the sun and let it melt?"

"Well, the empty lot. . ."

"Go on, now, scoot."

I went into the dining room.

"Hi, Dad, there's a Screaming Woman in the empty lot."

"I never knew a woman who didn't," said Dad.

"I'm serious," I said.

"You look very grave," said Father.

"We've got to get picks and shovels and excavate, like for an Egyptian mummy," I said.

"I don't feel like an archaeologist, Margaret," said Father. "Now, some nice cool October day, I'll take you up on that."

"But we can't wait that long," I almost screamed. My heart was bursting in me. I was excited and scared and afraid and here was Dad, putting meat on his plate, cutting and chewing and paying me no attention.

"Dad?" I said.

"Mmmm?" he said, chewing.

"Dad, you just gotta come out after lunch and help me." I said. "Dad, Dad, I'll give you all the money in my piggy bank!"

"Well," said Dad. "So it's a business proposition, is it? It must be important for you to offer your perfectly good money. How much money will you pay, by the hour?"

"I got five whole dollars, it took me a year to save, and it's all yours."

Dad touched my arm. "I'm touched. I'm really touched. You want me to play with you and you're willing to pay for my time. Honest, Margaret, you make your old Dad feel like a piker. I don't give you

enough time. Tell you what, after lunch, I'll come out and listen to your screaming woman, free of charge."

"Will you, oh, will you, really?"

"Yes, mam, that's what I'll do," said Dad. "But you must promise me one thing?"

"What?"

"If I come out, you must eat all of your lunch first."

"I promise," I said.

"Okay."

Mother came in and sat down and we started to eat.

"Not so fast," said Mama.

I slowed down. Then I started eating fast again.

"You heard your mother," said Dad.

"The Screaming Woman," I said. "We got to hurry."

"I," said Father, "intend sitting here quietly and judiciously giving my attention first to my steak, then to my potatoes, and my salad, of course, and then to my ice cream, and after that to a long drink of iced coffee, if you don't mind. I may be a good hour at it. And another thing, young lady, if you mention her name, this Screaming Whatsis, once more at this table during lunch, I won't go out with you to hear her recital."

"Yes, sir."

"Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

Lunch was a million years long. Everybody moved in slow motion, like those films you see at the movies. Mama got up slow and got down slow and forks and knives and spoons moved slow. Even the flies in the room were slow. And dad's cheek muscles moved slow. It was so slow. I wanted to scream, "Hurry! Oh, please, rush, get up, run around, come on out, run!" But no, I had to sit, and all the while we sat there slowly, slowly eating our lunch, out there in the empty lot (I could hear her screaming in my mind. *Scream!*) was the Screaming Woman, all alone, while the world ate its lunch and the sun was hot and the lot was empty as the sky.

"There we are," said Dad, finished at last.

"Now will you come out to see the Screaming Woman," I said.

"First a little more iced coffee," said Dad.

"Speaking of Screaming Women," said Mother. "Charlie Nesbitt and his wife Helen had another fight last night."

"That's nothing new," said Father. "They're always fighting."

"If you ask me, Charlie's no good," said Mother. "Or her, either."

"Oh, I don't know," said Dad. "I think she's pretty nice."

"You're prejudiced. After all, you almost married her."

"You going to bring that up again?" he said. "After all, I was only engaged to her six weeks."

"You showed some sense when you broke it off."

"Oh, you know Helen. Always stagestruck. Wanted to travel in a trunk. I just couldn't see it. That broke it up. She was sweet, though. Sweet and kind."

"What did it get her? A terrible

brute of a husband like Charlie."

"I'll give you that. Charlie has got a terrible temper," said Dad. "Remember when Helen had the lead in our high school graduation play? Pretty as a picture. She wrote some songs for it herself. That was the summer she wrote that song for me."

"Ha," said Mother.

"Don't laugh. It was a good song."

"You never told me about that song."

"It was between Helen and me. Let's see, how *did* it go?"

"Dad," I said.

"You'd better take your daughter out in the back lot," said Mother, "before she collapses. You can sing me that wonderful song, later."

"Okay, come on, you," said Dad, and I ran him out of the house.

The empty lot was still empty and hot and the glass sparkled green and white and brown all around where the bottles lay.

"Now, where's this Screaming Woman?" laughed Dad.

"We forgot the shovels," I cried.

"We'll get them later, after we hear the soloist," said Dad.

I took him over to the spot. "Listen," I said.

We listened.

"I don't hear anything," said Dad, at last.

"Shh," I said. "Wait."

We listened some more. "Hey, there, Screaming Woman!" I cried.

We heard the sun in the sky. We heard the wind in the trees, real quiet. We heard a streetcar, far away, running along. We heard a car pass.

That was all.

"Margaret," said Father. "I suggest you go lie down and put a damp cloth on your forehead."

"But she was here," I shouted. "I heard her, screaming and screaming and screaming. See, here's where the ground's been dug up." I called frantically at the earth. "Hey there, you down there!"

"Margaret," said Father. "This is the place where Mr. Kelly dug yesterday, a big hole, to bury his trash and garbage in."

"But during the night," I said, "someone else used Mr. Kelly's burying place to bury a woman. And covered it all over again."

"Well, I'm going back in and take a cool shower," said Dad.

"You won't help me dig?"

"Better not stay out here too long," said Dad. "It's hot."

Dad walked off. I heard the back door slam.

I stamped on the ground. "Darn," I said.

The screaming started again.

She screamed and screamed. Maybe she had been tired and was resting and now she began it all over, just for me.

I stood in the empty lot in the hot sun and I felt like crying. I ran back to the house and banged the door.

"Dad, she's screaming again!"

"Sure, sure," said Dad. "Come on." And he led me to my upstairs bedroom. "Here," he said. He made me lie down and put a cold rag on my head. "Just take it easy."

I began to cry. "Oh, Dad, we can't let her die. She's all buried, like that

person in that story, and think how awful it is to be screaming and no one paying any attention."

"I forbid you to leave the house," said Dad, worried. "You just lie there the rest of the afternoon." He went out and locked the door. I heard him and mother talking in the front room. After awhile I stopped crying. I got up and tiptoed to the window. My room was upstairs. It seemed high. I took a sheet off the bed and tied it to the bedpost and let it out the window. Then I climbed out the window and shinnied down until I touched the ground. Then I ran to the garage, quiet, and I got a couple of shovels and I ran to the empty lot. It was hotter than ever. And I started to dig, and all the while I dug, the Screaming Woman screamed....

It was hard work. Shoving in the shovel and lifting the rocks and glass. And I knew I'd be doing it all afternoon and maybe I wouldn't finish in time. What could I do? Run tell other people? But they'd be like Mom and Dad, pay no attention. I just kept digging, all by myself.

About ten minutes later, Dippy Smith came along the path through the empty lot. He's my age and goes to my school.

"Hi, Margaret," he said.

"Hi, Dippy," I gasped.

"What you doing?" he asked.

"Digging."

"For what?"

"I got a Screaming lady in the ground and I'm digging for her," I said.

"I don't hear no screaming," said Dippy.

"You sit down and wait awhile and you'll hear her scream yet. Or better still, help me dig."

"I don't dig unless I hear a scream," he said.

We waited.

"Listen!" I said. "Did you *hear* it?"

"Hey," said Dippy, with slow appreciation, his eyes gleaming. "That's okay. Do it again."

"Do what again?"

"The scream."

"We got to wait," I said, puzzled.

"Do it again," he insisted, shaking my arm. "Go on." He dug in his pocket for a brown aggie. "Here." He shoved it at me. "I'll give you this marble if you do it again."

A scream came out of the ground.

"Hot dog!" said Dippy. "Teach *me* to do it!" He danced around as if I were a miracle.

"I don't. . ." I started to say.

"Did you get the *Throw-Your-Voice* book for a dime from that Magic Company in Dallas, Texas?" cried Dippy. "You got one of those tin Ventriloquist contraptions in your mouth?"

"Y-yes," I lied, for I wanted him to help. "If you'll help dig, I'll tell you about it, later."

"Swell," he said. "Give me a shovel."

We both dug together, and from time to time the Woman screamed.

"Boy," said Dippy. "You'd think she was right under foot. You're wonderful, Maggie." Then he said, "What's her name?"

"Who?"

"The Screaming Woman. You

must have a name for her."

"Oh, sure." I thought a moment. "Her name's Wilma Schweiger and she's a rich old woman, ninety-six years old, and she was buried by a man named Spike, who counterfeited ten-dollar bills."

"Yes, *sir*," said Dippy.

"And there's hidden treasure buried with her, and I, I'm a grave robber come to dig her out and get it," I gasped, digging excitedly.

Dippy made his eyes Oriental and mysterious. "Can I be a grave robber, too?" He got a better idea. "Let's pretend it's the Princess Ommanatra, an Egyptian queen, covered with diamonds!"

We kept digging and I thought, oh we will rescue her, we *will*. If only we keep on!

"Hey, I just got an idea," said Dippy. And he ran off and got a piece of cardboard. He scribbled on it with crayon.

"Keep digging!" I said. "We can't stop!"

"I'm making a sign. See? SLUMBERLAND CEMETERY! We can bury some birds and beetles here, in matchboxes and stuff. I'll go find some butterflies."

"No, Dippy!"

"It's more fun that way. I'll get me a dead cat, too, maybe. . ."

"Dippy, use your shovel! Please!"

"Aw," said Dippy. "I'm tired. I think I'll go home and take a nap."

"You can't do that."

"Who says so?"

"Dippy, there's something I want to tell you."

"What?"

I whispered in his ear. "There's really a woman buried here."

"Why sure there is," he said. "You said it, Maggie."

"You don't believe me, either."

"Tell me how you throw your voice and I'll keep on digging."

"But I can't tell you, because I'm not doing it," I said. "Look, Dippy. I'll stand way over here and you listen there."

The Screaming Woman screamed again.

"Hey!" said Dippy, "There really *is* a woman here!"

"That's what I tried to say."

"Let's dig!" said Dippy.

We dug for twenty minutes.

"I wonder who she is?"

"I don't know."

"I wonder if it's Mrs. Nelson or Mrs. Turner or Mrs. Bradley. I wonder if she's pretty. Wonder what color her hair is? Wonder if she's thirty or ninety or sixty?"

"Dig!" I said.

The mound grew high.

"Wonder if she'll reward us for digging her up."

"Sure."

"A quarter do you think?"

"More than that. I bet it's a dollar."

Dippy remembered as he dug, "I read a book once of magic. There was a Hindu with no clothes on who crept down in a grave and slept there sixty days, not eating anything, no malts, no chewing gum or candy, no air, for sixty days." His face fell. "Say, wouldn't it be awful if it was only a radio buried here and us working so hard."

"A radio's nice, it'd be all ours."

Just then a shadow fell across us.

"Hey, you kids, what you think you're doing?"

We turned. It was Mr. Kelly, the man who owned the empty lot. "Oh, hello, Mr. Kelly," we said.

"Tell you what I want you to do," said Mr. Kelly. "I want you to take those shovels and take that soil and shovel it right back in that hole you been digging. That's what I want you to do."

My heart started beating fast again. I wanted to scream myself.

"But Mr. Kelly, there's a screaming woman and. . ."

"I'm not interested. I don't hear a thing."

"Listen!" I cried.

The scream.

Mr. Kelly listened and shook his head. "Don't hear nothing. Go on now, fill it up and get home with you before I give you my foot!"

We filled the hole all back in again. And all the while we filled it in, Mr. Kelly stood there, arms folded, and the woman screamed, but Mr. Kelly pretended not to hear it.

When we were finished, Mr. Kelly stomped off, saying, "Go on home now. And if I catch you here again. . ."

I turned to Dippy. "*He's* the one," I whispered.

"Huh?" said Dippy.

"He *murdered* Mrs. Kelly. He buried her here, after he strangled her, in a box, but she came to. Why he stood right here and she screamed and he wouldn't pay any attention."

"Hey," said Dippy. "That's right. He stood right here and lied to us."

"There's only one thing to do," I said. "Call the police and have them come arrest Mr. Kelly."

We ran for the corner store telephone. . . .

The police knocked on Mr. Kelly's door five minutes later. Dippy and I were hiding in the bushes, listening.

"Mr. Kelly?" said the police officer.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

"Is Mrs. Kelly at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"May we see her, sir?"

"Of course. Hey, Anna!"

Mrs. Kelly came to the door and looked out. "Yes, sir?"

"I beg your pardon," apologized the officer. "We had a report that you were buried out in an empty lot, Mrs. Kelly. It sounded like a child made the call, but we had to be certain. Sorry to have troubled you."

"It's those blasted kids," cried Mr. Kelly, angrily. "If I ever catch them, I'll rip 'em limb from limb!"

"Cheezit!" said Dippy, and we both ran.

"What'll we do now?" I said.

"I got to go home," said Dippy. "Boy, we're really in trouble. We'll get a licking for this."

"But what about the Screaming Woman?"

"To heck with her," said Dippy. "We don't dare go near that empty lot again. Old man Kelly'll be waitin' around with his razor strap and lambast heck out'n us. An' I just happen to remember, Maggie. Ain't old man Kelly sort of deaf, hard-of-hearing?"

"Oh, my gosh," I said. "No *wonder* he didn't hear the screams."

"So long," said Dippy. "We sure got in trouble over your darn old Ventriloquist voice. I'll be seeing you."

I was left all alone in the world, no one to help me, no one to believe me at all. I just wanted to crawl down in that box with the screaming woman and die. The police were after me now, for lying to them, only I didn't know it was a lie, and my father was probably looking for me, too, or would be once he found my bed empty. There was only one last thing to do, and I did it.

I went from house to house, all down the street, near the empty lot. And I rang every bell and when the door opened I said: "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Griswold, but is anyone missing from your house?" or "Hello, Mrs. Pikes, you're looking fine today. Glad to see you *home*." And once I saw that the lady of the house was home I just chatted awhile, to be polite, and went on down the street. The hours were rolling along. It was getting late. I kept thinking, oh, there's only so much air in that box with that woman under the earth, and if I don't hurry, she'll suffocate, and I got to rush! So I rang bells and knocked on doors, and it got later, and I was just about to give up and go home, when I knocked on the *last* door, which was the door of Mr. Charlie Nesbitt, who lives next to us. I kept knocking and knocking.

Instead of Mrs. Nesbitt, or Helen as my father calls her, coming to the door, why it was Mr. Nesbitt, Charlie, *himself*.

"Oh," he said. "It's you, Margaret."

"Yes," I said. "Good afternoon."

"What can I do for you, kid?" he said.

"Well, I thought I'd like to see your wife, Mrs. Nesbitt," I said.

"Oh," he said.

"May I?"

"Well, she's gone out to the store," he said.

"I'll wait," I said, and slipped in past him.

"Hey," he said.

I sat down in a chair. "My, it's a hot day," I said, trying to be calm, thinking about the empty lot and air going out of the box, and the screams getting weaker and weaker.

"Say, listen, kid," said Charlie, coming over to me. "I don't think you better wait."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Why not?"

"Well, my wife won't be back," he said.

"Oh?"

"Not today, that is. She's gone to the store, like I said, but, but, she's going on from there to visit her mother. Yeah. She's going to visit her mother, in Schenectady. She'll be back, two or three days, maybe a week."

"That's a shame," I said.

"Why?"

"I wanted to tell her something."

"What?"

"I just wanted to tell her there's a woman buried over in the empty lot, screaming."

Mr. Nesbitt dropped his cigarette.

"You dropped your cigarette, Mr. Nesbitt," I pointed out, with my shoe.

"Oh, did I? Sure. So I did," he mumbled. "Well, I'll tell Helen when she comes home, your story. She'll be glad to hear it."

"Thanks. It's a real woman."

"How do you know it is?"

"I heard her."

"How, how you know it isn't, well, a *mandrake* root."

"What's that?"

"You know. A mandrake. It's a kind of a plant, kid. They scream. I know, I read it once. How you know it ain't a mandrake?"

"I never thought of that."

"You better start thinking," he said, lighting another cigarette. He tried to be casual. "Say, kid, you, eh, you *say* anything about this to anyone?"

"Sure, I told lots of people."

Mr. Nesbitt burned his hand on his match.

"Anybody doing anything about it?" he asked.

"No," I said. "They won't believe me."

He smiled. "Of course. Naturally. You're nothing but a kid. Why should they listen to you?"

"I'm going back now and dig her out with a spade," I said.

"Wait."

"I got to go," I said.

"Stick around," he insisted.

"Thanks, but no," I said, frantically.

He took my arm. "Know how to play cards, kid? Black jack?"

"Yes, sir."

He took out a deck of cards from a desk. "We'll have a game."

"I got to go dig."

"Plenty of time for that," he said, quiet. "Anyway, maybe my wife'll be home. Sure. That's it. You wait for her. Wait awhile."

"You think she will be?"

"Sure, kid. Say, about that voice; is it very strong?"

"It gets weaker all the time."

Mr. Nesbitt sighed and smiled. "You and your kid games. Here now, let's play that game of black jack, it's more fun than Screaming Women."

"I got to go; it's late."

"Stick around, you got nothing to do."

I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to keep me in his house until the screaming died down and was gone. He was trying to keep me from helping her. "My wife'll be home in ten minutes," he said. "Sure. Ten minutes. You wait. You sit right there."

We played cards. The clock ticked. The sun went down the sky. It was getting late. The screaming got fainter and fainter in my mind. "I got to go," I said.

"Another game," said Mr. Nesbitt. "Wait another hour, kid. My wife'll come yet. Wait."

In a while he looked at his watch. "Well, kid, I guess you can go now." And I knew what his plan was. He'd sneak down in the middle of the night and dig up his wife, still alive, and take her somewhere else and bury her, good. "So long, kid. So long." He let me go, because he thought that by now the air must all be gone from the box.

The door shut in my face.

I went back near the empty lot and hid in some bushes. What could I do? Tell my folks? But they hadn't believed me. Call the police on Mr. Charlie Nesbitt? But he said his wife was away visiting. Nobody would believe me!

I watched Mr. Kelly's house. He wasn't in sight. I ran over to the place where the screaming had been and just stood there.

The screaming had stopped. It was so quiet I thought I would never hear a scream again. It was all over. I was too late, I thought.

I bent down and put my ear against the ground.

And then I heard it, way down, way deep, and so faint I could hardly hear it.

The woman wasn't screaming any more. She was singing.

Something about, "I loved you fair, I loved you well."

It was sort of a sad song. Very faint. And sort of broken. All of those hours down under the ground in that box, must have sort of made her crazy. All she needed was some air and food and she'd be all right. But she just kept singing, not wanting to scream any more, not caring, just singing.

I listened to the song.

And then I turned and walked straight across the lot and up the steps to my house and I opened the front door.

"Father," I said.

"So there you are!" he cried.

"Father," I said.

"You're going to get a licking," he said.

"She's not screaming any more."

"Don't talk about her!"

"She's singing now."

"You're not telling the truth!"

"Dad," I said. "She's out there and she'll be dead soon if you don't listen to me. She's out there, singing, and this is what she's singing." I hummed the tune. I sang a few of the words. "I loved you fair, I loved you well. . ."

Dad's face grew pale. He came over and took my arm.

"What did you say?" he said.

I sang it again, "I loved you fair, I loved you well."

"Where did you *hear* that song?" he shouted.

"Out in the empty lot, just now."

"But that's *Helen's* song, the one she wrote, years ago, for *me*!" cried Father. "You *can't* know it. *Nobody* knows it, except Helen and me. I never sang it to anyone."

"Sure," I said.

"Oh my God!" cried Father, and ran out the door to get a shovel. The last I saw of him he was in the empty lot, digging, and lots of other people with him, digging.

I felt so happy I wanted to cry.

I dialed a number on the phone and when Dippy answered I said, "Hi, Dippy. Everything's fine. Everything's worked out keen. The Screaming Woman isn't screaming any more."

"Swell," said Dippy.

"I'll meet you in the empty lot with a shovel in two minutes," I said.

"Last one there's a monkey! So long!" cried Dippy.

"So long, Dippy!" I said, and ran.

Death, wandering the aisles of the scurrying train, planned that Sue should go on her journey . . .

and NEVER

There is something about the unvarying precision of railroads that forms an ideal backdrop for the story of suspense. From "The Lady Vanishes" to "Night Train" to Hitchcock's latest, the movies have apprehended and used this tense atmosphere. Perhaps it is the self-containment of the Pullman, a highspeed world passing through a static world—or perhaps it is the unerring flight, as of destiny on the wing. But here's a shining example of taut suspense riding a train . . . and you're a passenger.

SUE GARDNER just got Kathie to sleep when the telegram came. The streamliner was picking up speed, gliding west from Galesburg with the moon in pursuit. Sitting in the darkened compartment, Sue could see the moon rolling and bumping along the treetops. They were really on their way, she thought. The morning after tomorrow, Wednesday, they'd be in Pasadena . . . with Matthew.

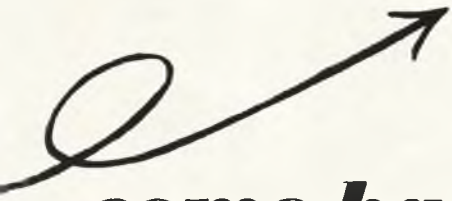
Odd that the thought of seeing Matthew should mean pleasurable excitement instead of shrinking and dismay. As if she could mend it, or wanted to after two years. As if Ila didn't exist. She tried not to think of Ila Gardner. Ila had Matthew but . . .

She looked down at her six-year-old daughter, clutching the eternally smiling clown doll, Pagliacci. She reminded herself this was no pleasure trip. If only Matthew's Aunt Katherine could live to see her little namesake.

She hardly noticed the knock on the door. People bracing themselves along the swaying passage often brushed knuckles against the compartment. The knock came again and a man's voice: "Mrs. Gardner?"

She knew no one on the train. It must be late—after ten. Perhaps it was that officious balding man with squeaky shoes. If she didn't answer

DOROTHY MARIE DAVIS



come back

he would knock again and wake Kathie. She snagged the sashes of her robe tighter and opened the door.

"Sorry to disturb you. A telegram." It was the conductor. "Not bad news, I hope."

"Thank you. Probably my father; he loves telegrams."

She smiled, recalling the gay surprises her parents liked, the amusing and amazing advice Dad used to send to summer camp and school.

"Well, if you wish to answer, the next stop is Shopton in about . . ." He consulted a thin handsome watch. "Forty-four minutes. Goodnight." He walked toward the rear of the train, balancing like a sailor, paused to tell the fat black porter, "I'll be in the observation."

Should she have tipped the conductor? No, she decided. She had never traveled alone before. These small perplexing questions were settled by her father before her marriage and then by Matthew . . . till the divorce. Silly trivia, but knowing what was correct smoothed existence.

She tilted the yellow envelope for the corridor light rather than risk waking Kathie. "MRS. MATTHEW GARDNER, CARE OF CONDUCTOR, WESTBOUND . . ." Dad would never address her that way. Mrs. Matthew Gardner! No one did any more. Even the telephone book said: Sue Farrell Gardner.

The telegram was from Los Angeles and her heart plunged. She tore it open. It might be the lawyer who phoned her long distance that morning; she quelled her excitement. He had called because old Katherine Gardner's peremptory summons had brought Sue's polite but crisp regrets. Perhaps Aunt Katherine was dead already.

The words took her by surprise: "RE PHONE CALL NO USE YOUR COMING SUE KATHIE ON TRAIN NO ONE ELSE WANTED." It was signed "Matt."

She realized the porter in his starched white coat waited. "No answer," she whispered and stepped

back into the welcome darkness of her compartment. She shut the door and leaned against it.

NO USE YOUR COMING SUE—neat black type on yellow paper! Her cheeks burned as if she'd been slapped. Ordering her to send Kathie on alone! NO ONE ELSE WANTED. Did he think she'd seek a reconciliation? Had he forgotten the divorce was hers over his protests and pleadings? Had he forgotten Ila? Did he imagine Sue still loved him . . . wanted to see him?

There it was, confronting her. She had never stopped loving Matthew. When she gave in to the lawyer that morning and agreed to take Kathie to Pasadena, the last defense of her pride crumbled. Old emotions invaded and now . . .

The yellow paper crackled as she crushed and flung it from her. Was it only that noon when Kathie dashed in from school full of news about the pretty lady in the yellow car who offered the children a ride? Sue was full of news herself, too excited to repeat the usual warning.

"Kathie, we're going to California . . . tonight."

"To see Daddy?"

"Yes. On a big silver train."

"Oh, Mother," cried Kathie, halfway between apprehension and longing. "To stay? And never come back?"

And never come back! Sue's heart echoed the question as she found the sticky mess of melted candy-bar in the little girl's hand.

"The pretty lady had a whole sackful, Mother. A different kind for each one of us, but I wanted you to have some, too."

"That's my girl, but . . . it's sort of melted, isn't it? You go wash your hands, darling, by yourself. Like a big girl. Mother has so much to do and so little time." . . .

Nothing . . . not even Mugsy the pup getting sick in the car when they drove him to her parents . . . nothing could dull her anticipation, until this—"NO USE YOUR COMING SUE."

Of course it was no use. He had Ila now to comfort him. She fanned the angry spark which someway dimmed the pain. Poised beautiful Ila . . . Ila the irresistible! He hadn't waited long to make her the second Mrs. Matthew Gardner.

Mrs. Matthew Gardner! Sue caught her breath. "Mrs. Matthew Gardner," she whispered in the dark. Realization washed over her like ice-water. She switched on the light, shielding it from Kathie with her body, found the ball of paper and read again:

MRS. MATTHEW GARDNER, CARE OF CONDUCTOR, WESTBOUND SUPER CHIEF.

Matthew wouldn't make that awkward slip. It wasn't for Sue; it was for Ila. Sue experimented, grouping and regrouping the words. RE PHONE CALL—NO USE YOUR COMING—SUE, KATHIE ON TRAIN—NO ONE ELSE WANTED. How different it was! She almost laughed. Not quite.

Ila was on the train. *Why should I be afraid?* thought Sue. *She can't hurt me, either of us.* But she was afraid. She smoothed the paper, tried to straighten it. She would have to explain. It was a natural mistake

but Ila would not forgive her. No amount of care would iron out the wrinkles, restore the torn envelope. Horror shook her hands. The bitter crumpling would tell Ila what Sue longed to conceal. Well, there was nothing to do but face it.

Sue folded it as near as possible in original creases. She would ask the porter to give it to the conductor, explaining. What a coward she was! She buzzed for Bumble. He had told Kathie that was his name. When he didn't come she opened the door. She thought someone retreated hastily at the end of the passage.

"Mr. Bumble," she called softly. "Mr. Bumble." She started toward the rear and heard the door to that platform sigh, opening. The rumble and jangle of the train swelled before it shut again sibilantly.

Perhaps porters went off duty at a certain hour. Sue knew so little about trains. The observation-lounge was only the third car back—not far. She listened to Kathie's even breathing. Nothing short of a five alarm fire would arouse her little daughter. And if Kathie did wake up, she wouldn't be frightened or confused in the strange swaying room. Sue's sense of humor asserted itself. Kathie would know instantly where and why and how and be delighted, just as she always knew at the second of popping awake that it was Christmas or her birthday.

She buzzed once more for luck, then dressed quickly in the two-piece blue faille she had chosen for travel. She didn't like to leave Kathie but it wouldn't take long, five minutes at the most. She carried her purse for dignity.

There was something eerie about the empty passage, as if she trod a deserted train rocketing toward doom. She fought the weight of the door, crossed the steel platform and that somehow frightening jiggling sill that linked the pullmans.

Entering the next coach, she half-expected to see someone ahead of her but there was no one. The door of an unoccupied bedroom gaped darkly. Earlier that night the conductor and another trainman sat there, intent on the tickets. Maybe the porter . . . Whoever sat in the dark corner drew back sharply into the shadow at Sue's intrusion.

"I . . . I beg your pardon. I was looking for our porter," Sue explained, embarrassed. "Sorry if I startled you."

She hastened on, glancing over her shoulder, wondering. No berth had been made up in the dark room. Maybe she had only imagined the figure, the withdrawal. Maybe it was the porter. No! He dozed on his shelf, starting awake as she came. But it wasn't Bumble.

She nodded, reassured, and went on, fighting the last set of doors. The conductor had swung the end chair to face the roadbed slipping away behind. His head swivelled at her step. He sprang up, smiling.

"Plenty of time," he said at her breathlessness. "We're just coming to the Mississippi."

But she hadn't brought him a reply, she told him. She plunged into her explanation bravely, faltered.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to realize . . . and . . . the condition . . ."

His kindly blue eyes twinkled, sobered. He drew a sheaf of papers bound with a rubber band from his neatly mended pocket and studied one. "There is another Mrs. Gardner, boarding the train at Kansas City. She must be the one."

"Mrs. Matthew Gardner?"

He nodded. "Yes. The mistake was mine . . . and then the telegram arriving at Galesburg! I'll see what can be done. Don't worry." Only his eyes were interested and aware, the rest of his face was impersonal. "Please excuse it, Mrs. . . . Gardner."

"I should have known at once," she said. She escaped as quickly as his "Goodnight" released her.

She almost ran, conscious of a change in the movement of the train, a steadying. It was slowing, perhaps, or the roadbed was different. On the first platform she recognized why. They were on the bridge. The clack was hollower. Beams blurred, whizzing by in the moonlight outside the window, and there was the far hoot of a river boat.

The same porter swayed with the train, his chin low on his white jacket. He did not wake as she passed. The bedroom door was shut. She bucked the platform door and stepped out . . . into white radiance and wind.

Draft sucked her outward. Her frantic hand found a hold. Why . . . the whole wall was gone! Both upper and lower halves were folded as when they put luggage on. Someone might . . .

Something solid struck her. It was soft . . . yet heavy. It filled the platform. It brushed her to her knees on the metal floor. Her wrist twisted with agony. Desperately she kept her hold. The smothering weight slithered over her, flattening her, half-dragging her out of the train. It caught in the slipstream, whammed sideways, then whisked out, struck the bridge supports and fell.

Sue held on, gritting her teeth, waiting, hardly daring to breathe. Nothing more tore at her. Slowly, painfully she opened her eyes again —shut with the horror of that gray thing falling. She saw moonlight sparkle on the river below the ties, almost invisible with speed. Slowly she inched backward from the brink of the metal platform.

The porter found her there, huddled against the door, afraid to attempt to stand. He helped her up, exclaimed over her raddled hose and skinned knee. "You mustn't never open those doors," he chided gently. "I'll have to tell Mr. Housh."

Indignation steadied Sue, ready to weep a second before at his sympathy. "I didn't open them. I wouldn't know how. They were . . . just open . . . like that. And something knocked me down and fell off past me."

"Now, now."

"I wish you would tell Mr. Housh, whoever he is. It wasn't that way when I went back to speak to the conductor. Where were you? I rang."

He rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Miz Gardner. Guess the other party rung first. I was gone about ten minutes; that's all. Are you all right, Ma'am?"

