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SPINE-CHILLING NOVEL BY FRANKLIN GREGORY

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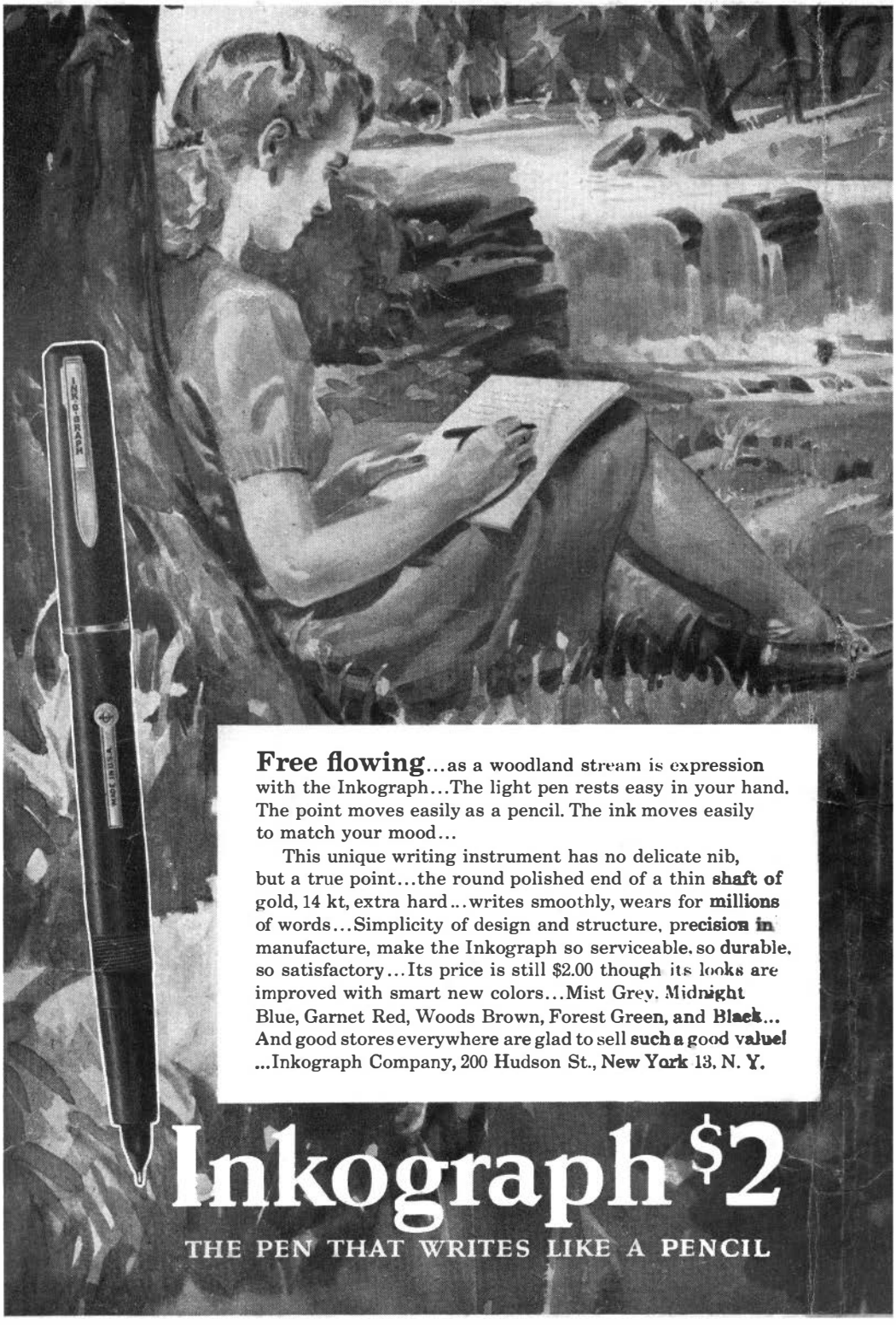

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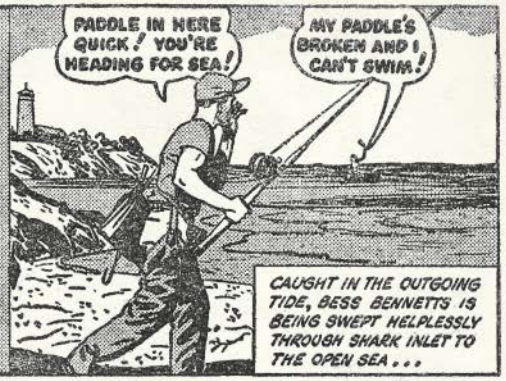

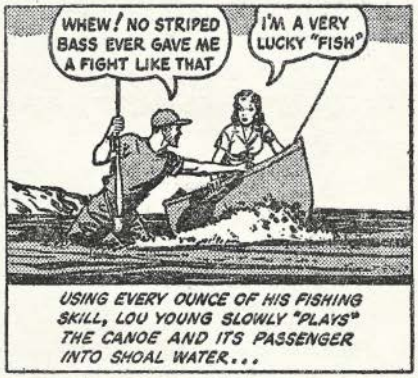

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NOVEMBER ISSUE OUT OCTOBER 3rd!

Volume 35 *October, 1947* Number 3

EERIE MYSTERY NOVEL

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FIVE SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 14, 1944, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $1.80; other countries 50c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Hand of Glory

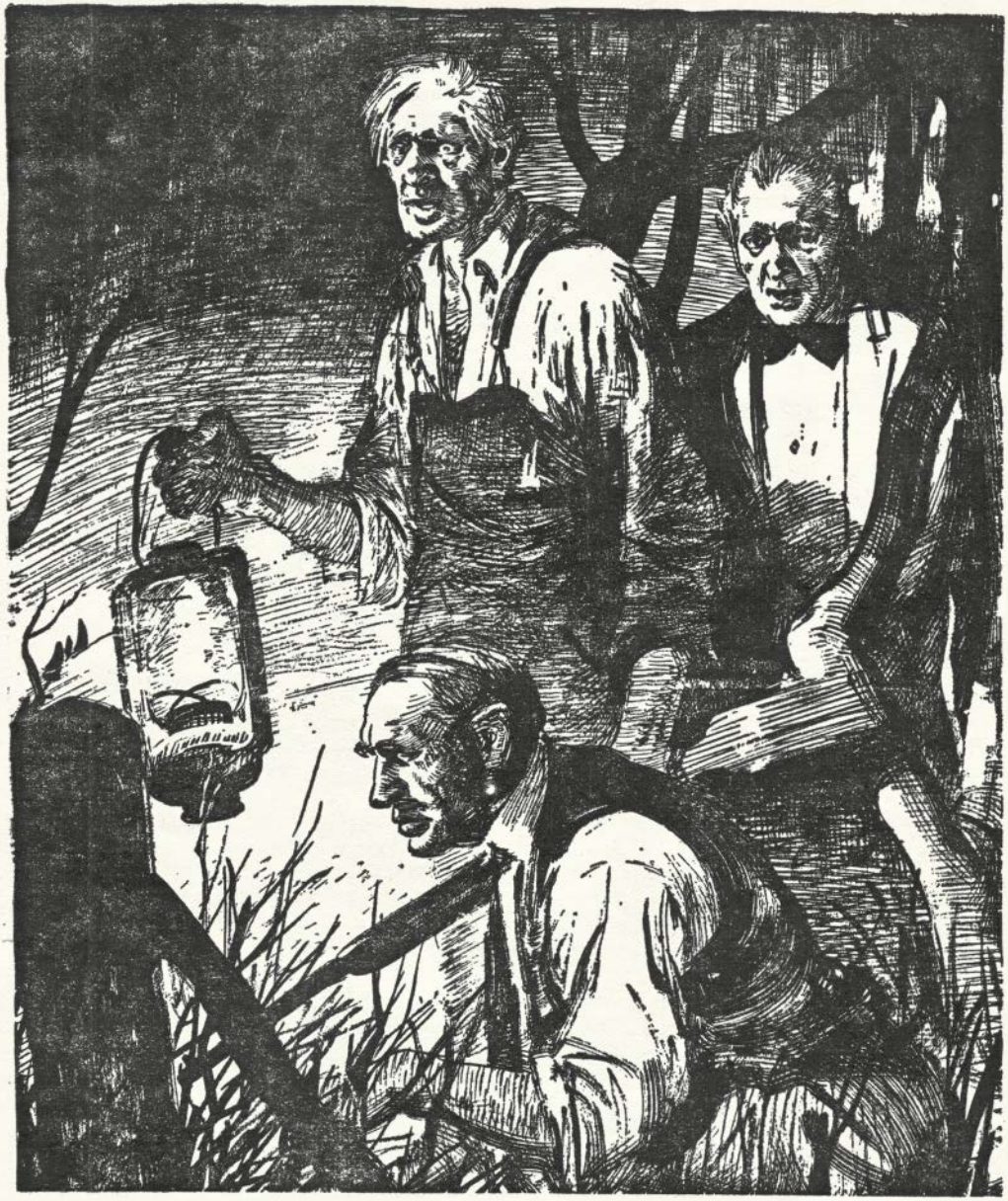
THEY SAY that the reason I'm kept here is that I am suffering from paramnesia. Other than that, they refuse to discuss my case. But I know what paramnesia is. It's misremembering. It's the disorder in which you compensate for loss of memory by filling in the gap with fancy.

What amuses me, if anything can amuse an able-bodied man in this wretched place, is the bewilderment of these high-and-mighty doctors. Oh, they don't say any-

Groups of men were standing around watching, while the coroner examined the bloody, gashed remains of Elizabeth Hepstrohm.

Eerie Novel of Nocturnal Terror

By FRANKLIN GREGORY



Far north from where I lived, on a clear day you could see the stark outline of old Hexenkopf, that brooding hill in whose form superstitious old-timers see a witch's head. . . . But I was sane then . . . sane enough to laugh at the Witch's Head, and the shadows that walked through the black forests of the Jericho Mountains . . . and at the strange, bloody tracks that led—God help me—to my own doorstep!

thing, of course. Not to me. But I can see they are baffled when they come into the room. Baffled because of their inability to trace my so-called psychosis to any of the known fundamental causes of paramnesia: fatigue, alcoholism, epilepsy, paresis, dementia praecox, things like that.

I don't have any of them, and they know it. If Charlie ever regained his sanity, I could prove it. Charlie has the key, you see. But they keep insisting, nonetheless, that I'm criminally insane. And why? Well, they say that I killed a man. It wasn't a man that I killed. . . .

Listen! Why should I have killed young Peter Burgot? I know the district attorney says that I didn't fancy him marrying my Diana. True. I thought he was a pretty weak puppy. No gumption. And I suppose I did mention it one time or another to somebody. Else where would the district attorney have picked it up?

He says it preyed on my mind. What the devil! A civilized man such as I believe I am, and especially one versed in the law, doesn't go around knocking people off just because they want to make his daughter happy. And they don't let it bother them too much. That's the way I looked at it, anyway.

As I told Molly, "*Your* father didn't like *our* marriage any too well. So who am I to interfere?"

And wasn't Charlie Burgot, Pete's father, about the best friend I had? I suppose what happened was that one of the servants heard me that time, exclaiming in the white heat of that sickening revelation, "But of course they can't marry—now."

Well—the Burgots did have their queer streak, as what ancient family doesn't? Two hundred and fifty years old, that's the American branch. And in France they ran back to the rather famous trial of Pierre Burgot who was burned at the stake in 1521.

As their family lawyer, I knew something of their history—that yarn about a family curse, for example. And I'd laughed at it, just as everyone else did. Hadn't it been rationalized these generations until it had become no more than a family excuse for the waywardness of certain of the members? Well, I'll come to that later.

"WE'RE GOING to put on a show," young Peter told me one fine Saturday afternoon in early June. He'd driven up the lane to the house where he found me puttering about in the rose garden. He leaned out of his flashy sports roadster and grinned in that rather asinine way that somehow I've always associated with Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. "You're in it," he said.

I put my tools down and looked at him. He was a pale, slender lad who had fought the war from a desk in the Pentagon. Nice enough looking, I'll grant, but inclined to impudence.

"Why me?" I asked.

"Oh, not for your looks," he said airily. "We want your voice."

Well, I did sing in the church choir, and I'd been in the glee club at Princeton when I was his age. I'd kept it up, too. Some people were kind enough to say I was still a pretty good bass baritone.

"What is it?" I asked. "Musical comedy?"

"Better than that," Pete said. "Opera, if you please, Mr. Whartley."

Then he explained that it was something the young people were getting up for charity, something about funds for the starving Greek children—something like that.

"We've chosen Faust," Pete said, "and you're Mephistopheles."

"The devil!" I said.

"Exactly," said Pete. "You'll do it, won't you?"

I said I supposed I would. As a matter of fact, the thought of playing a middle-aged Satan rather pleased my fancy.

"What'll you be?" I asked. "Besides directing, of course."

"Oh, Faust, of course," Pete said, ignoring my dig. "And Diana's Marguerite."

"Sounds like a family affair," I observed. "Does she know about it yet?"

"Sure, it was her idea." He had his clubs in the car, and he added, "Where is she? We've got a golf date."

"Right here, darling." Diana came through the door and out onto the terrace, carrying her golf bag. "Did you tell Dad?" Pete nodded. She smiled at me winningly. "I didn't want to bring it up myself, he'd refused *me*."

A lie, and she knew it. Why do women

always have to trouble concocting little falsehoods? Is it that it makes life more interesting?

I suppose Diana is pretty. But then a father always thinks that about his daughter. Certainly she was attractive and had a nice figure and more energy than the rather languid Peter could ever imagine. And eat? She had an appetite like a young horse. She was dressed scantily—too scantily, I always claimed—in a snatch of gay cotton. Her brown legs were bare except for bobby sox. And there was a bright ribbon in her bright brown hair.

I watched them drive down the lane and turn into the county road. I wasn't envious for their youth—and certainly not for Peter's. I wasn't even wistful. In fact, I was quite satisfied. I thought: The world's been good to me. It's given me Diana and Molly. And it's given me this—and I glanced around the farm. It was a mighty nice farm, with an old stone Colonial house built and rebuilt over a period of two centuries, and Jericho Creek flowing along the southern boundary, and the Hills of Jericho falling away to the Delaware River in the east. It's pretty nice what you can do with the fat fees you collect from people foolish enough to get themselves into legal tangles.

I went back to puttering in the rose garden.

* * *

I don't remember much about the rehearsals. Or is that misremembering, too? As a matter of fact, I missed a couple. I was quite busy that month. There was a last-minute rush of business before the Supreme Court adjourned for the summer. And then there was a sudden trip to St. Louis for a conference on the Missouri Valley Authority. That meant I had to miss the dress rehearsal. But Diana said that was all right, that I had my role down pat enough.

"But if you don't get back on time. . . ."

She emphasized her warning by drawing a slender finger across her white throat. She added, "There'll be Old Ned to pay."

The opera was scheduled for Saturday night, June 23rd, in the Bucks County Playhouse at New Hope. As luck would have it, I wasn't able to wind up my business in St. Louis until after noon that day and caught the Philadelphia plane at two o'clock by the skin of my teeth. I'd still have time, I figured, to get home, eat a hasty dinner and dress for the performance.

MY FELLOW-passenger in the aisle seat did not particularly interest me at first. He was a quiet, short, portly chap somewhere close to fifty. His hair was greying about the temples, but it added no appearance of distinction, for it was quite thin. He wore those yellow, plastic-rimmed glasses that have taken the place of the old shell-rims and he was well enough dressed in a grey suit with a thin stripe. On the lapel of his double-breasted jacket was a Rotary pin.

Altogether, he was the usual business-man type you see at sales conventions. Somewhere in the $5,000 to $10,000 class, probably, with a pleasant suburban home, a pleasant wife and a couple of pleasant children. It wasn't until I saw what he was doing and glanced directly into his round, pink face that my attention was attracted to him. Attracted—and repelled. Never in any man's face had I seen an expression of such utter calculation.