Sue shook her head against the spinning black wheels that threatened to shut down over her. "Yes. Yes. I must go to Kathie."

He helped her into her room where Kathie dreamed on serenely and Pagliacci laughed on the pillow by her. Then Bumble went for the conductor, as the train was stopping.

Kathie! The necessity for calmness quieted Sue here. She bathed her face, her knee. This must be Shopton and the conductor would not come for a few minutes. Sue was glad for the chance to recover her nerve and think. Her shoulder ached from the wrenching she'd given it. She had broken two fingernails to the quick and was suddenly amused at herself because this last seemed the worst of all. *But I'm alive,* she thought. It was a miracle in itself. She felt quite herself and the streamliner was gliding on again when the conductor came.

Her word had never been doubted before. The shock of it left her inarticulate yet she didn't blame Mr. Housh. He hadn't found her there on the platform, terrified. His blue eyes now were keen and appraising. She could almost read his mind: Was she an exhibitionist or . . .? He read special significance into the episode of the telegram, she saw. She guessed how it looked to him. She was a suicide whose nerve failed. It was logical. She was helpless against that logic. Nothing she said nicked it. Why—he might have her arrested, put in "protective custody"! He might take Kathie from her.

She sought words of protest and disproof. "But . . . but Mr. Housh, I . . ." Desperate tears rose to her eyes and she gritted her teeth against them. He did not believe her. What use were arguments? The truth had no defense at all, none, no alibi neatly worked out. His glance was pitying but speculative, judging her.

"I've told you the truth, the whole truth, Mr. Housh." Her voice rose uncontrollably and she stopped, drew a deep breath and began again lower, slowly. "I don't pretend to understand or explain what happened. I only know it did happen and . . . and tomorrow . . . you'll find a mattress is missing from some room. You'll see."

"We'll search the train carefully," he said. "Now, you say your shoulder is wrenched and your knee . . .?"

She refused to see a doctor, humiliated because it was so obvious the conductor suspected her of trying to frame grounds for suing the railroad, but relented. Maybe they would believe her when the doctor saw her injuries. The examination was brief; the doctor was sleepy. She would not accept his offer of a sedative for she did not want to sleep . . . not yet. Oh, they said Ila wouldn't board the train till Kansas City—miles away, but Sue wanted to be sure.

Bumble came after a bit and tattooed softly. "Don't you worry, Miz Gardner," he told her through the door. "I'm sticking right here, Ma'am, keeping an eye on things."

Not worry? He didn't know. Was it possible for Ila's malign influence to reach her across space? She knew Ila would be boarding the train, and

at once . . .! Wasn't there a psychological explanation for that?

The old miserable dread of Ila shook her again. She had been free so long. It had been such a baffling inexplicable dread, as if she—Sue—had a guilty conscience and feared to face Ila, feared to meet her on the street or at a restaurant, anywhere. She would go out of her way to avoid meeting her, despising herself meanwhile. It was horrid, an emotion she never understood. Almost neurotic.

The first time she met Ila was at their wedding reception—Sue's and Matthew's. Suddenly the tall slim woman in sophisticated black paused in the arch to the hall, brushed past Sue's cousin who was assisting, ignored the long queue of patient friends and crossed direct as a bullet to Matthew.

Sue felt him stiffen, his hand crushed hers. "Ila," he said, dismay sharpening his voice, even before Ila cried, "Matt! Matt!" so that everyone, not already watching, turned.

"How have I hurt you to make you do this?" she said in a low rich voice that everyone heard. Implying . . . oh, implying Sue didn't know what, didn't want to know. She shrank from the knowledge, from the moment. Somehow she held the smile before her face like a sequined carnival mask, thinking in brief relief: "But she's years older than Matthew. She must be thirty-two at least."

Then Matthew was making a bad job of introductions. Ila merely glanced at Sue, no greeting! Sue's hand, half-advanced for Ila's, fell empty. Words died on Sue's lips before that swift searing glance. Later Matthew tried to explain.

"Don't, dear. It's all right."

"But she gave the impression . . . Sue, I want you to know there was never anything between us. I . . ."

"It doesn't matter, dear. Let's not spoil this."

"It does matter. How can I make you believe there was nothing?"

"Darling, don't. I don't care if there was."

"My God! Don't say that, Susie—as if there was something to overlook." He upended his crisp hair with a frantic gesture. "Listen, she was one of the ones you meet along the way . . . dine, dance . . ."

"I believe you, Matt." And she did . . . at first. But Ila kept appearing, always to Sue's disadvantage, making her appear gauche and immature. Perhaps it was as Matthew said: Ila just hated to let go of anything, anything at all once hers.

There was the time Sue, returning to their table in the Pump Room, found Ila in her chair opposite Matthew. The woman sat there insolently, ignoring Sue's arrival though Matthew leaped up instantly, his eyes worried.

"Sit here, Susie. I'll get another chair."

Sue wanted to walk on by—to the cocktail lounge; Matthew would have to excuse himself and hurry after her. Surely he would, but she dreaded a scene, flinched from rudeness. Maybe she was afraid he wouldn't follow. *I'm not jealous,* she

told herself. *I'm not.* She turned to speak courteously to Ila, and something—Ila's toe, she suspected later—tripped her at the table's edge. It wasn't a bad fall, merely awkward. She sprawled and the woman at the next table gave a little scream, attracting more attention.

Matthew was scarlet, helping her up. "What on earth, Susie?"

"One too many, perhaps," said Ila. That mocking red smile!

"But I'm not . . . I haven't . . ." Sue stopped, chin high. "Shall we go, Matt?"

"If you wish." As if he didn't want to!

Ila said softly, "Yes, take the child home, Matt. Be seeing you." That "Be seeing you!" . . . echoing and reechoing through the days.

And the windy autumn evening Sue told him about the baby. They were on their way to the theater. He seemed as giddy and happy as she but when she tucked her hand into his pocket for warmth, she found the long crimson suede glove. Ila's!

"Damn her," roared Matthew. "If she thinks for a second . . ." Then, "Susie, you don't believe . . . I tell you I haven't seen her, more than to speak to. She came to the office today while I was out. She waited a few minutes, then left. I swear that's all. I didn't tell you because . . . well, it wasn't anything. I wasn't even there when she was. But she must have put her glove in my coat then."

"Oh, Matt, why would she?"

"To give her an excuse. To ask me to return it, don't you see?"

But this new accident . . . it could not be Ila's fault. Ila wasn't due till Kansas City, and the conductor had promised to search the train. *I won't sleep,* thought Sue, with the wheels warning her, threatening . . . Never come back, never come back, never come back. . . .

Kathie woke her at seven with repeated echoes of "Mother, are you awake? Mother, are you awake? Oh, do get up," she wailed tragically when Sue pulled her down and kissed her. "We're missing everything."

The whole thing seemed ridiculous in the sunlight . . . except her sore shoulder and stiff knee. A stupid accident, she admitted, dismissing what she could not explain. Kathie helped her to forget. She was as full of wonder and curiosity as a monkey. Kathie, pushing buttons, brought Bumble running.

His eyes questioned Sue while he scolded Kathie with mock seriousness. "Now, see here, Miss Kathie, this here is that extra hour I told you about last night. Your watch is wrong. You got your poor Mommy up at six o'clock."

"I never did," Kathie giggled. "I can tell time."

"In Chicago maybe, but Dodge City is different. You see, this train has got the sun working hard to keep up; yes, Ma'am." He added to Sue, "Did you sleep finally, Miz Gardner?"

"Yes, Mr. Bumble, thanks to you."

She wanted to ask him if Mr. Housh found anyone, if a mattress was missing and if at Kansas City . . .

He hurried away as someone buzzed.

Sue said, "I was thinking it might be fun to have breakfast right here in our room. Mr. Bumble will set up a little table and . . ."

"No," said Kathie. "I want to see them carry trays when the train rocks."

Sue wondered what she would do if she met Ila in the diner. But Ila would never be up this early, especially if she got on at Kansas City. No danger of seeing her at breakfast. The precautions Sue had planned before dropping off to sleep seemed idiotic now—to barricade themselves in the compartment, see no one. Impossible to tie last night's accident to Ila, just because Ila hated her.

That was putting the word on it, the proper word. Had Ila actually hated her at first? At least she did that wintry day when Matthew came to say goodbye to Kathie.

Sue had full custody of the little girl. Matthew wanted it that way but he visited Kathie often, bringing gifts like the beloved clown. That day, without warning, he said he was leaving for Los Angeles to be in charge of the home office.

"Being kicked upstairs where I'll do less harm. It means . . ."

He didn't finish because Ila walked in behind him. "It's cold waiting in the car. If you don't mind . . ." She let the mink wrap slip down a little. Her glance disdained the comfortable small room, paused on Kathie. "So this is the fabulous offspring."

She stooped, held out exquisite tapering rose-tipped fingers. "Hello, Kathie. How would you like to come and live with us in Pasadena?"

"Ila," choked Matthew.

Kathie whirled, hugged Sue's knees and buried her face there. Sue could smile a little, secure in Kathie's choice, then she stared startled at the mask of hatred the other woman's face became. Matthew took Ila away at once.

Yes, they were gone, and the pain of never seeing Matthew was almost eased by the relief of Ila's absence. But it wasn't Ila that had him transferred west, cutting him cleanly from Sue and Kathie. Aunt Katherine did that.

The old woman had not approved their marriage. (Did she like Ila any better?) Hurtling westward at Aunt Katherine's beck, Sue traced her influence across their marriage. And now, dying, she still called the tune.

She was a family monarch who wrested her brother's portion from his weak invalid hand and, when he died, wielded the double fortune as a scourge over his family, having none of her own. She seemed to enjoy their groveling and whimpering while she despised them for it.

At least that was the picture Matthew had drawn of her. He never pretended to like her though he admitted a grudging respect. He refused to court her with flattery as the rest of his family did, but her influence was instinct in everything he did.

Before he called on Sue's parents, he said, "They'll want to know my prospects. Well, I'm the youngest nephew of the head of a big business.

I've been eased in over better men to run the Chicago office. Myself, I'm nothing; but I've got a rich aunt."

And when the baby was coming —"in escrow," as they put it, having just bought a house out Evanston way—Sue said, "If it's a boy, we'll call him Matthew, darling."

"If it's a girl," Matthew answered, "we'll cross our fingers and call her Katherine to tickle the old lady's gizzard."

Sometimes he shocked Sue. Her protests made him grin. "I'm youngest of five brothers and a sister. They've had their fingers in the jam for years; I want my share for the baby and you."

No, Sue couldn't grieve over Aunt Katherine. She wouldn't be on the train except for the woman's lawyer.

"She's old," the lawyer said. "Humor her, Mrs. Gardner. She can do a lot for your little girl. Have you a right by your decision to cut her off forever from her lawful inheritance through her father? Think carefully, Mrs. Gardner. Don't let pride or prejudice sway you in what may so greatly affect Kathie's future. Miss Gardner only wants to see her namesake. It's a very small thing to ask."

The lawyer's transcontinental phone call had come at eight-forty Monday morning just after she walked with Kathie to the corner near school. Then the mad dash.

Bumble smiled and winked as Sue reconnoitered the passage. He asked Kathie, "Are you ready for a b-b-big breakfast?"

"Yes," she said with a skip. "Are you coming, too?" She confided to Sue as they went forward, "I like him. He seems like a nice person."

Because she was half-afraid, Sue paused on the fateful platform on their way to the observation car. No need to go into a tailspin because of an accident—a mattress propped up and forgotten that fell with the train's sway. But . . . it hadn't been swaying so much on the bridge!

Kathie's scream wiped the memory out. The little girl had tried to buck the door ahead by herself. When Sue did not follow immediately, she turned to wait and the door, inexorably closing, caught her short flaring skirt and held her fast.

"There!" Sue said, freeing her. Her heart pounded sickeningly from the shock of the outcry. "Now, no one's hurt. Kathie, such a big noise to make! You . . . you frightened me."

"I'm sorry but I didn't want to tore my new dress," Kathie said, smoothing and worrying with the skirt. Then she tossed her head. "Nobody heard me yell, Mother, anyway."

It was true. Sue let the bad grammar go by, thinking, *And last night no one would have heard though I screamed and screamed.*

They spent the morning in the lounge, Kathie busy with a coloring book. People were kind; they pointed out the Rockies, told Kathie stories and had her nose glued to the windows watching for Indians. The day was slipping away fast. It hardly seemed possible that tomorrow . . . Ila's husband . . . Sue schooled herself.

Returning to their compartment after a late lunch, Sue needed a nap

more than Kathie. She smiled at Bumble. "If my knee didn't hurt I'd think I dreamed last night," she told him frankly, pausing while Kathie trotted ahead importantly to unlock their door.

"No, Ma'am, you didn't dream it," he said. "Etiwanda is shy a mattress from a bedroom that was empty up to Kansas City. Mr. Housh is sure upset."

Kathie burst from their room, stricken, tears flooding down her cheeks. "Oh, Mother . . . my Polly!" Polly was her version of the clown's formal name. She lifted what was left of the doll. The body was slit to shreds and the stuffing spilled, the comic-sad face was smashed as if someone had ground it under his heel . . . viciously.

"Oh, Lordy," whispered Bumble.

Sue gathered Kathie into her arms as the porter pushed past into the compartment, examining, searching. But that was all the damage they found. Nothing missing, nothing even disturbed . . . except Pagliacci.

"I swear there ain't nobody been in this room while I'm sitting here," he said, scratching his cropped head. "That's the trouble, Miz Gardner. I get called now and then to do things. I ain't never heard anything like it for plumb ugliness—spoiling Miss Kathie's doll. I'll call Mr. Housh."

Ugly was the right word. It crawled in Sue's mind as she tried to mend the little clown with her inadequate traveling kit open on her knee. Kathie sobbed herself to sleep, unconsoled. Mr. Housh came, looked at the doll, poked around the room.

"They might have thought you had something hidden in its stuffing," he said. "Jewels, money." He smiled when Sue laughed almost hysterically. "You know anybody on the train that might try to scare you, Mrs. Gardner?"

"My husband's second wife," she said.

Mr. Housh glanced at Kathie, her breath still stumbling with sobs. "The other Mrs. Gardner came aboard at two-thirty this morning," he said.

"You're sure?" Sue tried to keep her voice even. "There couldn't be a mistake . . . a trick?"

"We take on a pullman there. It's made up for occupancy by nine-thirty the evening before. She was on it, her ticket—everything, in order." He seemed to be waiting. "Have you any other suggestions, Mrs. Gardner?" He withdrew, courteous but enigmatic as ever. She could only guess what he was thinking, that she had staged both occurrences herself.

Sue was afraid again, desperately. She looked around the compartment. What else besides the doll? The ice water in the insulated carafe? She emptied it down the washbowl. The toothpowder? She emptied the can. The aspirin followed. An alien parcel on the shelf was only their hats in a brown paper sack. She inspected everything, tested it, left nothing to chance.

I can't go on like this, she thought feverishly, *trusting no one, nothing.* A person had to have someone to trust. Bumble! She could count on him. And Mr. Housh, if she could

convince him she was a victim, but how?

She went back carefully over everything that had happened From the start—the phone call. He had said he was Aunt Katherine's lawyer, but the whole thing might have been faked. Even the telegram from Aunt Katherine earlier, the story of her illness. But why? To get Kathie where they wanted her. No, that would mean Matthew was involved. She couldn't believe that. There must be something else.

It was plain suddenly. Kathie was the key. No kidnapping charge, no danger to Ila. And in the event of an accident to Sue, the little girl's stepmother would take charge, of course. Sue felt she knew what Ila would have said when she heard (after Kansas City, of course): "How tragic! We had both been called to the bedside of my husband's dying aunt. I suppose poor Sue just couldn't face seeing Matthew again." Yes, that was how it was to be. Ila wanted Kathie . . . as a hold on Aunt Katherine . . . or Matthew himself. Oh, clever, clever!

She shivered though sunlight was potent on the window. They flashed through a straggling town like a western movie setting. A wigwag clanged louder, louder, higher in tone, whipped past and faded on a descending scale. Two Indians in a buckboard paralleled the tracks for an instant, their velveteen blouses—blue next to orange—bright against the hazy desert reaches.

Kathie would have been disappointed in the Indians. Sue looked down and saw Pagliacci again. The damage to the little clown was different. It was evil, aimed at Kathie directly—like a voodoo spell. There was something not quite sane about the ruthless useless act.

Why did Ila hate her so, hate Kathie? She had won Matthew from them. She could afford to be generous, having Matt.

And why was she in the East in the first place? The answer could be obvious. She was from Chicago where she met Matthew. She could have been visiting relatives. Matthew's telegram mentioned a phone call—either his to her or hers to him.

Suppose—suppose the old lady had willed Kathie a sizable hunk, enough to make her guardianship worthwhile, and suppose Ila knew. Ila might try to get possession of Kathie, or failing that, might try to provide evidence that Sue was not a fit guardian. *That's close,* thought Sue. *I'm on the right track.*

That didn't mean Matthew was party to it. No, no! Ila could even be planning to wield her possession of Kathie over him like a club. He was too tactlessly honest always for subterfuge, a little bitter perhaps about his family, even cynical, only saved by his gamin sense of humor, but he wouldn't be in this with Ila. Probably Ila had phoned him. His wire sounded like an answer. NO ONE ELSE WANTED.

Sue decided to telegraph Matthew from Albuquerque. He would know what to do at once. Relieved, she dropped her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. Matthew!

She could trust him, too. (That made three!) Matthew loved Kathie, if no longer Sue. Maybe she hadn't played her cards as well as she might. Viewpoints changed in two years. A marriage was worth fighting for but she had walked off and left Ila the victor by default. Sue had been young, deeply hurt and too immature to meet the crisis. Self-centered, she said of herself now. It took two to make a quarrel, but it took two to make a marriage as well and she had failed.

"Mother," said Kathie, "are you crying for Polly, too?"

"We'll get you a new Pagliacci, dear."

Kathie cradled him in her arms. "No-o-o-o, I love this one." Her under-lip trembled. She quavered, "He doesn't mind. He says it doesn't hurt much . . . now."

They were entering Albuquerque. Sue would have ten minutes, plenty of time. "Would you like to get off the train, Kathie, and walk in the sun and see some real Indians?"

The train was barely stopped before men were washing the windows. Sue held Kathie's hand tight, hurrying down the crowded platform toward the station, dodging the strollers.

"The telegraph office, please? Thank you."

They waved her on toward a crowded counter. So many ahead of her! Would she have time? She paused, uncertain, looking for a thinner spot in the pressing people, and a tall woman in beige shantung turned from the counter.

Ila was more beautiful than Sue remembered—haughty, slender, perfectly groomed from smooth dark hair to stilt heels of the platform pumps that matched the beige shantung. And for this moment, Ila was surprised, even startled off-balance, but she recovered.

"Why—it's Susie, isn't it?" she said. "I haven't seen you for so long . . ."

"Last night," said Sue clearly, danger electric in every nerve, but she felt safe in the midst of the crowd. "I wish Mr. Housh was here. I'd like him to hear me say this."

"Mr. Housh? Oh, yes . . . the conductor. Matt said you always knew everyone's name. If you'll pardon me. We have only a few moments . . ." She pushed past coolly, unhurried yet hurrying.

"Goodbye," said Kathie, raising her voice. "Thank you for the candy."

Sue took three steps before she froze, stooped and tipped Kathie's chin. "Candy, darling?"

"That's the pretty lady in the yellow car. I told you. At school . . . she had a whole sackful . . ."

Sue choked, caught Kathie up and held her till she wriggled. "What happened to the candy, baby?"

"Mugsy licked it off my hand . . . all clean, but I washed afterwards like you said."

Mugsy, sick in her parents' car!

Sue straightened. "Mother, you're hurting my hand." She uncurled her fists carefully.

"Sorry, darling." She elbowed to the counter, head high, imperious, fighting for assurance. "I just sent a

telegram," she said boldly, snagging a clerk for herself. "It was addressed to . . . to Matthew Gardner, Pasadena. I'd like to change it if I may. I am Mrs. Gardner."

The man looked harassed, credulous of anything. He ruffled through a basket of yellow sheets, handed her one and went to another customer.

MATT DARLING, read the carefully impersonalized lettering, I CAN'T GO ON THIS WAY FORGIVE ME THIS IS THE ONLY WAY OUT FOR ME. It was signed, SUE.

Far off someone called, "All 'board." She folded the message twice, jammed it into her purse and ran, dragging Kathie. They were barely in time. Bumble shook his head, clucked his tongue as he lifted Kathie aboard.

"I didn't see a single Indian," protested Kathie.

"Bumble, when . . . we're well started again will you call Mr. Housh for me? I have something to show him." Sue couldn't keep the triumph from her voice. She smiled down at Kathie. "We have something to tell him," she added.

Mr. Housh was reluctant to reopen the incident. "Now, Mrs. Gardner, you had a bad experience . . ."

"I was nearly killed," said Sue. "Even Kathie isn't safe. Tell him, Kathie, about the pretty lady in the yellow car."

Kathie told him gravely, even about Mugsy's sickness.

"And she's on the train now? You saw her?" asked the conductor sternly of the little girl.

"Not on the train," said honest Kathie. "In the . . . the . . ." She looked up at Sue, frowning.

"The telegraph office," Sue supplied quickly. Too quickly, she realized, flushing as she saw the arch of the conductor's brows. Did he think now she had coached Kathie in a lie?

She got the message out and gave it to him. "You see it's signed with my name but I didn't print it. There's some way to prove that. You have everyone print the words and compare them. Don't you see, Mr. Housh, she's working toward . . . another accident?"

"Am I intruding?" asked Ila from the narrow door. She smiled at Mr. Housh; her slim height exaggerated by the high-heeled shoes made her seem taller than them all. She came in a step. "I rather thought something like this might happen. Poor little Sue. She was my husband's first wife, but of course she told you. He had a difficult time with her . . . so tragic."

"Why, you're implying . . ." Sue drew Kathie to her, put the child behind her. "Mr. Housh, it's not true. Don't you see she's lying to cover up?"

"So emotional," said Ila, gently. "Unstable and imaginative. This . . . this persecution complex of hers isn't new. I don't know what she's accused me of this time . . . something utterly fantastic, I suppose. If I'd known she was to be on the train—but no matter. I really came to ask at what stop I can take a plane on. There's something so . . . humiliating about all this."

"Mr. Housh," whispered Sue, be-

cause he was eyeing her oddly—as if he believed Ila, as if he might lock Sue up. Maybe he would take Kathie from her, make out she was crazy, not a fit mother. Over Mr. Housh's shoulder, past his troubled face, Ila was laughing at her, ghastly silent mirth that drew her painted mouth wide.

"Look at her," cried Sue. "Look at her. She's the crazy one."

"Now, now," said Mr. Housh pityingly. He did not look around at Ila and Sue knew she had clinched her own condition in his mind. Didn't crazy people always think they were sane and the others not? She leaned against the cool wall, weak, nauseated.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Mrs. . . . er . . . Gardner," he told Ila, watching Sue. He shut the door when Ila was gone.

"Please believe me," Sue begged.

"Suppose you lie down for a while," he said. "I'll have our train nurse take Kathie for a little while."

"No, I'm all right." Sue straightened, ready to fight . . . any way. "Oh, please, why do you think my . . . former husband sent that telegram to this train ahead of time, Mr. Housh? He knew Ila boarded it in Chicago. Don't you see? Remember, it spoke of a phone call. He must have talked to her—in Chicago. The gates are narrow at Dearborn, everyone crowding through. You don't examine tickets minutely; you just make sure everyone has a ticket."

"Well . . ." He looked badgered and she pressed this small advantage.

"Suppose she had a ticket to get on at Kansas City. Would it look different? Be a different color? Or couldn't she buy one to . . . any place, Chillicothe, anywhere? Even on a different train. Could you be certain?"

"We'd catch that later," he said firmly.

Sue talked fast. "If I didn't have a ticket I'd keep moving along the train, avoiding you. It would be easy. I'd go into a lounge and be eating when you caught up with me. I'll bet I could stow away as far as Kansas City, especially if I looked and acted like a bona fide first-class passenger. There were empty rooms —like that bedroom on . . . Eti something."

Mr. Housh blinked. "The blankets were laid back in the berth," he said thoughtfully. "The berth was put up so we didn't discover it—that the mattress was gone, I mean. I had a thorough search of the train made after your accident. There was nothing irregular."

"But we stopped just before that."

"Shopton," he admitted.

"And the search came even later than your talk with me, didn't it? Someone could have got off in the darkness at Shopton and walked away. There's a town nearby, isn't there? An airport? Don't you see? A plane could set her down in Kansas City with time to spare. She'd be aboard the waiting pullman and in bed just as you said when we pulled in."

He looked down at Kathie, listening round-eyed on the edge of the

seat. "And somebody hurt my Polly," she said promptly.

"Wire my parents," Sue urged. "We took Mugsy to the vet's on the way to dinner. Here . . . I'll write their address. Maybe there's a report on the pup. Oh, please. Be very, very sure before you decide against me. I'm in trouble, Mr. Housh, desperate trouble. I don't know just what she's trying to do but . . . I'm afraid for . . . for Kathie. Please help us."

"Don't worry," he said with sudden briskness. "Perhaps you'd better stay . . . here till we get this ironed out. If you'll pardon me now. You'll help me by keeping calm . . . and not worrying." He turned Ila's unsent telegram in his hand. "I'll just keep this."

Don't worry! Sue laughed weakly, without humor. Now that there was nothing to do but keep calm and wait, her hands shook uncontrollably. Tears kept starting to her eyes. She was as good as a prisoner, she told herself. Even Kathie was unnaturally still. It had been an awful scene for a sensitive child to witness.

Fear sat with them. No, not fear—hate, a tangible corrosive. *It can only hurt me if I let it,* Sue thought. And Kathie must know nothing of it. "Why don't you tell Pagliacci a story?" she prompted.

Kathie stirred. "What about?"

"About Bumble," said Sue.

Her mind hared off under the screen of Kathie's sweet treble. Why should Ila hate Sue and Kathie? Back to that again. Was it a legacy from Aunt Katherine or did Matthew still love Sue? How could a person find her way out of the awful maze she'd built of life?

Bumble brought dinner to their room, making a grand occasion of it for Kathie. He had a new trick every minute—balancing a spoon on a glass rim, making an orange disappear under a napkin. He rolled four corners of a paper napkin and put a round lime under it to roll and wobble its four legs like a merry spider.

It was a hilarious dinner party though Kathie's eyelids drooped heavily before the end. "Polly is sleepy, Mother," she whispered.

For a second, Sue held her breath, suspicion freezing her. But the sleep was normal and somehow comforting. Bumble carried the dinner things away softly. Shadows reached far over the desert and the sunset flared, dyeing the barren waste with crimson and purple. The porter set her chair out in the passage by the window.

"Now you set there and hold Miss Kathie where I can keep an eye on you both," he ordered, smiling, "and I'll have these berths made up in no time at all."

"Thank you, Bumble. Bumble what?" she asked suddenly.

"Just Bumble," he said. "Bumble Bee," and he laughed and slapped his fat thighs and went about his job.

She wished she could tell him adequately how much his friendship meant to her, keeping her on even keel, protecting her from stark unreasoning terror. But he had saved the best for his goodnight.

"This'll make you sleep," he said.

"That other Miz Gardner, she's packed and ready. She's getting off the train at Ashfork. It ain't a scheduled stop but Mr. Housh is glad to be shut of her . . . and I think some folks are going to meet her there. Yes, Ma'am."

"Ashfork!" repeated Sue. "I want to see her get off, Bumble. I want to be sure. Will you call me? I won't go to bed till after . . . Ashfork."

She sat by the window in the darkness of the compartment, watching the same moon pursue the train with all the desert lying white beneath, white as if it had snowed. And the wheels made a sound of snow on a window pane. No, they were whispering again . . . never come back, never come back . . .

She sprang wide awake shivering, but it was Mr. Housh knocking. "Sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Gardner. A telegram. Took it on at Winslow just now."

With an odd feeling of repetition she stepped into the passage to read it, not minding his hovering. He was a friend. She wanted him by her. He cleared his throat and she waited.

"About your dog, Mrs. Gardner . . . we got a report. He'll live. It was . . . one of the barbiturates. The . . . er . . . other woman is leaving us soon, so don't worry."

"Thank you." Sue tore open the telegram, feeling that no mere "Thank you" was enough to express her deep gratitude. For a moment she could not see the typed letters and Mr. Housh made a helpless gesture.

"Now, now . . ." he said, backing away from her a little.

MRS. SUE GARDNER, she read. It was from Pasadena.

"I . . . uh . . . wired him," said Mr. Housh as she gasped.

Sue read on hungrily: WILL MEET YOU IN PASADENA MY DIVORCE FROM ILA GRANTED LAST WEEK AUNT KATHERINE BACK ON HER FEET SAYS WILL MEET TRAIN TOO I SUSPECT HER ILLNESS FRAUD TO GET YOU HERE. MATTHEW.

"Oh boy!" said Bumble, a dark moon at her shoulder. "Got to get that beauty sleep now, Miz Gardner. Yes, Ma'am."

"Yes, Bumble. Oh, yes."

But now sleep was farthest from her thoughts. Now she knew that Ila had reason to . . . well, dislike her. She almost pitied Ila. Would they ever reach Ashfork? Bumble shook his head over her.

"Not for about ten minutes."

"I think I'll walk forward. It'll take time."

"Well . . . I'll stay with Miss Kathie. So help me, Miz Gardner, folks can buzz till the cows come home."

She went forward toward the pullman that had been added at Kansas City. It seemed a long way, so many cars, so many heavy doors and racketing platforms. There were only two people left in the forward lounge to stare. She bent to a window, fencing off the light, peering out at the expanse of desert between her hands. The train whistled . . . like some other train . . . far off, dimly.

Soon I'll be able to breathe, thought Sue. *To sleep.*

She didn't know just when a night-

marish awareness of repetition came to her again. She had done this before—fought the doors, stepped warily over the jiggling metal sills, zigzagged down empty passages with the swift rock of the streamliner. Wait . . . it was like last night . . .

Porters glanced up, questioning with their eyes. They were all there tonight. All of them. Sue thought, *it's all right. I'm not afraid.*

But she was afraid. She dreaded each platform. She was not even surprised when she stepped out, felt the swirl and suck of wind. Someone's opened the window for a smoke, she thought . . . even as her eyes saw the gulf yawning on her right. The platform was lifted, not just the door folded back. The steps dropped away to the rocky careening roadbed.

And Ila was there! Ila mocked her over the grind of the wheels. Ila laughed. "You little fool! I guessed you'd come. Well, you won't see me get off. They'll never miss you till hours after I'm gone at Ashfork."

Sue whirled, galvanized out of shocked immobility. The heavy door was closing, softly sighing. Sue yanked but terror made her limp. And Ila clawed at her shoulder, wrenching, twisting her toward the cliff of steps. Ila was tall . . . strong.

Sue screamed and screamed again. They must hear her. They must. Ila would take Kathie . . . Kathie! She clung to the door and dragged it back a bit, but Ila beat her hands with hard fists, tried to tear her from it. Sue was remembering . . . Kathie! She raised her knee against the tiny gap in the door. She saw the fold of blue faille go in as the door closed. Would it hold?

With a terrific lunge Ila thrust her toward the steps and then . . . Ila screamed. She lurched, pitched down the steps, striking her head on the wall as the blast of slipstream hit her. She fell out, limp as a doll.

Sue slid down to the metal floor. The door held the faille like a vise so she could not move. She did not want to move . . . for a moment, slumped there, staring at the broken high heel with its rag of beige shantung that lay so close. She withdrew her hand from it with a little cry as Mr. Housh came . . . and the train was slowing . . . slowing . . . for Ashfork.

HOUND 'N' HARE

If you couldn't beat murder out of a suspect, maybe you could beat it into him . . . .

the THIRD DEGREE

CHARLES LENART

We can't claim to have discovered Lenart. He has made one fiction sale before. But we consider it a coup to bring you a tale as exquisitely ironical as this one about an irresistible force and an immovable object. Like a rubber hose, the yarn does its work quietly, thoroughly and with a deadly flick at the end.

WHEN I got back to the station, I learned that Carpenter hadn't confessed yet. I went down to the basement to see how it was coming.

Ed and Chick were taking a break, smoking near the windows. Muloney was doing the questioning. His shirt was unbuttoned, his sleeves rolled above the elbows. Sweat glistened through the hairs of his powerful arms, ran down the creases of his bull neck. His square tough-looking face was weary and unshaven, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"You were arguing, weren't you? About the company funds. And the argument got out of hand and he pulled a gun and threatened you, didn't he? You thought he was going to shoot and you struggled with him and in the scuffle, the gun went off and the next thing you knew, Knoepfler was dead.

"You got panicky. Instead of going to the police like you should have, you put his body in the alley and took his wallet and watch hoping to make it look like a robbery-murder.

Then you threw the gun in the river, or hid it."

Carpenter wagged his head slowly from side to side in stubborn denial. The first movement out of him since I had entered the room. He was sitting in a straight-backed chair under the lamp—about fifty, average height and weight, and with sparse graying hair now matted and disordered. He had a round, gentle face and childish blue eyes. Right now, though, you couldn't see that because his head was resting on his chest, his arms dangling at his sides.

"Want some relief pitching?" I said.

Muloney looked up at me. "No thanks, Frank, I'll see it through. I think he's just about ready to talk."

"Yeah. That's what you said four hours ago." I walked over to the chair.

"Look at it this way, Carpenter," I said. "We're not out to burn you. We just want to get this case cleared up. You confess and we guarantee the charge will be manslaughter, not murder. In a few years, you'll be free."

Slowly and laboriously, Carpenter raised his head and looked at me. His eyes were red and swollen and his face bore the streaks of tears and sweat. His voice was a barely audible croak.

"I assure you, if I had committed this crime, I would have long since confessed of my own accord. But I am innocent and I will not be intimidated by the bulldozing tactics of this sadistic ape—"

Muloney's fist smashed into his mouth. Carpenter and the chair went crashing to the floor. In the awful, silent moment that followed, he just lay there. His eyes staring glassily at the ceiling. A trickle of blood came from the corner of his mouth.

Then, in what seemed like magically swift motion, he was off the floor and flying at Muloney. His eyes were wild with hate, his lips drawn back in a scream, his arms stretched before him. He hit Muloney with such force they both toppled to the floor, Carpenter on top. He got his hands around Muloney's throat. He started choking and bouncing Muloney's head savagely against the cement floor. And all the while he was screaming:

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

Chick, Ed and I finally tore him loose. We set him back in the chair and, sobbing and shaking, he half lay, half sat there. Chick and Ed held him.

Muloney picked himself off the floor. His face was white and twisted bitterly. His hands, his whole body trembled as he clenched his huge fists and advanced on Carpenter.

I left then. As I went down the corridor, I heard Carpenter scream again. Only this time it was in pain, not rage. I heard it again at the top of the steps. A horrible piercing scream that raised the hairs on the back of my neck and made my stomach curl.

In my office I tried to work on a report, but I could still hear that scream. I tried to drown it out with the radio, but my mind kept reproducing it for me.

In a way, you couldn't really blame Muloney. He needed that confession. If he failed to crack this case, it would be the third straight one he'd missed. Through no fault of his own, of course, but still, that never looks good on a man's record. And Muloney was up for promotion in a few weeks. That's why we'd given him this case. We had thought it would be a snap and we wanted Muloney to get the credit.

Knoepfler and Carpenter had been partners in a prosperous lumber business. Two days before, Knoepfler had been found shot to death in the alley behind the lumber yard. His watch and money were gone and at first it looked like a robbery-murder.

But we learned from the firm's secretary that Knoepfler and Carpenter had quarreled that afternoon about a shortage in the company books. When the secretary left at five that afternoon, they were still going at it hot and heavy.

The medical examiner said Knoepfler was killed between eight and nine that night and, naturally, Carpenter had no alibi. No one who could testify as to his whereabouts at the time. So we turned him over to Muloney, figuring the case would be a pushover.

But it wasn't. Carpenter refused to confess. Muloney and I bombarded him with questions and accusations for hours. We threatened him. We pleaded with him. We tried to compromise him. He wouldn't crack. He stuck to his story, feeble as it was. I began to feel that it was hopeless, that he would never crack. I was even beginning to wonder if we had the right man. But not Muloney. He not only felt we had the right man, he was equally sure he could get a confession. Well, it was his baby.

I turned off the radio when Captain Starke entered the office about nine. The screaming had stopped. Starke threw his hat on a chair, gave me a gruff "Hi!" and then sat down and gnawed on his cigar for a few moments. Then he said:

"I just been downstairs talking to Muloney and Carpenter. What do you make of it, Frank? Do you think Carpenter did it?"

"Well, no," I said. "But that's only my opinion. It seems to me we got a pretty good case of circumstantial evidence if the D.A. wants to prosecute."

"No, it isn't. It's no good at all unless we find that gun or get Carpenter to confess. And I don't think he's going to. He's taken everything Muloney's given him, and I've never seen Muloney madder. Hell, we're just wasting our time. I'm going to turn him loose."

He picked up the phone, got connected with the extension downstairs and said:

"Get Carpenter cleaned up. I'm letting him go."

There were squawking noises from the other end but Starke hung up and began examining some papers on his desk.

Muloney barged in about ten seconds later. He was buttoning his shirt.

"Listen, Captain," he said, "you

can't let Carpenter go now. He's just about ready to confess. Just give me one more hour."

"That's what you said six hours ago," Starke said.

"But it's different now. I've got him worn to the breaking point. One more hour will do it."

"No!" Starke said. "He goes right now. As far as I'm concerned, we'll have to tackle this case from another angle. I don't think Carpenter killed Knoepfler. I don't think he could kill anyone."

"Oh, you don't?" Muloney leaned over the desk till his face was only a few inches from the Captain's. "Listen, a while back, he attacked me. Tried to choke me and knock my brains out against the floor. Ask Frank; he was there."

Starke looked at me. "That's right," I said. "But that was only after Bill slugged him first."

Muloney gave me a bitter glance and then turned back to the Captain. And now his voice was lower and more solicitous.

"Sir, I don't have to tell you what this case means to me, the amount of work I've already put in on it. I don't think I'm being unreasonable in asking for just a little more time."

"I said he goes." Starke's voice was low and charged with anger.

Muloney saw there was no point in arguing any more. He straightened up and I could see the powerful muscles in his jaw tightening.

Carpenter was brought in then. His left eye was black and there was a bluish welt along one cheek and a bandage on his lower lip. But there was still defiance in his eyes as Starke told him he could go but that he shouldn't plan on any sudden trips out of town for a while yet.

Then Carpenter walked out and Muloney, who'd been standing grimly to one side, spoke up.

"Am I still on the case or not?"

"Sure," Starke said. "If you want to be."

"I do," Muloney said, then left.

We didn't see much of him around the station for the next three weeks. He'd sign in and take right off again and we wouldn't see him again till quitting time. Official quitting time, that is. For, as I later learned, Muloney was working on the case day and night, stopping only occasionally to grab a few hours sleep or a bite to eat and then back to work.

It wasn't until the case was closed that I learned what happened in those three weeks. And then I had to piece the story together from many sources. But in the main, it was this:

Muloney had never doubted for a minute that Carpenter was guilty. And he wasn't going to give up just because Starke had decided that Carpenter was innocent. Sure, he worked the other angles of the case as Starke had ordered, but there wasn't much to go on and Muloney's heart wasn't in it. Carpenter was guilty, Muloney felt, and the only way to crack the case was to get the little man to confess.

And so, Muloney would take time off from his regular duties to haunt Carpenter. In the mornings, when Carpenter would arrive at his lumber

yard, he'd find Muloney leaning against the office building.

"Hiya, Killer," Muloney would say. "Been planning any murders lately?"

And, during the day, Muloney would ring Carpenter's number three or four times and say something like:

"You know there's no statute of limitations on murder, don't you? We can try you for it 25 years from now if necessary. Why not confess now and get it over with?"

Or: "Doesn't your conscience ever bother you when you think of poor Knoepfler lying dead in that cold, cold grave?"

And so it went. Muloney would be at the lumber yard when Carpenter arrived in the morning. He'd take time out from his regular work to give Carpenter a ring during the day. And he'd be there when Carpenter quit at night. He'd follow Carpenter from the office to his car and taunt him every step of the way.

Nor did he stop there. For, as I later learned, Carpenter could count on getting one or two calls in the dead of night. One time, Muloney called at midnight and said:

"This is the ghost of Felix Knoepfler—"

At which point Carpenter hung up.

This went on for three weeks. At the end of that time, Muloney looked like a physical and nervous wreck and Carpenter couldn't have been in much better condition. I often wondered why he never called Starke and complained, but I guess he figured we'd set Muloney on his tail and he wouldn't get anywhere by yelling about it.

On the 18th, Muloney, bleary-eyed and tired, shuffled into the office while Starke was out. He dropped in now and then to keep me posted.

"How's it coming?" I asked.

He managed a tired smile. "Pretty good," he said. "I'm really wearing him down. I'm driving the rat nuts. He'll be in to confess, and damn soon. Well, gotta be running along.

He'll be quitting work soon and I wanna be there when he walks out of his office."

He left and I went back to work. At five, Starke arrived, chewing on a cigar as usual. He threw his hat on a chair, threw me the usual gruff greeting and sat down.

"Anything new on the Knoepfler case?"

"No," I said. I didn't see the sense of telling him what Muloney was doing. The poor guy was having a tough enough time, thinking he could crack Carpenter. He didn't realize just how strong the little lumberman was.

And then, at six, the door of our office slowly opened and there, leaning wearily against the door jamb, was Carpenter! In a voice that sounded a thousand years old, he said:

"I killed him. I want to confess."

The cigar fell out of Starke's mouth and I almost fell out of my swivel chair. For a minute, we couldn't believe what we'd heard. We just sat there as if frozen. And then we went into action.

I got a chair for Carpenter to sit on. Starke gave him a cigarette, then ran to the hall and yelled for a stenographer. Then he ran back and lit Carpenter's cigarette. Then he ran back to the hall and yelled for the stenographer again.

Carpenter puffed nervously on the cigarette. "I didn't mean to kill him, honest I didn't. But he pulled out his gun and threatened me. I told him to put it away as it might go off. He wouldn't. We fought and in the scuffle, it went off and he got killed. I put his body in the back seat of my car—"

"We know. We know," Starke said. "We'll have a stenographer here in a minute and you can make a complete statement. In the meantime, just relax."

"Get Muloney," I said. "He'll want to be in on this. Where's Muloney?"

The cigarette fell from Carpenter's lips and his blond eyebrows shot up.

"Why, you'll find his body in my car outside. Who did you think I was talking about?"

DREAD DILEMMA

ASK NO QUARTER

DUANE YARNELL

What is it about the ring that builds that tight feeling in the gut? Is it the huge purse dangling in the balance? The fierce mood of the crowd? The focusing of thousands of minds on two powerful figures? Or is it the violence, the lust for blood? Here's a yarn that gets it all—and something more as well. Author Yarnell, too, is a two-fisted man—with a typewriter. He sold his first seven stories before turning 21, and his slicks, pulps and network shows are legion.

"TELL ME, Pop," the boy said again, "how it will be."

They were sitting on the rug, the fighter and his son, a toy log cabin half built between them. Georgie Lyle, the challenger, leaned across the pile of notched logs and dropped a muscled arm around the boy's slim shoulders.

"This is the way it will be," Georgie said. "For five, six rounds, I'll work on the champion's body. And then his guard will come down. Like this." Georgie dropped his left arm down, exposing a broad expanse of brown, solid chin. "Then I will tag him," Georgie said proudly. "And that will be all, Skipper . . ."

Skipper's young eyes were dark, round agates. "And then," Skipper said, "you'll be the champion?"

"Just like that," Georgie said. He touseled the boy's dark hair that was so much like Rose's. "Now," he said, "we'd better get your hat and coat on. We'll be leaving before long."

"We waiting for Maxey, Pop?"

"Sure, Skipper. A fighter never goes into the ring without his manager."

"I don't like Maxey," the boy said firmly. "He looks mean."

Georgie Lyle frowned. "You should like him, Skipper. A year ago, we were havin' it tough. Then Maxey came along. Tonight, I'm fightin' for the middleweight title."

"Am I gonna sit with him while you're fightin', Pop?"

"You tell 'em," Georgie said. "Right at ringside. You can thank Maxey for that, Skipper. Maxey says

when a boy gets to be six, it's about time he watched his old man fight."

"When I grow up, can I be your manager, Pop?"

"You bet," Georgie said. "I wouldn't have anybody else . . ."

The telephone rang. Georgie Lyle glanced at his watch. Six o'clock. It would be Rose, telling him that she had arrived safely at the little apartment where Georgie's invalid mother lived.

Rose had been a good wife, never carping when things were tough, never complaining when Georgie used a part of his ring earnings to make things easier for his mother. Always before this, on the night of a fight, Rose had taken the boy and they had gone across town to his mother's apartment so the three of them could listen to the fight together.

"Hello, baby," Georgie said, lifting the receiver.

"Hello, champ . . ."

Georgie snuggled back in the big leather chair and a wide grin split his battered face. A feeling of tenderness swept through him. "Honest, baby," he said, "if I had to go into the ring right now, the champion would knock me square on my pants. What do you do to me, Rosie?"

When he closed his eyes he could imagine her, the gentle smile and the look in her dark eyes that was for him alone.

"Your mom's beside me, Georgie," Rose said. "She would tell you good luck herself, except she's so proud she'd blubber . . ."

For a moment, Georgie couldn't say anything. Then, "How does Mom like the television set I got her?"

"She swears she'll only listen. But she'll have her eyes open all the way."

Georgie grinned. "Well, I hear the elevator. That'll be Maxey comin' up . . ."

"Is Skipper all right, Georgie?"

"If he was any better," Georgie said, "he could take the champion in two heats himself."

"He's awfully little to be going to a fight, Georgie."

"Don't worry," Georgie soothed. "He'll be right beside Maxey all the time. He won't be out of sight for a minute."

From the other room there came the ringing of the doorbell. He could hear Skipper moving toward the door. "Well, Rose," he said, "I guess . . ."

"Good luck, Georgie." Rose's voice was husky, tremulous. "I love you, Georgie. No matter what happens I love you."

He cradled the receiver gently. He heard the outer door open and when he turned around, Skipper was standing just inside the hallway arch. There was something about the stiff way he held his back, the half-bent head . . . but later, Georgie was to tell himself, the boy had not shown fear.

"Was it Maxey?" Georgie asked.

"No, it was some men, Pop. They . . . they . . ."

Georgie was moving across the room the way he always moved out for the first round. With caution.

There were two men and they both wore overcoats. The nearest one was thin-bodied, gaunt, and the dark toupee he wore looked phonier than it was. His cold eyes were deeply socketed and his thin mouth was sullen. His name, as every tabloid reader knew, was Baldy Gordon. The other man had huge shoulders and an unshaven puffy face. His expression was dull, stupid. In his hand was a gun.

"What do you guys want?" Georgie said.

"Shut up!" Baldy Gordon said.

The big man brought his gun up level with Georgie's belt. "Yeah," he said. "Shut up!"

Baldy Gordon's expression might have been a smile. "Sit down, Georgie. That chair, the one over by the telephone . . ."

Georgie stood there warily. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the gunman take a rough hold on the boy's slender arm. It was like a kick in the stomach to Georgie Lyle. He could see the boy's mouth begin to tremble.

"Just stand there, Skipper," Georgie said. "Don't move at all. They're playin' a little game with us."

The big man's hand tightened on the boy's arm. That was more than Georgie Lyle could stand. Arms out, he dove for the gunman's knees. But a gun barrel caught him on the back of the head, clubbed him to the floor. A fog came over him, then lifted slowly. He looked up. The gunman was still holding the boy with one hand, the gun with the other. Georgie got up slowly, backed across the room until he felt the touch of leather against his legs. He sat down heavily.

"That's more like it," Baldy Gordon said.

"What do you want, Baldy?"

"You got six years on the champion," Baldy answered. "And the fans figure you to win. They're bettin' five bucks on you to get one. Them're long odds, Georgie."

"But not too long," Georgie said.

"Hah," the gunman said. He grinned stupidly. "Listen to the guy, Baldy."

"I've planned this a long time," Baldy said. "My boys are staked out in every city on the east coast. They're puttin' their money down in little bundles, but very steady, to keep the odds where they are."

Georgie Lyle got it then. He came half out of his chair, but when he caught the sight of the gun in the big man's hand, he sank back slowly.

Then a thought struck him. Maxey Coleman, his manager, would be coming for him shortly. If Maxey should ring the bell, if the gunman's attention should be diverted for even a split second . . .

Baldy Gordon had anticipated the thought. "If you're lookin' for help from Maxey," he said, "don't! I figured all the angles, Georgie. Maxey was one of 'em."

Georgie began to tremble, then. So Maxey was in this thing with them. Maxey, his manager, who had eased him into this title fight, Maxey who had planned everything, right down to having the boy wait here for him.

"This is the way it will be," Baldy continued. "There's a cab down-

stairs, waitin' to take you to the arena. I'll be in a car behind you, watchin' you all the way. Maxey will meet you at the arena door. If you try anything cute, such as tryin' to flag a cop, we'll get in touch with Jake, here, before anything can be done.

Georgie looked at the gunman. "What about him?"

"Jake," Baldy said, "will stay here with your kid. He'll listen to the fight over the radio, Georgie. The minute you lose, Jake walks out of here alone." Baldy paused a moment. "If you try a double-cross, he'll take the kid with him."

Georgie looked at the gunman, estimating his chances. But Jake's gun came up again and his other hand tightened on the boy's arm. "Don't try it," Jake warned. "Don't try it at all."

Baldy went into Georgie's bedroom, came back with an overcoat. He tossed it across the room and Georgie eased into it. His eyes met Skipper's.

"I ain't cryin', Pop! Honest I ain't," the boy said.

Georgie had to look away. He said, "Baldy, if this guy of yours does anything to Skipper . . ."

"It's in your hands," Baldy said. "It's strictly up to you."

Georgie walked stiffly through the archway, not looking at Jake.

When Georgie walked down toward the ring, Maxey walked beside him. He said, "What could I do, Georgie? You can't buck Baldy Gordon's mob! We'll get another chance, Georgie."

Georgie climbed into the ring, the great, dazzling square of canvas made white by the brilliant lights over head. The cries of the crowd grew louder. But he felt alone, and a hundred years old.

The champion came into the ring, a taller man than Georgie, and with a longer reach, but six years older. They were given their instructions and as Georgie searched the champion's eyes sickness spread through him for he knew that the champion was in on the fix. Georgie went back to his corner. He stood there pawing the little pile of powdered resin, wanting nothing more than to get out and get this over with.

Maxey Coleman stood beside him, the frozen smile upon his fat little face. "Just walk into it," Maxey whispered. "The sooner you do it the better."

Walk into it, Georgie. Get it finished. Then try to forget that after five years of trying, you finally threw the fight that was to be the biggest one of your life.

The bell rang. Georgie Lyle turned around and moved across the ring. He feinted a left to the face, then shot his right as the champion came under and moved in. Georgie missed, not so widely that anyone would guess, but enough so that the blow grazed the champion's bobbing head, went harmlessly over his shoulder.

Georgie chopped with his left, but the champion blocked. Then Georgie was wide open and even though he tried to duck the blow that followed, it caught him squarely over the heart. There was pain, more intense

than he had ever felt before. Paralysis stilled his arms before he could lift them. The right that followed came straight from the champion's shoulder. It caught Georgie in the face, blasted him backward against the ropes. He felt his nose go.

There was pandemonium, but it seemed very far away. Georgie hung on the ropes, one arm over the top strand, unable to go down. The champion swarmed in, hitting him with everything. An uppercut lifted him up off the ropes and before the champion could prop him for the kill, he went down onto the canvas. His eyes glazed. Blood trickled from his mashed nose. The ring was rocking. The cry of the fans, standing now, was a roar. Somewhere, a man was shouting. It was the referee, counting close to Georgie's ear, waving his arm with each count.

". . . four . . . five . . . six . . ."

Georgie got his elbows under him. He was lying in his own corner. Down through the ropes, he could see the first row ringside. Maxey was standing in front of the corner seat. The next seat, where the Skipper should have been, was vacant. And in the next was Baldy Gordon, his gaunt face beaming.

". . . seven . . . eight . . ."

Instinct urged him to stay down. He had been hurt and his fans would not blame him for losing this one. He tried to concentrate. Was there any way out? Suddenly, he thought he saw the way, the thousand to one chance. His arms shoved upward, his knees came off the canvas, and before the fatal *ten* was reached he was on his feet. He was unsteady. But he was standing.

The champion came surging over, uncertainty in his eyes. He stalked Georgie all over the ring. But Georgie plastered himself against the ropes and each time the champion tried to corner him, Georgie took them on the gloves and on the shoulders; watched his chance until he could hang on.

It took a full two minutes to circle the ring. Then back in his own corner Georgie stopped dead still. The champion swarmed in and Georgie made no effort to move out of danger. He stood up against everything that the champion could throw and when the bell ended the round, he was still up.

The crowd screamed encouragement. Then Maxey Coleman was leaping into the ring, shoving Georgie onto a stool, going to work fast on Georgie's battered face.

"What're you tryin', Georgie?" Perspiration beaded Maxey's forehead.

"This bum knows he's got it in the bag. But I'm makin' him work for it. I'll carry him the limit if I can. He'll get the decision. But he'll work for it, Maxey."

He searched Maxey's face for some sign that Maxey saw through his plan. No, Maxey had swallowed it, all of it.

At the bell, Georgie went out cautiously. The champion closed with a rush, driving him to the ropes with a hook to the body and a right to the face. Georgie moved slowly along

the ropes, parrying blows, then moving in to tie. And when he backed into his corner again, near the end of the round, he stayed there, feet planted wide, daring the champion to come in after him. But the champion was suddenly wary. He stood away, feinting, bobbing, but never drawing Georgie out. At the bell, they were still pawing.

When the champion came out for the third, the look of wariness was gone from his eyes and Georgie knew Maxey had passed the word around that his man would carry the fight to the limit.

The champion jabbed and Georgie parried. Then the champion missed with a right and for a split second, the opening was there. A great rage welled up inside the challenger and he banged a hard left. But at the last instant, he shifted course and the blow went wide. He saw, then, the look in the champion's eyes for which he had been waiting. The champion was sure of himself again. He had given Georgie the opening and Georgie hadn't taken it for fear that the champion would go down for the count. The champion was pleased, but he was also sore that Georgie was making him go for the distance of fifteen rounds.

A left exploded in Georgie's face. He rocked back under it, blocked the right that followed. He was back against the ropes again and blows were slamming into him from half a dozen angles. It was all he could do to tie the champion, to hang on.

Desperately, Georgie backed away as the referee parted them. As the champion came in again, Georgie hung on. He wrapped his arms around the champion's thick waist.

Twelve rounds left. Forty eight minutes and it will be over—if it lasts that long. You've got a plan, Georgie, but even if it works, how long will it take? How long does that subway trip take?

Again the referee parted them and again Georgie backed away. A salvo of lefts failed to dent his defense and he was immediately hopeful. Then a right came in over his shoulder, rocked him back again. At the end of the round, he was in his corner again, blocking as many as he could, taking the rest of them. He had to.

Maxey Coleman worked over Georgie between rounds. "You're a sucker," he muttered. "The crowd knows you took a jolt in the first. Take one on the chin, Georgie. Get it over with . . ."

"I'll make him work for it," Georgie said. "Shut up."

At the buzzer, Maxey went down through the ropes, took his seat in ringside. Georgie's eyes traveled beyond the empty seat at Maxey's side, to a faintly smiling Baldy Gordon, the mobster against whom the cops had never managed to stick a charge that would hold.

Ten rounds gone. Ten rounds lost. All of them to the champion whom Georgie might have beaten in an even fight. The referee looked at Georgie's mashed nose, at his rapidly closing eyes. He shook his head, then moved away. And when the bell rang, they were at it again. The

bell ending the thirteenth found Georgie barely able to move back into his corner. He caught the top ropes, sagged down onto the stool.

And then he saw them . . .

A great sob came up in his throat. They were coming down the crowded aisle. Rose, his wife. And the boy, the Skipper, held high above the crowd by the thick arms of Mike O'Hara, the detective, who worked out of the precinct station just around the corner from Georgie's apartment.

Maxey was already in the ring, but Georgie was paying no attention to him. He watched Mike O'Hara drop Skipper into the vacant seat, then tap Baldy Gordon on the shoulder. And from somewhere nearby, two other men in plain clothes emerged and led the mobster out of there. The detective settled into Baldy's seat, Rose into Maxey's. Georgie looked down at her upturned face and caught the look in her shining eyes that was meant for him alone.

He turned back to Maxey and he saw that Maxey's face was pale, frightened. He saw the fat mouth open, then close. Maxey had a sponge. He wiped it across Georgie's eyes. Hard. The ball of his thumb, buried in the sponge, raked Georgie's eyeballs. Tears came, blinding tears that distorted Georgie's vision. He swore at Maxey, but the buzzer sounded and Maxey was out of there, his job done . . .

At the bell, Georgie Lyle was blind. He kept his gloves up in front of his face, his elbows against his body. The tears were still flooding his eyes and when the attack came it was like nothing he had ever taken before. Georgie's arms dropped lower and the champion came in again. The blow landed high on the temple, too high to finish it, but high enough to knock Georgie down.

That was what saved him, that trip to the canvas. For in the interval of time that he lay there, his eyes began to clear and a part of his strength came back. He lifted his head, studied the champion and hope surged through him again. The champion had not seen the men take Baldy Gordon. The champion still believed that this was his fight to win.

"seven . . . eight . . . nine . . ."

Georgie got up, a picture of a beaten fighter. The champion came across to end it there, his right drawn back, his left carelessly out in front of him. Georgie watched the right. It uncorked. At the last instant, Georgie bobbed aside. The blow went over his shoulder. The left came up, but the challenger blocked it. His own left was free, and he buried it wrist-deep in the champion's middle. The champion's eyes bugged and he stepped in close, tried to cover.

But Georgie was waiting. He watched the left shoulder drop and when the triangle of flesh exposed itself, Georgie chopped a right to the champion's chin.

Instantly, there was pandemonium. The champion stood spraddle legged and from his corner there came the shrill cry of warning, the

cry to retreat, to ride it out. A smile moved across Georgie's face as he stepped in. He rocked the champion with another left to the body, another right to the head. He drove him against the ropes, chopping, slamming, beating away at the face. At last the champion lay writhing until unconsciousness overcame him. Georgie staggered to his corner and he held to the ropes to keep from falling, until the count was ended and the referee was holding his hand aloft.

"The winnah," the referee yelled, "and new champeen . . ."

Later, after Maxey had been taken away, the champion rode to his mother's apartment in the back seat of Mike O'Hara's police car. He held his boy on his lap. Rose was beside him, with Mike on her other side.

"Now," Mike O'Hara said, "maybe I can get a few things straight. This much I know. Rose came rushing into the station. She told me that Skipper was in danger and we'd better take it easy entering the apartment. We used her key, and there was nothing to it. Jake Gariki had his nose buried in the radio and he didn't have time to go for his gun. The thing I want to know is how did she figure it?"

Georgie grinned through his split mouth. "Rose is the brains of the family. Me, I'm just the muscle. Tell him Rose."

Rose told him, never taking her shining eyes off Georgie's face. "Georgie promised that Skipper would sit beside Maxey. But he wasn't there. The seat beside Maxey was empty and just beyond it was that horrible Baldy Gordon . . ."

"Now how in blazes did you know that?" Mike demanded.

Rose squeezed Georgie's arm. "I was watching it over Mom's television set. When Georgie backed into the corner it didn't make sense. Georgie's too smart for that. Then he kept going back to the corner and suddenly I saw that he was trying to show me something. It was that vacant seat between Maxey and Baldy Gordon."

"And then," Georgie interrupted, "I kept circling the ring so Rose could see that Skipper wasn't anywhere near ringside. I wanted to do it often enough so she would understand early in the fight. To give her time."

"I was frantic," Rose said. "I called the apartment house and the boy on the desk told me that Georgie had left alone. That meant that Skipper was still in the apartment, and I knew Georgie wouldn't have left him unless someone forced him to. So I caught the subway, Mike, and I came to you for help . . ."