He had a handsome briefcase on his ample lap, of a kind of smooth-grained black leather I'd never seen before, and he was using it for a support on which to pen a drawing on white paper. It was red ink he was using—at least it looked like red ink. And the drawing was simply of a hand.

He glanced up when he noticed that I was watching.

"The trouble is," he said, "I'm pretty busy these days and I don't have much time for the fundamentals."

Curious statement? I thought the man was crazy.

"But why a hand?" I asked.

He shrugged and continued drawing. Now I saw that the hand was clenched, and that a candle appeared to grow out of the knuckles. It made no sense to me, but I couldn't help being fascinated by the man's skill. It was so real that you could tell the hand he drew was that of a dead man. Suddenly he added a line or two, and the candle seemed actually alight.

He pursed his lips, glanced at me and

then back at the drawing on his lap.

"It's the Hand of Glory," he said, answering my question.

"Hand of Glory?" I repeated. "Don't think I ever heard of it."

"No," he smiled, "people don't—nowadays. But in the old times they used to make them out of a hanged man's hand. And they'd dry them with nitre and salt and such-like odds and ends, and the candle was made of human tallow."

"Ugh!" I said. "What were they used for?"

"Spells."

He answered my questions and that was about all.

"You a student of the occult?" I asked. "You don't look like one."

He shrugged again.

"I dabble in it," he said. He drew another line, and the light on the candle seemed to flicker out. "Trouble is, the world keeps moving," he added reflectively. "Gets more civilized, and the Devil—who used to have horns and claws and a tail and a Papal tiara—has grown civilized, too. A hundred years ago he became a man of the world, mocking, sarcastic—no longer Asmodeus or Ashtaroth or Baal, but Mephistopheles. Now, I shouldn't wonder, he'd be an advertising man—" he paused—"or a lawyer."

He glanced at me shrewdly, and his look rather jolted me. It was curious he should bring up Mephistopheles, the role I, a lawyer, was to sing that night. I didn't say anything, and he tapped the drawing with a pudgy finger.

"Same thing here," he said. "The Hand of Glory doesn't have to be a real hand any more. People have moved ahead. It's the idea that counts."

He fell silent then, this strangely unattractive Babbitt. It wasn't until we reached Pittsburgh that he spoke again. Glancing at his wrist watch, he said, "Won't reach Newark till pretty near dark, I imagine."

"But this is the Philadelphia plane," I protested. "It doesn't go on to Newark."

"It does today," he said. "Didn't you know it was Poligny Fair Day, the Eve of the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist?"

More than ever I was convinced the man was crazy. I returned to reading my book, a new best-seller. Then—

"Fog at Southwest Airport," I heard the stewardess say. "We will have to go on to Newark."

Fog? There hadn't been a hint of it as we'd approached Philadelphia's southwest. I glanced sharply beside me. My portly fellow passenger wasn't in his seat. Probably in the lavatory, I thought. But when we stepped off the plane at Newark Airport, I didn't see him there, either.

I DON'T like cabs. But it was dusk, I was sixty miles from home and in two hours I had to appear for the show at New Hope, in Pennsylvania, clear across the State of Jersey.

"New Hope?" the driver said. "That'll be Route 29 straight through."

"No," I said. "I have to stop home first. I live in the Jericho Mountains, below New Hope near Washington Crossing. Take 29 to Raritan, 31 to Princeton and from there you can cut over to the crossing. Less traffic."

Sitting back, watching the trucks and cars flash past, my thoughts returned to my friend of the plane. Not only had there been no fog in approaching Philadelphia, but we'd run into none after we passed over. He must have had a report on purely local weather conditions, but where'd he gotten it?

There was something else, too. Poligny Fair Day. Now what in thunder did he mean by that? And where'd I heard the name before? Of course. It was where Peter Burgot's ancestor had been burned at the stake.

Poligny . . . Mephistopheles . . . lawyer . . . Hand of Glory. Did the man know me, and I not know him? Or was it merely a series of odd coincidences? I felt distinctly uncomfortable.

My driver was good, I'll say that if I do hate cabs. And in ninety minutes flat we were rolling across the bridge at Washington Crossing from Jersey into Pennsylvania.

"Now up the river road a piece," I said when we left the bridge. And as we turned north, I added, "There's a short cut through Jericho that leads to my place."

Do you know the Jericho Mountains? They loom to the west of the Delaware River, dark, frowning, a crescent-shaped

range of wild crags and virgin forest that begins in the south with the high plateau on which my own Pleasantview Farm is situated, and swings to the north, ending with Bowman's Hill—a round, wooded knob, so-named because that's where Dr. Bowman, Captain Kidd's physician, is buried. There's a story that if you put your ear to the ground, you can hear the old doctor groan.

"Here's the turn," I told the driver. And the cab swung left into a narrow gravel road. I glanced at my watch. Twenty minutes to curtain time. Still some miles to the house, and then cut back for New Hope. Well, they'd just have to wait, that was all. I'd phone from the house and tell them I was stood up.

We passed a couple of outlying farms and then began the climb into the hills. It was a lonely road, narrow, but smooth. And very dark, too, with the timber closing in on both sides. My man drove slowly, carefully, for there were many turns and there were deep ditches at the roadside.

"Pretty wild in here, mister," he said.

Then it happened.

Slowly, evenly, the cab turned to the right, rolled off the roadway, headed down a gulley, gathered speed, hurtled through brush, bounced over rocks and crashed into a tree. Shattered glass sprayed about me and I felt a suden sharp pain in my right leg.

But I managed to get out all right. And so did the driver. In the still blazing headlight, I looked at him.

"What in hell did you do that for?" I demanded.

His face was white, his eyes staring.

"Mister—" he sputtered.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

He shook his head wonderingly. I wasn't cut myself. Only my leg hurt. I still looked at the cabbie.

"But, what—!" I exploded.

He cut me off. "Mister, I didn't do a thing!"

"You must have," I accused. "You were driving slow enough. The road was smooth."

"It was the steering wheel," he said.

"But you were on a straight stretch. If the wheel jammed, couldn't you have put the brakes on?"

"I did. Mister, it was like some force wrenching the wheel right away from me and pushing the brake pedal back at my foot."

"Nonsense," I said. I climbed painfully back into the car and tried the wheel. "Turns now," I said. I applied the brake with my good foot. "And this works," I added.

He was standing in front, looking at the wheels.

"And *they* turn," he said. "I don't get it."

That was when we smelled it. Faintly at first, and then more strongly—an acrid stench as of sulphuric acid, only more rotten.

"Brake linings?" I asked.

"That's no brake linings, mister."

CHAPTER TWO

Mephistopheles

FOUR HOURS later, I was home in bed. There'd been an hour's wait before a car passed by. And another two hours with Doc Branford down at Washington Crossing, with Doc treating the leg.

"Take it easy for a few days," he told me. "Don't walk on it; it's badly sprained. I'll drive you home."

I tried to call the Bucks County Playhouse at New Hope to tell them I couldn't get there, and to tell what happened. But I couldn't reach anybody.

I was lying in bed with the light on, reading, and Doc had just left when Molly and Diana came in, their faces glowing. Diana rushed up.

"Oh, Dad! You were wonderful! Everybody simply raved!"

She bent down and gave me a light, cool kiss on the cheek.

"But where in heavens did you disappear to afterwards?" Molly asked severely.

"And where were you before?" from Diana.

I blinked. I was still in pretty much pain and my mind was muddled.

"Listen!" I finally got a word in edgewise. "I wasn't—"

"We thought you never would get there," Molly said. "Anyway, you did. That was the main thing. Was it a hard trip from St. Louis?"

"Look—" I began again.

But Diana broke in: "And your first scene with Peter—Faust—where you showed him the vision of me and he sold his soul to you. Golly!"

Her eyes were sparkling so that I could tell she'd been praised for a good job, too. Then her mother frowned and asked, "James, what was the ugly thing you kept carrying on the stage? It looked exactly like a dead hand."

"Peter said it was a Hand of Glory," Diana said.

I sank back on my pillow. Have you ever tried to talk, with two women chattering excitedly at the same time? I'd try to explain in the morning, I decided. After I'd had time to think it through. But I didn't. For when morning came and the *Sunday Inquirer* was brought to me, I ran across a review of the affair by Ward Mason, their music critic. Ward and I knew each other pretty well. You wouldn't have supposed *he* could be wrong. And yet he'd written:

> "Easily the most professional performance was turned in by Mr. James Whartley, the well-known attorney, whose interpretation of Mephistopheles held his audience spellbound. . . ."

I had a lot of time during the next couple of weeks to think. Those elderly muscles in my leg were slow in healing, and I'd sprawl in a deck chair on the sunny terrace and gaze down toward the Delaware. There were ghosts out there: the ghosts of Washington and his men where they'd crossed the river to surprise the Hessians. And you could see, sharply etched against the sky to the north, the observation tower marking the grave of Doc Bowman. Still farther north, on a clear day, you could see the stark outline of the Hexenkopf, that hill in whose form the superstitious Pennsylvania Dutch see a witch's head.

I knew that the early German settlers had simply transferred their fear of the malign Blocksberg in the Hartz Mountains of their fatherland to this black, forested hill in the New World. I'd climbed Old Hex myself, fascinated by the legends that kept the illiterate, God-fearing farm folks away from its slopes. For it was said that witches who had come with these immigrants from the old country had held their orgiastic sabbaths there.

Staring at it now, I was not any longer fascinated, but repelled. I found myself wondering: Is this valley that I love so much one of those regions of the earth that men say are. . . .

Evil? Honestly, that was the word I was about to use. And then I laughed at myself. I, James Whartley, materialist, who had always attributed the least out-of-the-way belief to ignorance!

Still, I couldn't help thinking of my strange fellow-passenger on that plane. I could hear him, again, quietly remarking, "People have moved ahead. It's the idea that counts."

I got painfully out of my deck chair, limped into the library, took down a volume of Charles Lamb and returned with it to the terrace. I opened the book, and there it was again, the same idea expressed in other words:

> "Gorgons and Hydras and Chimaeras . . . may reproduce themselves in the brain of superstition—but they were there before. They are transcripts, types—the archetypes are in us, and eternal. How else should the recital of that which we know in a waking sense to be false come to affect us at all?"

You see? It's the persisting idea that counts, as my casual friend had said. And I, who had never thought much about such things, was getting myself into a mood. I know now that this was what he intended. It was a put-up job, to use a term of the street. And when I was in the mood, I would accept.

"A penny for your thoughts, my dear."

It was Molly, my ever-cheerful wife, bringing me a tall, frosted mint julep. I jumped, startled.

"You're actually absent-minded, James," she said. "Some law case bothering you?"

"No—it's just this damn leg."

I'd told her I'd slipped and fallen coming home after the opera. No use telling her the truth. She'd have thought I was having aberrations.

She sat down on a lawn bench beside my chair and smoothed her dress over her knees. Nice knees. Nice legs. Molly had never lost her figure; that was one thing. Nor her happy disposition.

"I still don't understand," she teased, "why you went off by yourself so fast after the show." She added archly, "Not

another woman in your life, I hope?"

I laughed. "Hardly. I've too many of 'em now."

"Well—I like that!"

She sprang up and started away. Then she came back.

"Oh, I forgot. Charlie Burgot telephoned a while ago to say he's coming over. He wants to talk with you."

CHARLIE'S estate lay behind ours to the west. It was through the wooded ravines of his land that Jericho Creek flowed until, crossing his boundary, it became the boundary line between the Esslinger farm and my property. There was a footpath that led down a steep ravine from our house to the creek, then upstream along the creek bank to Charlie's house a mile or so away. We older folks seldom used the path, preferring to drive the more circuitous route of four or five miles—circuitous since the Burgot place fronted on the state highway to the west.

I saw his car turn into the driveway from the county road. As usual, it was driven by his chauffeur, for Charlie Burgot never did anything himself that others could do for him. I think he would have let the chauffeur carry him across the lawn if it weren't for the fact that it would have looked so ridiculous. He was a short, fleshy, easy-going man who had inherited his money and let other people bother about keeping it for him—me, for one. No one ever would have suspected that in his younger days he had been a devoted naturalist, accustomed to tramping through rough country hours on end.

I didn't get up, favoring my leg. He walked with considerable effort and drew up beside me, panting. Without formality, he plumped down on the lawn bench, perspiring. He refused a cigar, accepted a drink.

He wasn't his usual genial self, and he came to the point at once.

"I'm worried about Peter," he said.

I kept to myself the obvious observation that it was about time. Instead, I said, "Peter? What's wrong with Peter?"

"Out again all night," Charlie said.

"Again?" I grinned. It hardly fitted with my preconceived theories about Peter, who I always figured was tucked in his beddy-bed by his nurse at sundown.

"It isn't funny," Charlie rebuked me. "It's been going on for more than a week."

"What do you want me to do," I asked, "take him over my knee and spank him?"

"That isn't funny, either," Charlie complained. "And he's taken to using some smelly pomade on his hair that stinks up the house."

"We used vaseline," I smiled.

"He's up to something," Charlie continued, "and I don't know what. Naturally, I don't want to question him. He's a grown man—well, he's grown anyhow. I did say something about keeping pretty late hours, and he muttered something about a date with Diana."

"Not all night," I said. "Not with Diana. She's been coming in a bit early, in fact. Around eleven."

Charlie nodded moodily.

"That's what I wanted to get straight," he explained. "I'm a heel, probably, checking up on him this way. But actually, Jim, I'm worried. The boy's not himself."

I didn't say anything. After a moment, Charlie continued: "Seems off his feed, thinner, paler."

"You ought to see a doctor, not a lawyer," I said.

"As if he had something on his mind," Charlie said, ignoring my crack. Again I resisted the impulse to state the obvious. "Moons around the house all day. Quiet. Hardly eats a bite at meals. He and Diana haven't quarreled, have they?" He glanced up at me sharply.

"Not to my knowledge. He was around last evening to pick her up. They went off for a ride somewhere." I was thoughtful. "Hmm. You're right. I did notice his eyes seemed a bit hollow. And now you mention it, he was all perfumed up. Don't know how Diana stands it."

Charlie sipped at his drink, then stared at the ground.

"What I'm afraid of, is that after dropping Diana off, he slips off on some wild binge with that artist's crowd up at New Hope. They tell me there's some pretty loose women up there, and that might account for his sprucing up." He paused. "Or would it be gambling?"

I grinned again, remembering the all-night poker sessions Charlie and I'd sat in on at Princeton. He saw what I was thinking.

"But not every night," he protested. He paused again, then said, "Funny thing, he seems pretty fresh when he comes in. . . ."

"Maybe he's been winning," I suggested.

Charlie caught something of my amusement, and smiled faintly.

"Not that. It's not the Burgot luck."

He was getting ready to leave when another car rolled into the driveway and parked behind Charlie's. It was a white state police car, and I recognized the officer who stepped out and strode across the lawn as Sergeant Keller. He was one of those tall, handsome, broad-shouldered troopers you see in motoring ads. Sam Browne belt, leather puttees highly polished, natty blue-grey uniform perfectly creased, broad-brimmed campaign hat with chin strap just so, revolver in side holster. Quite a fancy rig. But Keller himself was a right enough young fellow.

I FORGOT to mention that I'm justice of the peace in our township. Not a difficult job, there's so little crime hereabouts. But because of my standing at the bar, not a few township and county officials—and even some of the state boys—drop in accasionally to talk over their problems. So Keller's appearance didn't surprise me. What he had to say did.

He glanced questioningly at Charlie, then at me.

"Shoot, Sarge," I told him. "It's all in the family."

He nodded off across the plateau toward my south quarter where, far down in that deep ravine, Jericho Creek divides my land from Hans Esslinger's.

"Judge," he said, "there's a complaint against you."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Rather," he added, "against that mastiff of yours."

"King?" I was puzzled.

"Mr. Esslinger," Sergeant Keller went on, "says that he got loose last night and killed two of his prize ewes."

This was serious—more serious to me than Peter Burgot staying up late. Boys would be boys, but dogs. . . .

"I don't know why he didn't come to you first, Judge."

I knew the answer to that. Hans Esslinger had grown up on that next farm; it had been his father's and his father's father's. The Germans thereabouts formed a tight little community, and they resented the intrusion of outsiders—especially wealthy ousiders like myself who used the land for pleasure instead of profit-farming. Also, there had been a boundary dispute which the courts had settled in my favor.

Keller gave details. "I went over there," he said. "It happened in his north pasture, just beyond that line of trees along the the creek. One of the sheep was partly eaten, and there's dog prints in the soft ground leading down to the creek toward your land from the pasture."

I got up and limped to the back of the house and called Hank, our hired man. Keller and Charlie followed.

"Hank, I hear that King got loose last night."

Hank stood a pitchfork against the barn and stared at me.

"King?" He shook his head slowly. "No, sir, Mr. Whartley, not King! He was chained up when I went to bed and he was chained when I got up."

"Chained now?"

"Yes, sir."

We walked around to King's enclosure. A handsome brute of a watch dog, he saw me coming and tugged at his chain. Sergeant Keller was puzzled.

"Let's walk down and see those tracks," I suggested.

It was a slow and painful walk for me through the woods and down the steep path, and at the creek we had to step across on stones to reach Esslinger's land. Sure enough, there were animal tracks in the soft ground along the bank. They led to the creek edge.

"Funny thing," Sergeant Keller said. "I can't find where they come out on your side. There's a man's boot tracks a piece up on your side, but no dog's."

Charlie was studying the tracks.

"Those aren't a mastiff's," he said suddenly. "They're a wolf's!"

"A wolf's!" I exclaimed. I was about to laugh, only I remembered that Charlie was one of the most learned members of the Academy of Natural Sciences. Keller looked puzzled.

"There hasn't been a wolf in Pennsylvania in fifty years," I protested.

"Wrong," said Charlie. "There was one

trapped near Kane about a year or so ago."

"Away over in that end of the state?" I laughed. "And probably a lobo that sneaked down from Canada."

"As a matter of fact," said Charlie, "it was a Pennsylvania timber wolf. The Academy checked up on it."

Sergeant Keller was scratching an ear.

"Fellow up in the Poconos breeds wolves," he said. "Peddles 'em to zoos. Read somewhere one escaped last spring." He glanced across the creek at my land. "But what I can't understand is why this—well, whatever it is—didn't leave any tracks on the other side when he came out. I've looked up and down both banks five hundred yards each way, and there's nothing but a man's prints, like I said. It's not like an animal to wade up and down a creek bed just for the hell of it."

PEOPLE talk about how a rumor spreads. And I for one have always been interested in the problem from a lawyer's standpoint. You have to be pretty sharp, in tracking down sources of information, to sift out the truth. Hearsay evidence doesn't go in court. What you'll usually find is that there's a germ of truth to start with. Then it's warped this way by the fellow who hears it and passes it on, and it's molded that way by somebody else; not dishonestly, but because it fits the teller's own prejudices or impressions.

There we were, just the three of us, talking about a wolf—and it wasn't two days before the whole countryside was crying "Wolf!"

I know I hadn't breathed a word of our suspicions. Charlie said he hadn't, either. And Keller—well, you know how close-mouthed the state cops are. So I just had to put it down to telepathy on a mass scale. Certainly, the rumors that suddenly spread through the eastern half of Bucks County seemed to originate from half a dozen different points at once. I know better now; I know deep in the hearts of men and women of our community they clutched at something to explain their fears. This is what happened:

Sue was pouring our coffee at lunch. Sue is Hank's daughter, a fresh young bobby-soxer of fifteen, who helps around the house during summer vacations. As she poured my coffee, she spilled some of it into my saucer and it slopped over onto the tablecloth where it made a brown stain. It wasn't like Sue.

"I'm sorry, sir," she faltered. There was fear in her eyes—not fear of me. "I—I was thinking about the wolf." She started to get a cloth.

"The what?" I asked sharply.

"Susan," said Molly, eyeing the girl with mock disapproval. "What nonsense is this?"

Diana glanced up quickly from her plate as Susan turned at the sideboard and faced us.

"It's not nonsense," she said earnestly. "I—I heard it over the party line this morning. I—"

"Susan," said Molly severely, "you know that you shouldn't listen—"

I held up a hand.

"I want to get a load of this," I said. Sue turned to me.

"It's true, Mr. Whartley. I heard Mrs. Wicker telling Mrs. Esslinger about the grave robber, and Mrs. Esslinger said it was—"

"Grave robber!" I sat straight up. But Sue was too perturbed to continue. Suddenly she sobbed, dropped the cloth and disappeared into the pantry.

"Now what's got into that girl?" Molly demanded. I was perplexed myself. I was thinking of that scene at the bank of Jericho Creek—Charlie, Sergeant Keller and myself, and those animal tracks. I was thinking about that when I noticed Diana. She was staring at her plate, and she hadn't touched a bite.

I'm normally pretty good-natured. But just then a pain shot through my leg and I barked, "And here's Diana not eating! Just like Peter. What's going on around here, anyway?"

"Peter?" asked Molly. "What's wrong with Peter?"

"Ask our dear daughter," I suggested sourly. "Lovers' tiff, I think."

Diana raised her face, but she didn't look directly at me or at Molly. Her face was unnaturally flushed.

"No lovers' tiff lasts until four in the morning," Molly said tartly.

"Mother!" Diana exclaimed. "You said—"

"I know, dear. I'm sorry." Molly turned to me. "But now that I've said it, you

may as well know that your daughter was out practically all night."

That was Molly for you. Diana was *my* daughter when she didn't quite come up to mark. That was when I noticed the small scab at one side of Diana's full, red mouth as if she had been slightly cut. I leaned across the table.

"You're hurt, honey," I said. "Molly, I swear, it looks just like a tooth mark."

"It is," Diana said. "I bit myself."

"Clear over there?" I asked in surprise.

It was Molly, always practical, who broke the tension that somehow seemed to have been growing.

"I don't suppose, James," she said crisply, "that you remember the time you kissed *me* so hard that you made the blood run." That, also, was Molly for you. No inhibitions at all.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on Her Lips

WHAT THE devil, I wondered, as I went into the library, is going on? I switched on the radio and sat down to listen to the one o'clock news broadcast. I didn't sit very long.

". . . from Bucks County, the home of many of the nation's greatest writers and actors, comes horrifying news of a grave robbery," the newscaster was announcing in his breathless style.

"It was at eight o'clock this morning that Sexton Hugh Tilton of the little community church at Jericho Corners above Washington Crossing found a new grave dug open. It was the grave of two-year-old Nancy Weisbrot, farmer's daughter, who was buried only yesterday.

"'It was as if an animal had dug open the grave with its paws,' Sexton Tilton reported. 'There were animal tracks about the grave.'

"State Police Sergeant William Keller, who made an investigation, provided the details. He said the child's body, its legs and arms eaten off, was found some distance from the grave, where it had been dragged. There is also a report that a number of sheep owned by Hans Esslinger, a neighboring farmer, were killed by an animal recently. Rumors tell of a wolf escaping from a breeding farm in the Poconos Mountains and some say this animal is responsible. A posse is being formed to track it down. . . ."

I switched off the radio. My God! I thought. Jericho Corners was only down the road two miles. I thought of Sue and her listening in on the party telephone line, and I could imagine how the neighborhood felt.

I was sitting on the terrace cleaning my .30-30 when Sergeant Keller drove up. With him was another trooper. He glanced at my rifle.

"Well, I see you've heard about it, Judge," he remarked. I nodded.

"It's not King, in case you want to know."

"I know that," I said. "Since you were last here, I've seen to chaining him up myself."

"It's a wolf, all right," Keller went on. "Or wolves. I've taken casts of those prints. At the grave, and down there—"

He nodded toward Jericho Creek and the Esslinger farm.

"Then I took the casts to the zoo down in Philly. They identify them as wolf tracks. I just got back."

He took several moulage casts out of the car, arrayed them before me and stood staring at them.

"This is the set from down below where the sheep were killed," he explained. "They're pretty big, you see. The zoo says they're a male's. But—well, I don't know what to make of these others, the ones we found near the grave. One set's the same as this other, male. But these smaller ones—found near the grave, too—the zoo says they're female. Looks like we've got *two* wolves."

* * *

The evening newspapers were full of it, of course. And by nightfall, reporters and photographers had descended on our township from the New York and Philadelphia papers. Some of them joined the various searching parties that were beginning to organize. Some simply hung around the state police sub-barracks over near Pitchtown.

I had a good reason for not joining in the hunt. My leg. But Molly had dated us up with the Clarkes in Flemington for an evening of bridge, and we started about

seven, Molly driving. Along the road we saw groups of men, rifles slung under their arms.

It was late when we returned, well past one o'clock. After we passed through Washington Crossing, Molly took the short cut through the hills. We were just approaching the place where my taxicab had swerved off the road when Molly spoke.

"James, do you smell that?"

I sniffed. It was an evil, decadent, rotten odor—and I knew it for the same that I had smelled the night of the accident.

"Probably from that swamp down in the hollow," I said. Yet I was remembering my cab driver's remark: "That's no brake linings, mister."

For some reason the stench got on my already-harrassed nerves.

"I can imagine the devil smells like that," Molly said lightly. "But it's not the swamp. I smelled it the other day up near the house. It seemed to come up from Jericho Creek."

"What?" I exclaimed involuntarily. Then I resorted to: "Oh, nonsense. You must have imagined it."

But there wasn't any imagining to the scene that confronted us when, just after turning into the county road and passing through Jericho Corners, we saw ahead of us a row of parked and lighted cars. There was a flashing of photographer's bulbs, and I saw the white, ivy-clad cottage of "Queer Lizzie" Hepstrohm light up for an instant. There were men in the yard with lanterns and guns. Molly slowed down and stopped. A figure approached the car and flashed a light in our faces.

"Oh, it's you, Judge."

It was Sergeant Keller.

"Bad business, Judge." He glanced quickly at Molly and then asked me to step out into the road. When we were out of earshot, he continued, "It's Lizzie Hepstrohm. She was attacked and killed. Just the other side of her house."

He led me along the ditch to the gate, through the front yard around to the far side. A group of men stood there, one holding a lantern. I recognized the coroner, Ray Lander, from Doylestown. He was bending down, examining the bloody, gashed remains of Elizabeth Hepstrohm.

"Good God!" I exclaimed involuntarily. Never had I imagined that a body could be so horribly mangled. I retched and turned my head. Lander stood up.

"Deep fang marks quite plain," he said. "There—in that flesh ripped away from the throat. And there on the torso and thighs where the flesh is shredded . . . claws, I take it. Oh, hello, Whartley."

Somebody asked, "But what's an old lady like her doing prowling around the yard in the middle of the night?"

"You didn't know her," somebody else said. "That's why we called her Queer Lizzie. Been half-crazy since her husband died twenty-odd years ago. Often you'd see her along the road at night."

This was true. I'd seen her myself one midnight, coming out of the cemetery where her husband was buried.

"The wolf?" I asked Keller.

"Plural," he replied. "Rangy Schroeder here saw them, says he got in a shot." Keller raised his voice. "Rangy?"

A tall, thin, awkward lad I'd sometimes seen about the Corners sauntered over to us. He had a rifle slung under his arm and I remembered that he had an Army medal for picking off a nest of Jap machine gunners at Iwo Jima. He had a puzzled expression on his face.

"Yuh, tha's right," he said. He scratched a match on the seat of his pants and lit a cigarette. "Two of 'em. I was with Abe Peterman and Clint Matthews up there on the crown o' Bald Hill. 'Tain't fur. We heard her scream."

"Mrs. Hepstrohm?"

"Musta been. Abe an' Clint, they had lanterns 'n couldn't keep up with me. I loped down faster'n a scared doe an' come round the corner o' the house, and here she was, down on the ground right where you see her now, and them with their heads down over her. Golly, I never seen nothin' so fierce the whole len'th an' breadth o' the Pacific."

"Wolves?" I asked sharply.

"Judge, I ain't never seen a wolf—just their pictures. An' it was fair dark, only the starlight to see by. But if those wa'n't wolves, they was the biggest dogs I ever see. That corner there . . . fifteen feet would you call it? They seen me an' looked up just as I raised my gun. But—"

He hesitated.

"Yes?" I prodded.

"Judge, I don't lie. But it's somethin' I

can't figure. I'm rated a pretty fair shot—leastways the Army thought so. And I had plenty of time to draw a good bead on the near'n. You'da thought that bullet woulda splashed his brains out, but the beast didn't seem to mind a-tall. Eerie, it was. Then they lammed it for the orchard. I reckon I'll have to put it down for a miss. There ain't no blood back there."

I turned to walk back to the car. But by the light of a lantern I saw something glitter in the grass at my feet. I stooped and picked it up. I held it in the palm of my hand and examined it. And then my hand began to shake. It was a gold earring set with a ruby—one of a pair I had given Diana on her nineteenth birthday!

NEVER in my life will I forget that shock. The rest of the night was a parade of confusion.

Molly took Queer Lizzie's death with comparative calmness. She suggested, sensibly enough, that we ought to unchain King. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't have him taking the blame for whatever was going on.

When we reached home, Diana was in bed and asleep. When I glanced into her room, I saw her, by the light from the hall lamp, her head pillowed in her arm, her tousled bright brown hair disarrayed, an expression of perfect contentment—so different from her mood at lunch—on her face. Yet there was about her face something contradictory; an unnatural ruddiness of the mouth and cheeks, and at the same time a vague, pallid quality that I could not account for. I felt uneasily that something familiar about her was missing.

"James! Will you ever stop? You've been tossing for hours!"

Molly speaking.

"Sorry, it's my damn leg," I lied. I got out of bed and put on my slippers and dressing robe. I went to the casement windows to draw the curtains across. A red band of breaking day stretched across the eastern horizon beyond the Delaware. And the waters of the river reflected, more deeply, the crimson of the sky.

Down in my study, I put the earring on the desk and examined it. No, there wasn't any doubt. It was the same I'd given Diana. I'd had it especially designed. But, God in heaven! How had it gotten where I'd found it? Was this a dream? Was I cracking up?

I went back upstairs. Softly, I entered Diana's room. Her head turned in her sleep. The dawn light filtered through the curtains, and objects stood out prominently. I went up to the dresser. No, I wasn't mad. For there, on the dresser's polished surface, was the earring's twin.

Carefully, I placed the one beside the other and left them there. What else could I do?

* * *

I don't need to recite the history of those next few days around the countryside. You read the papers and heard it on the radio: how alarm after alarm spread, how tension grew, how more reporters and photographers and movie cameramen poured into the neighborhood, overcrowding the inns at New Hope and Lambertville and Washington Crossing and Jericho Corners. And how state police cars patrolled the roads by day and by night.

It was the state police that organized the posse after one hunter had shot and wounded another. You couldn't have haphazard bands of armed men roaming about. The police organized them into corps, and each corps was given a certain zone to patrol. And they tracked through the hollows and the woods, and along the creek bottoms and the slopes of the hills.

Children were kept in their yards within sight of their homes. The women, when they went into town shopping, were accompanied by their men. And the men, when they went into the fields, were accompanied by their guns and their dogs. At night, the houses were bolted, something never before necessary in our neighborhood where crime was no factor. Even the windows were closed.

But two sheep had been killed, a child's corpse had been violated, and a woman slaughtered. One could not take chances.

Even natured abetted the restiveness. For these were the hot, glaring days of mid-July and the nights were warm and humid.

There were uneasy rumors. For, along the river, where so many Pennsylvania Dutch dwell, there is still a widespread belief in hexerei. And hadn't Rangy

Schroeder shot pointblank at one of the beasts and yet no blood been drawn? And did this not mean that beast was unnatural? Folk turned their eyes to the north, toward the foreboding Hexenkopf. Had *they* come prowling down from there?