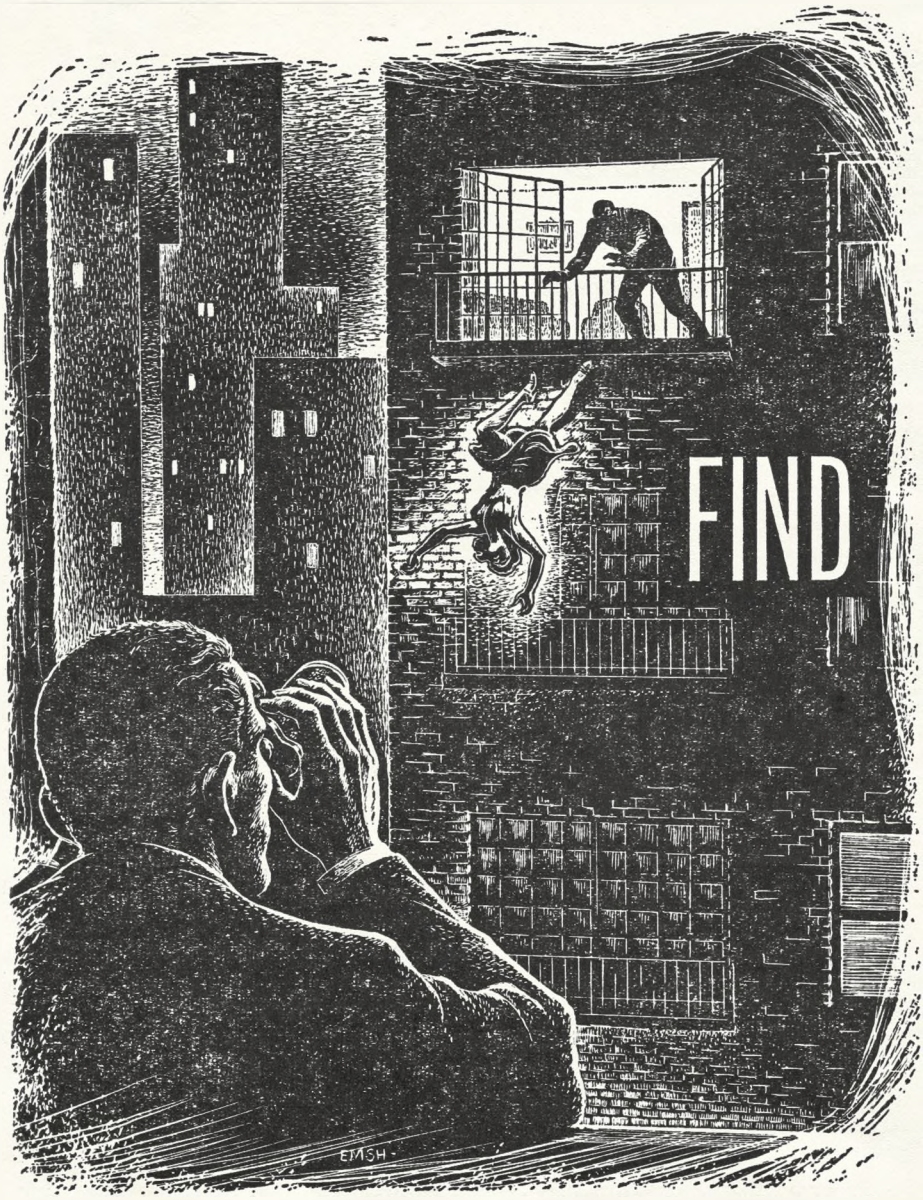
Skipper shifted around in Georgie's lap, looked up at him. "When those men came in, were you scared, Pop?"

He drew the boy close to him and with his other hand he held Rose's arm against his side. "Confidentially, son, I was paralyzed."

"What does that word mean, Pop?"

"It's French," Georgie said. "It means look at the big buildings so I can kiss your mother . . ."

CRIME PUZZLE



One, among the city's millions,

had seen the murder. Only he

could save Elena from the killer.

The majority of writers, nowadays, are apt to pay scant attention to the dull grind of police work. So concerned are they with hardguy private ops and gentleman dabblers in dirty work they tend to forget that real crimes are solved by real cops. The author of this one, an old hand at slicks, pulps and quality, takes 4000-odd words to let you in on what really happens when a harness bull goes after his man without the help of gimmicks, gadgets or even a handy astrolabe.

THE WITNESS

TED STRATTON

LLOYD RANCE sat in the back room at headquarters, in the manner of all Homicide men who wait for somebody to die violently. With hat low over his eyes, feet on the table, the chair legs cocked, he worried white teeth with a toothpick. He was a medium-sized, solidly dark man, a trifle too young in police service to have cop stencilled on his face.

The phone rang on the table and he moved swiftly. Out at the front desk, Felch said, "Side room, Rance. Something special."

Rance threaded the big room, entered the small conference room. A moment later, somebody tapped, and he said, "Use the knob."

A red hat and blonde curls peeped in and a young girl said, "Is this the Mr. Rance, who's in charge of the Fae Wren case?"

He nodded, waved to a vacant chair. They had put him on the Wren case because it was unimportant.

She entered all the way, wearing a red dress with a Puritan collar, carrying white gloves and pocketbook. She sat on the edge of the straight chair, feet primly together. She said tensely, "Fae Wren did not jump

from that window like the newspapers said."

"You're Miss—uh—"

"Miss Noltri. I am—was one of Fae's friends. I knew her casually since we roomed at the same place. Would a girl who was so young and beautiful and talented, so full of the zest for life, jump to her—death from the Cronin Apartments?"

Instinctively, he liked the fervency of her voice. But this was headquarters, so he asked, "Do you know what she was doing in the Cronin at eight-fifteen p.m.?"

"No."

"Why was she at the twelfth floor window on the firestairs?"

"I don't know."

"She had been unemployed for several months, Miss Noltri. How did she pay her way?"

"She had parents in Ohio."

"Doesn't her father have a large family and doesn't he earn only fifty dollars a week?"

Color deepened on her face. "If you're implying that Fae was—was bad—"

He interrupted quietly, "We search only for facts, Miss Noltri. Fae Wren came to this city nine months ago with two-hundred dollars in savings and high hopes that she could become a professional dancer. That's a tough ladder to climb. Miss Noltri, frustration is the worst part of failure."

He had been standing, and now he leaned carelessly back against a table, and asked casually, "If you think Miss Wren was pushed out of that window, what can you tell us that we haven't already found out?"

Teeth nibbled a lower lip. "Why do you stand there and ask questions? Why don't you find the murderer? Would she jump when she was engaged to be married, when she was so deeply in love?"

Twice before, when he had nosed into Fae Wren's background, he had heard of a shadowy man in the dead girl's love life. "What's this man's name?"

"It—it was a secret. She never told me his name."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Did she ever tell you what this man looked like? What he did for a living? If he had money? Who his friends were? If he lived in the Cronin Apartments? His age, size, coloring? Miss Noltri, is there anything you can give us so that we can build this man into a definite identity?"

"She never told me anything—yes, once that he had a deep voice that thrilled her!"

That made it simple. He could start looking, in a city of seven million, for a man with a deep voice. He used a brutal technique, trying to shock any information from her that she might have. "Miss Noltri, why don't you forget it and mind your own business?"

The question shocked her. She stood up angrily, a tall girl on high heels. "Pardon me," she said scornfully, "but I thought you might possibly be a detective!"

"That's what the Commissioner thinks."

As if Rance had not spoken, as if he were not there, she said, "One reads about our police in every newspaper. You give them a television set and they do their job. No, that's not the way *our* police work! You give them a television set so they *won't* do their job!"

She stormed towards the door, and he said quietly, "If you get any pertinent facts, Miss Noltri, will you bring them to me?"

"I'll bring you a television set," she flared, and went out, slamming the door.

He shrugged. What did she expect him to do—pick a murderer out of a hat? Still, he had never been convinced about the Wren case. In a big city there were always ways for a pretty, young girl to get herself murdered. He had delved as deeply as he could, during the past five days, into Fae Wren's background. There was a good reason. He had something on the case that Miss Noltri did not know about.

He walked out to the front desk, said to Felch, "About that anonymous tip that got us in the Fae Wren jump. Don't look it up. Just as you remember it. What did the phone caller say?"

Felch hunched over the desk, half-closing his eyes. "Oh, he said he sat at his back window watching the city lights. He saw this man and girl on the stairway of the Cronin Apartments. They stood at an open window and the man heaved the girl out, headfirst. He hung up before I could trace the call and you went over to check. Did you make a pass at that pretty Noltri dame, huh? She sailed out like she had wolves on her tail."

"No pass," Rance said, and strolled back to the big, silent room and sat down.

The anonymous phone caller might be the one who had pushed Fae Wren out the window, if she had been pushed. Sometimes, a murderer did phone in what had been done. Then, again, he might have found the girl in the alley behind the Cronin and jumped to the conclusion she had been shoved out a high window.

Rance had checked carefully. No employee at the Cronin seemed to know Fae Wren. Nobody had seen her enter the building. It was not too difficult to get inside. Tenants had keys to several side doors. The girl could have entered as some tenant went out or in. A methodical check, discreet as befitted the high class of the Cronin, had failed to uncover anyone in apartments near that open, high window, who had witnessed anything unusual that night.

So he had nothing to go on, except that anonymous phone call and his own instinct that the girl could have been murdered. Now, he had to wait, keeping the case open in his mind, waiting for information.

What had the Noltri girl told him? *Fae Wren was in love. In love with a man with a thrilling, deep voice!* So he had to find two men. Deep voice and anonymous voice. Yeah, among seven million people! . . .

Felch shoved a slip of paper across the desk. "The Noltri dame phoned

and said this might be important."

Rance glanced at the paper. It was a Vanderbilt telephone number. "I'll go see her," he said, and headed for the door.

Five minutes later, he parked in front of a rooming house, checked a room number on a list beside a phone, and climbed stairs. He tapped lightly at Room 24, and the Noltri girl asked, "Who is it?"

"Rance."

"Just a minute, please."

It was three minutes before the door opened, but he didn't mind. She wore a loose, green robe. A white kerchief covered the blonde curls, but three bobby pins peeked from under the hem at the front. She did not move from a position blocking the door.

"Where did you find the phone number, Miss Noltri?"

"I remembered," she explained, "that I once wrote a phone number on the wall at the rear of my letter box downstairs. It wasn't that I couldn't remember the number, just that it was an important number and it gave me satisfaction to write it where I would know it was, but nobody else would know. You told me I knew nothing about—about this case. That number was at the rear of Fae's letter box."

It could be something or nothing, he knew. Until it was nothing, it remained something and—

She said swiftly, all in one breath: "I had to do something so I called that number and a man with a deep voice answered and I hung up without telling him anything."

A little anger grew in his mind. "I told you to bring me anything that you found, Miss Noltri."

"You have the number."

"But I want you to keep out of this, understand? You can't possibly know how we work and I don't expect you to understand how we move. The next time you get anything that may be important, bring it to me and that's all."

She leaned against the jamb. Her lower lip curled ever so slightly and she said evenly, "I don't even know *if* you work, Mr. Rance. By the way, did anybody give you a television set yet?"

Before he could snap out an answer, she closed the door softly and the inside bolt clicked shut. His eyes hardened. He tapped the door with a fingernail, making no sound, and muttered, "If you were a man, blondie, I'd go through the door after you."

He trotted downstairs, found a tier of open-faced letter boxes by a pay phone. Using a flashlight, he peered into the one where Fae Wren's name had been pencilled out. On the painted wall, somebody had written the phone number that Miss Noltri had left with Felch. It could mean something or nothing. There were a lot of deep-voiced men in this city. Still, a more thorough detective could have found that pencilled number by himself. Maybe, a more thorough detective could identify that anonymous phone caller, yeah!

As he left the house, he thought, "You think the Noltri girl might write your phone number in her let-

ter box someday later on?"

That was a laugh. . . .

She sat on the straight chair in the conference room at headquarters. She wore no hat or stockings. She had on a green dress with a medium-low neckline, the cloth laced with white piping and a wide white belt at the waist. She wore high-heeled, green shoes and carried a white pocketbook.

Rance glanced at his strapwatch. It was seven-thirty p.m. "Miss Noltri," he said, "I want you to phone that Vanderbilt number again. I happen to know that a certain man will answer. When he does, just say: *Frank, Fae Wren told me all about you.* Don't say another thing until he answers. Don't give your name or any hint as to your identity, like: *I was Fae's friend.* When I wave my hand, hang up. Do you want me to go over it again?"

She asked, "Is this some more of how you work that I don't understand?"

"Yes," and he motioned for her to sit at the phone.

She sat at the table. Rance used a second phone to raise Felch at the front desk, had Felch plug the two lines on one circuit. He motioned the girl to dial, and her fingers clicked out the Vanderbilt number. Rance listened in. The girl spoke in a low, clear voice. Thirty seconds, and Rance had heard enough and motioned for the girl to cradle the phone. He waited until the connection had been broken at the other end, then closed his line.

She stood up, eyes curious. "Who is *Frank,* Mr. Rance? Do you know?"

"Sorry."

"You think he's the one—who knew Fae so well?"

He did not answer.

Tiny red spots flamed on her cheeks. "Mr. Rance, do you think Fae jumped from that high window?"

"This is the way it's always been with us. We ask the questions. We expect the answers. May I drive you home?"

"Why, I wouldn't think of putting a policeman to any extra work," she purred, and left the room.

At least, he thought, this time she didn't slam the door.

It was beginning to take shape, Rance thought, sitting at the table. The Vanderbilt number belonged to a Frank Pynecroft, who lived on the fifteenth floor of the Cronin Apartments. He didn't work. He didn't need to work. He was married to a woman, five years older than himself, and the woman had plenty of money. She traveled a lot—West Coast, Florida, Bar Harbor—usually with friends, which left Pynecroft alone in that high class apartment.

A tall, broad-chested man, Pynecroft was forty-five years old, but looked ten years younger. He liked to dabble with the entertainment crowd, playing the big-shot, which might have been the way he had met Fae Wren. Because Frank Pynecroft *had* known the dead girl.

When the Noltri girl had phoned a moment ago, there had been a dramatic pause after she had given a message. Rance had heard the slow

soft hiss of Pynecroft's indrawn breath, followed by a too-quick, "Who are you?" Too late, Pynecroft had said, "Whoever you are, you have a lovely voice that I'll remember. Who are you? Who is this Fae Wren? Whatever she told you about me, I hope it was interesting." And Pynecroft had laughed.

Just that to go on, but it was beginning to shape up. The elements of murder might be all there, depending on what kind of a man Pynecroft was and what kind of a girl Fae Wren had been. Was Pynecroft the anonymous lover? Had he promised to marry the girl? Had she gone to his apartment, secretly, a few nights ago, with trouble in her mind? What should Pynecroft have said when the Noltri girl had called?

It would have been better for him if he had said: "Oh, yes. Fae Wren. She asked me to help her with a job. How is she, eh?"

Rance broke it off, spread a map of the district on the table. He had marked the Cronin Building with an X. It was U-shaped. The firestairs where Fae Wren had been by the open window faced the area between the sides of the building. On the map, Rance had drawn two long narrow lines, funnel-shaped. The lines started from the firestairs, then fanned out thinly over a half dozen blocks of buildings. Somewhere inside that funnel, a man had sat at the *back* window of a house and had seen those firestairs.

"Maybe," he muttered, "a thorough detective could locate that anonymous phone caller. Then, you'd have it. Deep voice, anonymous voice, Rance."

He went out into the soft, Spring night. . . .

It was eight-forty p.m. It had been easier than Rance had thought.

He stood across the street, staring at a row of three-story houses in the center of the block. Behind one house, in the distance, loomed the tall Cronin Apartments. It checked, from this angle. From the courtyard in back of this house, it had checked also. There had been a man's white face at an open, dark window on the third floor.

He crossed the street, entered. Inside, a dimly lit hallway reeked of stale cabbage. On the sidewall, was a phone. By that, a list of names and room numbers. Rance picked one out.

J. Harry Melker. Melker was going to be one very surprised man in another minute.

In the top corridor, he tapped once on a door. A voice whispered through the wood, and Rance monotoned, "Harry."

A window closed. A shade roller rattled. A light switch clicked. Steps crossed space. A key turned. The door opened a crack.

Rance shouldered in fast, heeled the door shut. It was a cheap bedroom, with a lone overhead light outlining a rumpled bed, a bureau, a chair by the single window, bare walls, and a thin rug.

Pimples spotted the thin face of a young man in rumpled pajamas. "You can't bust in here!" the man blustered, lifting puny fists.

"Melker?" His voice was cold.

"Yeah, and who wants to know?"

Rance flashed a badge, prompted, "You made an anonymous phone call a few nights back. To headquarters. You reported a murder. You hung up without giving your identity. Thought you were smart, didn't you? Down at headquarters we label guys like you. Obstructors of justice. Concealers of evidence. We can send guys like you up the river. Unroll it, boy."

The ugly pimples rhumbaed on Melker's face. He came apart so fast he collapsed on the bed, sat there staring blankly. He had been just watching the lights from the back window. Liked to see the city at night and the tall buildings. Happened to see a man and this girl on a stairway by an open window. The man heaved the girl out, headfirst, and she disappeared and—

The pimples on Melker's face stood out like berry stains on white tile. He bleated, "My God, I—I had to phone *that* in!"

"But you didn't have to hang up, smart guy. You sat on the chair by the window, eh?"

"Yes, and—"

"The window open that night?"

"They don't wash the windows outside and I—"

"Your own light off?"

"That way I can see the outside lights better and—"

"Turn the light off, smart guy."

"I don't do nothing wrong and I—"

"Shut up, Melker."

In the darkness, Rance rolled up the shade, opened the window, sat on the chair. Across the backyard, to the left and right of two low flat-roofed houses, were apartment buildings with lighted windows. Across the flat roofs, loomed the Cronin Building, nearly four-hundred yards away. This was the widest part of that funnel he had drawn on the map of the district.

Rance said, "Bend down here, boy."

Melker leaned. Rance's fingers clamped on a thin wrist. He stood up, levering the wrist over, and snapped, "Where'd you put the binoculars?"

Melker whined, "My wrist! Bi—binoculars?"

Rance twisted.

"The mattress!" Melker bleated.

Rance released his grip, fumbled binoculars from under a mattress, sat down again, and trained the glasses on the back of the distant Cronin building. They were good glasses. The Cronin jumped across flat roofs and loomed outside this window. Lighted windows appeared. Life-sized people moved, here and there, inside luxurious rooms.

A line of dimly-lighted windows, as regularly spaced as rungs, laddered up the Cronin at the back of the giant-U. High up there, Rance saw stair railings, metal doors, blank walls.

He lowered the glasses. A movement in the apartment building to the left caught his eye. A door had opened in a lighted bedroom. A brunette stood there, wearing only a red bathing cap and a huge, white towel. The towel moved.

Rance said, "She does that every night?"

Melker moaned in the darkness. Rance closed the window, rolled the shade down, and Melker mumbled, "I—I can't get dates, see? They won't go out with me. All the time it's that way and—"

Rance switched the light on. Melker leaned against the wall, like a butterfly stuck fast with a pin. "It had to be binoculars," Rance said. "I kept walking from the Cronin, block by block, into one backyard after another, looking for you. Did you lie over the phone, Melker?"

"No, no!"

"What did the man look like?"

"Big, is all. He wore a topcoat and—and hat."

"What about his face? Can you pick him out of a line?"

"He had the brim low over his face."

"The girl?"

"Sure, sure. Say, five-foot, five-inches. Brown hair. A pretty, laughing face. Like—like a model's picture on a magazine cover, see? Wore a suit coat, green. A gold pin on the coat and—"

Melker had described Fae Wren accurately. "When did you first spot them, Melker?"

"Well, two floors above the open window. They came out a door onto the stairs and walked down. They stopped and—"

Rance checked it in his mind. Open window at the twelfth floor . . . two flights up to the fourteenth—no! . . . no thirteenth floor in the Cronin . . . you couldn't rent the thirteenth floor to a lot of people . . . they had been on the fifteenth floor . . . and Pynecroft was a big man.

"He heaved the girl out, Melker. What next?"

"He ran! Out the door, see? I only saw the back of the topcoat and the hat! So I can't pick him out of a line! He kept his face hidden so how could I see it?"

That was understandable. Pynecroft would have been careful in that spot. Rance pocketed the binoculars. "Don't try to run off," he warned. "Keep your mouth shut until I come back."

At the door, he pivoted. "This city is full of pretty girls, Melker. The trick is to keep meeting them in the open, to have dates, until you locate the right one."

He strode out into the odor of stale cabbage.

It had form now, sinister and brutal. Pynecroft knew Fae Wren. Maybe she had learned that he was married, just playing around with her while his wife traveled. Maybe she was the kind who had always had things *her* way, and she had threatened trouble. That would endanger Pynecroft's easy, soft way of life. What would a man like Pynecroft do when threatened? Had he been in pretty deep with a twenty-year old girl? Deep enough to murder?

What next?

There wasn't any evidence that would stand up in court. That meant that heat had to be applied to Pynecroft. He had to be driven to the ragged edge of panic so that he

would crack in a hundred pieces. It could be done with the aid of Melker.

Melker could phone Pynecroft, blurt exactly what he had seen on the firestairs that night. More, Melker could add that he had recognized Pynecroft, later identifying him by hanging around the lobby of the Cronin Apartments. Then, the threat of blackmail, an arranged meeting with Pynecroft for the passage of money. Not too fast with the heat, just right with the heat to panic Pynecroft.

The Noltri girl might be used again, since he had started with her. Maybe another phone call. That Noltri girl. Kinda nice, spirited, full of fire. So she thought a cop didn't work at his job, eh? So she knew all about cops, eh? Maybe he could teach her something about cops that she didn't know.

Maybe she could be told right now. He could give her a little more of it, just to let her know *one* cop was on the job.

He drove leisurely across the city, stopped at her house.

Rance went inside, climbed a set of stairs. She might be out. To a movie with another guy? It was Spring, wasn't it? Why should she be in? And whose phone number had she written on the wall inside her own letter box? Must have been a pretty important phone number.

He tapped twice on the thin door.

When she opened the door, he'd say, "I've got something on the case, Miss Noltri. Fae didn't commit suicide." That would get him inside her room where they could relax and talk. *Elena Noltri.* Full of music, that name.

He tapped again, listened. Open up, Elena. It's Rance, the cop. The one who doesn't have a television set, see?

From inside, he heard a sound. Shade roller? Then a click. Window lock turning, eh? Come on, open up! Elena Noltri, open up. It's Rance, the cop, and—

A phrase jumped into his mind. *You have a lovely voice that I'll remember,* Pynecroft had said over the phone. No, not that! Pynecroft couldn't get here so soon, find *her!*

Rance backed across the corridor until his shoulders firmed against the wall. He lowered the shoulders and eyed the door just above the knob. He took two fast, running steps and the point of his shoulder smashed the door above the knob. The wood was thin and old. With a splintering crash, it broke loose suddenly, so suddenly he dived headfirst into the dark room.

As he fell forward, his chin jerked up. There against the shadeless window, the window half up—the bulking shadow of a long-coated, hatted man. A gun crashed. Flame stabbed the darkness. Something sang past Rance's left ear and spanged against a wall.

He landed on all fours, two yards from legs. He dove again, just as he landed. His arms circled out and closed on the legs. He twisted one shoulder, the way you start a rolling tackle in football. The man with the gun above him toppled and a solid weight came down on Rance.

He wriggled free, clawed blindly and found a wrist. He levered on that wrist and the big man grunted in pain. A fist crashed against Rance's nose and tears blinded his eyes and blood salted his tongue. He got the fist again, in the face, but Rance had the gun wrist and twisted, twisted, until the gun dropped to the floor.

The gun gone, Rance slugged a chin. The man grunted, and he drove knuckles against a nose and felt the bone go. Riding on top of the big man, he hammered down with a fist and felt the weight under him relax and he stood up, kicking the gun away.

He worked the switch and light came on. It was a neat room, clean as pins. A mirror on the dresser and hairbrushes, combs, and the kerchief Elena Noltri had worn the other night. Long green drapes pushed aside by the half-opened window. A small table, books on it, the bed.

She lay on the bed, wearing the long, loose robe. Her arms were flung wide, just as she had fallen across the bed, one long leg on the coverlet, one leg dangling to the floor. Her eyes were closed. There was a nasty lump over her left eye and drops of blood.

The bed springs creaked and Elena Noltri said weakly: "Mr. Rance—did—you get—him?"

"It's all right," he said.

She stirred a little, tried to sit up. Wide eyes stared up at him. He pressed fingers lightly against her shoulder to keep her flat.

"It's all right," he repeated. "How did he know?"

"Some man phoned," she explained. "He asked for me—and I answered. He had a—a high voice—and I talked. He hung up. Later, someone knocked. I—I had phoned you at headquarters—I didn't know what the call meant. I thought—it was you—and opened the door—and he came in with a—a gun!"

"But I don't see how he knew it was you? There are other young girls rooming here and—"

"Three misses," she said. "All over sixty—and men. So he knew."

An elderly woman fluttered in, carrying a basin of water. "Oh, you poor dear," she said, and moved towards the bed. . . .

Lloyd Rance threaded through the big backroom at headquarters and tough Danoski glanced up from his solitaire and said: "That Noltri girl give you a television set yet, Rance?"

Rance opened his locker. The letter was there. He slipped it into an inner pocket. It was a good letter. Felch had given it to him this morning. From the Commissioner. *Lloyd Rance,* the note said, *elevated to the rank of first grade detective,* and a lot more, but the first was far more than he had expected.

He went out into the soft spring night and got into his neat, nine-hundred buck coupe and drove leisurely across town. He had plenty of time tonight. He had all the time in the world or all the time a man gets when he's on Homicide. But Elena Noltri would wait.

Hadn't he seen the wall inside her letter box where she had written *his* telephone number?

FLIGHT OF FANCY

HOT EYES

Wife on the town? In love with another babe? There's an easy way out if you happen to have . . .

DEAN EVANS

Slaughter by remote control is something that has tempted a great variety of writers, from H. G. Wells to our own Dean Evans. Dean is 38, lives in California, dines on raspberries, kohlrabi and ex-wives, and operates a deluxe limousine (vintage 1928) to which someone misguidedly attached a truck body.

It began in the private office of James Willing, and the one responsible was Sybil West, his private secretary. For a long time Sybil had been in love with James Willing. Secretly, that is, for he was already married.

At the moment of its beginning Sybil was at her desk. Across the office James Willing was at his own desk. He was talking on the phone to his wife. Or rather, he held the phone and his wife did the talking. He was listening. But he said now, "I'm sorry if you've got a headache, Veronica."

He did more listening. Once or twice he just barely managed to squeeze in, "But. . . . but. . . ."

Mostly he just sighed quietly, however. After what seemed to Sybil West a very long time she heard him say quite gently, "Very well, my dear. Probably you are right, a weekend up at the cabin would be just what you need. I was only thinking that at this time of year the weather might be. . . ."

More listening. Now he held the phone slightly off from his ear, and a dull flush began at his temples and stayed there. "Very well, Veronica. Goodbye, my dear."

He put the phone down and glanced quickly over at Sybil West. Working a little half-hearted smile at his lips he explained, "Veronica seems to have one of her rather severe headaches again. She—she thought a weekend up at the cabin might sort

of drive it away. Mountain air. . . ." He trailed off and dropped his eyes from the frankly disbelieving eyes of his secretary.

For a little while Sybil did nothing but dig holes in her palms with her sharp fingernails. Then she got up, went hurriedly out of the office and went to the ladies' powder room to cool off. But she was still hopping mad when she came back.

"You can fire me," she said almost calmly, leaning over his desk and staring him straight in the eyes. "You can just say Sybil, you're done, get the hell out. Well, I don't give a damn anymore."

". . . . . ?" he said, startled.

"Headache, my fanny!" she said, this time not so calmly. "The only headaches that dame ever gets is when she has a hunch you might be getting wise, which isn't often—probably never."

James Willing's eyes batted rapidly.

"Mountain air!" snorted Sybil. "When oh when are you going to catch on, you-you. . . ." she almost sobbed ". . . . . you *dope!*"

James Willing's mouth dropped and hung open.

"Don't you know when you're getting the run around?" she demanded, leaning over and spearing him with her eyes. "Can't you see the picture when they hang it on the wall in front of you? Do they have to slam you in the face with it?"

James Willing managed to get his mouth closed. He swallowed and then wet his lips. He finally said, "What are you talking about?"

"Ask that Al Masterson, why don't you!" she yelled. "That's that gigolo she's playing with!"

James Willing took a breath. "Al Masterson, the golf pro?" he said. "Why he's only giving her golf lessons. He's trying to improve her stance. He's. . . ."

"Is that what they call it? Stance?" Sybil's words stung like the slap of an open palm.

For a long while he just sat there and stared at her flashing eyes, at her determined jawbone, at the angry rising and falling of her tight breasts. "I'm afraid you're pretty worked up over nothing, aren't you, Sybil?"

"You know what's wrong with you, Mr. James Willing? You wouldn't get mad if somebody stamped on your toes and then spit in your face."

She swung away from the desk. Her high heels clicked angrily on the small area of bare floor between the two desks. Without looking in his direction she went to the clothestree in the corner, tore her hat and coat from it. She didn't bother to put them on. She just clutched them under her arm and started for the door.

"You can send me my final check. You know my address."

"Sybil, please don't be ridiculous. You're not fired. Why in heaven's name should I fire the very nicest and best secretary a man ever had?" he said, mildly.

That stopped her. She turned around and looked at him. But then she quickly turned back again and kept on going. The door slammed

behind her. Before it did James Willing heard a muffled sob escape from her lips.

For a long long while he stared at the closed door. Then he went over to the window and stood there looking out at the rays of the dying sun. Red rays, they were. Angry, blood-like things that still had heat in them. He could feel that heat on his eyeballs.

He didn't go home, of course. Instead, he found a little hole-in-the-wall on a side street off Wilshire Boulevard where he could put his elbows up on the counter and put his head down in his hands and stare at the moodily-hissing steam coming up out of a corroded, nickel-plated coffee urn. Probably he ordered the Special. When he finally slid down off the hard stool and left he had probably been overcharged and he probably didn't notice. Probably he wouldn't have given a tinker's dam if he had.

He drove around the block and came back to Wilshire. There wasn't much traffic, which was strange for it was Saturday night. He went to Figueroa and over to Sunset and turned right. The first thing he knew he was on Boyle Avenue. The next thing he knew—rather automatically, it seemed, somehow—he was pulling into a parking lot that adjoined a concrete block garage. He slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid running into a big Buick station wagon parked up against the wall. A good thing, considering the owner had only that one Buick station wagon to his name.

The attendant wandered out of his little booth over in the corner. He said out of the corner of his mouth, "Closin' up in five minutes. If you're gonna leave the heap here y'better lock it up."

James Willing nodded as though he were listening.

"Six bits," said the attendant, and didn't bat an eye.

James Willing gave him a dollar. He wandered out of the lot. A few moments later he had one elbow on a wet spot on somebody's dimly-lighted and smoke-filled bar. His left hand held a shot glass that every now and then he put to his mouth and each time it had something in it. One of those bottomless things.

Nobody bothered him. There was a great peace and quiet broken only by the ringing of the cash register and the lifting and putting down again of the shot glass that he wasn't able to empty. It was very late when he finally gave up trying. . . .

He didn't remember leaving the place. He didn't remember wandering down wrong blocks and wandering back up again and then at long last finding the parking lot which adjoined the cement block garage. He didn't remember making it to the only car in the lot—his own—and getting the door open. But he did remember something: Putting his arm through the open window and staring at the blank concrete side of the garage and thinking almost as if he were talking the words aloud: *She said you wouldn't get mad if somebody stamped on your toes and then spit in your face.*

He snorted. Wouldn't get mad? Ridic'lous.

He lifted his head and clamped his eyes tight on the blank cold wall of the garage. He concentrated, thinking back.