What rot! I thought. And yet, gradually, you see, I was getting into the mood. For two days, Diana remained in her room, pleading a headache. And so, even had I desired, I had no opportunity to ask her about the earring. When I did visit her, I found her cheeks no longer ruddy, but pale. Molly told me she hardly touched her food. And Peter neither came to the house nor called.

On the second evening, I was sitting in my study trying to work on a brief. Each night, for years, it had been my habit to tear off that day's sheet from the calendar in preparation for tomorrow. Tonight was no exception. I tore the sheet, and idly noted: "July 15—St. Swithin's Day."

I heard Diana on the stair. I heard her go to the telephone. I heard her voice:

"Yes, dear. About twenty minutes?"

She hung up. I walked into the hall. Diana was dressed for a stroll.

"I wouldn't go out," I advised. "There are too many armed men about. It's pretty dangerous, honey."

She looked at me. The spit an' image of Molly at her age, save for her pallor. But where was the lightness of heart?

"We'll take the car, then," she remarked.

Well—that seemed all right. Now tell me, didn't that seem all right? And what could I say? Men wouldn't shoot at a moving car. I followed her to the terrace. The sun was setting through the trees. I saw her walk across the lawn toward the garage, the sun on her hair. Something . . . something. . . .

Molly went to bed about eleven. But I waited up. Finally, shortly after midnight, I heard the car roll into the driveway. And a few minutes later Diana came into the house. She was whistling a cheerful tune. Her eyes sparkled. Her pallor was gone. She was my same gay, pretty, fascinating daughter. That's what I thought.

"Hi, dad."

"Have a nice evening, dear?" Lord, I was relieved.

"Lovely."

I thought: How a splitting headache can raise ned with a woman's character!

She stepped across the room to the cigarette box on the library table. I looked at her shoes. There was yellow clay clinging to them. I said, with what severity I could command, "I see you went for a walk after all."

"But not in this neighborhood, and it was just a short one," she said. "I really needed the exercise after two days in bed."

True.

She picked up the table lighter, snapped it and held it to her cigarette.

It was at that instant that I came to know. I stared, stricken by the horror of it.

"Dad! Dad! Are you ill?"

She came toward me and I, sitting forward in my big chair, my hands gripped to the arms, shrank back.

"Why do you stare at me like that?"

"Nothing," I managed to stammer. "Nothing."

I don't know how I managed to get out of my chair, how I managed to stagger to the dining room, how I managed to lift the decanter with my shaking hands and pour myself a half tumbler of whiskey. I don't know what happened to the rest of that night.

I AWOKE late the next morning with only one thought, that I knew. I knew. I lay abed, wondering, ideas revolving. So that's what it all meant. My Babbitt of the plane. The cab accident. My "appearance" at the opera when I was miles away!

Too late for family breakfast, I ate alone. Susan, her hand shaking, placed the morning newspaper before me.

"Lumberville Boy Killed, Eaten!"

That was the revolting headline that struck me between the eyes.

"Wolf Tracks Found in Clay Bottom."

Appetite gone, I read the story:

> "Johnny Sterling, 12, son of . . . returning home from the birthday party of a friend . . . father heard him scream . . . rushed from house . . . found nothing on road . . . searchers found body an hour later near foot of bluff where it had been dragged about a quarter of a mile . . . dismembered . . . chewed . . ."

And then:

"There were animal tracks in the soft, yellow clay." I gasped. Yellow! "Shortly

before the body was discovered, one of the searchers heard an automobile motor starting up from a nearby side road."

* * *

"Lumberville," said Charlie Burgot after greeting me. "That's ten miles up the river. Yes, I see how they could have done it. The search didn't extend that far up."

Charlie seemed his easy-going self again, not worrying any more.

"How's Peter?" I asked.

"Oh, fine! Chipper as a sparrow. Whatever was eating him, he got over it. Had a pretty bad spell the last couple of days. But he's up and around this morning, feeling swell."

We were sitting in Charlie's library with its broad view of the Jericho Mountains.

"Charlie." I held my voice as steady as I could. "Why was Pierre Burgot burned at the stake at Poligny?"

Charlie blinked. Then he grinned. Then he burst out laughing.

"Why, damn it, man! That stuff and nonsense!"

"But you've got the old records?"

"Oh, sure." He was still laughing. "I've read 'em. Lycanthropy. That was the charge. But you know how they were back in medieval times. He was supposed to have admitted it."

He got up and took three ancient books from a glassed shelf. One was Johann Weyer's *De Magorum Infamium Poena* of the mid-17th Century. Another was the English translation of Boguet's *Discours*. Oldest of all was Leonard Vair's *De Fascino,* printed in 1583, and quoting his patron, the famous Cardinal de Granvelle.

"Haven't looked 'em over in years," Charlie said cheerfully as he began turning the yellow pages with care. "Here we are. About their trial before Maître Jean Boin, Inquisitor General for the diocese of Bensancon."

"*Their* trial!" I nodded vigorously. It fit my theory. Charlie looked at me, puzzled.

"Yeah—Michel Verdun and Philibert Montot. Say—just what are you getting at?"

"Read on," I said. I could have read it myself, but I wanted to get him in a mood. He read out loud how, at the trial, Gros Pierre Burgot confessed that nineteen years before on Poligny Fair Day on the Eve of the Feast of John the Baptist he had lost his sheep during a thunderstorm. And while he was searching for them a black-clothed horseman on a black horse approached and told him that his sheep would be returned if he would acknowledge him as master. Pierre promised.

"And at the rider's command," Charlie read on, "Pierre renounced God, Our Lady, all the Company of Heaven, his Baptism and Christ. He swore never to assist at Holy Mass, nor to use Holy Water. And he kissed the rider's hand, which was black and cold as a corpse."

Charlie looked up again. His face was sober.

"Fairy tale!" he grunted. But, reading on, he actually shuddered when he came to the account of how Pierre Burgot lured Verdun and Montot to a warlocks' sabbath where, with spells and incantations and witches' unguents, the men shifted their shapes.

"Their limbs were hairy, their hands and feet the paws of a beast, their fleetness that of the north wind."

And in these forms (Charlie recited) the three damned men killed a woman who was gathering peas, seized a seven-year-old boy and tore him to pieces, killed and ate a four-year-old girl, and ate, raw, a sheep the property of one Maître Pierre Bongré.

Charlie dropped the book. Sweat was pouring down his round cheeks as he stared at me.

"But what are you getting at?" he cried.

I hesitated; then I took the plunge.

"That it's a poison in the blood line," I said.

"Bah!" Charlie was on his feet. But there was a lack of confidence in his voice now.

"Charlie," I pleaded. "Where's Peter now?"

"Out in back somewhere, I imagine."

"Let's go find him."

We found Peter out on the driveway, tinkering with his car. We didn't approach. That wasn't my purpose. I held Charlie back, and we watched Peter stand up in the late morning sunshine.

"Now look hard," I said. "Look at him.

Look at him, Charlie, and keep looking."

Charlie frowned.

"At—but I don't see anything . . . unusual."

"You will," I told him, for I could see it clearly. It was what I'd come for.

Suddenly, Charlie's jaw dropped. He clutched at my arm and drew me back into the house. There, in the gloom of the hall, he faced me with an expression of abject terror.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Peter hasn't any shadow!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Lammas Eve

IT DIDN'T come upon Charlie all at once. Those who found him in the house thought it did. But it didn't. I was there, and at first he was quite coherent and made a real effort at self-control. He led me back into the library and made me sit down and share a drink with him. And he sat down, too, across the fireplace from me and stared into my eyes.

Finally, he asked, "How long?"

"Have I known it? Only since last night when Diana came home."

"Diana?"

"With yellow clay on her shoes," I said with significance.

"Does she have it, too?"

I nodded.

"Two. That's right," he said.

"A male and a female," I added. I told him about the earring.

Charlie seemed to gain some comfort out of Diana's complicity.

"You see what happens," I said. "They're much better off after a night of—" I couldn't bring myself to say the word. I added, "But it wears off and they become thin and pale, and they can't eat what we can. And so they have to go out again to satisfy their craving."

Charlie was breathing hard.

"This is—"

I think he meant to say "beastly," but he checked himself. He was perspiring, and he pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"Those tracks down by your creek that led into the water from Esslinger's place," Charlie said. "That would fit." He nodded toward the book on the floor. "It says the transformation often occurs in a running stream. But—"

He gazed at me.

"Yes?"

"There was only one set of tracks that time."

"The male's," I said. "Sergeant Keller noticed it, but he didn't know what it meant: those prints of a man's boots on the opposite bank, on my side. But Keller was looking for an animal's."

"Then that was—"

He could not bring himself to name his son.

"Yes, Diana wasn't in it then. That came later." I told him about the cut on her lip. "Where he must have kissed and infected her," I said. "Much, perhaps, as Pierre Burgot gained control over Verdun and Montot."

"But, how, when . . . ?"

"On the Eve of the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist," I told him. "Midsummer Eve, which was also one of the Poligny Fair Days. June 23, according to our new calendar; July 7, as they reckoned the calendar then. And it oc-

curred at that opera the youngsters put on in the Bucks County Playhouse at New Hope."

I spoke savagely as I continued: "Tricked, that's what Peter was. By the Devil himself in the role of Mephistopheles. That scene where Faust sells his soul. And because of the weakness in Peter's blood line, he was clay in the Devil's hands."

A shrewd gleam came into Charlie's eyes.

"It doesn't hold, Jim. I was there. And so were you—in your role."

"I wasn't," I said, "and I can prove it. By Doc Branford down at Washington Crossing. I had an accident that night. Without any rhyme or reason the cab I was in was pushed from the road. I smelled the Devil that night and—I didn't reach New Hope. Think back. Why do you think everybody raved so about the acting? It was the Devil himself playing his own role."

Our voices had risen, I remember. And I remember that Mrs. Dale, Charlie's housekeeper, stopped at the door to the library and peered in.

Perhaps she was still nearby, or perhaps one of the maids, when I said, "But of course they can't marry—now. God, man, think of their offspring!

Doubtless the district attorney infers from that that I was angry with Peter.

Charlie got up suddenly, his fists shaking his eyes lighted with a wild fire.

"No! Not Peter! He didn't do it. Diana, perhaps. You can't blame it on Peter!"

Perhaps the servants heard this, too, or saw him launch toward me furiously, then abruptly come to his senses.

"Sorry." He looked down at me. "But I don't believe it. It was an illusion. I'm going out to look again."

He staggered out of the room, through the house, out onto the back verandah. I followed no farther than the door. But I saw him walk down the steps and across the lawn to where Peter, still under the warm sun, still tinkered with his car. I saw Charlie approach Peter with purpose. Peter stood up and looked at his father. Charlie looked at the ground at Peter's feet. Then he made a circle about Peter. I saw Peter say something. But Charlie made no answer. He was looking—and he didn't find what he was looking for. It wasn't there, of course, no more than it had been before. From where I stood I could see that. But Charlie's was outlined sharply enough.

Charlie tottered, and I thought he would fall. Peter reached out to support him. But Charlie wrenched himself away. Then, slowly, he returned to the house. Peter stared after him, but he did not follow.

Back in the library, seated, Charlie looked at me with glazed eyes.

"You see," I said, "we'll have to do something to help them. You and me, Charlie . . . they're ours. We'll have to plan—"

"What?" said Charlie.

He has never spoken a word since. For it was at that moment it came upon him. Catalepsy, the psychiatrists called it: muscular rigidity induced by hysteria.

I stepped to the back door.

"Peter," I called. "You'd better phone for the doctor."

YOU CAN see where that left me: to fight it out, single-handed. And where it leaves me now, without a witness. Charlie in one sanitarium; I, in another.

This was St. Swithin's Day, of the rain superstition. Curious, I thought, as I returned home, unconsciously glancing at the sky, how the holy days of the church became involved in these dark matters.

I didn't turn up at lunch. I couldn't stand the thought of facing Diana. I thumbed through the calendar. The next holy day of old would be Lammas, the festival of St. Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison, August 1. But what could I do with that? And what might happen between, and what horror on the eve of that day?

There were means, I had heard, of combatting this dreadfulness. Now that I had seen one manifestation of the horror and believed what I had seen, I could believe in the means. But how could I learn the technique—I, a lawyer, a layman, universed in both religion and the occult? Study? Then form a plan?

"We'll have to plan," I'd told Charlie. But while I studied and planned, what could I do with Diana and Peter? I couldn't lock her in her room. Molly

would never stand for it. Nor could I send her to a private sanitarium. There would be questions, examinations, and how could I explain? Over Peter I had no hold at all.

At first, the thought was only a germ in my mind, and it sprang, I know now, from my love for Diana. Peter was at fault. Peter must be cured first. Wouldn't that cure Diana, too? Satan, I imagined, would have something to say about that; it would be a tug of war with the Prince of Hell for possession of a soul. Peter was Satan's; Diana was Peter's. That was the way my mind worked. Peter . . . must . . . go. And Diana would be released!

Once I'd struck on the general strategy, I knew what to do. Certainly, a lawyer knows how to go about research. But—

I would be gone for days from the house. How could I protect Molly? Should I take her with me? But wouldn't she wonder what I was doing? I had some bad moments, I tell you, over that. And once in the night I got up while she slept and went to her shoe closet and chalked a cross inside of each of her shoes. In the light of the next morning, it seemed an absurd thing to have done.

Then I conceived something I thought more practical. And Molly was pretty much surprised when the sheep began to arrive. By afternoon there was a flock of three dozen or more grazing the lawns.

"Are you crazy?" Molly asked as she stood on the terrace and surveyed them.

"Perhaps," I said. I was beginning to wonder myself.

"They'll bring those wolves right to the door," she protested.

"Maybe that's the idea," I said.

As a matter of fact, she'd just about hit it. I saw those sheep as a sort of back stop, a safety valve to give the neighborhood comparative peace while I pursued my plan. Diana and Peter *might* stop, if they had them at hand. But what I didn't know was that they had graduated far beyond such fare.

* * *

I couldn't go to a priest—not in this Twentieth Century—with a tale like mine. You can understand that. I did the next best thing. In the great libraries of Philadelphia and New York, I spent days reading the old books. I learned of the warlocks' lust for animal flesh and blood; how, since they were the slaves of Satan, they were permitted to use the hellish craft to transform themselves into beasts, the better to satisfy their inhuman craving. . . .

I studied the theories of lycanthropy, and I came across the commentary of the great modern authority, Summers, on Fra Bartolomeo Spina's *Quaestio de Strigibus*:

> ". . . that although the demon cannot make material new forms, which is essentially an act of creation, he can so confuse, commingle and intermix already existing forms that, fantastically, he represents to any who behold, the human form in a brute shape."

And again I found the Sixteenth Century scholar, Jean de Sponde, reporting:

> "But most hold that although there is no real shape-shifting, the Devil can so cheat and deceive men's eyes that by his power they take one form, which they seem to see, to be quite another thing from what it actually is."

Was an illusion cast over men's eyes, then? Was the essence of metamorphosis a sort of mass hypnosis? Saint Augustine appeared to believe this in stating:

"Nor can the deuills create any thing . . . but onely cast a changed shape ouer that which God hath made, altering onely in shew." And Ulrich Molitor, professor of Pavia, in his medieval *De Pythonicis Mulieribus* also accepted this view.

I read with a start, too, of the ointments—gifts from Satan—which the warlocks used to change their shapes. Unguents of human fat and wolfsbane and henbane and belladonna. Was this the pomade of which Charlie had spoken?

I was seeking knowledge, you see; for with knowledge might come the key to release this pair from bondage; I was seeking the methods that, in the old days, had proved effective in dispossession.

My heart nearly stopped with excitement when I read of the efficacy of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Then my hopes fell when I learned that the Church itself forbade its use. It was too potent, the learned said; it was feared that the presence of evil spirits, the enemies of

God, might taint the Holy Sacrament.

And still I could not take my problem to a priest.

Exorcism . . . dispossession . . . the sacramentals. They were three words ever on my mind those days. I learned of the powers of the sacramentals to fend off evil. I learned that the chalice and the font were blessed. I found, suddenly, that in those old days a silver bullet, blessed by a priest, had been found quite sufficient to release the soul. But it must be fired into the beast while it was still in its state of metamorphosis.

A silver bullet would not be hard to make. Melt the metal and pour it into a mould. How many times had I done it with lead as a boy. But—and here again I knew that no priest in these times would provide a blessing on the basis of what I told him in confidence. For the Church, though still holding to the principles and concept of exorcism, had today so limited the powers of the priest that he must take each case of demonic possession to his bishop; and that before exorcism was permitted, a board of inquiry must first examine and report.

I don't apologize for what I finally did. It was a display of religious medals in a shop window that I saw, as I walked to the Pennsylvania Station in New York, that gave me the idea. They were of gold and silver and meaner metals. And though I was first about to select a medal of St. Christopher's, my attention was suddenly attracted to a silver St. Hubert's, that patron saint of hunters.

Nor was the blessing a difficult matter, though I own that it was trickery upon the priest to whom I took it. Yet I looked at the matter in a larger sense. I prayed: Dear God, forgive me; it is to save a soul.

Yes, a soul! And human lives, to boot.

"THEY'VE done it again."

These were Molly's laconic words as I entered the house. I'd been two weeks in my research, and this was the Eve of Lammas Day.

"When, dear?"

"Two nights ago. Didn't you read about it?"

As a matter of fact, I'd been too busy in New York to even glance at the papers.

"It was old Mr. Watson, the crossing watchman up at New Hope. They caught him as he was going home near the edge of town after the last train. The whole countryside—"

"The sheep?"

"Never touched, thank the Lord." Molly spoke severely. "James, you'll have to get rid of those sheep. Really, I'm frightened. I'm afraid they'll come for them."

I might have known it—that they wouldn't want sheep, once they'd had a taste of human blood. But, still, I was relieved that Molly was safe.

"How's Diana?" I asked casually.

"Moping again. She was all right for a while."

I went out to my workshop in the garage. It was late afternoon; there wasn't time to lose. And there I melted my medal and moulded my bullet.

Have you known doubt? Have you known the doubt of your own reason? Have you known the doubt of your own plans? I had these doubts as I looked at the bullet in my hand. Perhaps it was not filed just right; perhaps it would burst the barrel. Perhaps I was mad. And if not, would this thing that I had in my mind . . . would it work? I remembered the words of my traveling companion that day in the plane:

"Same thing here. The Hand of Glory doesn't have to be a real hand any more. People have moved ahead. It's the idea that counts."

Then how on God's earth, I asked myself, could I expect to fight this thing—this thing that had moved ahead with the times—with a means as old as this?

But perhaps my companion (and I knew too well who he was) had merely given proof to an old theory: That these beasts were not real; that they merely robed themselves in Satanic glamour that, to others, gave them their horrendous form.

"And the Devil grows civilized, too," he'd said.

You can understand my doubts. And you can understand, too, that I feared there might be some change in the quality of my silver; a spiritual change wrought by the melting of it. Was it any longer the thing the priest had blessed?

Still, what stuck with me was: "It's the idea that counts." And I certainly had the idea.

I was waiting in the shadows when she walked out of the house and turned into the lane. She was frail and lovely in the light of that full moon that had just crept above the hills beyond the river. And yet there was in her walk a haunting restlessness.

I waited until she was merely a receding wraith at the far end of the lane before I followed. Suddenly, I saw her disappear. For a moment I was panic-stricken. Was this it? Had she already changed and gone loping off into the night? Would she outdistance me?

But when I reached the spot, I found that she had merely left the lane to walk along the path that led through the woods down to Jericho Creek. Once, twice, I caught a glimpse of her at a turn in the path. The path was steep and rocky. I felt the pebbles under my feet, and once several became dislodged on an incline and rolled down ahead of me, clattering. As I dodged behind a tree, she stopped and glanced back. Then she went on, and I saw her again, sylph-like, in a patch of yellow moonlight.

She was standing, when I next saw her, in a clearing at the creek bank. I could not have been more than thirty feet from her and some distance above.

"Peter!"

"Darling!"

I hadn't seen him till then. And here they were, clinging closely to each other, her lips upturned to his.

I told myself: It's unbelievably idotic. It's unreal. I'll go back. How often, I thought, had Molly and I stolen away in this same fashion when I was courting her.

They parted in a moment, and Peter produced a small jar and opened it, and they dipped their fingers into it and rubbed it lightly over their faces and hair. Then, holding hands, they stepped into the creek.

If I had been about to retreat, I was stricken where I crouched. For suddenly there was no longer any Diana; there was no Peter—only two long, lean, shaggy beasts standing in the shallow rapids.

I'd thought I was prepared. But the human mind, I learned that night, has a limit to conception. And when it came, the shock of the inconceivable overwhelmed and paralyzed me. My grip relaxed on my rifle, and even as I stared those two grey, hungry-looking things of Satan turned and trotted upsteam out of view.

How long I stayed there I have no idea. My mind was numb. For I had been in the very presence of that which is not of this world.

IT MIGHT have been half an hour, an hour later when I heard a shot far off in the direction of the Burgot farm. My heart paused. I knew what it meant.

Then, as the echo died away, the voices of men wafted to me on the breeze and I distinctly heard: "Missed, damn it!"

Sick to the pit of my bowels, I returned to the house. Halfway up the lane I saw, far across the lawn, Molly sitting on the white stone bench on the terrace. A lovely apparition in the light of the moon, dressed in an exquisite gown of yellow silk, she sat as if expecting me. And I knew that I could never tell her of these horrible things because I loved her so.

Somewhere from the back of the house I heard a low growl. King's? I could not say. Along the county road a car raced, its lights stabbing the night.

Walking slowly, I started across the lawn. Molly's eyes were on the sheep, grouped in a far corner. Perhaps she was wondering what silly idea had made me set to grazing there.

I had reached the shade of a tall, overspreading oak when I thought I perceived a commotion among the sheep. I paused.

Then, from around the corner of the house, some yards beyond where Molly sat, I saw two shadows moving, slinking shadows, moving forward, hugging the shrubbery, crouching.

The sheep were stampeding now, and Molly was staring at them. She started up, but she did not see the menace behind her, the menace of things that, hemmed in by the gunners about the countryside, had returned to the least-protected place to perpetrate their foulest crime. But I, seeing the two beasts about to spring, was no longer my listless self. In the balance of that second was weighed all that I held dear. I raised my rifle. Molly, sensing something behind her, turned. At that instant I fired at the larger animal. With the report of the gun, I saw in its eyes a gleam of human agony. Agony that turned to gratitude.

"Jim! Jim! My God, what have you done?"

It was Molly, pressing down upon my arms that were still gripping the smoking rifle.

"Didn't you see them?" I asked, staring at her.

"Only—"

And there was Diana, her face flushed with a freedom that she would never understand, staring at me, crying out with horror, "Dad! Dad! Dear God, you've shot Peter!"

And at our feet, bleeding from a fatal wound between his eyes, lay the dying boy.

"Good God, Molly!" I cried. "Didn't you see?"

She looked at me, still clinging tightly to me.

"Only—only Diana and Peter," she said slowly.

A blaze of light blanketed us as a car turned into the lane. It stopped and Sergeant Keller got out and strode toward us, calling, "They're around here somewhere. We got a shot at 'em over at the Burgot place. Was that your shot just now?" Then, as he came closer: "Say, what happened?"

* * *

Well—there you have it. And did Molly turn too late to see, or did a merciful providence draw a veil across her vision so that she could never know? And for the rest of us, was there a diabolic illusion? Or was it, as the psychiatrists claim, paramnesia? I myself little care. I know what I know. I know that ever since, peace has ruled that countryside. I know that, as a father and a husband, I could have done nothing else that Lammas Eve. And I know how vital and human, though still sad over Peter's death, Diana was when she last visited me.

"He had this in his pocket," she said, holding it out to me. "What do you suppose it is?"

I looked at her. It was the drawing that the stranger had made while sitting beside me in the Philadelphia-bound plane—that fateful drawing of The Hand of Glory.

"Don't you remember?" I asked, recalling that she'd seen the thing itself at the opera. She'd said so. She shook her head slowly.

"Dad, there are some things—" she began.

"Then I don't know what it is, my dear," I said. "But I do know that it's the idea that counts."

THE END

By
RUSSELL BRANCH

The cop pushed his way in and hefted his billy. "Sonny boy here give you any trouble, Pop?"

EARLY TO BED —NEVER TO RISE . . . .

"DON'T MOVE!" said the doctor sharply. "Look straight ahead!" *Look. . . ? Me. . . ?* That was a laugh, but I didn't feel like laughing. Not right then. I felt about as humorous as the guest of honor at a funeral. And twice as lonely.

Except for one little round spot—the one I was supposed to keep focused on—all I could see was the usual hazy blur. But then a blind guy knows things his eyes never tell him. I'd found that out in the past year.

There was light, lots of bright light glaring down on me. I could feel it like a weight. And it must've been plenty hot in there, because I heard the doctor ask a nurse to wipe his face. But it felt cold to me. Empty and cold—an operating room

I could hear the old man calling me, quietly, despairingly. . . . But I sat there unmoving, my blind eyes staring at the great, new, lighted-up world that awaited me, and would be mine—after he died. . . .

lined with tile. And that smell, the smell you always get in a hospital. I suppose it was just some kind of disinfectant, but it tatsted like death to me.

Sure I was scared, and willing to admit it. Not that it made any difference to the people around me. To them I was just another job of work, like a car that needs new rings to a mechanic. And even through the stuff they'd doped me with, I was wishing there was somebody else. Somebody waiting, somebody who . . . well, somebody like Pop Garson.

But that was a laugh too. Because Pop was a chump, a sucker, a sentimental old fool. He was also dead.

I GUESS I must have been feeling the same way inside the first night I met up with Pop, except that I wasn't blind then, of course.

Scared, lonely, cold . . . but then you could've twisted my arm off before I'd have admitted it. Not a dime in my pocket, but a fifty-dollar chip on my shoulder. A young punk with big ideas, stranded in a hick town named Glenwood.

The only reason I was there was because of the joker who'd given me my last ride. When he picked me up on the highway that afternoon he told me he was headed for the city. But then it turned out he lived here. "Glenwood, A Family Community," the sign said, and that was that.

"It's only ten miles farther," he told me when he let me off. "You can get a bus into the city."

Only ten miles. Dark, cold, drizzling—and I didn't even have the price of a bus ride in my pocket. But I wasn't going to tell him that, not after the way he acted like he had done me a big favor. A fat jerk in a lousy old coupe, and he seemed sore when I got out without bidding him a fond farewell.

So here I was on the main drag of this little dump, waiting for another car to come along, and walking just to keep warm. The local citizens seemed to be all tucked in for the night. Neat little houses with lights and warmth and the smell of supper. They didn't give a damn about Johnny Mannix, and frankly I didn't give a damn about them, either.

All I wanted was a ride on into the city where I had friends of my own. Well, maybe not friends exactly, but guys who knew the score and could find a spot for me.

I was almost to the other edge of town, and getting soaked fast, before I finally spotted a pair of headlights. I kept walking, waiting for the car to catch up with me and hoping it wasn't going to turn off into some driveway or side street first. When I stopped for another look it was still there but taking its time, and I knew the answer. There's only one good answer for a sedan that moseys along like it wasn't in a hurry to get anywhere on a cold rainy night. . . . .

And I wasn't going to be picked up on any vagrancy charge in that lousy little berg. Not Johnny boy. I knew all about those "family communities" with their two-by-four jugs and bored cops.

So in less time than it takes to tell this, I was making mud tracks across some taxpayer's new lawn. I heard the car speed up and a yell, but I didn't look around. I just kept going—around the corner of a garage, through somebody's back yard, over a fence, and then along a hedge until I finally came out on a side street.

Having doubled back toward the center of town, I found myself in the rear of a service station I had passed by a few minutes before. There was the usual little steel and glass building by the pumps, with a night light burning inside, and I ducked behind it. The car was far up the road now, still poking along. It was a prowl car all right—and they had seen me run, because they had a spotlight working the side of the road.

I waited until the spot finally flicked off and the tail light faded out down the road. Then I stood up, ready to move on, when something caught my eye inside the gas station shack. A cash register, standing there big as life in the dim light of the night bulb.

My feet moved, but only a step, and then my eyes came back to that damned cash register. Usually, you know, cash registers are left open at night to show there's no money in them. Particularly one in plain sight like this was. But. . . .

Well, this was the sticks and I could almost see the dough inside that closed drawer. Not much—maybe ten, fifteen bucks in small change. Say the price of a bus ticket, a meal and a couple of drinks, a hotel room until I made my connections.

Sure, I was a sap to even consider it. I should have learned better. I *had* learned better in reform school, better and safer ways to make an easy buck. But at the moment I was tired of being kicked around, and as long as I was going to run, I might as well have something to run for.

The door was unlocked and that cinched it. I flicked off the light and slipped inside. Then I waited in the dark. Outside it was raining hard now. I could hear it banging away on the tin roof. Behind me, at the rear of the lot, there was a small building that looked like a garage, and I noticed for the first time that a crack of light showed through the doors.

But there wasn't any other signs of life, and here I was.

I poked one of the keys on the register, but nothing happened. Then I tried another one. The fact that it was locked made me only surer there was something in it, and I felt around on the counter. My hand found something that felt like a greasy rag, then a pile of pamphlets or maps, and finally it hit cold metal. A pile of tools . . . a hammer, a screwdriver.

First I tried the screwdriver, but I couldn't get it in far enough. So I wrapped the cloth around the hammer and gave the screwdriver a couple of good ones. Then I listened. Just the sound of my own breathing and the rain.

When the screwdriver had a good purchase, I laid the hammer down and put my strength to it. It was a tough old baby, that register, and I must have been really working at it. Because it seemed hours later that I suddenly realized the rain was louder and there was a cold draft on my back. Then it was too late.

A flashlight hit me square in the face, blinding me, and a voice said quietly, "Lookin' for something, son?"

LIKE a dope, I just stood there blinking. All I could think of was the cops. They must have followed me after all, circled the block, come back. I was trapped like a rat in a glass cage—and I didn't like the sound of that voice. It was sort of dry, calm, tough. Like it had something to back it up.

The flashlight moved down, and I knew what a real dope I was. Because the guy in the doorway was an old gent in greasy coveralls. Just a skinny, short monkey with nothing but a flashlight in his hand and a funny look on his face.

It was the look that stopped me. Like he actually felt sorry for me—and all I had to do was jump him, slug him, and go my way. But I hesitated just long enough to lose my second chance.

More light poured into the shack, and the sound of tires squealing on the wet pavement outside. I didn't even have to look around to know that this time it was the cops in that prowl car.

They came up behind the old guy, and he was still standing there just looking at me.

"Okay," I said. "Okay."

I wasn't even trying to think any more. It was just the same old thing, beginning all over again. . . .

But the old guy must have been deaf or something, because he didn't even seem to notice that the law had arrived. He just stood there blocking the doorway until one of them tapped him on the shoulder. Then he turned.

"Huh. . . ? Oh, hello there, Fred."

The cop pushed past him and hefted his billy as he looked me over. "Sonny boy here give you any trouble, Pop?"

"Trouble?" said the old boy. "No, no trouble, Fred. Just tryin' to get this danged cash register open. We lost the key."

Fred was fat in the seat and fat in the head, and he didn't get it. Neither did I at first, for that matter.

The other cop had pushed his way in now and he was all business. "We spotted him up the road, Pop. Good thing we happened along."