She was right. By God she was right! He couldn't remember the time. There had never been the time! Never. He'd never once got mad—really mad, that is—in his whole life!

He toyed with the novelty, the enormity, of the thing. Just imagine that. Never once. He wondered what it felt like to be mad—really mad. He stared hard, concentrating and tried to picture what it was; tried to create within that surging, burning, boiling something which he knew instinctively would be first cousin to pure hate. He tried to feel the hot blood within him rising higher, higher, reaching his brain and finally lodging like licking fiery tongues behind his two hypnotically staring eyes. He held it like that for several seconds.

A gently sighing wind coming in off the ocean swept up the lonely street. It touched things here and there as it came, losing little bits of itself, picking up little bits of other things. It was a very strong, very pungent wind; it assailed his nostrils like spiralling wire brushes twisting in a wound of torn flesh. It broke the spell.

He sighed and got in his car and got it started and turned around in the lot and drove off. He wasn't drunk anymore. Miraculously, he felt only a glow, a cushion-like something that had yet a firm backing to it.

He drove slowly up Sunset to Hollywood Boulevard. There came to his ears a dull rumbling explosion somewhere but it was a vague thing; it held no slightest importance. He stopped at a signal. While he was waiting for the light he stared out at the broad bole of a stubby palm tree that grew through a porthole in the cement slab of the sidewalk in front of a men's store.

In the same instant that the light turned green he began to smell smoke. Wood smoke. You can tell wood smoke, green or dry. He started up, went several blocks before he hit another red light.

So he couldn't get mad, eh? That was a lot of malarkey, and that's for sure. It was easy to get mad. All you did was to stare hard and let the blood begin to boil. And before you knew it it was up there behind your eyes. Red hot.

As he pulled away he heard the wailing siren of a fire engine somewhere behind. He looked in his mirror but he couldn't see anything so he kept on going.

Each time he had to stop for a signal he practiced getting mad. Easy. Wonderful. The most delightful tingling, novelty-sensation he'd ever had.

He heard more fire engines in the rear distance. He turned off Hollywood at Laurel Canyon and wound up the hill to home.

Just as he was reaching up to turn off the bedlight he thought of it again. He chuckled. He could hear

himself chuckling. He stared out the bedroom window, out into the darkness of night. He tried it. At once the hot blood began to rise. It never failed.

He passed out cold.

The next morning was very difficult. The sun streamed in through his bedroom window and with the gentlest of sinuous movements crept across his bed as though it was important not to disturb James Willing on this bright and happy Sunday morning.

But he was already awake, he'd been awake for several minutes. His head was an enormous, tender thing and he knew the slightest of sounds would be like stabbing icepicks. He lay there breathing as quietly as he could.

And that made the door chimes sound in the rear of the house. Somebody outside was punching the door button. He got up, groaning.

"I am very ill," he said, holding the door open a crack and staring up into the tall man's face.

The tall man didn't seem to hear that. He said: "Are you James Willing?"

He nodded. The tall man was very very tall, taller than tall men usually come. And he had a stooping roundness to the set of his bony shoulders. In his right hand he held a little golden shield like a bright bit of dimestore jewelry.

"Arson Squad, Mr. Willing. I'd like to take up a little of your time if I may."

"Arson?" said James Willing. And then his eyes nearly popped from their sockets as he stared over the shoulder of the man before him and across the street to where a house used to be. "My God," he said huskily. "Old Sam Hardy's house across the street has burned down!"

It was the tall man's turn to look surprised. "You didn't know that?"

"Why no. Of course not . . ." and then he caught the suspicious look in the other's eyes and stammered: "W-when did it happen?"

"This morning. About two a.m."

He could feel the flush building in his cheeks. He pulled the door wide open and backed into the room. "You'd better come in," he said.

The tall man followed and closed the door. James Willing said, "To tell you the truth I was pretty drunk last night. When I got home I must have passed out. That's why I'm so ill this morning. That's probably why I didn't know."

"Oh," said the tall man. "I was hoping you could give us a little help on how the side of the Little Eagle Garage got blown out last night."

"The side of . . ." James Willing gawked. "The Little Eag. . . .?"

"Corner of Sycamore Boulevard and Boyle Avenue."

"But how would I know a thing like that? I mean . . . drunk *or sober?*"

"A hunch I had," said the tall man. "The attendant at the adjoining parking lot gave us your license number and we checked up on it. He said yours was the only car in the lot when he closed up. The only reason he took your number was that he had warned you to lock your

car and you didn't—and he feared in case it was stolen. . . ." The tall man shrugged.

It filtered slowly "My God," whispered James Willing. "The side of the garage blown out? And you're from the Arson Squad?"

"Doesn't necessarily mean anything personal," said the tall man, smiling faintly. "We're investigating, yes. You see, the garage, like the parking lot, contained but one car at the time. A repair job they hadn't finished. At about one thirty this morning the gasoline tank of the car inside the garage suddenly exploded and blew the side of the garage to kingdom come. And since gasoline tanks don't explode without some good reason. . . ." he left it like that and stared at the man facing him.

"My God," said James Willing again.

"What we were wondering," said the tall man. "Did you happen to notice anything peculiar around the garage or the parking lot when you drove away? Or were you too. . . ." He stopped, embarrassed.

"Too drunk, you mean?" said James Willing flatly. "Yes. I very likely was. I didn't notice a thing. The explosion must have occurred right after I pulled out of the lot. Come to think of it I remember hearing a dull sort of a noise a little while later. Like an explosion, I mean. I went up Sunset to Hollywood Boulevard and I think it was at the first red light I came to that I heard it. And after that I seem to remember hearing fire engines."

The tall man blinked. "Sunset to Hollywood?" he said in a funny voice.

"Yes. I think so. I can't be sure now, of course, but I think so. At least that would have been the quickest way home. Why?"

"A very odd coincidence," said the tall man. "Just about at that time this morning somebody set fire to six palm trees on Hollywood Boulevard. And also the canvas awning over a fruit store." He stopped, blinked rapidly again, and added, "And *here* somebody set fire to a man's house." His eyes went out the window to the charred remains of the place across the street.

"My God," said James Willing for the fourth time. "Who would do a thing like that?"

"We should like to know the answer to that," the tall man said very grimly.

There was a moment of silence then. James Willing stared through the window at the same sight that met the tall man's eyes. He wondered if old Sam Hardy had been notified yet. Sam was spending the winter in Palm Springs with his family and the house had been vacant.

He quickly averted his eyes and settled them instead on the tall man's squad car out at the curb. It pained him to look at the burned out shell of old Sam Hardy's house. He thought about it, staring at the police car. What a lousy trick it was to burn down a man's house! The thoughts of that made him mad—mad clear through. And then he no-

ticed something rather odd.

Smoke.

The tall man noticed it at the same time. His eyes spread as though they were about to fly off the sides of his head. "I'm damned!" he almost hissed and made a running dive for the door. "Now the prowl car's on fire!"

He couldn't be sure. How could you ever be certain of a thing like that? He pushed it from his mind and went out to the kitchen and made a full pot of coffee and drank it down black. Then he made another full pot and kept the flame going very low beneath it.

He didn't want to trust his thoughts. Not just yet. Let it lie dormant, that was the best thing.

He went to the living room and stood before the window looking across the street at the remains of old Sam Hardy's house. And the more he looked—somehow—the better he felt. Pshaw! The tall man had said it himself, hadn't he? Coincidence, that's what it was. Of course. What else?

By midafternoon he had it out of his mind sufficiently to begin feeling the loneliness of an empty home. He walked from room to room feeling it, not liking it, but not knowing what could be done about it.

That led his footsteps into Veronica's bedroom as though it were some form of evolution he was powerless to prevent. Like tails growing on monkeys for instance.

He stood just inside her bedroom door, and looked around. What a feminine room it was! Everywhere he looked pointed to it: the bed with its fancy, satin-lined canopy; the cream-white drapes at the windows that came down and spilled in carefully-studied fashion in little piles on the floor; the chaise-longue with its two plump silken pillows; the vanity with its grotesque-sized mirror that went upward to the ceiling and outward to the two wall limits.

He looked at himself in the mirror. Looked at the tufts of gray over his ears. He smoothed those with a nervous hand. At the little fold-wrinkles of the skin under his eyes. Those he couldn't smooth.

He was getting old. Funny, he had never noticed it before. He dug out a pack of cigarettes from his dressing robe and lit one—the first all day. He sucked in deeply on it. Funny. Veronica wasn't getting old and yet they were of an identical age. He reached down and picked up a big eight by ten folder-photo of Veronica that sat on the left edge of the vanity. Old? He felt like laughing. Veronica looked as though she'd never grow old. My God but she was good looking.

He sighed. That was the trouble. Too good looking. He started to replace the folder on the vanity. As he did a little slip of notepaper fell from behind the photo and landed face up on the vanity. It looked as though it were something torn from the bottom of a letter. He blinked, stooped over and read it:

"To Christmas night and always, huh, baby?"

It was signed, "Your Al."

Al. Al Masterson? The golf Pro? He tried to think back to Christmas. He and Veronica had been here at home, he was positive. Or was he? He slowly began to remember something. Christmas night was the night he had come down with the flu and Veronica had gone out to distribute baskets to needy families.

She said.

He suddenly smelled smoke. The little slip of note paper was curling to ash right before his eyes. As he watched, the smoke died in a wisping tendril. He blinked. He reached down and brushed aside the fragments. Underneath, in a little spot the size of the notepaper, the white oak surface of the vanity was charred.

A spark from his cigarette?

He took a deep breath and slowly turned away. He'd never be able to kid himself about it again. Not after this.

Sybil West was at her desk the next morning. It was as though there had been nothing said and nothing remembered—although she was very quiet, very reserved. As for him, he tried to act as usual. He smiled; he called her by her first name as he had always. He made little jokes that fell flat unless somebody rushed to lend them a helping chuckle. Like always.

The day passed. At five o'clock he went home. Veronica was there. He said quietly: "Hello, Veronica, my dear."

She didn't answer that. She said coldly, "I see while I was away you managed to burn a spot on my vanity. What were you doing in my room in the first place?"

"Is your headache better, my dear?" he asked.

"I suppose you were the one who burned down Sam Hardy's house across the street, too." The tone of her voice went down—ominously down.

"What were you doing last Christmas night, my dear?" he asked—again quietly. "I don't mean what you said you were doing, I mean actually."

And that's the way those things start. Or rather, end. Veronica stared at him for a long moment without answering. Then she took a deep breath that made her high proud breasts strain against the constriction of her dress. She left the room. An hour or so later she came back to the living room with three bags. She was wearing her fur coat and a new hat he had never seen before. She dropped the bags, said coldly, "I'll be taking the car. I'll be needing it for a while. I'm going away."

"Away?' he said. "Away, my dear?"

"If it is positively necessary you can contact me at the Oro Del Rey in Reno. We can arrange a property settlement when I get back."

"Reno?" he said. Just like that. Not another word came from his lips.

And that was all. In these civilized days there isn't always the broken furniture, the cursing, and hysterical screaming. Not in these days.

He sat in his favorite chair for a very long while after she had gone.

He seemed rooted to the spot. The hours went by. At two o'clock in the morning an inexplicable weariness descended on him and he slept for a while. He awoke again at four, though. He went out to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee and drank it black. At five the telephone rang. It was the Receiving Hospital at Bakersfield. They told him his wife had been in an automobile crackup.

And that she had just died. . . .

The tall man waited until Sybil West left the office and the door closed behind her. Then he leaned over James Willing's desk and said very seriously, "I've held off until after the funeral and all, Mr. Willing."

James Willing raised his eyebrows. The other went on, "I'd just like you to know I'm not devoid of feeling—despite the job I hold down."

"Say what you have to say, please," said James Willing.

"I am. Believe me, I am. Firstly, let me say I don't think that explosion in the garage was an accident. Further, I don't believe the palm trees burning down and the awning burning down and your neighbor's house burning down and the prowl car catching on fire was all a peculiar set of coincidences. I might have—but I don't anymore."

"Don't you? Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell me what you do think then?"

The tall man rubbed his long chin and stared speculatively. "You sound a little annoyed, Mr. Willing. Perhaps you'll sound even more so when I say that the Department doesn't like coincidences of this kind."

"Indeed."

"Quite. And here's something the Department likes even less. Upon the request of the Bakersfield Receiving Hospital we've been making a little investigation of your wife's death. It seemed necessary under the circumstances."

James Willing's hands tightened a little on the desk blotter before him. He waited a moment before he said:

"What circumstances?"

"These," said the tall man very gravely. "To begin with, there wasn't any apparent reason for her running into that telephone pole. Except of course, for the slight reason of the charred fur coat she was wearing at the time. Secondly, although she wasn't injured in the accident they found she was running an extremely high temperature when they examined her at the hospital. Nothing wrong with her, understand. She wasn't even suffering very badly from shock. Just this very unusual fever."

"Go on."

"I intend to. Some of the best doctors in the county are at that hospital. Yet none of them could account for the fever. More seriously for your wife's sake, none of them could reduce it by so much as one degree despite everything they tried." The tall man leaned forward and looked James Willing straight in the eyes.

"Now comes a more amazing thing yet," he said. "At two in the morning your wife's fever broke and her temperature returned to normal. Instantly." He snapped his fingers

with a loud rasping sound. "Like that," he said.

"I know," murmured James Willing. "I fell asleep."

"What?" The tall man's voice was sharp.

James Willing took a very deep breath. "Since you're doing so much prying I'll tell you something you probably didn't know. My wife had left me, copper. She was on her way to Reno for a divorce. And if you think I did something to make her car swerve into that telephone pole then I'm afraid you'll have an extremely difficult time proving it. I was home. I was—surprisingly enough, perhaps—falling asleep. As I just said."

The tall man sighed unexpectedly and nodded. "I know," he said softly. "I know. There's a lot of things I don't know in this old world but that's not one of them. I was watching your house from across the street. You didn't leave it, that I'll swear."

"Quite right. Are you finished?"

"Almost. There's just one more amazing thing—two, rather. First, at four o'clock in the morning your wife's fever suddenly returned. It was intense. It lasted until she died very shortly afterward. The doctors say she literally burned up inside. Moreover, they still can't explain it—even after the autopsy."

"Two things, you said?"

"Yes. Here's the last, although it probably bears a remote connection. Down at Laguna there was a little golf shop with sleeping rooms behind it A man by the name of Al Masterson used to run it. He doesn't run it anymore. The shop went up in flames and Al Masterson was in it at the time. He didn't get out. And this was the same night your wife died." He paused. Then he added dryly: "The remote connection I referred to is this: Al Masterson, from what I can learn, was a little more intimate with your wife than would have seemed proper."

There was a long silence after that. James Willing said nothing to break the silence. He stared into the tall man's eyes and his only movement was one of slow breathing. Finally —and with another long sigh—the tall man said:

"I'm thinking some very peculiar things, Mr. Willing. Very peculiar. I don't expect ever to be able to prove what I'm thinking, but if I ever do. . ." he left it unfinished. He got to his feet. He looked very tired—and very very baffled.

After he had gone, Sybil West came back in the office. She looked expectantly at James Willing but she said nothing. She saw the smile on his face. She saw him reach for the phone and dial a number. She couldn't hear what he said. His conversation didn't take long. When he pushed the phone away again he looked over at her and said, still smiling, "Love me, honey?"

"Wha. . . .?"

"Plane leaving for Las Vegas in two hours. We can take it, get married up there without any wait, and be back here tomorrow morning. Then maybe next week end we could have a little honeymoon . . ."

"Wha . . .?" Sybil's mouth was

suddenly extremely wide open.

"Come here," said James Willing. He got up and stood beside the desk . . . .

He nodded to himself. He got out a cigarette, speared his lips with it and then looked cross-eyed at the end of it. Instantly it broke into glowing fire and he inhaled deeply:

And then he froze. Good Lord, he'd better watch that, too. Suppose somebody saw him doing that trick?

He crushed out the cigarette and folded his hands on the desk. He had a little idea. It wasn't full-blown yet, but it would get there. He had been wondering at just what distance this thing could still be effective. Like for instance, could he project it way across an ocean, he wondered?

To the Kremlin, over in Moscow, for instance?

He chuckled softly. It would be great fun trying.

PASSIONNEL

If I say you are guilty

and you think you are guilty

then you may be sure that . . .

YOU KILLED ELIZABETH

BRETT HALLIDAY

The "different" story often goes unpublished. Brett Halliday, father of mystery fiction's red-headed Michael Shayne and (with his equally famous writer-wife, Helen McCloy) of a 3-year-old named Chloe, saw this particular infant bounced by one American editor after another. "You Killed Elizabeth," was first published by The London Mystery Magazine *and has its U.S. magazine debut right here and now . . .*

You've probably read a dozen versions of the story already. If you live anywhere in the United States and even glance at the headlines you've certainly read something about Edgar and me. And Elizabeth.

The metropolitan newspapers had a field day with it. Front-page stories with pictures, and by-lined interviews by the sob-girls and the columnists; digging far back into the past for every detail that went into the making of our friendship, with fanciful allusions to David and Jonathan, Damon and Pythias . . . Even with a few veiled hints of homosexuality tossed in for good measure . . . All for the purpose of trying to understand why each of us did what we did.

I don't think it's so difficult to understand. Of course, there are a few things none of the papers got hold of. But even with the facts they had, it all seems understandable enough to me.

What would you do if you learned your best friend was a murderer? Would you cover up for him? Lie to

the cops, maybe, and even put your own neck in jeopardy? Or, would you go high-minded and moral and turn him over to the executioner? Even if he had killed the only woman you had ever loved?

I'm talking about real friendship, you understand, between mature men with roots that go all the way back to your childhood. Friendship that had survived a quarter-century of living with never a quarrel.

That's what there was between Edgar and me. We grew up together on adjoining farms in Nebraska, went to the same school and sat in the same classes through high school and then through four years at State U, taking the same courses and rooming together, graduating on the same platform with degrees in engineering.

Swimming together in the summer and hunting in the fall. Playing kissing games with gals when we were kids and double-dating at college.

Through it all, I tagged along in Edgar's wake. Or would have tagged along, if he hadn't insisted that I keep pace with him, giving freely of his time and energy and strength and intelligence to keep me from lagging too far behind.

It was like that from the first day we went to school together. Edgar was a year younger than I, but he had a brilliant mind that grasped book-learning out of the air, a physique that made him a star athlete all through high school and college, a driving inexhaustible energy that always carried him to the front. And the sort of rugged good looks coupled with a persuasive charm that gave him any girl he ever bothered to go after.

I don't mean that I was dumb or physically inadequate, except by comparison with Edgar. I had girls, too, but they were ones Edgar didn't want or had discarded.

It was the same way after college. We went to work for a construction company as rodmen on the same survey party. When Edgar was promoted to party chief he lifted me along with him as his transitman. When he became project engineer, I went along as his assistant.

Even through the war we got our commissions in the Engineer Corps on the same day, Captain and Lieutenant. And we came out three years later as Major Edgar Curteen and Captain George Whaler.

The papers got hold of most of that stuff, though they didn't know the half of it. The innumerable times, stretching all the way back to first grade, when I would have dropped far, far behind if Edgar hadn't paused to give me a helping hand.

After the war we came back to our jobs in the city and found a small but decent apartment together on East Thirty-eighth Street. Self-service elevator and no doorman or desk-clerk to note the hours we kept.

I met Elizabeth two months ago. Elizabeth Grange. She was a career girl on her way to the top in the publishing business with a salary at least equal to mine, living alone in a small, swanky apartment on East Sixty-sixth.

It began at one of those small, intimate motion picture theatres in New York that specialize in foreign films. They were showing an English picture that I had wanted to see for a long time. Edgar was out of town on a business trip and I, as usual at a time like that, was somewhat at a loose end. When Edgar is out of town on business trips, I catch up on my movie-going and other things of that sort which Edgar would call "cultural."

I had a late dinner alone and I reached the theatre a little before nine o'clock. I was told by the man who took my ticket that the feature was on and it would be about twenty minutes before it started again. I'm one of those peculiar people who like to see a picture from the beginning, so I checked my topcoat and hat and went into the small, comfortably furnished lounge to wait for the beginning of the second run.

There was a neat Negro maid in a trim blue-and-white uniform presiding behind a buffet with a bubbling coffee percolator for those who wished to relax in the lounge. I went to her and she smiled and offered me a cup of coffee which I took black. I moved across the room and sat down in a comfortable, deep chair to sip my coffee. There were a dozen or more people in the small lounge waiting as I was. Some of them were drinking coffee, two or three couples were whispering together animatedly, but mostly they were singles; men and women, sitting alone in comfortable chairs, sipping coffee or smoking cigarettes, looking with feigned interest at the décor, avoiding meeting each others' eyes across the room in the manner of men and women of a certain social class in a city like New York, refusing to show an interest in any person to whom they have not been previously introduced.

To my western mind this is all a lot of foolishness, and I've thought about it a lot in the past. I've wondered what is gained by a dictate of society that prevents lonely people of the same sex or of opposite sex speaking to each other under such circumstances.

There they sit, in New York, or Chicago, or Buffalo, or Miami, men alone and women alone, each looking at the other, realizing that it would be pleasant to become acquainted, to have a human contact, yet barred from doing so by a silly social code thrust upon them by people long since dead.

I lit a cigarette and sipped my strong, black coffee.

She was sitting directly across from me, not more than six feet away. There was an empty coffee cup at her left hand. She had a cigarette between the first two fingers of her right hand and, when I first saw her, she was taking it away from her lips.

I'm not going to try to describe her dress. I know it was gray, fawn-colored perhaps. I know it was the sort of thing she should have worn. I'm not going to try to describe Elizabeth's face. All I can say is it was what I had wanted to see for a long, long time.

How can a man like me, an engineer, describe what happens to him when he looks out of the window at night and sees moonbeams dancing on new-fallen snow? How do you describe a song that lingers in your heart? How can you put into words what happens inside you when the first sunlight of a new-made day streaks across the eastern horizon?

I shan't attempt to describe Elizabeth. She was the woman I had always dreamed I would one day know. Our eyes met across that six feet of thickly carpeted space and she didn't look away. Her manner was grave and interested and welcoming. Her lips were faintly parted and I had a feeling deep inside me that if I made the right move, her lips would open gladly to speak to me.

I remember setting my coffee cup down quietly, rising and moving across five of those feet that separated us.

I don't recall that she moved, except to tilt her chin a trifle, burrow her head farther back against the soft cushion of the chair in which she sat. Her eyes remained wide, unblinking, holding mine, and I said, "If I'm wrong, please say so at once, but I have a feeling it would be pleasant if we two could sit together, and see this picture."

Her lips spread a trifle, into a smile. There was an empty chair beside her and her right hand reached out to touch the arm.

She said, "Why don't you sit here?"

I sat down and told her my name. She told me her name was Elizabeth Grange. She also told me quietly and matter-of-factly in the few minutes before the picture started that she had felt as I had felt, sitting there alone in the lounge with a cup of coffee, looking at the people about her who had bothered to come to this particular picture on this particular night. A picture not for the masses . . . Oh, she wasn't high-hat, she didn't have any silly ideas about the intelligentsia or that sort of bunk. But she did feel, as I had felt, that there was a particular type of person who would be attracted to this particular type of picture, even that there was a particular type of person who would prefer to wait in the lounge until the feature began again, so she had had a peculiar feeling of kinship as she sat there for everyone else in the lounge.

You see, it wasn't the sort of pick-up that happens so often in a big city. She wasn't the sort of girl who found a vacant stool in a bar and turned a little when a man sat beside her, hoping he would buy her a drink.

It isn't necessary to go into much more detail. Elizabeth was what I had dreamed about for thirty-eight years of my life. We sat together in the theatre that night without touching hands, without our shoulders touching each other, no physical contact whatsoever. I was so intent on making her understand that it was all right, that it was perfectly proper to have met a man in the city this way.

I couldn't tell you now what the

picture was about. I remember a glow, a feeling of enjoying the picture, of enjoying being alive, of sitting there beside Elizabeth and knowing that this was it. This was what I had waited for for a long time. Without even the touch of her hand, I felt a vibration from the girl in the theatre seat beside me, and I knew without question, that she felt exactly what I felt.

When the picture ended, we went out together. Outside the theatre, on the sidewalk, I asked her if she would like to go some place for a drink. It was a little after eleven o'clock, and she lifted her eyebrows in an expression of mock dismay and told me, "I'm a working girl, George. Could it be a cup of coffee and, perhaps, a sandwich?

I told her a cup of coffee and perhaps a sandwich was exactly what I wanted, too. We found a Child's nearby and we sat there until twelve-thirty, smoking and telling each other about ourselves. When we parted outside the restaurant, I had a date to take her to dinner the next day.

I picked her up at her apartment in the evening, and, at my suggestion, we went to the Five Hundred Room on East Fifty-second Street. It's always quiet there and they have a way of doing rare filets mignons with some sort of French sauce on top that is out of this world.

She was wearing a different dress when she met me at the door of her apartment, a pale green thing, with a suggestion of frothiness about the neck and the short puffed sleeves. She looked demure and beautiful and happy to greet me.

She had two champagne cocktails before dinner and the filets were rare and everything else was just exactly as it should have been for that first dinner. We talked a lot, each about our work, about the sort of life we had led. She was from Fort Wayne, Indiana, and had been in New York three years. She didn't tell me exactly what her position was, but it was with a well-known book-publishing house and had to do with the editing of juvenile books.

After dinner that first night we moved into the bar and dawdled for an hour or more over one cognac, while we completed the job of falling in love.

That is, she told me later that she completed it that night.

It had already happened to me. It had happened the previous night when I looked across the theatre lounge and first met Elizabeth's eyes.

I kissed her good night when we parted a little before eleven in the foyer of her apartment house. She turned her face up to me trustfully and I touched her lips lightly with mine. Then I turned away quickly before I went too far, too fast, because I knew Elizabeth wasn't the sort of girl who would welcome a pass from a stranger.

As I said before, Edgar was out of the city on a business trip, and I had one entire week with Elizabeth before he came back to New York. We spent every evening together, and the fourth night Elizabeth told

me that love had hit her exactly as it had me.

I believed her. I made myself believe her. I was really in love for the first time in my life and I wouldn't let myself believe that anything could possibly come between Elizabeth and me.

I refused to think about Edgar's return to the city. I simply put such thoughts out of my mind. I was sure of Elizabeth. I was sure that nothing could change what we had together. Not even Edgar.

Yet, when Edgar did return, I found myself unable to tell him about Elizabeth. I didn't admit it to myself, but I realize now that I simply couldn't risk it at that time. We had known each other only a week. I thought I was sure, but I guess I wasn't.

I didn't mention Elizabeth's name to Edgar. I didn't tell him I had fallen in love. He stayed in town ten days that time and I managed to keep the whole thing a secret from him. We worked together at the office, lunched together, and spent most of our evenings together—just as we had done in the past.

I had to make all sorts of excuses to Elizabeth about the evenings. She knew about Edgar, of course, but not what I was afraid of. I managed to see her occasionally and briefly during those ten days, and explained that when Edgar was in the city it meant a great deal of extra work that we had to do together in the evenings—and she accepted that explanation.

Then Edgar was sent out to Detroit to look over a municipal project our firm was bidding on. He was gone almost three weeks that time, and Elizabeth and I were together a great deal of those twenty-one days.

When Edgar returned this time, I told myself I was sure. Elizabeth was mine and nothing could change that. Not even her meeting Edgar. For the first time in my life I felt I had achieved something really important without a helping hand from Edgar. For the first time in my life I had something better than he, something he couldn't possibly take away from me.

That's what I thought I thought, but I hedged again when he came back. I did tell him about Elizabeth, even her name; but I made a joke about not letting him meet her for fear she'd fall for him. He took it good-humoredly and didn't object when I went off alone in the evenings to meet her. She began wondering why I didn't invite her to our apartment when Edgar was in the city, and I made all sorts of excuses. I don't know whether she guessed the truth or not. I had told her a lot about Edgar and our relationship and I think, now, that maybe she did guess, but she didn't mention it to me and didn't press me too much.

Then, it happened, as I suppose I had subconsciously known it would have to happen.

Just ten days ago. I was delayed at the office and found Edgar talking on the telephone when I walked into the apartment. He was lounging back comfortably with a half-smile

on his face and I knew he was talking to a woman before he spoke into the telephone.

He said, "If you're half as nice as your voice sounds, it's really going to be a pleasure. In about half an hour?" He hung up and turned to me enthusiastically.

"What a honey, George!"

I tossed my old G.I. raincoat down and asked, "Who?"

"Who else but your incomparable Elizabeth? We're picking her up in half an hour for dinner."

I said, "We?" and crossed to the sideboard to pour myself a drink.

"It's on me, George. We'll make it a real celebration. I'll phone El Morocco for a table." He began humming softly in a pleased manner as he lifted the telephone.

From across the room, I said flatly, "Make it a table for two."

He was dialing and he lifted his eyebrows at me. "You got something else on?"

I said yes I had something else on. I don't know why I lied. I just knew I couldn't go. I couldn't stand seeing those two together, seeing it happen. I wasn't angry. I didn't blame Edgar then, nor afterward. You don't blame the sun for setting in the afternoon, nor the ocean for being too cold for swimming in mid-winter.

I sat there and sipped my drink and watched Edgar dress carefully for an evening at El Morocco with my girl. Only I knew she wasn't my girl any more. That was ended. It had been a wild, impossible dream I'd had. Lovely and impossible as dreams so often are.

I hoped he'd be good to her. That's all I really thought about as I ate dinner alone that evening and came back to the empty apartment. I still loved Elizabeth and I hoped she wouldn't be hurt.

I was lying awake in the darkness of my own room when I heard Edgar come in quietly a little after midnight. I could tell he was slightly tight by the way he knocked against things in the living room. Not drunk the way he sometimes gets, but pleasantly high. For years, now, he's had a way of pulling a complete mental blank when he drinks too much. An absolute blackout of his conscious faculties without showing it physically to anyone who doesn't know him as well as I do. There are little signs I've learned that tell me when he's like that, but this night I knew he'd been careful not to drink too much.

I lay in bed without moving and heard him go into his bedroom and undress. And pretty soon he began snoring lightly.

I had oranges squeezed and coffee made when he came into the kitchenette the next morning. His hair was tousled and he looked boyish and happy. We didn't mention Elizabeth or the night before. I waited for him to begin, and I guess he was waiting for me. We talked about the newspaper headlines and about work to be done that day at the office.

Edgar left the office a little before I did that afternoon without saying where he was going, without suggesting we do anything together that night. I didn't ask him. I thought I

knew where he was going.

I called Elizabeth after I got home and her phone didn't answer. I called at hourly intervals until midnight and it still remained silent. So then I faced it. I knew I'd never telephone Elizabeth again.

I didn't. And Edgar didn't mention her name to me for several days. I avoided him as much as possible at the office, and he made it easy for me to do so. He spent all his evenings out and I was in bed every night when he came in.