"Billy?" said the old man, still perplexed. "Billy's a good lad. My sister's boy over in Meadville; he's come to work for me. Billy, this here's the local law and order."

My mouth was wide open, and the cops were looking at each other. Then the fat one called Fred moved in on me. "Look, Pop, you close up now and don't worry no more."

I decided the old boy was deaf after all, or just plain nuts. He scratched his head and ignored the coppers.

"Billy," he said, and he was talking to me, "I hate to leave the cash here all night, but I reckon it's better'n us busting this register all to hell."

The tall cop didn't get it either. He

grabbed the old man's arm. "Look, Pop, you all right? We got this baby cold; we'll put him where he won't bother you no more. You better go on home."

Pop hit his hand away. The old boy had a temper—as I learned later. "What in hell you two fatheads talkin' about? I tell you Billy works for me. Got anything against him, say so. Otherwise get the hell outa here."

The cops looked at each other again. Then they both looked at me, at the cash register with the screwdriver still jammed in the edge of the drawer.

"Well . . ." snaps the old coot, "you got a new law says a man can't open his own cash register?"

The tall cop didn't like it at all. "It don't add up, Pop. I know a job when I see one. Besides, we saw this punk up the street ten minutes ago . . . running."

"You callin' me a liar now?" demanded Pop, and I thought he was going to tie into the Glenwood police force all by himself. They glared back and forth, forgetting all about me, and I started adding up my chances of making the door. But then the old boy turned on me like he was reading my mind.

"Come on, Billy," he yapped at me. "Pull that screwdriver out and let's call it a day. We may not lose that cash after all, allowin' that these two blockheads quit pestering decent folks and stay on the job."

Then he herded the two uniforms out the door. "Sorry I got sore, fellows," I heard him saying. "No harm meant."

"Hope you know what you're doing," one of them muttered. They still weren't convinced, but they were climbing back in their car. The old boy was practically shoving them in.

He was chuckling when he came back, but he stopped when he looked at me again.

"Get moving, kiddo—before I change my mind, or one of them."

I still didn't get it. It didn't make any sense, but I did like he told me. There wasn't anything else to do, because the cops were still sitting out there, waiting. . . .

THE doctor was snapping at me again. "Don't move that eye! Look straight up at that light."

His voice brought me back. I could tell by the tone of it, by the tenseness around me, that they had reached a crucial point. I tried to lie frozen, to hold even my mind still. . . .

Then suddenly it was the light all over again, the flashlight that Pop Garson had speared me with that night nearly two years ago. A blinding white glare. . . . I could see again!

No, they had just moved the one bright spot in closer. Because that's all I could see. Instead of the foggy haze, a bright haze. It wasn't any improvement.

"Hold still," said a woman's voice, a nurse. "You've got to hold still and concentrate. It won't be much longer now."

It won't be much longer. . . .

* * *

I remembered thinking the same thing as I walked out into the rain with Pop that night, with the cops still watching me from their car. Not much longer, I told myself, until I'm alone with this old crackpot. . . .

We climbed into a battered old pickup at the rear of the gas station and started out. The old man glanced at me just once.

"Relax, kid. Nobody's gonna kick you."

I didn't say anything and we kept going, with the rain beating down on the road and the windshield wiper clicking away. And me still trying to figure out what the old man's angle was. Finally, far out on the outskirts of town, we slowed down and started to turn off the road. Then Pop stopped the car and looked at me for a second, as if trying to make up his mind.

"You can get out here if you want," he said. "Or we can go in and talk things over. It's up to you."

I shrugged. If he expected me to fall on my knees he had another think coming, but I was still curious. "Makes no difference to me," I told him.

So we drove on in. It was a little dump set back off the road with fields around it, like he'd built it mostly himself.

But it looked good to me when I got inside. One big room with a table and a couple of old armchairs and a little kitchen built back in one corner. Also a bedroom and a bathroom, all neat as a pin and cheerful in a corny sort of way. Of course, anything looks good to you after you've been on the road for a while.

"Had your supper?"

I shook my head. If this old duck wanted to play Santa Claus it was all right with me. For a while, anyway . . . until I found out what the catch was.

"I'll scrape us up some grub. Make yourself to home."

I hung my wet coat up to dry by the fireplace he'd lit. Then I walked around looking at the pictures on the wall. Pictures from magazines and some snapshots, mostly of mutts and guys with guns. A picture of Pop himself with a fish that didn't look like anything much to me.

"Like to hunt, young fellow?"

I looked around. Pop had just taken something from the icebox and was sitting down by the table. He fiddled with it for a bit and then rolled up his shirt sleeve.

You could've knocked me over with a feather. It was a hypo! The old boy was giving himself a jab . . . and I was getting out of there, but fast. That was one thing I knew enough to stay away from.

But he chuckled at the expression on my face as he laid the needle down again. "Insulin," he said, holding up a little bottle. "I got diabetes. Have to give myself a shot of this morning and night. Dang nuisance."

He got up, put the bottle back in the icebox and started getting supper. Behind his back I looked him over carefully. He was short and skinny, like I said. His head was bald on top with lots of freckles, and what hair he had left was sort of reddish, sand-colored.

No, he wasn't any hophead. I've known a couple of them in my time. The old cuss was just a little balmy, maybe that diabetes thing had something to do with it.

He got supper on the table and we sat down and I wondered what was coming. A tear-jerker on the evils of crime . . . or a proposition? He was halfway through his soup before he looked up.

"What's your name, young fellow?"

"Mannix. Johnny Mannix." I didn't see any harm in giving him that much.

"Where you from?"

I shrugged. "Points east."

"And you're headed for points west?"

I couldn't help but grin back at him. Balmy or not, the old cuss was sharp.

"My name's Garson," he told me. "You can call me Pop, everybody does."

I went back to my soup. It wasn't bad.

"Know anything about cars?"

That was getting too close to home. I knew a lot about cars, hot cars. That was what I was trying to get away from.

"Not much," I told him.

"Well, it don't matter. I need somebody to help out around my gas station. You want the job?"

Just like that! It was too fast for me. I looked at him.

"Thirty bucks a week, if you earn it," he said, "and keep. You can live here with me."

"Wait a second," I said. "I wasn't asking for any job."

He didn't answer, just shoved his soup bowl aside and reached for the big platter of scrambled eggs.

"Look," I said. "You caught me tonight with my neck out. Busting in your register. Now you wanna give me a chance to finish the job. . . ." I shook my head.

He shoved over the platter. "Help yourself."

Then he went on. "Pulled something like that myself when I was a kid. Only I didn't get caught—and I didn't pick an empty cash drawer. . . ." He grinned at me. "Oh, I sent it back to the guy ten years later, when I didn't need it so bad. That was in Laredo."

I didn't care where it was. I was still getting out of there after eating. But those eggs were good. Not even a family resemblance to the brand you get in the city hash joints.

I told him so, just to change the subject. "Good eggs, Pop."

The old boy beamed like I'd handed him a twenty-spot. "Grew 'em myself. I've got a dozen of the prettiest pullets you ever did see, out back. New Hampshires, good for eating and eggs both."

He got up and took the coffee pot off the stove. He even apologized when he saw me looking around for the sugar. "Sorry—don't use the stuff myself on account of diabetes, you know. Maybe I can find some though."

Well, it was all pretty as a tea party. He found some sugar and also a pack of cigarettes, then stoked up an old pipe for himself.

I lit a butt and managed to slip the pack in my pocket sort of absent-minded like as I got up. "Thanks for the handout," I said. "I gotta be going now."

Pop looked sore for some reason. "That's all right," he growled. "I'd do the same for any stray mutt—always am. You can keep the cigarettes."

I had my hand on the door already, but I wasn't going to take that. "Listen, grandpop, nobody asked you for nothing. It was all your idea, so don't get huffy."

"No," he snapped, "you ornery young whippersnapper! If you'd get your back down, you'd see *I* was asking you. I need some help, like I said, and I'd be better off with somebody living with me, too. It's good to have somebody around when you have diabetes, case you get an attack. And you look like you could do with a little regular eatin', too."

Well, the old chump was still beating his gums as I opened the door. But then the cold rain hit me and I wondered if *I* wasn't being the chump. Wouldn't hurt to lay over for a couple of days, even if it meant kidding the old fool along.

I closed the door again. "Thirty bucks a week is hay," I said.

"It's better'n a hundred in the city," he growled. " 'Specially when it's yours."

That was Pop. He always did have the last word, up till now. . . .

AND now Pop had stopped talking forever, and I was in an operating room. They had slipped something over my eyes and the white glare was gone. The two doctors were talking in low voices; they seemed far off. I wondered if something had gone wrong and I cussed Pop again. If it hadn't been for him, I never would have been here in the first place. . . .

Because the end of that first week had passed and I was still around. The rain changed to snow and then cold weather set in and . . . well, I guess I just got used to it.

I didn't mind the work; I'd always liked to fool around with cars anyway. Pop let me work on the repair jobs when he found out how much I knew, particularly on the late models.

Then there was my thirty bucks a week regular—plenty for what there was to do in Glenwood. A movie house, a couple of beers after work, some fellows who liked to play poker once a week. And some of those babes around town weren't bad,

either. There was one of them, Irma—but that's another story.

At first I still had some idea about picking up Pop's dough and hauling out of there some dark night. But after a while I even forgot about that. The old boy was regular, I'll say that for him. Had a drink with me now and then, even though he said he wasn't supposed to on account of his condition. And we went hunting a couple of weekends.

Sure, we had words—but that was part of it. He wouldn't take any guff no more than I would, and I respected him for it. No, it wasn't bad living with the old guy. Not at first. Not until I had the accident.

It happened one day late in February when we had two cars in the little garage. Which made it pretty crowded, but still better than working outside in the cold.

Pop was underneath one, checking some bearing I'd just adjusted, and I was putting a battery back in the other one. I set it down on the floor to check the water level first and started to unscrew the plugs, but I dropped the last one and it rolled under the car. I got down to reach for it. . . .

Pop told me later on how it happened. He told me a thousand times how it happened. He said he finished under the other car and started to shove himself out on his mechanic's creeper. Laying on his back like that he didn't see the battery. His foot smacked it hard and knocked it over.

It was right by my head and I heard it go, but I didn't have a chance. Not with my head crammed under a runningboard. There wasn't even time to turn my face—and the stuff splashed across my eyes.

Battery acid . . . you know what it does to clothes?

I don't remember too much what happened after that, except Pop dragged me off the floor like I was a baby and ducked my face in the tub of water we used for testing tubes. Later, when they got me to the hospital—this same hospital—I heard a doctor tell Pop that was the only thing that saved my eyes at all.

Why that was supposed to make me happy, I didn't know—not then anyway. As far as I was concerned, I was blind, even if I could make out the difference between light and dark. That was worse than being completely blacked out. Everything was shadows and blurs, like things look to you when you first put drops in your eyes. I couldn't tell what the blurs were, and even in that little shack of Pop's I had to learn to find my way around again, by feel.

Sure, I went back to live with Pop. I didn't have anywhere else to go, not now that I was blind. And he couldn't do enough for me, because he blamed himself entirely for the accident.

"Johnny," he told me the day we came back from the hospital, "you got a home here as long as you want it. I can't make up for your eyes—but I can fix it so you'll never have to worry about anything else."

Well, that was all right—at first. I didn't blame Pop any more than I blamed myself for what had happened. But the days and weeks went by and I grew to hate the old man and his house and everything about him, now that I couldn't get away from it. It got so I spent my whole day just thinking about him and his phony attempts to be cheerful. He pretended not to notice.

Then one evening we had it out. I'd gone crazy that afternoon, really crazy. I'd smashed some plates in the kitchen and then went out back and wrung a lousy chicken's neck, just for the hell that was eating inside me.

"Johnny," he said, when he got home that night, "I don't like this. Not at all."

"Go ahead, then," I told him. "Kick me out."

I could see him in my mind, shaking his head stubbornly like he used to when we got hot at each other. "No, Johnny, it's not that. I know how you must feel, but it ain't good just to do nothing but set around all day. You've got to find something to do."

"Like what?" I sneered at him.

I heard him sigh patiently. That was another thing, his confounded patience.

"You could learn to read this Braille stuff. I'll drive you to the city every day if necessary. And there're other things blind folks learn to do with their hands."

"Not me," I told him. "No rug-weaving for me. Not unless you're tired of feeding me. You want me to get a cup and some pencils?"

"You could still help out around the station," Pop said. "A mechanic uses his hands more than his eyes, anyway. You know that."

"Thanks just the same," I told him. "You want an exhibit down there, get a monkey in a cage—like Peterson's."

HE WAS silent and I knew I'd finally got under his skin. Because when I first came back, he must have asked almost everybody in town to come by and see me daytimes. Old lady Sutter from up the road, the minister—even those two cops that tried to run me in the first night. They all dropped by now and then, until I told 'em off.

Now I went on because something inside me wouldn't stop. "Why don't you kick me out? Go ahead, just tell me, that's all. You don't owe me nothing, nobody does."

He didn't say anything.

"You scared to?" I asked him.

"Not scared, Johnny," he answered quietly. "And not just because you're blind. Because it ain't in those eyes of yours where you're really blind. Maybe some day you'll know what I mean, and what the Good Book means when it talks about being your brother's keeper."

I laughed at him. "Don't give me that Bible stuff, Pop. I went to church once myself. You wanna read something that makes sense, look up that part about 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' "

After that he left me alone. I couldn't even get a rise out of him any more, and that was even worse.

Then one afternoon I heard the old pick-up come tearing in the driveway like the way I used to drive it. It was too early for him to be through work and I wondered what had happened.

He came busting in the door like he was drunk and shoved something in my lap. It felt like a magazine, a big magazine with smooth paper.

"Johnny, my boy," he yelled, "Look! Look at that article!"

"You look," I told him. "I'm blind."

He calmed down a little. "Johnny, there's a way they can fix up your eyes, good as new. Soon as I saw this, this morning, I drove over to the hospital in the city. The doctor there said it was right—the one that took care of you before. They can take part of another eye, a good eye, and graft it on yours."

"Fine," I said. "What's the catch?"

Pop was silent for a second, and I knew there was a catch, after all. There always is.

"Come on," I yelled. "What is it? How come the doctor never said anything before?"

Pop's voice was pretty low. "Yes, Johnny, you're right. There is a catch to it. You see, this operation is fairly new. And there're still a lot more blind people—people injured like you—than there are donors. That's why the doctor didn't tell us before, because he didn't want to get your hopes up too soon. Now he says it may be a year yet . . . maybe longer."

"So what's all the excitement about?" I asked.

Pop swatted me on the back again. "Come on, Johnny, snap out of it! You're gonna be able to see again! Ain't that worth waitin' for?"

"How do you know it'll work with me?"

"Nine out of ten times it does, Johnny. That's what the doctor said."

"And how," I said, still thinking it over, "do I know any guy's going to turn up with an eye to spare for me? There's probably some angle to that, too."

"Well, I'm not gonna last too much longer," Pop answered in a funny voice. "Not at my age, with diabetes like I got."

"Now who's moaning?"

"Not me!" Pop snapped back. "I'm not complainin'. You see, I found out at the hospital this morning that anyone with normal eyes can be a donor. They take a section of the cornea—that's the outside part where the acid burned you—well, they take a little piece of this cornea from the good eye and graft it in place of the scarred part. Sort of like putting in a new window pane; you'll be able to see as good as new. And I signed a paper sayin' that when I die my eyes go to you."

"Thanks," I said. "So now I'm supposed to sit around waiting for you to kick off?"

"I'll like that, Johnny," Pop said. "I'll like that, knowin' I've made it up to you at least part ways. . . ."

WELL, I hoped the old boy was liking it now, wherever he was. Because sure enough he had died . . . and here I was on the operating table just like he had planned.

The nurse was still talking to me, telling me I was doing fine and it was nearly over. I tried to think about how it was going to be, being able to see again. But I couldn't

get Pop out of my mind. He had been dead only a little while, even if it seemed years ago now and I wanted to forget it. Just yesterday. . . .

Thinking about that, I didn't even notice at first that something had happened to that white haze. The two guys bending over me sure looked funny, all wrapped up with just their eyes showing. And that one bright spot I'd been trying to figure out at first was a spotlight on an adjustable arm. . . .

Then it hit me. "I can see! I can see!"

The nurse said quickly, "Just hold still. Don't spoil it now." Then something went over my eye again, cutting it all off.

Yes, I could see!

But there had been something wrong. Something else besides the two doctors and the spotlight and a big skylight above. Something in the background that didn't make sense, like a double exposure on a film. . . .

"There's something wrong," I told them, finally.

"Don't talk," said the nurse.

One of the doctors spoke up. "Nothing wrong at all, young fellow. But you're going to have to wear a bandage for a while."

And then I was back in my bed. Bandage, hell! It felt more like somebody had a thumb in my eye. That one glimpse was all I had had, but I kept telling myself now it was worth it. Even with the pain. They told me it would be about a week. . . .

I was used to counting time in minutes and hours instead of days. But that week seemed to pass slower than the whole three months did from the time Pop came home and told me about the chance I had, to when he finally kicked off.

We didn't talk about it again, after that afternoon. There was something new between us now, and that made things even worse than they had been before. The funny thing is, I think Pop realized what it was even before I did.

Then one day I knew. One day when he came home early again. I heard him go straight to the icebox and I knew he was feeling bad from his diabetes. Sometimes when he got too tired or got careless about his diet, he had to give himself an extra shot of that insulin stuff.

He tried to joke about it, but I knew he was worried. "Well, Johnny," he said, after the insulin had begun to work, "at this rate you won't have to wait much longer for that eye of mine."

"Nuts," I answered him. "You're a tough old rooster, Pop."

I said that just because I didn't like what I was really thinking right then. Pop went back to work the next day as chipper as ever, and I tried to stop thinking. Yes, I honestly tried to get the idea out of my head —at first.

But a month went by, and I was still thinking the same thought. Sitting there in the armchair, hearing the clock over the stove, the chickens clucking out back. . . . Blind! And all I had to do was get up, walk toward the back part of the room, reach in. . . .

Then I'd stop myself. It probably wouldn't work. It was too risky.

That went on for two months more. Then, one day, just like I always knew I would, I got up from that chair and did it.

Pop came home that night plenty tired. But he didnt' get much sleep—and neither did I. I could hear him tossing on his bed, and once he got up and I heard the icebox door opening. I stayed in bed, though, pretending to be asleep—until finally I smelled the breakfast coffee on the stove. Then I got up and dressed.

When I gave him a big "Good morning!" he answered like he was glad to see me in good spirits. But he didn't say much at breakfast.

I finally asked him, "What's the matter, Pop? You got a grouch on?"

"Don't feel good, Johnny. I'm gonna see Doc this morning."

Right after breakfast he drove off. I washed up the dishes just to keep myself busy. It must have been ten o'clock when he came back, and he still wasn't feeling too hot. I could tell by the way he walked in.

"What'd the Doc say?"

I heard the icebox door open and close as he answered me. "Told me to knock off and rest."

"That old horse doctor," I said. "Didn't he give you anything?"

Pop walked past me into the bedroom. "Just more insulin—a stronger solution. Says I'm not gettin' enough. You remind me, Johnny, if I forget."

"Sure," I told him.

Well, Pop went back to bed and I went

back to my chair. I sat there and waited until I heard him snoring. Then I got up and went to the icebox. There were two of those little bottles in it now. . . .

It suddenly seemed to me the snoring had stopped, that a board had creaked in the floor of the bedroom. But then I heard Pop's regular breathing again, and I laughed at myself.

A couple of hours later, after I'd heard the afternoon train go by up the valley, I went in and woke him up.

"How d'ya feel?"

"Pretty good." But he was lying; I could tell by his voice. "What time is it?"

"Getting on afternoon. Aren't you supposed to take some more of that insulin?"

"Yeah, thanks." He climbed slowly out of bed. "Doc says three times a day now, when I need it."

I followed him into the other room, waited while he fixed himself up. "Johnny," he said, and I could feel him looking at me.

"Yeah, Pop?"

"You know what to do if I pass out? You remember how I told you to bring me out of it?"

"Sure. But maybe you better go back to the doctor? You don't sound so good."

The old boy was stubborn, just like I knew he would be. "Hell, no. I'll be all right soon as this stuff begins workin'."

He went back to bed, and I sat down again. And waited. He couldn't get back to sleep. Then he began to breathe harder, like he couldn't get enough air.

I waited.

"Johnny. . . ." It was just a gasp.

I didn't move, but the sweat was pouring down me. I wished that blindness hadn't made my ears so sharp, that I couldn't hear every breath he took. Once I started to get up. . . .

"Don't be a dope," I told myself and sat down again.

The clock ticked on, and that was all I could hear in the house now. Just that and the pounding of my own heart. It was getting late. Outside on the highway there was the rush of traffic that meant people coming home from work in the city.

I finally got up and went into the bedroom.

"Pop!"

He didn't answer and I shook him hard. He was limp, completely limp, and barely breathing. There was no turning back now, and still one thing left to do. One last trip to the icebox.

Then it took me a good twenty minutes to find my way across the fields to the Sutter place up the road. I was out of breath when I got there, completely winded and muddy and scratched up.

I must have made it good, because all Mrs. Sutter said when she opened the door was, "Good Lord, Johnny!"

"Your phone!" I gasped. "Quick—it's Pop!"

WELL, they rushed Pop to the city hospital in a police car, and I rode along with them. The same old car and the same two dopes: fat Fred and the other one. The biggest laugh of all was the way they treated me after one of the doctors came out and told us there wasn't much chance.

"This is a tough break for you," Fred said. "You better come on home with me. The old lady won't mind, until you can get straightened out."

"Nope, I'm staying right here," I told him. "Old Pop was the only friend I ever had, and I'll hang around till the end. Don't worry about me—I'll get along."

I did wait there in the sitting room, too. Waited for hours, it seemed, until the doctor came back again.

"I've got bad news for you," he told me.

"He's—Pop's gone?"

The doctor laid a hand on my shoulder. "He was too far gone, son. We couldn't bring him out of it." He paused, and then added more cheerfully, "I understand it gives you a chance to see again, though. That right?"

"See—see again?"

I was dumb as all hell. They had to explain it to me. . . .

That was all there was to it. Toward the end of the week old Doc Bentley from Glenwood dropped in to see me, and I just played dumb again. It isn't hard when you've been blind, anyway, because most people treat you like you'd lost your brains along with your eyesight.

Doc asked me all about the operation and how my eye was coming along, and then he got to the point.

"Johnny, I still don't understand about Pop."

"He told me he'd been to see you the day

before he died," I said accusingly, almost angrily.

"He did, he did," the old horse doc sighed. "But he wasn't in such bad shape then. Just needed more insulin, and I gave him that. Didn't he take the stuff like I told him?"

"How would I know?" I asked him. "I couldn't see—remember? All I know is, I thought he was sleeping. That afternoon I was fooling around outside, and I didn't know anything was wrong until I came in and tried to wake him. . . ."

"Yes, yes," Doc sighed again. "I know you did everything you could, Johnny. But I still don't understand it, I still don't understand. . . ." He finally left, still muttering to himself.

That was yesterday and today was the big day—the day the bandage came off. While they were getting ready, I was scared all over again. And I didn't know quite what I was scared of—that I wouldn't be able to see, or was it something else?

I felt them loosening the bandage, and it was all I could do not to yell for them to stop. Finally they lifted it, and light hit my eye. I saw the doctor again—the one who had operated, and a nurse. But I saw more than that. It was the same thing I thought I had glimpsed in the operating room before: that strange double-exposure effect.

Only this time I had a chance to see just what it was. Because I wasn't blind any more. I was seeing again! I was seeing, but through another man's eyes. Pop's eyes. . . .

And I couldn't stand it; not what that eye was showing me. I raised my hand . . . and they tried, too late, to stop me. I raised my hand and rubbed it across that eye, trying desperately to blot the image out. I guess I screamed, too. . . .

* * *

The eye surgeon came back to see me once more before they took me away. He still didn't seem to understand, and I explained it to him again. There wasn't anything to lose, anyway, because my confession was already down in black and white. My confession with the other details . . . about the water and the drop of milk to make it cloudy like insulin and all the rest, with my signature underneath.

When I told the surgeon again just what I had seen, he was silent for a minute. Then he said irritably—as if it wasn't me he cared about but that operation of his I had ruined:

"Nonsense! It was just in your mind, that's all. The cornea's like a window glass. Light comes through it, but leaves no impression. Even if the old man had seen what you thought he did . . . well, the image died in his brain. You were just imagining things."

Maybe so. But I still know what I had seen in those few seconds before I raised my hand to rub it out forever. I had seen me, Johnny Mannix, pouring insulin out of a bottle.

Insulin. . . ? No, a man's life. Pop's life, and I had seen it through his eyes. Because Pop had seen what I had done. He had known.

I know now, too, what he had meant about being blind in another way that has nothing to do with eyesight. But I'm just as glad I won't be able to see when they lead me into that gas chamber.

THE MOST DELICATE OPERATION

Compelling Murder Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Operation Murder

HE DID NOT know fear. He had never felt, in his curious life, that stupid reaction. Fear was for fools and for neurotic women. Fear dangled like a long tail to a kite, pulling a man every which way, anywhere the wind might take it.

He charted his own course, his own destiny. Rose each morning promptly at seven. His life, he liked to think, was planned to be precise, exact—although of course the sun might shine one day and the next day it might rain. The seasons changed and men were born and died, but nothing could affect *his* schedule. He would spend all of ten seconds on awakening in delicious stretching. There was a certain satisfaction in this stretching, a certain cat-like joy. Then three minutes were given to a quick, cold shower; at seven-twenty exactly he would appear on the stairway. His wife, Marcia, as though waiting for this signal, would flutter at his toast. She would come alive, it seemed, and call, "Good morning!"

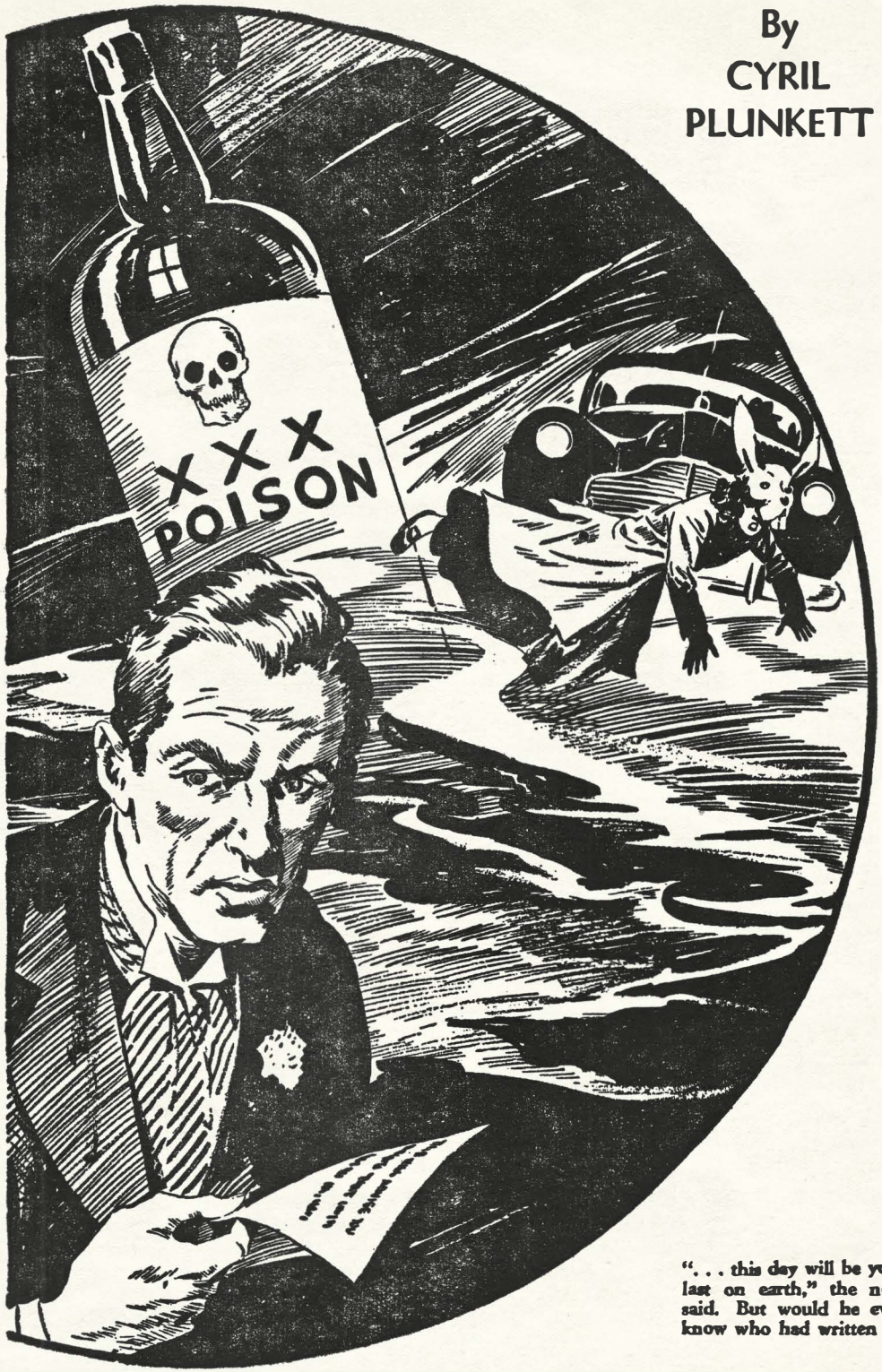
This morning, as usual, the cook, Mrs. Weber, came in promptly from the kitchen, beaming.

"Bacon, I see, Mrs. Weber?"

"It was ham with your eggs, Doctor,

Before him, those silent, staring ghosts passed in review: Tom Jerrold, who had died beneath his probing surgeon's knife; Dunhill, whose last word had been a despairing curse flung back from death's enfolding shadows; Wanda Weber, whose tiny body had been crushed remorselessly under the wheels of his car. . . . But which of these wraiths was beckoning him along his bitter path, Dr. Stern would never know—until the final reunion in Hell!

By
CYRIL
PLUNKETT



"... this day will be your last on earth," the note said. But would he ever know who had written it?

yesterday morning and the day before."

"So it was." He smiled. "I'd quite forgotten."

He was Dr. Louis Stern, *the* Dr. Stern of Lakeview Hospital. He was the man whose scalpel opened windows to human brains and hearts. Only the most delicate surgery did he do—cases, usually, one read of in the papers. "So and so was brought to Lakeview in a chartered plane." Or by train. Or properly referred to him by specialists halfway across the nation.

He was forty-one, his dark hair with a fine full wave in it, his grey eyes always clear, direct and searching. He had a fine high forehead, a slender figure, strong long-fingered hands. He was proud of his hands; and when he smoked he used his cigarette as a woman might a jewel—the glowing end catching the eye, accentuating his fingers. Nails manicured, of course. Firm fingers. Never a tremor in them.

This morning Marcia spilled a drop of coffee.

Stern frowned his disapproval. It was always that simple. Years back, he'd thrown a saddle and a bridle on her and broke her. The doctor's wife belonged in the home, and once that fact had been established his married life had flowed smoothly. No questions. She must answer, "Yes, dear." As his nurses, his assistants—Bennett, Dunhill—answered, "Yes, Doctor." He did not tolerate questions.

So Marcia gave him no cause for concern and now, convinced that she was chastened for this day, he picked up his mail. Not the morning mail at this early hour; they lived above the city in a villa in the mountains, and the important mail all went to Lakeview, to his office. But sometimes odds and ends crept up like this to his home, to be read at breakfast.