I was alone in the apartment that night about ten o'clock when the telephone rang. It was Edgar: His voice was furry on the edges, the words slightly blurred together so I knew he was pretty drunk.

"George. Come on down, fellow, and have a drink."

"Where are you?" I knew he was close to passing out when he talked like that, and needed someone to look after him.

"Down here at Tony's. Got news for you, George. 'Portant 'nouncement to make."

Tony's was a little bar around the corner on Lexington where we sometimes stopped for a nightcap. I told him I'd be right down, and for him to lay off the drinks until I got there.

A light mist of rain was falling, and Edgar was sitting in one of the rear booths still wearing his damp Army trenchcoat belted around him when I got there. He was hunched over a double rye, nursing it in his strong hands, and a lock of black hair lay rakishly across his forehead as he looked up at me.

I could see he was on the verge of a blackout and knew the one drink on the table might do the job, so I slid into the booth in front of him and reached for his glass, suggesting lightly, "Suppose you lay off and let me start catching up."

But his fingers tightened on the glass. He said in a low voice, "Before God, George, I didn't intend this."

"What are you talking about, Edgar?" I crooked my finger at a waiter, keeping my voice light.

But he was deadly serious. "You've got to believe me. I didn't mean to do this to you. But Elizabeth . . ." He paused and wet his lips without looking at me, then lifted the double shot swiftly and gulped it down.

The waiter brought my drink and I emptied it before asking, "What about Elizabeth?"

"She's wonderful, George. Terrific. My God in heaven . . ." There was a tinge of awe in his voice. He looked at me directly and his eyes were glowing. A pulse jumped in his lean cheek. I knew he was wavering on the edge of one of his blackouts.

"We're in love," he said. "It's the real thing this time. For the first time in my life . . ." He paused and put out a hand toward me. "I wouldn't have done it otherwise." He was pleading with me. "I know you went for her, too. But we're going to be married, George. Right away. We just decided."

I leaned back to avoid his groping hand. I said, "Why bother to marry her?" I didn't know I was going to

say that. The words just came out, sounding loud and harsh in my ears. I put a grin on my face though I could feel the stinging hot wetness of tears behind my eyelids.

"What do you mean by a crack like that, George?" He looked and sounded bewildered. As if he didn't, actually, understand.

I pulled my hand out of my raincoat pocket and held out a key to him. "This is what I mean. Marry the little tramp, if you're fool enough, but you might as well take this key to her apartment instead. I won't be needing it any more."

He came out of his seat in one lunge, grabbing for the key with his left hand and smashing his right fist into my face at the same moment.

I grabbed him and grappled with him, holding him in close against me so he couldn't swing again, shaking my head at two waiters who had started forward to separate us.

I knew he was passed out by the ease with which I was able to handle him. I've handled him in that condition plenty of times. Some of the strength seems to flow out of his body when he loses conscious control of it. I shoved him back across the table roughly, and he sat there staring at me with glazed eyes that saw but did not comprehend.

My upper lip was split and my nose felt broken. I left him sitting at the table and hurried back to the men's room for a cold towel to stop the bleeding, and discovered my nose was definitely bent but not broken.

When I went back ten minutes later, Edgar was gone.

"Got up and walked out the door right after you left the booth," one of the waiters told me. "He looked real bad. I never even ast him to pay for his drink."

I told him that was all right, and gave him two dollars and hurried out to look for Edgar.

He had disappeared in the rain-misted night. You never knew where he would go or what he would do when he was like that. The bad part of it was that no one else ever realized he was walking around unconscious. You'd think he was a little tight, that's all. I had seen him win three hundred dollars shooting craps with a construction gang one night, and the next morning he didn't know a thing about it. And he'd come home several nights all beaten up without the vaguest idea where he'd been or who did it.

I was pretty badly worried about him, and started out to visit some of the places where he might have gone. I felt plenty guilty about what I had said and done back in the bar. I wished to God I'd kept my mouth shut.

I couldn't locate Edgar in any of the half-dozen places I went to, and I was sitting up waiting for him in the apartment when he came stumbling in at two o'clock.

I heard the self-service elevator stop at our floor and his footsteps straggling down the hall, then his key fumbling in the lock. I hurried across and jerked the door open. He leaned against the threshold dazedly, shaking his head and looking at me

out of bleared eyes. His tightly belted coat was soggy and his uncovered head shone with wetness.

"George, I . . ." He lurched into the room, fumbling at the belt of his coat.

"Where the devil have you been all this time?" I took his elbow and helped him across the room to a chair.

He put his hand on my forearm for support while he shrugged out of the coat, and when he took it away there was a reddish stain from his palm on my white shirt.

"God only knows," he muttered. "I pulled a blank. Back there in Tony's bar. Just came to while the elevator was bringing me up."

That was according to pattern. Somehow the return to familiar surroundings always brought him back to awareness of himself after one of his blackouts.

"It's been hours," I told him. "Get off your wet shoes and I'll pour you a drink." I started to turn away but he stopped me.

"George. I told you about Elizabeth and me, didn't I? Just before I passed out."

"You told me." I hesitated, not knowing whether he remembered any of the rest of it or not, and at that moment we both heard her name spoken by the news announcer on the radio.

It was the regular two o'clock newscast and the voice had been droning monotonously ever since Edgar entered the room, but I don't suppose either of us had heard a word it said.

Now we listened with transfixed attention: ". . . body of Elizabeth Grange, murdered less than an hour ago in her Sixty-sixth Street apartment, brutally bludgeoned to death by a cut-glass decanter found beside her nude corpse. The deed was discovered by Miss Ellen Knaves, residing in the apartment directly across the hall, within ten or fifteen minutes after it occurred, and it was she who notified police. Miss Grange had a male caller shortly after midnight, according to Miss Knaves' story; an intimate friend, it is assumed, since Miss Knave states emphatically that her door into the hallway was open prior to his arrival and she is positive he did not ring Miss Grange's bell from the lobby for admittance. She did not see the man, but shortly after his departure —hearing no sound from within the lighted apartment and feeling vaguely uneasy—she found the door standing open and upon investigation . . ."

I came to my senses and jumped forward to click off the radio. When I turned around, Edgar was sitting erect staring down at the palms of his hands. "Sticky," he muttered, waggling the fingers. "It looks like—blood! *George!*" He was on his feet staring at me in a frenzy, holding out his clawed hands. "Did you hear? Did—do you think . . . ? My God, I've got blood on my hands."

"Wait a minute," I said as calmly as I could. " Do you remember anything? Any place you went?"

"Nothing. We were sitting there in Tony's. . . ." He was staring down at his damp raincoat, and stooped to

pick it up. "There's blood here on the front. Smeared traces as though I wiped my hands . . ." He paused and dropped back into the chair, groaning. "I couldn't. Not Elizabeth. I never do anything to people I care about when I pass out, George. You know that. Even though I'm not really conscious, I never do anything I wouldn't do otherwise." He stopped, and his voice changed suddenly, was loud with relief.

"But it couldn't have been I. You heard the radio. It was someone who had a key. Her buzzer is awfully loud, and that girl across the hall says . . ."

"Hold it, Edgar." God, I hated it, but I had to do something. And fast. Before the police got hold of our names as two of Elizabeth's close friends and came to interview us.

I leaned down stiffly and picked up his discarded raincoat. Felt in first one slanted side pocket and then the other. Edgar's jaw fell open slackly when I turned to him with Elizabeth's latchkey in the palm of my hand.

"What's that, George?" His voice was a harsh croak. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"This is the key to Elizabeth's apartment," I told him. "Don't you remember? In your pocket."

"No. That's a lie. It can't be. I haven't got her key."

"You snatched it out of my hand in Tony's just before you socked me," I told him wearily. "I went to the men's room and when I came back you had disappeared. I looked for you at all our regular places but no one had seen you."

He seemed not to hear me. He was staring at the key in disbelief. "*Her* key? *You* had it, George?"

I leaned down to grab his shoulders and shake him, and I gave it to him straight. "That's right. Elizabeth's key. I offered it to you in Tony's and you got sore. For God's sake, start thinking fast. Get out of those damp clothes and into the bathtub. Before they get here to question us."

"They?" He looked at me stupidly.

"The cops. They'll find my name in her apartment—maybe yours. Wait a minute." I ran into the bathroom and soaked one end of a towel in warm water, brought it back and began rubbing the traces of blood off his hands. He sagged apathetically in the chair, shaking his head from side to side and mumbling while I talked fast. "This towel and raincoat seem to be the only traces of blood. I'll carry them down to the basement and put them in the furnace while you get in the tub. If we can both get undressed and have things burned up before they come, you've got a chance. We'll both swear we've been right here all evening—since you left her earlier. We can't tell them about being in Tony's. One of the waiters heard us arguing about Elizabeth and saw you grab the key and knock me down. He may forget about it if nothing reminds him."

"Wait a minute, George." He was fully sober now, fully aware of the situation. He was studying me strangely. "You—think I murdered Elizabeth?"

"Whether you did it or not," I snapped, "you'll be nailed to the cross for it if we tell the truth about tonight. But if we stick together . . ."

"You'd do that, George?" he asked softly "You'd stick by me? Lie to alibi me? After I took your girl away from you? Even after you think I—killed her?"

"Wouldn't you do the same for me?"

"I don't know." He broke suddenly and began sobbing. "If I did do a thing like that while I was passed out, I ought to . . ."

"Shut up. If you did do it, she had it coming to her. You're not responsible when you're in that condition. It's my fault, too. If I hadn't got sore and told you the truth about her, you'd never have gone back there tonight. Get into the tub fast while I burn this raincoat and towel."

And that's one of the things I was thinking about as I took the elevator down to the ground floor and went back quietly to the rear stairs and down into the basement where there was a stoker-fired coal furnace. How it was my fault, and it wouldn't help Elizabeth any now for Edgar to be electrocuted for her murder. Anyone would have done the same thing in my position. At least, it seems to me he would. Some of the reporters made a great to-do about it, screaming frenetically about "this rare, selfless love of one man for his friend." But, as I said in the beginning, there are a few facts the papers didn't get hold of.

Edgar was out of his bath when I got upstairs. Nothing had happened yet. He had the radio going. Nothing more about Elizabeth. We got in our pajamas and fixed up the story we would tell the police—the exact truth as far as we could. We wouldn't try to hide the fact that I had been in love with Elizabeth and she had jilted me for Edgar. Or that they had become engaged that evening and he had hurried back to tell me. We realized she might have told some friend, and it would look bad if we lied about it.

I went over and over the scene in Tony's bar so Edgar would understand how damning it would look for him if it came out, and made him promise to stay away from Tony's until it all blew over.

That was one danger point that we couldn't do much about. The other was that Edgar didn't have the faintest idea whom he might have encountered at any time during the missing four hours.

It was possible, he agreed, that someone had seen him entering Elizabeth's apartment or that he'd been seen by someone he knew staggering home at two o'clock.

Barring those two points, I felt we were pretty safe, and I felt a lot safer after the police came at four o'clock and aroused us.

I think we both put on a pretty convincing display of amazement and innocence, and they weren't rough about their questions. After all, they had no reason at all for actually suspecting either of us. They had found my name in her address book, and it was only a routine inquiry. They didn't even know about Ed-

gar's connection with her until we told them, and that must have sounded as though we were holding nothing back. They questioned him closely about the evening they had spent together, how she acted and whether she mentioned a later appointment, whether she seemed to be trying to get rid of him early so she could entertain another man.

And, without being too subtle about it, they intimated their suspicion that she might have been a party girl, and pressed us both hard for admissions of intimacy with her, but we both reacted indignantly enough to convince them. At least, I thought they were convinced.

They left after taking our fingerprints and telling us not to leave town. We would be asked to sign our statements later.

It was dawn by that time, and neither Edgar nor I felt like sleeping. He got a bad case of shakes and sat around with his head in his hands groaning about never touching another drink for the rest of his life, and I finally took several big ones to keep his yammering from driving me nuts.

I was all mixed up in my thinking about Edgar. I couldn't help pitying him for the spot he was in, and I couldn't get Elizabeth out of my mind. The happiness we'd had together until Edgar intervened . . . Yet, I couldn't honestly blame him for what had happened. And I couldn't wholly blame her. There was my own inadequacy, too. Isn't it a man's own fault if he can't hold a woman's love?

Elizabeth's death hit the papers big the next day, but our names weren't played up. Edgar was mentioned as her *fiancé* and the last person known to have seen her alive, but it was stated that he had an ironclad alibi for the time of her death.

Neither of us went to the office that day. We left the telephone off the hook after the third call from a reporter, and we kept the radio turned on and took turns going out for newer editions of the papers.

There wasn't anything in them to frighten us. Apparently no one had seen Elizabeth's last caller enter the building, and no one had come forward to mention meeting Edgar during the four hours he'd been blanked out. The waiter at Tony's who witnessed our quarrel was my biggest worry, but by late afternoon I'd decided there was no real reason to fear he'd come forward with information about us. Our pictures weren't in the papers, and I wasn't sure he even knew our names.

Edgar didn't take a drink all day. He scarcely spoke a word. Sat in his chair by the radio with his jaw set hard and a hand shielding his eyes. He replied to me in muttered monosyllables when I tried to talk to him.

It worried me. I didn't know what he was thinking. I didn't know what crazy thing he might decide to do. I tried to think how I would feel if I were in his position. You can't ever know, of course. I think it must be impossible to ever know, really, what another human being feels. Even as close as we were.

At six o'clock Edgar got up and

got his hat and went out without saying anything. There was a sudden, determined set to his shoulders, and he walked out with his heels hitting the floor hard. I started to protest, to suggest that I go with him, but you could tell he wanted to be alone.

He came back in about twenty minutes. One look at his face told me where he had been and what he was going to do.

He didn't look at me. I might just as well have not been there. He crossed to the chair near the open window and sat down. The telephone was on a low table beside his chair. He lifted it and dialed Operator, told her in a low, tired voice, "This is an emergency. Get me the police."

There was a silence in the room while he waited with bowed shoulders. I sat across from him, scarcely breathing. I could have jumped him, knocked the phone out of his hand, but what after that?

No. This was Edgar's show. I let him play it out his own way.

He said into the telephone, "Let me talk to someone in charge of the Elizabeth Grange murder," and waited again.

So did I. He still hadn't looked at me since entering the room. I think if he had he might have changed his mind. I don't know, though.

He said, "Hello, Lieutenant. This is Edgar Curteen speaking." He gave the address and apartment number, speaking slowly and explicitly. "If you'll send somebody around here you'll find the murderer of Elizabeth Grange waiting to be picked up."

He replaced the receiver and

looked at me for the first time since entering the room "I guess you know I went around to Tony's?"

I nodded without speaking

"Something has been bothering me all day. I had to talk to the waiter who was there last night. Now I know."

He paused, then added gravely, "You killed Elizabeth."

I still didn't speak. I don't believe I could have if I had tried.

"The waiter noticed the latchkey lying on the table *after* I went out," he continued wearily. "You must have palmed it out of your own pocket last night and pretended you found it in my raincoat. And he told me about your nose bleeding all over the front of my raincoat after I hit you. That's where the blood came from."

I think I nodded. I'm not sure.

"All that time you were being so noble and alibiing me, you were really fixing it so I alibied you. All that time you were talking about loyalty and friendship . . ."

I heard the keening of the siren on a radio patrol car coming up Lexington. I guess Edgar heard it, too. He turned his head to listen through the open window. It faded to a sigh and then came up as the car turned into 38th and slowed to the curb.

I stood up. I said, "All right. But if you think I'm going to sit here like a cornered rat . . ." I made a lunge for the window eight stories above the street.

He shouted, "No," and grabbed for me.

That's what I thought he would do. I drove my fist against the point of his jaw with the weight of my moving body behind it. He went down and I stood over him panting.

I waited like that until I heard the elevator stop at our floor, the purposeful tread of heavy feet nearing our door.

Then I lifted him over the sill and shoved his body out the window, shouted, "No Edgar! My God, *no,*" as knocking sounded.

I whirled and ran to the door and jerked it open, stuttered to the two uniformed cops, "You're too late. He went out the window when he heard you at the door. He was sitting there quietly after he telephoned to give himself up. . . ."

It wasn't difficult to make them believe me. Not after I showed them the blood-spattered raincoat I had worn the night before, and the damp towel I'd washed Elizabeth's blood from my hands with, wadded together in the back of a closet. And her latchkey was in the pocket of the coat.

There was the alibi I had given him, of course. I told them frankly that I had helped him hide the raincoat and towel, and lied about his being with me and—what else was there for them to believe?

Not that the lieutenant liked believing it. Not when the murdered girl had been my sweetheart whose love Edgar had stolen. He felt, you see, that in a case like that a man should go high-minded and moral and turn in even his best friend.

The way Edgar tried to do at the very last.

His last letter held dynamite—

his wife must never read it!

DREAD DILEMMA

give back THE DEAD

JAMES ROBBINS MILLER

Fiction grows from fact. It is an arrangement of reality. Included in "Collier's Best," under the title "Letters from Cairo," Mr. Miller's story was suggested by a woman receiving a letter from a friend who had died a week before, in which he told of future plans. But Miller thought: What if those plans were to alter the lives of the correspondent's dear ones? What if their destiny depended on posthumous letters still to come? Here's what came of Miller's rearranged facts. . .

I HAD been very close to George and Cynthia Spence, and she called me as soon as she heard the news of his death. My own family was out of the city for the summer, so I was able to see Cynthia often at this time and to help her, a little.

It had been a good marriage, and Cynthia was desolated. Unfortunately, I think, she tried to suppress her feelings. She announced that she was going to make a tremendous effort, starting immediately, to forget George. It was a closed chapter. She asked me not to mention his name. On my second or third visit to her place, I noticed that she had put away the picture of him which had been on the mantel.

The next day, I saw that she was no longer wearing his ring. She thought, of course, that this sort of thing would support her resolve. It didn't look healthy to me. It prepared me, however, for the strange thing she did when Spence's letters began arriving, about a week after his death. She showed me the first one, unopened, and said to me, "I've decided not to read it. I want to, but I don't think I could stand it."

I remembered some letters I had got from my father after he died and how uncomfortable it had been to read them. "I think I understand," I said. "It might be a good idea to wait a while."

"No," she said firmly, "I'm not going to read it at all." She handed it to me. "Would you do it for me? There may be more. I don't mind your seeing the personal things, and if there's anything I should know, you can tell me."

I wasn't keen on doing it, but I said that I would, of course, if that was what she wanted.

The last Cynthia knew about Spence was that his plane, taking off from Cairo on July tenth, had crashed. That was all the telegram said, except that he was dead. There had been no mention of his name in the papers, presumably because of the job he had. Spence let most people think he was a mining engineer, as once he had been: That was convenient in explaining his many trips abroad. Actually, he worked for the government: intelligence.

It was hard to believe. He was a conspicuous sort of man—big, heavy and talkative. You would have thought him incapable of keeping a secret or of operating anywhere except in the open. He mentioned his work rarely, but at those times he did with amusement, as though he thought himself comically ill-fitted for it.

He was devoted to his home and to Cynthia. I have never known a man so obviously proud of his wife. When they appeared together, he seemed to exhibit her—holding her a little ahead of him and smiling not at her but upon her. She was quite an exhibit, at that—small, with striking black hair and eyes. She was a good companion for him. She knew that his warmth and candor, and a certain innocence, were not cultivated, and that these were qualities which mattered in their marriage. She knew he had other qualities, for dealing with other people. Spence once told me, with that innocence peculiar to him, that Cynthia, thank God, had no curiosity about his work. She had, of course; she simply understood that they could not live together if she showed it.

That was control—the thing she was trying so hard to exercise now. As she handed me Spence's first letter, she said, "After you've read it, burn it, will you? If it's around, I'll want to read it, and I mustn't. Just burn it."

Her desperation alarmed me as I walked back to my own place. I knew I would have to leave town on business in a few days, and I didn't like leaving her alone. I didn't like having the letter, either, and when I sat down to open it, I felt, unreasonably, that I was prying. That was a mild thing compared with the feeling I had as I read the letter. It was dated July seventh, in Cairo, and began with a rather formal and cautious mention of where he had been and where he was going next. Then, as though suddenly addressing another person, he wrote:

"Cynthia, I don't know how to tell you about this, but I must do it and

I hope you will try, somehow, to understand. I am very much in love with another woman. I know how you must feel at this moment, having read those words. Believe me, they are the most difficult words I have ever written Let me try to explain. First of all, I do know what I am saying. I would not tell you a thing like this if there were any doubt in my heart and mind of its being real.

"How it has happened, or why, I can't begin to explain. About all I can say is that I have no power against it. Can you believe me—will you try to—when I say that I love you no less than I ever have, which is enormously, but that this is something different, something I never dreamed could happen? Can you see that it must be an overwhelming thing that would cause me to do what I am doing to you?

"I have known this woman—she is English and her name is Elsa Chapin—for several years, but until recently our acquaintance was a very slight one. It is only in the past month that we have been together a great deal, but our feeling for each other is now too strong to be suppressed. I realize this is an awfully bad way to let you know about it, but I feel I must do it. Certainly it is better for you to hear of it this way than to hear some sordid bit of gossip which might be even more painful.

"What is more important—we have talked it over and agree that we cannot stand being together, feeling the way we do, without your knowing about it. Elsa is extremely sensitive to your point of view on this whole thing. It may not matter to you, but I would like you to know that she is almost saintlike in her honesty and decency, and I believe that when you see her you will have some understanding of why I feel the way I do about her. Naturally, we do want to see you and talk to you, and I am hoping that one or both of us can do it very soon.

"Cynthia, I can't write another word now. I can't tell you how much it hurts me to be hurting you. I won't hope for your forgiveness, but I hope you will try to understand something of the unhappiness in my own heart. I will write again—as soon as I can bring myself to it."

As I finished reading the letter, my own shock was still so great that I could think of nothing, for the moment, except the frightful complications and suffering that lay ahead for all of them. Then, suddenly, I remembered—Spence was dead. I had never thought I would be relieved by the knowledge of his death, but that was my feeling. By the grace of God, Cynthia herself had delivered this letter into my hands, and she would never need to know of it. Even the worst of gossips might be kind enough to spare her now.

I read the letter once more and then, with some enthusiasm, followed Cynthia's instructions to burn it. This was one letter no one else was going to see. Not that that disposed of the problem. He had said he would write again. I could only hope that Cynthia would not go back on her resolve, and that between the

seventh and the tenth of the month, when he was killed, he had not been able to write very much. I was bothered, too, by his having said that "one or both" of them might be seeing Cynthia soon. That sounded a lot like something that might be awkward.

I hated going to see Cynthia the next morning. I felt doubly sorry for her now, and although it was easy enough to conceal my reason for it, I was afraid she might sense my having one. In any case, I had to see if there were another letter.

There were two. Cynthia slowly and rather sadly separated them from the rest of her mail. She turned them over in her hands.

"I can't bear not reading them," she said. "It's all there is of him, in a way."

"I know what you mean, Cynthia, but I think it's a bad idea. He was going to be back soon, you know, and he talks about that. It gives me a turn, and I know it would hurt you. I don't think he'd want you to be reading them now."

She lowered her head and looked down at the familiar hand-writing on the envelopes. She looked awfully small and unhappy.

I said, "There wasn't anything in the first one you'd need to know. There probably isn't in these. It's personal stuff. I don't have to read them, Cynthia. I'll just take them and burn them, if you like."

"No, no," she said. "You'd better read them. I really don't mind. There might be something." Quickly, she pushed them into my hand. She looked up at me. Tears came to her eyes. She said, "I'm sorry," and turned and ran to their bedroom.

I knew I had been a little cruel, but it was a lot better for her to imagine what was in the letters than to know. I took them to the office with me and read them there. These latest ones, both dated July ninth, were as bad as the first. Spence filled them with one sorry attempt after another to make himself understood. I am certain that I read them without curiosity. Once the bare facts were known, there was nothing but humiliation for me in watching the poor devil wrestle with them. He now seemed most concerned lest Cynthia think his relationship with Elsa Chapin was something casual and cheap. He repeated his assurance that he had never, during their marriage, even considered another woman, and that this was a deep and genuine love.

I didn't want to carry these letters around, so I tore them into small bits and flushed them down the drain. It was good to be rid of them, but I was still worried. It was clear now that I would have to go to Washington the next day, and in one of the letters Spence had said that he would probably write once more, from Cairo. If a letter came in my absence, Cynthia—now weakening—might very well break down and read it. I decided to leave the office early for her place. The letter could have come that afternoon.

Unluckily, it hadn't. But Cynthia was in better shape. I took her out to dinner—downtown to a place where

we wouldn't meet anyone. She wanted to talk about herself, so I let her. She had ideas about going to California, maybe, or some other place far away, and getting a job. I knew she wouldn't be doing anything of the sort, but there was no point in saying so. This was a part of the long readjustment and it was better for her to be thinking ahead, however restlessly, than backward.

"What did he say?" she asked me suddenly. She was looking at me with an expression so full of loneliness and longing for him that I had to help her all I could.

"You know what he said, Cynthia. You know he said, in every letter, how much he loved you and how he was waiting to see you. I can't tell you how he said those things—no one else could—but you know how he would say them. They were letters you would love, if he were living. But you couldn't read them now, believe me. There were, of course, a few words about his plans for coming back. That's all. So far, there's nothing I need have read."

"So far? Will there be more?"

I had intended her to pick me up on that. The question of another letter had to be settled. "Possibly," I said. "He'd have had time to write one more before leaving Cairo."

"One more. His last letter—that one I'm going to keep. I should keep his last letter. I should read that one no matter how much it hurts—and keep it, always."

I said, "Possibly, Cynthia. Don't count on another letter. His last one said he was leaving the next day. You know how one of those days can be."

I took her home, and just before leaving her I said quite carefully, "If there's another letter, Cynthia, you can do as you like about it. It's really your business. But don't tear it open—don't read it quickly. I know how you feel, but take it easy, will you? Don't open it without talking to me first. Remember, every day you'll have just a little more strength against this thing. Take my word for it: Letters of this kind are tough. They fool you. They make you think—well, they make you think he's still here. You read them and then you have to start all over again with the fact that he's gone. Will you wait? In case there's another one?"

She looked tired, and I guess she was and so she said, "All right. It's not a promise, exactly, but I suppose you're right. I'll try."

It was the best I could do. I told her I would be leaving town in the morning, but that I would stop by to see her first.

It worried me for most of the night. One last letter could make all the difference. And yet, much as I wanted to intercept it, I couldn't wait around for it indefinitely. In any case, I couldn't stay at Cynthia's, policing her. If the letter came the next morning, perhaps I could get it. Otherwise, I would have to rely on her halfhearted promise.

Having to catch an early train, I was early arriving at Cynthia's. But she was up. She said she hadn't slept, and she looked it.

As soon as I came in, she said,

"There's another letter from George." It was clear that she had not read it, but she seemed to have spoken in a race with temptation. I couldn't help smiling at her.

"You don't want me to read it, do you?" she said.

I said, "No, I don't."

She turned away impatiently, then back, with a look of pleading in her eyes.

"Cynthia, it's your letter. But try to understand, won't you? I don't pretend to know your feelings, but I think I know what you can take right now and what you can't take. I know you'd be sorry if you had read the other letters. This one will be worse. It's almost surely his last one. Can't you see what that will do to you?"

"No, I can't! Why don't *you* understand? You keep saying it will make things harder. It couldn't! Things get harder anyway—harder every minute!" She went to a table and picked up the letter and stood holding it. "You treat me like a child," she said. "I know what I can take. For Heaven's sake—they're letters from my own husband! What's in them, anyway, that you don't want me to see? You'd think—"

"Stop it. You don't have to think anything. I know what was in the others, and you don't. He wrote about his last few days. Do you want to read now about his last few hours and his last few hopes?"

It was like hitting her, but it worked. She looked scared, and she didn't want any more.

"Let me have it, Cynthia. I won't burn it. Someday, if you want it, to keep, I'll give it back."

She held it out to me. She was pale, and her hand was unsteady. I put my arms around her for a moment and told her I would see her the next day and then left her. I was pretty unsteady myself.

I was in a hurry to get to the train, and in no hurry to read Spence's letter; I had had enough of his problem and his anguish for a while. I found my seat and went into the dining car for some breakfast. I read the paper and was halfway to Washington, I guess, when I finally took the letter out of my pocket.

It was dated July tenth, and in the first few lines Spence made a reference to his third letter which assured me that this one was his fourth and last. From there, he went into the familiar explaining, regretting and hoping. There was a page or so about Elsa and then, at the end: "I am sorry I cannot tell you where I'm going from here—nor can I send mail again for some time. But I will be home, as you know, around the first of August. I am so anxious to talk to you. I am afraid I have handled this whole thing badly, and yet, in all honesty, I can think of no other way that would have been less unkind to you . . . I must go now. My plane leaves in an hour."

An uneasy feeling brought me back to the passage in his letter about Elsa. I read it more carefully: "Elsa sailed from Alexandria last night and should reach New York in about ten days. She would like to see you, Cynthia. Personally, I should

think that would be very difficult for her, and for you, and I have suggested that she wait until I get back.

"But she feels strongly about it—she says waiting would be the easiest thing to do, but not necessarily the fairest. She realizes that you may not want to see her at all, but feels that if you do, you should be allowed to decide when it will be. I must admit that seems more fair. In any case, she will be in town for a couple of days before going on to the Coast, and she will get in touch with you as soon as she arrives. She said she would not phone you, of course; she would send a note."

As I finished reading this, I had the sensation that something terrible was in the making. I began putting the facts together. Today was July twentieth. If, as the letter said, Elsa Chapin had left Alexandria on the night of the ninth, she was now due in New York. Having been at sea for ten days, she almost surely would not know of Spence's death. And, believing that Cynthia knew all about her, she would write her a note, asking if she might come up. Cynthia might be puzzled, but she wouldn't refuse—and then they would face each other with the most horrible news either of them could possibly hear. I didn't see how Cynthia, in her state of mind, could stand it.

I looked out the window. We were getting near to Baltimore. I would have to get off the train there. I checked the newspaper for ship arrivals. There was nothing likely scheduled for the next few days; but Elsa Chapin could have arrived the day before. With no chance of heading her off, the only thing left was to call Cynthia. If she had heard from Elsa Chapin, she would tell me. If she hadn't, I would have to warn her.

I could say I had just read Spence's letter and learned that this was a person she shouldn't see—something connected with Spence's work—*he* had written the warning. Cynthia wouldn't quite believe it, but it might slow her down; anyway, it would give me time to get back there and see to it that Elsa Chapin didn't show up. As for the letter, I would have to lose that and take the consequences.

I got off at Baltimore and found I could catch another train back to New York in twenty minutes. I called Cynthia immediately. She made it easy to start, but very hard to finish.

"I thought you were in Washington," she said. "I'm glad you called. Who's Elsa Chapin? Do you know her?"

"That's why I'm calling. I'm in Baltimore, Cynthia. I just read George's letter. He says she might be in town about this time and to stay the hell away from her. It sounds like business. What have you heard from her?"

"Just a note, this morning. She wants to see me."

"Don't do it, will you? There's something queer about this. Stall her until I can get back and look into it."

"I *can't!* She sent this note up by messenger and said she was just in from Alexandria, so I thought she was some friend of George's and

told her to come along. I sent a note right back with the messenger."

"Oh, God. When is she supposed to come up?"

"This afternoon. I asked her for tea."

"Do you know where she's staying?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. My goodness, you act as if you thought she'd poison me! George probably meant she was an awful bore or something."

"No, he didn't. Look, Cynthia, I'm sure you oughtn't to see this woman. I don't mean it's dangerous, but it sounds as if seeing her would involve you in something. Get sick, or go out somewhere. Don't worry about being rude. Just don't see her—"

She was laughing. "Don't be ridiculous! You poor thing—you're in worse shape than I am! Now go on to Washington and stop thinking about me. You can call me tonight to make sure I haven't been kidnaped."

I knew I was sounding like an ass, but I didn't have much choice. "Cynthia," I said, "I honestly think this is serious. I've got to ask you not to see her. Unless you say you won't, I'm coming back on the next train—"

"Oh, please! Will you please stop treating me like a baby? I'll see her if I want to, and I don't like your interfering. Oh, I'm sorry, but I just can't stand this. Now *don't* come back. I'll be furious at you."

She hung up. That was that. I had five minutes, so I called the office and said I'd explain later and got the train back to New York. It was one thirty. With luck, I might reach Cynthia's place before teatime—whatever hour that might be in the mind of Elsa Chapin. If I didn't make it—well, there was only one other hope. If Cynthia spoke first—if she said Spence had been killed, on the tenth, and if Elsa Chapin were quick enough to see what that meant, and if she were strong enough, then Cynthia might never know. It was a small hope. If they met, Cynthia would probably be polite, and very curious, and Elsa Chapin would swiftly uncover the truth.

It was four thirty when I got to New York. I got a cab and went directly to Cynthia's. The elevator man knew me, and I wanted to ask him if Mrs. Spence had a caller, but I was afraid to. As I rang her bell, I had the feeling that a doctor would have been more useful in the situation than I.

I heard quick steps and Cynthia opened the door. I don't believe I have ever seen a face, or an expression, so devoid of light. There was nothing in it but pain and disillusionment and bitterness. She knew. As she looked at me, her eyes brightened a little, with hatred, and part of that was for me. She pulled the door half closed and stepped into the hallway with me.

"Go away," she said.

I said nothing and made no move to go.

She sighed and looked toward the elevator door. "All right," she said. "I suppose I'm going to need you—I'm going to need something—when

she's gone. Come in, if you want to. But don't take over, will you? Stop being a man for just a few minutes. I don't know what I'm doing, but I don't want anybody telling me. She's going now. Just come in and meet her and be quiet."

She was looking around distractedly She turned and started in the door.

I said, "Cynthia, how long has she been here?"

She was walking ahead of me, paying no attention.

"Cynthia—"

"Never mind," she said over her shoulder; and then, in a conventional social tone: "Please come in."

Elsa Chapin was standing. Certainly, she was older than Cynthia. She was tall, with brilliant blue eyes and light golden hair drawn back to a large knot. Her movement as she turned to me, was slow, easily poised. Physically, she was everything that Cynthia was not.

As she heard my name, she barely inclined her head and gave me her hand, warm and firm. She did not smile, but there was something in her expression that made me think she knew who I was.

She turned to Cynthia. "I must go now. I appreciate your letting me come up." Her voice was softly unhappy.

Cynthia needn't have told me to say nothing. It was clear enough that they had accomplished their sad, shocking exchange. I could only be quiet and wonder, with considerable admiration, at their composure.

Cynthia saw Elsa Chapin to the door. When she came back, she went to the cupboard and poured herself the first drink I had seen her take since George's death. She drank it quickly and her eyes watered. She looked at me and said in a casual but rather hard tone, "Well, what do you want?"

"Nothing, now. What did she say, Cynthia?"

"You read the letters, didn't you?"

I asked her to sit down. The brittleness in her attitude worried me. She was holding a lot back, and I didn't know what form it would take when it came out. It would be much the best thing if she could direct it to me. "I was trying to spare you this, but I botched it pretty badly. If I'd read this last letter an hour earlier, you would never have known. I'm damned sorry."

"Thanks," she said flatly. "I could kill you, but I suppose I should thank you."

"I have an idea how you feel, Cynthia. You're doing awfully well with it."

"Oh yes—I could have killed her, too, but I didn't. I didn't hurt her at all."

"Cynthia, it isn't going to help you to talk about this now. Why don't you turn in? Maybe that drink is a good idea. Have another one and go to bed. I'll hang around in case you want anything later."

She got up and poured another drink. Her hand was shaking and she spilled about half of it. She put it down. "I don't want to turn in. I don't want another drink. I wish I were dead and I wish you were dead

and I wish she were dead. No, I don't want her dead. I want her good and alive and beautiful and waiting for her beloved George."

I looked up quickly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I just want her alive—alive and waiting, the way I was. She loves him so, just like I did, and he loves her, she thinks."

Cynthia began laughing, at first quietly. I jumped up and went to her.

"For Christ's sake, Cynthia, what are you talking about?"

She was shaking with laughter now, putting her hands to her face. I shook her hard.

"Cynthia! What did you tell her?"

"Nothing!" she cried, sobbing now. "I didn't tell her anything. I just listened to her and heard all about it and I didn't tell her anything. She doesn't know. I was so nice about it, and now she feels all relieved and righteous and happy. She's happy! She thinks George is coming back to *her,* and everything is going to be wonderful! Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it *wonderful?"*

Her head had fallen back like a doll's, and she was going limp. I took her over to the sofa and gave her what was left of her drink.

She was all right in a minute, staring soberly through her tears. I said, "Listen to me, will you? It doesn't matter how much you're suffering—you can't do this to a person. It won't help you. It will hurt you even more. You can't do it. Where is she? Where's she staying? She's got to know about it."

Cynthia shook her head. "I don't know where she is—and why can't I do it? You say it won't help, but it does. She loves him and she thinks he's alive. She knows he's alive, so he is, in a way. That makes him alive for me, too. When she came in and started talking about him, he seemed to be alive. I want it that way. If he were alive now, he'd come to me. You don't understand."

I thought maybe I did understand. If her revenge had seemed monstrous, it now seemed human, at worst. I was glad when she began crying softly. I put her to bed and gave her a sleeping tablet and fixed up her sofa for myself. If I were to find Elsa Chapin, it would have to be tomorrow.

I never had to find her. She sent Cynthia a note the next morning. It said: "I am not sure enough of myself to claim the husband of a woman like you. The way you received me yesterday was something I could never have done in your place, and I find now that I am simply unable to go through with this thing. I know George loved you. I think your love for him must be stronger than mine. I will not see him again. I have no feeling of being noble about this—only the feeling of having been defeated.—E. C."

Cynthia's collapse was total. She did not speak for days, and her recovery will take a long time. I can only believe that she saw in that letter an even greater defeat for herself. Taken at face value (and Elsa Chapin had shown she could be generous despite her advantage), it

meant that without knowing it she was returning to Cynthia a husband who was dead. That was bitter enough.

But there was another possibility. Elsa Chapin might have learned of Spence's death. Someone could have told her; she could have guessed it from Cynthia's behavior—a slip during their conversation, or Cynthia's failure to fight; she could have wondered about my sudden appearance, and my silence. I read her letter again and again. Surely, much of what she said was ambiguous. If she did know, the letter was retaliation of the sharpest, subtlest and most devastating kind.

I don't know. I have thought a lot about those two women. Maybe Cynthia half believed she was keeping Spence alive. Maybe Elsa Chapin was a gallant person. I am inclined to think they both knew what they were doing, and, if it were up to me, I would be inclined to forgive them.

NOVELETTE

MURDER TOWN

A rain of blood, a prevalence of corpses, and a deadly puzzle for Jim Brady made the sinful city of Jordanville into a . . .

RAYMOND DRENNEN

Shove over, Sam Spade! Hit the road, Phil Marlowe! Here's a hardguy who takes his blood by the hogshead. Author Drennen makes corpses while you wait—and you don't wait long. Himself a man of action, he's shoved thousands of fellahin up and down the Nile, wrangled with Nazi agents in Cairo and worked on a hydrogen bomb project for the A.E.C. in North Carolina.

I RECEIVED two wires from Jordanville signed Betty Coblentz. The first one said COME IMMEDIATELY. AUNT ELIZABETH IN GRAVE CONDITION. The second one reached me at noon the following day. It said NEVER MIND COMING. AUNT ELIZABETH PASSED AWAY. I left instructions for Bill Shumate to follow immediately, and caught a plane for Jordanville, arriving that night. I was depressed and more worried than I'd let Bill know. He was my best op and Betty's fiance.

She was a bright eyed youngster just out of college and she wanted to be a woman detective. I think she was intrigued with the word criminologist, but she had a clear, analytical mind and a native ability to grasp criminal motivation. I'd taken her on my staff to do research and minor investigations. She was good. She and Bill had hit it off right from the start and were going to be married.

The Jordanville assignment had seemed innocuous enough. She'd asked for it and I hadn't thought twice about giving it to her. The International Carbon Company had asked us to look briefly into the private life of its Jordanville branch factory manager. They were thinking of promoting him to the New York office and they merely wanted us to verify his local record and integrity. We represented the company in all its investigative work,


BAR
Doctor

and this was a routine request. Betty wanted the assignment so she could stop over in Chicago on her way back for a pre-wedding visit with her family.

She'd been in Jordanville two days when I got the first wire. I was confident she'd sent it herself, asking for help. She was in the habit of signing her reports, jocularly, "Aunt Elizabeth." I didn't know who sent the second wire, and I couldn't see any reason for it, except a crude attempt to forestall my coming.

I'd tried to call her immediately, but her hotel, the Crestwood, reported back that she'd checked out. I'd caught the first plane then and registered in at the Jordan Hotel as James Haywood, sales manager for Marilyn Products. Before leaving, I'd wired for a reservation under my own name at the Crestwood and Bill was coming along to pick that up. I couldn't have kept him under cover on this job if I'd fired him.

It didn't take me long to discover that Jordanville was wide open. More slot machines and dice games to the square inch than a gambling ship. Main Street, with the Hall of Justice and the jail at one end, ran right into Skid Row and you couldn't tell where one stopped and the other began. A smoke pall from the factories hung low over the city, sucking up the noise and night lights.

I headed for the city morgue and found it had one thing in common with other towns. The night attendant was indifferent and underpaid.

"What was your sister like, mister?" he asked. His face was pimply and about as colorless as any dead person he had charge of.

I gave him a rough description of Betty Coblentz. Bodies come through the city morgue oftener than you think, and murder victims almost invariably—when they're found. "She disappeared in the last couple of days," I told him. "Might be using any name, or none at all."

"The wagon picked up a stiff at the Crestwood last night," he said. "A girl. Betty Coblentz was the name." He bent over the charred oak desk in the small office and ran his thumb down the log book. Then he straightened up and looked at me. "Overdose of sleeping pills, it says here."

The back of my throat felt like sandpaper. She'd never taken sleeping pills in her life. "I'd like to see her," I told him. That was the only way I could be sure.

He shook his head. "They took her out to the field this morning, mister."

Yeah, they would, I thought, if she was killed. "Were you on duty when they brought her in?"

He nodded, and I asked, "What did it look like to you?"

"What it says in the book, mister. That's what I'm paid for it to look like to me," he said indifferently. I took out my wallet and passed him a bill. He tucked it in his shirt pocket under his dirty white coat, and said, "But she might have had the back of her head broken in, like she was hit with a rod."

A shudder ran through me and I walked out. I was glad I'd come

along to do the groundwork instead of Bill. They'd taken her away awfully fast.

By midnight sweat was running down my face and the calluses on my hands were burning. The city cemetery was ten miles out of town in a wooded area adjoining irrigated fields. The bum I'd picked up in one of the poolrooms was half drunk. His name was Mack.

"I hit it that time, boss," he said thickly. He stuck his shovel into the pile of dirt beside the seven foot trench we were digging and reached for the bottle I'd brought to stiffen his courage. I hadn't told him what the job was.

"Careful of that lantern," I whispered.

The moon had gone to bed for the night and the lantern beamed our work like a lighthouse. There weren't many grave markers, and the trees didn't hide us completely from the main highway.

I eased myself down into the hole on one end of the pine box and started brushing the dirt off the rest of the lid. Some of the box nails they'd used were old and rusty.

"Heave on that end, Mack," I grunted. It was beginning to get him in spite of the liquor.

"I'm scared, boss," he whispered hoarsely. His eyes shot around the yellow perimeter of the lantern into the blackness. "I didn't know you meant this kind of digging."

"It won't be long now," I assured him. We worked some ropes under each end and hoisted the coffin to the top. I was easing the blade of my shovel under the lid when the muted crack of a rifle cleaved the darkness.

Mack stiffened suddenly, a tired groan coming from his mouth. He clutched feebly at his chest and plunged headlong into the grave. I dropped flat on my stomach and turned the wick on the lantern down. In the pitch darkness, with the thick trees around, I couldn't tell whether the sniper was fifty feet or five hundred feet away, or in which direction.

I laid still on the pile of dirt, listening to a far-away cricket, my ears straining for the sound of footsteps, the rustle of leaves or the crack of dry branches. I didn't move for twenty minutes and there was no sound, no indication where the rifleman was, or even if he was still there.

I threw my coat over the lantern, lit it, then jerked my coat off and rolled away. The rifle crack came immediately and the lantern shattered out. I couldn't see what was in the coffin without becoming a perfect target. I placed the rifle, from the sound, a couple hundred or more yards away, but I hadn't seen the flash and I couldn't tell the direction. I retreated fifty feet and watched the point in the darkness where the grave was for another half hour. Then I decided nothing would be lost by leaving for a little while.

I cut across the cornfield to the sideroad where I'd parked my coupe, and headed back to town.

Lloyd Fredricks, the local manager for the Carbon Company, lived in a big white mansion out in the

Ridgecrest section. I drove by a couple times and saw a few lights burning on the ground floor. It wasn't quite one o'clock and there didn't seem to be any unusual activity for that time of night.

It was Fredricks we were investigating, so he was the ranking suspect. The thing that perplexed me was that the investigation was so minor he shouldn't even have become aware of it. A routine check with the police, credit agencies, better business bureau, and a little nose for casual gossip.

Near the end of the block, I pulled to the curb on the opposite side of the street from the Fredricks house and started to turn out my lights. Then the door of the big white house opened and a thin figure in an open topcoat ran out on the porch.

He was in a big hurry and I left my lights on and the engine idling. He ran to the black convertible parked in the drive, backed into the street and swung in the direction away from me, his rear tires raising a small cloud in the loose gravel. I stayed a good block behind him.

He went through a red light, crossed a suburban shopping street and turned into a tree shaded street of small houses. A block further on, an ambulance and a couple squad cars were clustered in front of a white washed brick rambler. The black convertible nosed in behind the ambulance and the man ran up to the house. I drove by slowly, then came back and pulled up alongside the squad car.

"What's cooking?" I asked the uniformed cop at the squad car's wheel.

"Some guy shot himself," he said, yawning. "You'll read all about it in the morning paper."

"Who was it?"

"Guy by the name of Richard Willett," he said brusquely. "Go on home, mister. You're blocking traffic."

Richard Willett was Fredricks' chief assistant. It might have been Fredricks himself I'd followed over. I drove down to the corner and headed over toward Riverview Drive again. It was a large coincidence—if it was suicide. The quick briefing I'd gotten on Willett by telephone from the company personnel director said he was forty and a bachelor. They thought he was a good man. They had him slated to take over as manager of the plant when Fredricks was promoted.

I took the cemetery road off of Riverview and fifteen minutes later I pulled into a wagon track in the cornfield and cut my lights.

I had to risk another try at the coffin. It was black as a coal pit and I found my way largely by instinct and a good bit of luck. My feet sucked mud as I risked a beam from my pocket flash and avoided hanging my chin on the barbed wire fence as I climbed out of the ditch. I remembered the fence, bordering the grave yard. It was only a hundred yards to the open pit we'd dug.

There were no lights gleaming, but I went cautiously and crouched behind the bush while I played the thin beam of my flash toward the grave. There was no whisper of a breeze,

but it seemed there was a vibration of some kind in the air. My nerves, I guess.

There were no signs anything had been touched, and my decoy light beam didn't draw a rifle bullet. Mack's body was still in the grave where he'd fallen, his chest covered with blood around a hole right over his heart.

I had a tire iron to pry open the lid and I worked fast. My muscles skittered about nervously under my skin and the tire iron felt moist with sweat from my palm. I kept the light off and was working by touch, but with every nervous jerking breath I took, I could feel a bullet tear into my back and icy fingers lunge at me from over the coffin. But I had to have a look at the girl in the box.

As I forced the lid, the rusty nails squeaked out forlornly and I crouched, holding my breath. I got my fingers under the end of the lid and pulled up firmly and fast. The nails screamed in anguish as they left the wood . . . and I had an aperture two feet wide to look through.

I crouched and played my light inside.

The coffin was empty, except for a thick layer of gravel to give it weight!

I dropped the lid and straightened up, feeling like a ghost probably feels just after his sheeted raiment is swept away. If there'd been a body there when I'd lifted the coffin above ground, it was gone now. I had no way of knowing, but it didn't seem rational for anyone, for any reason, to bury an empty coffin.

The best answer was that someone had taken the body out. To hide the fact that she'd been murdered, I suppose. But they hadn't known I was coming. . . .

A LIGHT tap on the door awakened me at six-thirty the next morning. "Who is it?" I called, feeling for my gun. I'd been careful about coming back to my hotel and no one in town knew Jim Brady was there. As far as the hotel was concerned, I was Haywood of Marilyn Products, but I've found many times that it pays to be cautious.

"Bill Shumate, boss," a ragged voice replied. It wasn't his ordinarily soft, confident voice. He was taking it pretty hard.

I shrugged into my robe and slippers and opened the door. "How did you get here so soon, Bill?" I asked sourly. "You're not being very careful, looking me up this way."

"I caught the next plane and came direct, Jim. Got in around midnight." He sank into a chair wearily. "Any news about Betty?"

"Nothing for sure," I told him. While I was dressing, I briefed him on what had happened, trying to make it as easy for him to take as I could. "We're not positive at this point that she's dead, Bill."

"If she's not, there's no reason why they'd dig her grave," he muttered bitterly. "I'm going to take this town apart, Jim."

"We'll do it together," I said. "But there's one thing you've got to get straight. No matter how we feel about it, this is another job and you're

taking orders. I let you take over my spot so you could hinge the thing, but it was against my better judgment."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, "Okay, Jim. How do you figure this suicide of Richard Willett ties in?"

"I don't, yet," I said. "That's one of the things you're to look into today. Betty apparently got here and started her routine. We have no reason for believing she deviated from the standard approach, but someplace she got over her head. I want you to follow her tracks as well as you can and see where it takes you. If you come to a wall with a sign on it No Trespassing, I want you to stop right there. There's no sense in your committing suicide too."

"Betty found it soon enough."

"It shouldn't be hard," I agreed. "There's more to conceal now than when she started. Her disappearance for one thing. Willett's death is another. If he committed suicide, it may have been touched off by her disappearance."

"Her murder," Bill cut in angrily. "Quit trying to spare me."

"All right," I said. "Something that she found out which Willett was afraid of. Some racket she discovered."

"Maybe he was cracking up and they killed him to keep him quiet," Bill finished.

I nodded and gave him the two telegrams. "See if you can find the office where these originated. If they were phoned in, try and get the operator or operators who took them."

He shoved them in his pocket and went to the door. His eyes were cold and gleaming. "How'll I get in touch with you, Jim?"

I gave him the telephone number of a booth in the hotel drug store. "Call me at six tonight," I told him. "And Bill . . . be careful, until we find out what we're playing with."

I spent the morning on Skid Row and at eleven took a taxi out to the International Carbon plant.

I'd found out who to see if I wanted to put my gun out to hire, where to go if I wanted a shot of dope, and, more important, how to get a rap fixed. Ellis Barrett was the unofficial, smooth talking mouthpiece, and the standard fee for nonpolitical major crimes was $2,500, and they didn't care where you got it. He was the brother-in-law of Homer Stanley, chief of police!

I knew that one of the inquiries Betty would have made was with the police department, to check any record of arrests and convictions. Usually this resulted in a couple parking tickets. I couldn't even guess what she'd turned up on Lloyd Fredricks.

The plant grounds covered about twenty acres. The main building was a sprawling, six story red brick structure, with warehouses off to the left. A quarter mile behind the main building was another smaller building that looked to be boarded up, but there was a well graveled road running out to it. The administration building, with the flag pole in front, was a small, two story structure joined to the main building by a brick passageway.

A pert receptionist at a switchboard directed me down the corridor to a waiting room where a redhead in green harlequin glasses was in charge of a railed barricade in front of two mahogany panelled doors. The gilt lettering said Mr. Fredricks and Mr. Willett respectively.

The redhead was flustered. She read my card three times before she looked up. "Marilyn Products," she said. "I think Mr. Fredricks is awfully busy. What is it about, Mr. Haywood?"

She seemed out of her depth, new and uncertain in her job. I frowned and tried a shot in the dark. "What happened to the other girl?"

She was very relieved, smiling at me coyly like I'd brought her a box of roses and told her not to worry. "You mean Jean Crane? She quit a couple days ago and went to California. Things are sure a mess this morning, what with Mr. Willett dying and all. It happens every time I take a new job."

"Someone dies?" I grinned.

A tall man in a gray coat and a gray homburg hat came up behind me, interrupting her blush. He gave me the barest frown, ignored the redhead and pushed through the railing gate, entering Fredricks' door. I told the girl I'd see Fredricks later when he wasn't so busy, and went on out. At the switchboard, I got Jean Crane's address, and the assurance that she'd gone to California.

My taxi was waiting when I went outside, and so was a black Packard convertible that hadn't been there when I'd gone in. It could be the same car I'd seen at Fredricks' house and followed over to Willett's. A well appointed blonde girl in a mink coat and a green silk scarf was at the wheel. Bill Shumate was in the passenger seat. He didn't give me any sign of recognition and I taxied back to my hotel.

An airmail, special was in my box. The engraved return was Marilyn Products with the address of my branch office in Washington. It was a special report I'd asked for on conditions in Jordanville. Politics and crime as the F. B. I., Treasury Department and other government agencies saw it. After I turned through it, I was ready for Ellis Barrett, police chief Homer Stanley's brother-in-law. It gave me an angle that I'd been looking for to find out what made the graft flow in Jordanville.

The slot machines in the cigar stores and beer halls, according to the report, seemed to be made locally. Jordanville was a manufacturing town, and seemed to be the source for every kind of gambling device, crooked and otherwise, that was flooding the southwest.

Barrett, I found, was the man in the gray coat and the gray homburg who'd brushed past me to go into Fredricks office. He had plush law offices in the Chandler building and appraised me like I was a thoroughbred race horse when I went in.

"What does Marilyn Products have, Mr. Haywood?" he asked.

"That's a front," I told him. "My syndicate's looking for a supply of slot machines for the east coast.

We've got a new angle we want to try out."

Barrett frowned. "Why come to me?" he asked cautiously.

I smiled. "The syndicate's had its eye on Jordanville for some time, Barrett. The town's wide open, but it's not providing the take it should."

"I don't know your syndicate, or you," Barrett said. "But do I understand that you're thinking of setting up a business here?"

"That's right," I nodded. "We need some local talent that knows the ropes. Otherwise we'll have to bring in our own." I shrugged. "We'd like to do it as quietly as possible."

"I don't think you'll like this town," he told me seriously. "Things are pretty well under control."

"Yeah, but it's a little messy," I murmured. "It needs a little organization. Take that Jean Crane murder. That was junior grade, the way you handled it. It cuts down the take in the long run."

He squinted suddenly. "What do you know about Jean Crane?" he asked softly.

I stood up to go, ignoring the question as though it weren't really important. "Think it over, Barrett, and I'll get in touch with you in a day or so. I represent some big money and it's wasteful to buck each other." At the door, I added, "And you might tell Homer Stanley I'd like to see him."

He was sitting at his desk when I went out, his face a study in worried bewilderment. I hoped my bluff would open things up. If it did, it would cut my investigation down to hours instead of days or weeks.

I'd checked the Jean Crane thing out at her boarding house before I went to see Barrett, and it looked like my hunch had been good. Her landlady told me Jean had decided suddenly to get married and go to California. She hadn't even come home from work Tuesday night. Her boy friend had come for her things Wednesday morning, yesterday.

The odd things, though, were that Jean had lived at the boarding house for three years, she had plenty of boy friends call for her, but the landlady had never before seen the one she decided to marry. The second thing was that the girl had actually bought a ticket on the bus to San Francisco. The landlady had never seen any mail for her from San Francisco.

That made three possible murders in two days. Betty, Jean and Willett. I had no doubt but that Bill would dig up enough information to verify our suspicions on Fredricks' assistant.

At five minutes before six, I was in the phone booth waiting for Bill's call. I planned to set a place for us to meet later that night and compare notes.

He didn't call. At six-forty-five, I left the booth and went up to my room. He was an old hand at the game, I reassured myself, and he knew we were in rough company. But I was worried about him anyway. Betty's disappearance had unnerved him greatly and he was impatient to tie in to whomever was responsible.

I pushed open the door of my room and pulled my gun suddenly as the

hair on my neck stiffened. There was no light, and the man was sitting in the overstuffed chair in front of the window opening onto the fire escape. Lights from the theater sign across the street silhouetted him and winked dismally on the walls.

I backed against the door and felt for the light switch with my free hand. He was a heavy set individual in a dark suit. He had his hat on and one leg thrown up over the arm of the chair. His hands were empty.

"Been waiting for you, Haywood," he said. My suitcase was open on the bed with the contents scattered about. The closet door stood open and the dresser drawers had been pulled out.

"How would you like it if I went through your things?" I growled.

"My name's Duffy. Alex Duffy," he said in a dull monotone. "You might call me the reception committee. Or the garbage collector. I take care of things we don't want around. Throw them out."

"Drag that by once again," I said. "I'm not up to you city folks."

"The Chief doesn't think you're a desirable citizen, Haywood," he said in his monotone. "He thinks you should leave. There's a train going east at midnight." Duffy got up and walked to the door. He was a big hulking guy and walked about like he talked. "I'll be back to see that you make it."

"Uh, uh," I smiled. "Tell the Chief I'm willing to cooperate, but I sent for him. Not his flunky. Tell him he shouldn't make mistakes like that, if he expects us to get along together."

There was no expression on Duffy's face that anyone could read. I watched him walk to the elevator, then I closed the door and picked up the phone.

The Crestwood told me Jim Brady had checked out that afternoon.

I put the receiver down slowly and carefully and lit a cigarette. Bill Shumate was using my name at the Crestwood and he wouldn't have checked out without telling me. My worry about Bill was more than a light touch of nerves now. Betty Coblentz had checked out. . . .

I put on my hat and started for the door, but the phone called me back.

It was a woman's voice, low pitched and nervous.

"Jim Brady?"

I caught my breath at the name. Bill was the only one who knew the arrangement he and I had. "Who's calling?" I asked cautiously.

"I'm a friend," she said quickly. "Calling to warn you that they're coming for you now."

"Who are they?" I demanded.

She didn't reply for a moment. I could hear her nervous, rapid breathing on the phone. Then her answer was a faint whisper. "Max Karr's men. They swallowed the bait you gave to Barrett."

The line went dead in slow motion, as though she were hanging up the receiver very carefully and quietly.

Max Karr! According to the report from my Washington office, he was a Chicago gangster who'd moved to Jordanville a year ago. It was the information I'd hoped to draw as a

result of my little talk with Barrett.

There had to be a catalyzing agent, a final authority. Not just a loose knit local organization. There had to be some distribution tie-in with larger outside gambling interests. And my threat to Barrett that my eastern syndicate was moving in had started to smoke the real bosses out. My suggestion to Barrett that I was ready to deal with Chief Stanley had born fruit.

Stanley's invitation to me through his boy Duffy had all the earmarks of just being a dutiful gesture. There hadn't been much solid determination in the way Duffy gave it to me. I wondered if Karr's crowd was nervous about the possibility of my weaning Stanley away from them.

The only possible guess I could make on the girl who'd called me was the blonde in the mink coat and green scarf whom I'd seen with Bill Shumate in the Packard. I went down to the lobby trying to puzzle out the mysterious warning. She'd been nervous, no doubt about that. She had my name, which she couldn't have got by guessing. It had to come from Bill Shumate.

The warning didn't sound like any kind of a trap. It seemed to be just a warning, and nothing more. Unless the information she'd given me about Max Karr was wrong, to throw me off the track.

My object had been to cut the investigation down to hours. I wondered, as I stepped into the phone booth, if I'd cut it down too close.

I gave the long distance operator Clyde Drew's number and waited while his wife got him out of the shower.

"How long will it take you to get ten men together, charter a plane and get out here?" I asked him. "Fast flying time is about three hours."

"I oughta have four then, boss," he said immediately.

It was nearly eight o'clock where I was. "It's nine your time," I told him, grinning a little, "I'll give you five hours and meet you here at the airport at two A. M. my time."

He agreed and didn't ask any questions. I told him to bring some extra artillery and hung up. Then I went out and bought some pure heroin at a drug store I'd heard about that morning down on Skid Row, rented a coupe and drove down to the railroad freight yards. They were policed just enough to handicap my search and it took me over an hour to find what I was looking for. It might have taken me all night, if there hadn't been a truck with an International Carbon Company panel backed up alongside the freight car.

It was on a siding away down at the end that fed the part of town where the International Plant was located. The car was sealed for shipment, but the lock wasn't much good. When I got in, I pried open a couple crates, just enough to verify my suspicions. Each big crate had four neatly packed slot machines.

I nailed them back up and got out of there. But I couldn't figure out how Fredricks manufactured them—if that was what he did.

The company had plant inspectors that visited periodically and the pro-

duction lines and heavy equipment at that particular plant could not be used to manufacture lamps simultaneously with slot machines, and other gambling equipment. It would take weeks to change over from one kind of line to another. And the plant inspectors didn't give notice of their visits.

I wondered briefly if there could be collusion between Fredricks and the inspectors, but I discounted that. The company rotated its inspectors.

The morning papers were on the stands when I got back up town at ten p.m. An item on the third page said a man had been pulled out of the river below the narrows shortly before five that afternoon. An apparent suicide.

Papers found on the body identified him as Jim Brady, New York detective. . . .

I DIDN'T want to think what had gone wrong with Bill Shumate, because there was no answer. My only guess was that he'd taken the blonde girl into his confidence, and maybe he shouldn't have done it. It was more anger than shock which I felt. I guess I was more or less prepared for it when he didn't call in.

My own frame of mind was one of impatience now, too. I'd only been in Jordanville twenty-four hours, but the wheels were in motion and I didn't have the depressing feeling of exposed vulnerability I'd had when I first arrived. Then I'd known only that I'd sent Betty to do a job and she'd dropped from sight. I didn't know who or why or for what purpose. I couldn't even be sure it was connected with the job I'd sent her to do.

But now I knew what the opposition was, and I knew it was powerful. If I hoped to solve Betty's enigma, Bill's murder, and do the job the agency had been hired for, I would have to smash them completely. And do it before they realized the extent of my limited resources and marshalled their own.

The Karr-Barrett-Fredricks-Stanley axis was strong and well-oiled and well armored. Nothing flourishes like crime under police protection. They wouldn't let me bite into their juicy pie without a fight and they'd be more than happy to oblige me with a ticket to the narrows, like Bill Shumate.

Lloyd Fredricks was the key. I couldn't guess how he got into the racket in the first place, but he was the property the rest of them would protect. I decided it was time for me to call on him. Bill had called on him, and possibly Betty. But I had an advantage. I was fortified with a general knowledge of the picture and the corner Fredricks occupied. I knew where to be cautious.

I left the hotel and walked down the side street toward my car, right into an ambush. It happened fast. One of them came out of the alley at me and the other one jumped me from between the parked cars. They didn't take me by surprise and that worked to my favor.

As the big one from the alley mouth lunged at me, the smaller one behind me swung a blackjack that

would have driven my brain fluid clear down to my shoes if it had landed. I jumped as he swung, and he hadn't reckoned on that. His face was undefended and I put my fist right in the middle of it with a swing that I'd had ready since leaving the hotel. He went reeling back, his nose and teeth crushed in as I whirled and swung a blow into the stomach of the big man.

Air popped his cheeks as he doubled forward and I really went to work on him. I brought a right to the point of his jaw and he straightened. Then I doubled him again with a left and right in the stomach. His arms were flailing helplessly at that point and I did some artistry on his face.

I cut his eyes open, crushed his nose and blew out a handfull of his teeth. He reeled back against the brick store wall and bounced out toward me and I sent another stunning right to the side of his jaw. I felt the bone crush as he staggered back and slid to the ground. He wasn't unconscious, but he'd had enough.

"Cut it out, Haywood," he mumbled thickly. It was Homer Stanley's plainclothes cop, Duffy. It hurt him to talk, because his jaw was broken, but he was pleading as hard as anyone I'd ever heard.

The little man was still sleeping sweetly on the sidewalk and I hoisted Duffy into my coupe. He leaned back on the passenger seat and didn't struggle a bit.

There were four cars in front of the Fredricks home when I drove up with Duffy. The black Packard convertible was the only one I recognized. One of the others was a prowl car.

Duffy could walk and that was all. It wasn't until we got under the light on the porch that I saw what his face was like and I had to shudder. It looked like ground raw meat.

A man that had crooked cop written all over him opened the door. His face fell open when he saw Duffy. "What the hell is this?" he growled.

I shoved Duffy ahead of me. "Show me where the conference room is," I told him. With those cars in front, there had to be a pow-wow. I might be in luck, I thought.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

I didn't feel like arguing with him and showed him my gun. He squinted sullenly, then turned and walked down a short hall to a drawing room.

It was a big, sumptuously furnished room, with only one person in it, and she was seated at the piano. It was the blonde girl who'd been at the wheel of the convertible with Bill Shumate, the one, I guessed, who'd called and given me the mysterious warning. I didn't do more than glance at her as I followed the cop across the room to a closed door. He pushed it open and stepped aside, and I shoved Duffy in ahead of me.

It was the library, with four men seated around a table in the middle of the room. Three of them looked like nothing more than prosperous, respected business men. The fourth was Chief Homer Stanley, I guessed, a corpulent individual with red face

and a khaki uniform complete with badge. Ellis Barrett was the only one who recognized me. He started to his feet, his mouth tight as his eyes switched from Duffy to me.

There was a thin man, with a thin gray worried face and gray hair fringing the top of his head. I guessed he was Fredricks. The other man was heavy set and dark complexioned, sitting at the head of the table.

"What is the meaning of this, Haywood?" Barrett demanded angrily.

I smiled pleasantly, looking at the Chief. "This man," I indicated Duffy, "apparently mistook me for someone else, Chief. The other man's lying down in the alley behind my hotel. I hope they're not yours."

The dark man's face broke into a grin. "So you're Haywood," he said, looking again at Duffy. "I heard you were in town."

"Did Mr. Barrett give you my proposition?" I asked. I looked at the others. "I assume he did, or you wouldn't be meeting."

"You assume a lot, Haywood," the dark man said. I decided his name was Karr, the boss. The others seemed to wait for his lead.

"Mr. Karr, let's speak frankly," I said. His eye brows climbed as I mentioned his name. He was puzzled. "My syndicate has a good bit of money and influence behind it. We're growing, setting up branch organizations in smaller cities. We don't want to crowd the local boys out. We just want to make more money for everyone."

"Where do you fit in, Haywood?" Karr asked.

"My syndicate sent me to make a deal with the local boys and take over," I said soberly. "Everybody will profit."

Karr smiled. "How will that help us?" he asked softly.

"For one thing, we can keep people like that detective outfit from snooping around and upsetting things. You've already had to take care of two of their dicks and God knows how many more they'll run in. We have influence back east. We could stop things like that before they get started."

The grin left his face. It was puzzled and cautious. I went on:

"I don't like to see Stanley's cops turn into an execution squad, like they did on that Coblentz girl and that other dick, Shumate."

"My cops didn't do that," Stanley blurted, red faced.

Karr's reaction was quick and smooth. "Shut up, Stanley," he said softly. His tone was deadly. He studied me for a moment. "What do you propose, Haywood?"

He could trip me up at this point, but I had no alternative. It was a question I'd worried about, because the way I answered it would give away my bluff if I was wrong. My whole premise was Fredricks plant and if I was wrong, he'd just laugh at me. I would be able to tell by his reaction, I hoped, and the reaction of the rest of them, how close to the truth I was.

"I'll take over Fredricks plant first," I said. "I'll be there at seven tomorrow morning."

The fear on Fredricks face was not

open, but it was there. Barrett's sharp eyes switched from me to Karr and back, while Stanley's red, fleshy face turned angry.

"You may not live until tomorrow, Haywood," Karr said softly. "We don't want any help."

"You can't buck my syndicate, and you know it," I told him. I stood up and started for the door.

Chief Stanley jumped to his feet, his hand on his gun as he started toward me threateningly.

"Sit down, Homer," Karr snapped. I closed the door behind me, knowing that Karr's next words would be instructions to let me get away from the house, but not out of town. I and my mythical syndicate was more of a threat to them now than the detective agency. Because they couldn't tell whether I was bluffing or not, and if I wasn't, then it would be a power play with loaded guns from here on out.

They wouldn't risk a chance that I was just bluffing. They had no reason to think that I would be brash enough to walk in talking big, without a lot behind me.

In the drawing room, the blonde had been softly strumming the keys of the baby grand piano. As I came out of the library, she turned on the piano bench and looked at me.

Any other time I'd have stopped and just let my eyes fill up to the brim. Her hair was the color of a school girl's golden imagination, and her eyes were a delicate Columbine blue. She was wearing a pale green dress, the sheerest of nylon hose and green high-heeled shoes.

When I drew near her, I said, "I want to see you."

Her blue eyes, up close, were worried and troubled. Her low voice was quieter than a whisper. "I want to see you, too, Jim Brady."

My quick frown drew a faint smile from her full red mouth. "There's a tavern four miles out on the Kenyon road," she said quickly. "I'll meet you there at midnight."

Her slender fingers had never left the keyboard. She turned lithely on the bench and it was barely noticeable, but she wasn't looking at me any more as her white hands brushed the keys. Anyone in the room would hardly have noticed that we'd spoken.

I didn't dally going to my car. There were two hoods and the cop who'd let me in loitering at the door, but it was a problem of communication. If the men in the library wanted me killed before I could get away, they couldn't get word past me soon enough.

I knew that, but my skin was crawling anyway and my fingers tingled as they poised to draw my gun if trouble started. Outside the door, I was in my car and away before anything could happen. It was the only part of my trip that could be considered ignominious. I was sweating. I was plain scared...

The Kenyon tavern stood lonesomely in the middle of a two mile stretch of isolation, its red neon sign blinking like a weird lighthouse. It was a single story frame structure, with a gasoline pump in the middle of a graveldrive. One end of the building was a service station office,

the other end a beer counter with a few booths and a juke box. One old car was parked in front and I drove by slowly to the section road, then came back. The black Packard convertible had nosed into the shadow at the bar end of the building in the meantime. It was so dark I almost missed it.

As I went in the front door, the glimpse of her, smiling at me from the booth, was like a sunny spring morning. The roar of a motor crescendoed in my ears and a car swung off the pavement, its tires churning up gravel. I jumped inside the door and swung around flat against the wall, my gun in hand. There was no question in my mind but that my death warrant had been issued. It was as certain as higher taxes.

The car waited for gas and I breathed easier. As I slid my gun away, I looked at the blonde and thought, Death couldn't wear a lovelier mask.

I walked to the booth and sat down facing her.

"It's safe here," she said quietly, reassuring. "I was here with Bill Shumate this afternoon."

The back of my mouth felt like sandpaper. "Safe?" I said. When I got over my mild shock, I asked, "What time was that?"

"Shortly after we saw you out at the plant," she replied. "He didn't tell me who you were until later."

"You're the one who called me tonight," I said. "Who are you?"

"Gloria Yale is my name," she said. She frowned uncertainly and I prompted her:

"What is your connection with Fredricks?"

"Fredricks is dead," she said evenly. "They killed him Monday when your girl Betty Coblentz started asking embarrassing questions. He was cracking up and they ran in a ringer from Chicago. The man you saw tonight was one of Karr's men."

We ordered beer and I studied her speculatively. Her face was serious, her blue eyes troubled and sad. She looked up at me, thoughtfully, and said, "Mr. Brady, I'll give you. . ."

She stiffened suddenly, her eyes moving beyond me, following a car, its lights off, as it coasted off the pavement onto the gravel heading for the tavern. "It's coming too fast," she cried sharply.

I swung out of the booth as the car, a light ford tudor, coming at an angle, crashed into the side of the tavern and caromed off, nosing to a halt at the side of the door. Before I got there, a figure stumbled out of the driver's seat and staggered to the door, swung it open and lurched inside. He carried a submachine gun.

He was a tall, gangly man, staggering like he was drunk, but he wasn't. Blood was streaming down his face and out of the corner of his mouth. His nose was a dismal, bloody pulp. His tie was twisted back over his shoulder, his shirt front was torn loose from the buttons and hanging out, bloody and ripped to ribbons. He weaved drunkenly a few steps inside the door of the tavern and before I could catch him, he collapsed in a heap.

"Bill!" I mumbled hoarsely. I fell

beside him and lifted his head and shoulders on my lap. A bullet hole was pouring blood from his chest below his left shoulder, and another was in the right side of his stomach.

One of his eyes flickered open and rolled up at me. He couldn't open the other one. His mouth quivered as he tried for a grin. I could barely make out his feeble whisper.

"You got to get outa here, boss . . . the girl . . ."

A car swung off the pavement onto the gravel outside, followed by another one.

"Jim. . !" Gloria Yale cried.

I bent my ear closer to Bill Shumate's mouth.

"The girl. . ." he whispered. "In the freight car. . ."

A gun blasted at my ear and jerked me back to reality. Men were piling out of the cars and running toward the door. One of them crumpled outside the door, clutching at his stomach. Gloria Yale was standing over me, a gun in her hand, her eyes blazing fire every time she pulled the trigger.

The men outside scattered, taking cover behind the cars. I came to my feet, my own gun blasting as I started to drag Bill Shumate behind the beer counter. Then I realized he was gone, and I let it go.

I dived for the window and a hood stuck his head over the radiator of his car. I squeezed a shot and he slid back out of sight.

"Gloria!" I whispered. "How many are there?"

"I don't know," she crept up beside me. "I think they're Karr's men. They must have had Bill and he got away from them. I was to meet him here at midnight."

Suddenly guns blazed outside in unison and glass shattered over our heads as slugs tore their way through the wood around us. Then the barrage was over and I took a quick peek through the window and fired twice. I heard a scream of pain and ducked back down as a bullet whined over my head. I estimated at least a dozen well-armed hoods outside.

"Let's move back," I said. "It doesn't make much difference whether those things hit us direct or after they come through that wall." I crept toward the door and got the submachine gun Bill had carried in with him.

There was silence outside as we crawled on our stomachs across the floor. Gloria had switched the inside lights out while I was with Bill Shumate. Outside, the neon tavern sign gave us a slight advantage. They couldn't get near the door without our seeing them.

We crouched behind the beer counter, waiting, and after a moment of dead silence, there was a shattering crash of glass in the tiny office next to the tavern room. The next instant, a deafening explosion shook the building, bursting the connecting doorway into the tavern. Then the whole side of the building blossomed into a blazing inferno of gasoline and oil.

THE men outside were too scattered for me to waste the one burst of machine gun fire from Bill's gun.

But we had to do something. I had an extra clip for my own gun, and that was all. Something crashed through the window while I was searching around for an answer, and burst in the middle of the floor. Tear gas gushed up in the room like a fountain.

Smoke and flame were pouring in one end of the room from the service office. At the other end, there was a window. It was our only chance. Outside that window, Gloria's convertible was parked in the dark. She followed my glance.

"Come on," I said. "Let's try it."

We were both gasping, our faces covered with sweat and tears. We crawled over to the window on our hands and knees, our mouths as close to the floor as we could keep them, and shoved it open. Outside it was black. If anyone was there, I couldn't see them. But we had to act fast, before they covered that window.

"I'll go first," I said. "Then I'll try and cover you while you get the car started. Go like hell. Don't wait for me."

She coughed and brushed at the tears running down her face.

"I won't do it," she whispered angrily.

"I'll catch on. Scram!"

It happened like that. They didn't see me slide over the sill into the dark shadow by the car. Gloria made it and had gotten in the driver's seat, a bare three feet from the window, when a thug came around the side of the building. He was only six feet away from me.

"Hey!" he cried out. His gun fired, but he was too late. I had the machine gun in my right hand and my own automatic in my left. I put a slug into his stomach from the automatic as Gloria stepped on the starter. The rest of the hoods, a dozen of them, came running as she backed the car out.

I came out low around the corner of the building, spraying with the machine gun. It ruined their fire and they dived for cover as Gloria gunned the convertible out toward the pavement. I was hanging on the front bumper, clutching the hood ornament.

As she gathered speed, I climbed up over the hood. Then suddenly she lurched to the side of the road and I saw her slump across the wheel. Somehow she clamped her foot on the brake before she passed out. The car nosed into the ditch and threw me clear as it jarred to a stop.

The thugs' cars tore out from the tavern a hundred yards behind as I gained my feet and ran around to the driver's seat. The tavern was an angry red inferno, lighting up the night sky for miles around, a pitiful monument, I thought later, to one of the best cops in a rugged racket.

Shoving Gloria over, I threw the car in gear and bounced over the ruts back to the pavement. Then I gave her all she had.

We were headed in the wrong direction, toward Kenyon thirty miles away. The Packard had a lot of power and I had no trouble pulling away from them. Five miles out of Kenyon, I turned off onto a gravel side road for a couple miles, and

took another road into Kenyon.

On the outskirts of the little town, I stopped and had a look at Gloria. She'd huddled in a limp heap on the other side of the seat, her head rolling down on her chest.

The bullet tear in the canvas back of the driver's seat gave the story. It had ploughed into the back of her right shoulder. She wasn't dead, but she needed attention fast.

The one small hospital in Kenyon was a block from the center of town. It was dark and quiet when I pulled up in front and carried Gloria Yale's limp body into the small waiting room. A nurse came out from the office, took one look at me and motioned for me to follow her. We went down a short corridor, into an emergency room and laid Gloria on the table.

"Is a doctor around?" I asked.

The nurse was bending over Gloria. "I can get him quick," she said without looking up. "What happened?"

"My wife dropped a gun at home and it went off," I explained, moving to the door. "The name is Adams, nurse. Take care of her. I'll be right back."

It was nearly two o'clock and there wasn't anything I could do for Gloria. Clyde Drew was due at the airport, and I didn't want word of his arrival to get out if I could help it. As I drove, I tried to think things through, but no matter how I shifted the pieces, Bill and Gloria still remained imponderables.

The closest I could come was that Bill had killed one of their men who had been sent to assassinate him. Then he'd planted his own, or rather my identification on the body and dumped him in the river. It looked like they must have caught up with him later, and he'd gotten away from them.

Gloria had said she was to meet him at the Tavern. Maybe Bill had intended bringing me, and things hadn't worked out so he could contact me. I discounted the possibility that Gloria had tried to trap us, because she'd stood by my side and shot her way out with me. I still didn't know the part she was playing, but I gave her the benefit of a very large doubt because obviously Bill had trusted her. And I didn't know how serious her wound was, but I hoped she would be safe—and hidden—in the Kenyon hospital. I was sure her name was on the murder list now.

The airport was quiet when I got there. Clyde Drew was reading a magazine in the waiting room. I had blood all over me from Gloria's wound and, what with the smoke and grime, he grinned.

"Some fun, hey?" he said. "Get tired waiting for us?"

"There's enough left for you," I promised "Where are the men?"

"I sent them on into town in pairs. Thought you might not want the enemy to know your army had arrived."

"Good," I told him. We left the Packard there and took a taxi back to town. It was too distinctive a car and I didn't want to be spotted for a few hours. On the way, I briefed Clyde on the situation and told him

what I wanted him to do and when.

His mouth tightened when I told him about Bill, but he didn't comment. "What about Betty?" he asked.

"I'll have to tell you about that," I said. "Later. It's almost a different tale. The problem is this. A quarter mile behind the main factory is another smaller building which looks as though it were boarded up and unused. That's the only possible place they could be pulling the act. If that building were written off the books, Fredricks could keep the plant inspectors away from it easily."

Clyde had a quick, perceiving mind and there was something about the story I gave which he didn't like. He quietly tore a hole in it. "That's an awful lot of trouble and killing they're going to," he murmured. "It's not illegal to manufacture gambling equipment around here. The most that could happen to Fredricks is, the company would find out about it and fire him."

"That's what has puzzled me from the beginning," I told him. "It looks to me like Fredricks started using that building to manufacture stuff on his own at first, and some of the local interests found out about it. He's been manager here for twenty years and that might have happened years ago. It seems to me he was sucked in gradually until he was completely under their thumb.

"He had to be good to the boys for fear the company would find out about it," Clyde said. "But that doesn't explain all their sweat now. After all, he couldn't have been completely crazy before the boys knocked him off. All they had to do was walk out and leave him holding the bag. All they'd done was distribute one-armed bandits."

"That's the way I figured it," I agreed. "So I started looking around for another motive which would have the other boys standing on their ears in fright."

"You found it?" Clyde asked.

"I think so," I replied. "When we take over that building in a couple or three hours, I think we'll find the biggest opium cooking laboratory in the country. I traced some shipments of acid from a local supply agent this afternoon that can be used for refining morphine into heroin, but it can't be used in the legitimate manufacturing operations of that plant."

Clyde whistled softly. "No wonder they're fussing about it," he said.

It was after three when I dropped Clyde off on the corner of Belvoir and Main. The evening was chilly but agreeable and the dives of lower Main and the rest of Skid Row were crowded and noisy.

"Good luck, son," I told him. "I'll go through that gate at six o'clock and I expect you to be ready."

I COULD only hope that nothing had slipped when I drove up to the main gate of the plant at five minutes after six. It was an hour before sunrise and you couldn't see a car with its lights off three feet away from you.

The square-shouldered man in the seat beside me was Earl Humphries, the local agent of the F. B. I. I'd pulled him out of bed at four-thirty

and explained the situation to him. He was doubtful and inclined to wait for reinforcements, but I convinced him it would be too late for that. I needed his legal authority more than any other help he might give. Narcotic control normally is under the Treasury Department and they have their own agents, but there were none listed for Jordanville and Humphries agreed to play along.

"This will be strictly illegal if we don't find narcotics," he warned me. "After all this is company property and you're not authorized to take it over by force or any other way, Brady."

"I've covered that angle," I told him. If I was wrong about them using the plant as an opium refinery, then my case would collapse legally. I'd be thrown out legally, and they'd have plenty of time to cover up before I could get authority from the company's home office to take over. I couldn't risk being wrong. "There's enough pure heroin packed with the slot machines they're shipping down on the freight siding to guarantee federal authority," I said.

"You put it there, Brady?" he asked mildly. He didn't expect an answer. I'd told him the whole story, so he knew what I was after.

We swung into the gate then and there was barbed wire stretched across the road. A spot light from the guard house covered the car and a couple uniformed cops approached, guns in hand. When they got up to the car, one of them threw a hand light in my face

"I'm Haywood," I said.

He swung the light on Humphries and through the back seat. Then he stepped back, grinning. "Okay, chump," he said. "I got orders to let you in."

They tore the barbed wire down and I drove on toward the main plant. Just that portion of the plant grounds that bordered the highway was fenced. There was no fence around the rest of the twenty acres. It was just patrolled occasionally, and that was the crux of my plan. Lights were burning in the administration building, but before we got there, I swung over onto the gravel road that led back to the smaller building behind. It was our objective.

No one molested us and beyond the range of our headlights, we couldn't see a thing. If there was anyone in that building, they'd covered the windows against light so that not a splinter seeped out. Then the building loomed up in our headlights a couple hundred yards ahead. And so did a dozen trucks backed up to a loading platform.

"That's it," Humphries muttered. "Get prepared for a land mine."

But they didn't bother us until we pulled the car up to the door and got out. Then floodlights sprung on covering the front of the building, and a dozen hoods surrounded us.

Max Karr stood in the doorway, with Homer Stanley behind him. The Chief had his gun out and looked angry enough to pull the trigger at me and think, What a shame!

"Come on in, Haywood," Karr called. "Don't bother him, boys."

Humphries followed me in and we both followed Karr into a small office, the chief bringing up the rear with his gun still in his hand. Barrett was in the office talking to the man who was supposed to be Fredricks.

My watch said we had two minutes to go.

"You getting ready to move out, Karr?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "That damn detective outfit ruined it for us when they started nosing around Fredricks. We can't keep the lid on that, but it's been good for a couple years."

He laughed. "You come in at the wrong time, boy. Just when it's all over. The town's yours and Gloria's." He added softly, "For a few months."

"Why did you go after her?" I asked.

"Hell, she's a Treasury agent," he grunted. "Been here six months and we didn't find it out until tonight. Barrett got the dope on her. You can't trust these dames no more, Haywood."

He came closer to me and he was frowning. "Now you, I can't figure for sure. I been trying to find out what syndicate you belong to, and I can't get no leads from my friends back east. So I got it figured that you're working on your own."

"I don't have a syndicate," I admitted.

He laughed and walked to the window. "You're all right, Haywood. You had me going for a while. This town's dead for a few months. If you want to come in with me, we'll move this cooking plant over to Chicago and you'll do all right on the deal."

I looked at my watch. Forty-five seconds.

"How many men you got here?" I asked.

Karr scowled darkly. "Why, Haywood?" he asked softly. "You thinking of taking over all by yourself? There must be forty boys around this building."

"What did you do with Betty Coblentz?" I asked him.

"She died," he snapped, "for asking too many questions." His voice was as deadly as a snake now.

The Chief's gun had never left my vest button since I'd come in. Now I walked to the water cooler in the corner and drew myself a drink, careful to keep my hands in clear sight so Stanley's trigger finger wouldn't get itchy. Fifteen seconds...

"I'm Jim Brady," I said, turning. "I'm taking over this plant now. You boys all stay where you are."

Stanley barged forward from behind Karr, light glistening in his eyes. "I thought so," he snarled. "I never trusted this guy."

Karr put a hand on Stanley's shoulder. "How you and your friend expecting to get out of here, Brady?" he asked softly.

The palms of my hands were sweating and my skin was crawling. Maybe I'd called it too soon, or maybe something had gone wrong. Stanley's finger looked nervous on his gun pointed at my throat. Humphries stood beside the window, his hands on his hips. The Fredricks guy was covering him.

Suddenly a gunshot rang out not

far from the window. It was the signal for things to begin and I knew Clyde Drew had come through with his part all right.

A million guns seemed to blast outside simultaneously. Karr rushed to the window, and Stanley couldn't keep his eyes on my throat. Humphries and I jumped together, our guns firing at the same time. My slug entered the chief's wrist and ploughed up under the skin to smash his elbow, while the phony Fredricks took one in the stomach from Humphries. Barrett jumped back in the corner and Karr whirled from the window, a gun in his hand.

He was staring into my smoking automatic.

"Drop it," I told him. Sweat started pouring down his dark face as the flash of gunfire continued outside. Men were shouting and suddenly a brilliant flash of light burst with a shattering explosion in front of the building. The windows rattled and some of them shattered as Clyde did his work.

Karr's gun was hanging limp in his hand as we stared at each other. Suddenly the door burst open and a uniformed cop ran in. He looked at Karr, not at the Chief who'd staggered back into the corner nursing his smashed arm.

"There are a thousand rods around us, boss," he shouted above the din. "They got 'em all around the building. We're blocked off."

I grinned. Clyde had been a good infantry major in the war. He'd brought ten men with him and in two hours, each man had recruited four men in the missions down on Skid Row. That gave me a total of fifty men around the building. Each recruit was given a gun, with instructions to shoot like hell at the signal. They were shooting blanks. The live bullets were in the guns of my own men, and they used them effectively.

Stanley's, or rather Karr's men, collapsed and converged on the door of the plant. With my gun in his back, Stanley and Karr called them all in under the floodlights and we counted forty-two of them, with seven wounded or dead. One of my men had caught a bullet in the side and I sent him off to the hospital.

Then I turned the deal over to Humphries while I went back to town.

By nine o'clock I'd gotten the mayor to appoint Clyde Drew as acting Chief of Police and things were calming down a bit We had Karr and Barrett in jail and a couple dozen small fry that they'd squealed on. Humphries and I drove over to Kenyon to see Gloria Yale.

The doctor had taken the bullet out of her chest and she was going to recover all right. The smile she gave me when I came in was like coming out of a dungeon into the warm sunlight.

"We found the body of Jean Crane in the railroad car," I told her. "That's what Bill Shumate was trying to tell me. The way I figure it, they'd buried her under Betty Coblentz' name, and when I started to dig it up, they got frightened. But I can't figure why they buried her un-

der Betty's name to begin with."

Gloria said, "When Betty started investigating Fredricks, they decided to kill her. Jean Crane overheard them in Fredricks' office and went to Crestwood to warn Betty. She wasn't in her room and Jean waited. The thug killed Jean, thinking it was Betty. It wasn't until after they buried her the next morning, that they discovered their mistake."

"What happened to Betty?" I asked. I wanted confirmation, because I could be very wrong.

Gloria looked at me for a long moment before she answered.

"She stumbled on the answer immediately," Gloria said slowly. "She was smart that way. After they killed Jean, she saw her chance. She blackmailed Karr into paying her ten thousand dollars and she left town. She did it very cleverly so that he couldn't run the risk of having her killed." Gloria paused and looked at me oddly. "I think she caught a bus, Jim. . . what are you smiling for?"

"I wrote my San Francisco office to meet the bus and pick her up," I said. "After I investigated the Jean Crane angle, I knew one of them had taken the bus, and the evidence pointed to Betty. I should have a report when I get back to New York."

Gloria laughed, shaking her head ironically. "Bill Shumate said you were good, Jim. Now I've been here six months, and it took you twenty-four hours to start from scratch and break it open."

"Thirty," I corrected. "When is your contract up with Treasury?"

She smiled. "We don't have contracts, Jim. But I've been thinking of quitting. A government agent's job is mostly dull fact-finding. Now a private detective. . ."

We'd forgotten about Humphries, sitting over by the window smoking. He snorted suddenly. "You don't need me here. I'm leaving."

And damned if he didn't.

STORYETTE

the WAY OUT

LORRIE McLAUGHLIN

Brevity is an art. Subtlety is too. Thus the writer who can be subtle, brief and perfectly clear is an artist indeed.

A HEAVY mist had settled over the dark, half-sleeping city. The girl was walking along the dim street, her rain coat open, a scarf knotted around her head. At the bridge she stopped and stood looking into the water. So deep and so dark and so final. There was only a faint movement in the water. She had the half formed thought that it was like her own life during the past few years: drifting and never getting anywhere.

She heard steps behind her. A voice said, "Nasty night, Miss."

She turned sharply and stared into the carefully blank eyes of a policeman.

"Yes," she said, and walked on.

It had started so well. So young and so in love—three years ago. It had all changed quickly. Now all that mattered was their little girl. She would go to the aunt in Trenton. She wouldn't remember. Not for very long. The drunken curses, the abuse. A child soon forgot.

She was near the subway now and she turned into the entrance abruptly. The trains were coming and going. How often? One a minute? Often enough at any rate.

She stared at the tracks. No going around in circles here. A starting point, a straight line, a destination. And no detours.

"My dear," said a soft voice, "you really shouldn't stand so near the edge. It isn't safe."

She turned and met the eyes of a middle-aged woman. "I suppose not." She walked slowly toward the stairway.

Almost home now. Home! That was a laugh. Home was in Trenton, not in two rooms on the third floor.

The drug store on the corner was still open. She blinked as she went into the sudden light. She waited patiently as the clerk wrapped the box, then she slipped it into the pocket of her coat.

She stared with distaste at the faded, peeling green paint on the front door, then started up the worn steps, holding the splintered rail as protection against a slip on the rickety steps.

In the shabby kitchen she lifted the battered coffee pot. Enough for one cup. She shoved it to the front of the stove and emptied the box into a chipped cup. She stirred slowly while she poured the coffee until there was no trace of powder. Then she picked up the cup and went into the bedroom.

"Here," she said, shaking the sleeping man. "Here's a cup of coffee for you."

—Continued from back cover

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"A *murder will take place tonight at 6:30. Friends invited.*" A strange item for a newspaper "Personal" column! Everybody thinks it's a game. Then guns bark. The man who *put* the notice in the paper is murdered!

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MURDER STRIKES! The finger of guilt points at Sue Poore. Only ONE person can clear her. That person is killed. It dawns on Sue that SHE is to be the next victim in this murder parade!

5 Anthony Gilbert's

DEATH KNOCKS THREE TIMES

COLONEL SHERREN'S death *might* have been an accident, and his sister-in-law *might* have jumped off that cliff. But—ONE MURDER LATER—sleuth Arthur Crook knows that *this* killer is clever enough to CREATE "accidents"!

6 Stuart Palmer's

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—*continued on inside cover*

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