One plain envelope this morning was typewritten *Personal.*

"Louis," Marcia was saying, "could I drive in with you?"

He had slit the envelope; he looked up and paused. Each morning, Weber, his chauffeur, the cook's husband, drove him to the hospital. "Sorry. I shall have Weber return the car for you."

"But, darling, that would make it too late!"

"The cream, please."

She sighed softly. "Yes, dear."

"You know very well, my dear—" he cleared his throat— "the importance of my work, that I dislike any distraction whatever on my way to surgery."

"But I thought Dr. Dunhill was operating this morning?"

"I've decided," Stern snapped, "to change Dunhill's mind." He looked down at the note sheet. Two lines. Stirring his coffee, he read the first line incuriously:

"This will advise you, Doctor, that—

Marcia was saying pleadingly, "Louis, if you'll only listen a moment. . . ."

He no longer heard what she said. He read the second line, and stopped. He stiffened. He read the line over:

. . . . this day will be your last on earth."

EVERYTHING changed. A shadow fell across the room from the open window. It seemed as though the day itself had sucked in its breath. His heart began thumping at his ribs; the pulses in his temples began pounding. *This day will be your last on earth.* He drew in a deep breath, held it, let it slowly out. Then he put the spoon down, folded the letter, put it in his pocket.

Everything had changed. Six long months, like men with leaded feet, went marching through his brain. The clouded sky reminded him of rain. Reminded him of night, October, Hallowe'en. The rainy night he'd driven down the mountain. . . .

She'd darted out of nowhere, the child. He remembered. Memory rose in him like a volcano bursting with high flame. One moment there had been nothing ahead but the glisten of wet asphalt, the promise of applause that evening. His tires had been singing and he'd been thinking of the paper he would read, surgeons from a dozen states had gathered just to hear it. He would bask in his great fame; there always was applause when he developed and released new technique. He would bow and smile . . . .

Then she came out of nowhere, the child. She'd looked like a frightened rabbit in a dark green raincoat. Silly. Hallowe'en. She had on a falseface with two silly, furry ears that stood straight up from her head. And beneath the coat she wore a long, full skirt—a silly kid who'd dressed up in a silly gypsy dress to cross the street and play, perhaps, a silly prank on a patient

neighbor on that night of hobgobblins.

He'd turned the corner and there she was, straight in his path. As startled as he was; blinded, it seemed, by fear and his blazing lights. She tried to turn and leap back to the curb, but the long skirt tripped her. He saw her sway and fall. *My God,* he thought. He could almost hear her scream—and all this time, split-seconds, he was fighting for decision.

Wet streets—very slippery. Brake the car, or swing it toward the curb? It might skid. He might slam into the curb. He might even overturn, and then—then anything might happen. A crash could kill him, injure him, his hands. . . .

He was trained to make split-second decisions. He was trained to gamble, win or lose, with death. He was trained to lift a man's heart calmly in his gloved hand, squeeze it. So he gripped the wheel and felt the thud, and he gritted his teeth and let the car roll out its momentum slowly. He held onto the door, then squared his shoulders and got out, walked back. A young man was aready there, had come from nowhere, someone he knew, thought that he knew, vaguely. A woman cried out from a porch and came running. Suddenly two cars had stopped, and then there was a siren and policemen.

"I'm Dr. Stern," he said. "I've done everything I could. The rain. I didn't see the child. I felt the thud, but then it was too late."

Too late. The rabbit's ears no longer stood straight up. The falseface was all red, all crushed, all broken.

"Driver's license?"

"Yes, of course, officer. I'm Dr. Louis Stern. . . ."

Dr. Louis Stern. . . .

Yes, Doctor. Witnesses? The woman heard the scream, then ran out on the porch. Too late. So she knew nothing. The young man? Stern heard him say, "I was walking up the street. I heard the scream and swung around. . . ." Too late. *Yes, Doctor.* A nasty shock. Get a good grip. We'll contact you tomorrow sir. *Yes, Doctor.*

Stern stood there one more minute for appearances. The rain fell softly on his face, caressing, cool. The danger was past now; he was safe. The rain ran from his sleeves and down his hands. Fine, strong hands that never were in doubt or trembled. He walked back to his car. He leaned back in his car and sighed and closed his eyes. . . .

The little rabbit's name was Wanda Weber. A phone call settled that some twenty minutes later. Stern made the call himself, but Bennett was there, too, at his desk. Dr. Bennett, his assistant. Bennett somehow looked like Wanda Weber. Bennett had big ears; Stern shook his head a little with annoyance.

"Her family?" he said, on the phone.

The child's father was Jake Weber. Who knew or cared about a man named Weber? Apartment, very likely. Two or three flights up. Three rooms. Mortgage, very likely, if they owned their furniture. Mrs. Weber worked evenings in a restaurant.

"Of course," Stern told the phone, "I want to do everything for them that I can."

Yes, Doctor.

"Fine," Stern said. "I'll note the address, 726 Vine, and call on them tomorrow."

He sat back from the phone. Confound Bennett's ears! He'd never noticed them before. Never noticed that John Bennett looked so much like a—a rabbit.

Bennett said, "You're due upstairs in five more minutes. How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," Stern grunted.

Bennett looked at him. Then Bennett colored slightly, blinked. "I thought perhaps you might be upset. I mean I—I thought you might wish me to read the paper."

"Nonsense," Stern said. "These men have come to Lakeview to hear *me.*" Confound it, you couldn't tell a man to his blinking face that his place was in a cage, that he looked like a rabbit.

"Then you'll give the paper?"

"Certainly," Stern said. "Remind me, Bennett, to look up the Webers in the morning."

At eleven that night he drove over to see Hilma.

HE DROVE slowly, with great care. He cut his headlights one block off, and then swung quickly in a short black drive and the garage was open. The garage was always open. The door was only closed when Stern's car was inside. It was often inside, nights, like this, from eleven until dawn. He was very fond of Hilma.

She had beautiful clothes and long beautiful legs. She had a tiny waist, hips delicately rounded. Everything about her was well-rounded. Blonde, blue-eyed Hilma Jerrold. Widow of Tom Jerrold. Stern preferred though not to think too much about Tom Jerrold.

They'd come, a few months past, to his office, the Jerrolds. Jerrold, it seemed, had been in the war and was suffering from an old head wound. There had been a dark prognosis, and Stern, the genius that was Stern's, was considered Jerrold's last chance. Any chance Jerrold had had was gone the moment Louis Stern saw beautiful Hilma.

Her eyes had glistened that morning. She was beautiful in tears and her voice was husky and they had so little money, only hope. Two kids, newly married, terribly in love. Her lips were full and red and beautiful that morning.

Jerrold died on the table. For several years Stern had waited for his chance. He was working on Jerrold's brain and he had always wondered, coldly, scientifically, what would happen if—*if he dared cut deeper.* That morning he cut deeper. He even wrote a paper on the danger of it, later.

So Jerrold died on the table, and then Hilma owed a debt that she could never, never pay. She said that. She sobbed when he refused his fee. She sobbed and looked at him and said that.

"I tried, Mrs. Jerrold." His voice was soft and kind, and it amused him to consider that he had an organ in his throat that morning. There was music in his voice that he could use to play upon her tattered nerves. "I wanted desperately to win for you, Mrs. Jerrold, but. . . ."

God, you know, in His great Wisdom. . . . Stern was momentarily very grave and silent. Then:

"Are you going back to—Iowa, wasn't it, Mrs. Jerrold?"

"Nebraska."

"I wonder if that's wise. You're very young. Now, suddenly, you're completely without ties except—except the old associations, memories. Why don't you let me help you?"

"But Doctor Stern, you've already done so much. . . ."

He was cautious. There was plenty of time. She must learn to lean on him, depend on him for decisions. What could she do for a living? He was very cautious. A word from him and she had a job on one of the hospital elevators. Up and down all day—but now he had her in a cage. Like Marcia, like John Bennett. He could pause and smile and say, "How are you this morning, Hilma?" He could ask if she'd found a satisfactory room. Then add: "No, that's not the right place for you. Not the place to make you happy. You see, I feel a keen responsibility, Hilma."

So one day she was installed in a small but lovely apartment; and one night he called casually to see her—apartment. But he was very cautious. . . .

Now, this night, Hallowe'en, he climbed the rear stairs to her room and rapped. He heard her light quick footsteps. Slender, nude feet in high heels. A blue gown, just the right shade, made to match her eyes. A wide gold belt around her slender waist, her blonde hair falling gently to her shoulders.

"Louis!" she said. And he caught it instantly, her tension.

"The radio," she said then. Her breasts were rising, falling, swiftly in her agitation. "I heard about the girl on the ten o'clock news. Louis, how terrible for you!"

He looked tired. After all, it was almost midnight. It was easy to look tired. He slumped in a chair, and she ran around the room, long-limbed, every move she made delightful. A hassock for his feet. She lit his cigarette and brought a tall, cool drink.

"Darling, I wanted so much to be with you. I wanted desperately to phone and didn't dare. . . ."

He sipped the drink, then held it. Made with it tiny studied motions. "I'm going over to the Webers tomorrow."

"The parents, Louis?"

"Yes. Chap named Weber. I understand they're not too well off."

"Those poor people. And poor you!"

"I'm going to do everything I can."

She sat down on his chair. The scent she wore—he drank it in and damned this insane talk of rabbits, Webers. He wanted nothing quite so much now as to sweep her from the chair arm to himself. But every move had to be weighed with care. So he sipped the drink, then leaned back, eyes closed, sighing.

"This is what I wait for, my dear. These

wonderful moments with you. Hilma, are you happy?"

She kissed him, his forehead, his hair. She moaned a little, and he knew that how *she* felt was really unimportant to her. She trembled in his arms, and he had one thought of a black, wet street, bright headlights, a sharp scream. He had one bleak moment, a climax, a shiver. It was over then, and he pulled her down beside him in the chair. He found her red lips warm tonight, and eager. . . .

The phone rang.

For a moment they were almost unaware. She swung around then, and her hair spilled half across her face. She tossed it back, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Who could it be?" he said.

"Not for me. No one ever calls me."

The phone rang on, three times, four. "Hilma, are you sure no one knows that I come here?"

"Darling, I've never breathed a word!"

"Answer it." Then he added, "and be careful."

The sixth ring snarled briefly as she lifted the receiver. "Hello," she said. "Yes, this is Mrs. Jerrold." The color swept out of her face and left it ashen. "Dr. Stern? She flashed a glance at him. "You mean is he *here?*"

Stern's hands had gripped the chair arms.

"Who is this?" she said faintly. Again the glance, despair, and then she set the phone down. "He hung up!" she said. "Louis, he didn't expect me to call you! He didn't even wait for my denial. A man, Louis—he just laughed and then hung up!"

"Did you recognize the voice?"

She just stood there, frightened, staring at him, her head shaking.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mourner

HE BEGAN that night, for the first time in his life to wonder, to nibble at uncertainty. *Look here. What has this guy got? I dropped in to see Hilma. What does that prove? Nothing!*

Nothing? She was beautiful, wasn't she? Widowed, wasn't she? Dependent on him for a job, wasn't she? And the apartment. And her clothes. And the money in her purse, for all of that.

But what could the guy *prove?*

He doesn't have to prove anything All he has to do is hint. . . .

Yes, Doctor did not sound well if one sneered it. If one coupled it with scandal. Stern drove home with hands clamped upon the wheel, his mind searching, cursing.

The man who'd phoned couldn't have been Bennett. The key to the thing was undoubtedly ambition, and Stern had evaluated John Bennett this long time as a genius, and in a sense a fool, utterly devoid of ambition. All John Bennett wanted was time—and test tubes, dogs, guinea pigs and monkeys. He lived for ideas, to perfect, in a medical sense, a better mousetrap for humanity. Who then sold the mousetrap was to Bennett, fortunately, unimportant.

Bennett was the plow horse of the team; he pulled the weight and didn't even know it. So the man who'd phoned couldn't have been Bennett.

Driving up the mountain, around the high rim of the gorge, Stern faced an iron curtain. His life was full of ugly caves and rat-holes, but he had always camouflaged them well and he could think of no

one who might hate him. His associate in surgery, Doctor Dunhill? Dunhill didn't hate him. Dunhill, while ambitious and intent on a career, was still too young, so there hadn't been, as yet, the time to invite hatred.

No, the man behind the phone call had been ugly, his laughter deliberate, his plan without question—blackmail.

All right, Stern thought, lying quietly in bed that night, listening to the moaning mountain wind that night, *it's your first move, my friend. And then, who knows? Perhaps it will be my turn.*

He didn't think to tell his wife tonight about the rabbit. The life—and death—of Wanda Weber was that unimportant.

* * *

It was blackmail. The man phoned Stern's office in the middle of the morning. But Stern's secretary already had instructions. Doctor Stern would be occupied until six. Would the man leave his name? He wouldn't. *Pretty smart.* Stern was standing by the phone, and inwardly he grinned.

The man would try again at six? He did. This time, Stern was alone in his office. Now he leaned back in his chair. Expectant, tense all day, but very calm now.

"Dr. Stern?"

"Correct."

"I tried to contact you last night. . . ."

"Sorry. I'm not in my office evenings."

"Midnight." The man chuckled. "Mrs. Jerrold's apartment. Remember?"

Stern counted to ten—the proper pause to show that he was anxious. Then he said. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Oh, no! You're entirely too direct. First a meeting. It's to your interest that we have a meeting."

"When?"

"Are you alone? If you are I'll come right over."

"That isn't practical."

"Then when?"

Stern looked at his wrist watch, looked outside. It was dark outside. "That depends on where you are, I think."

The man chuckled again. "Cagey? Okay, I'll string you along. You pick a bar—"

"No public place, emphatically. I'll stop and have a drink with you, however, if you're in your home." He was calm.

This time the man waited. Stern could hear him breathing. "All right. I'll buy you a drink. I'm at seven-two-two Vine."

Vine? Stern's glance flashed off to his desk pad. *The Webers lived on Vine, at seven-two-six.* "Half-hour?"

"That's fine, Doctor. Oh yes, the side door, please."

Stern sat there, looking at the phone. Then he opened a drawer in his desk, removed a fresh pack of cigarettes and tore open one corner of it. He set the pack on the desk. A small bottle filled with murky fluid was next. He donned rubber gloves, removed the label, washed the bottle and wiped it. He removed the cap and partly filled a slender vial, then recorked the bottle. The bottle, touched only by gloved hands, went into his pocket. The vial replaced two cigarettes that he took from the pack. It fit snugly there, unseen, ready, the top open.

He put the cigarettes in his vest pocket, where they would stand straight up. Then he phoned Marcia.

"I shan't be home for dinner. I intend to look in on the Webers." He'd told Marcia this morning, at breakfast, of the Webers.

"Be generous to them, Louis."

"Yes," he said, "I intend to."

"Will you be home late?"

"Quite late, I think."

"Louis, you sound—strained."

"I?" He laughed. "No. Just tired."

HE TOOK the stairs, drew on dress gloves and walked out to his car. He drove directly to Vine Street. A back track to last night, half a block from where the accident had happened.

There were cars parked along the street tonight, at the Webers. The mourners. One more car would scarcely be noticed. He walked quietly from the shadows to the door, the side door at seven-two-two. Barely rapped before the door was opened.

"Ah!" the man said. "Dr. Stern!"

It was, as Stern expected it would be from the address, the young man who had been first to reach the rabbit, Wanda Weber, last night on the corner.

"Doctor, come in!"

"Thank you."

"I don't need to tell you that we're quite alone?"

"We'd get nowhere if we weren't."

"Precisely. Your coat? Your hat? You'll notice that I've drawn the draperies." The smile was artificial, mocking. "We always aim to please. Won't you sit down, Doctor?"

Stern looked around him, then crossed the room. Living room, very small; a bedroom on beyond it; a kitchenette and bath. He glanced from the hall into all these rooms, followed by the man's broad leer. Then Stern returned to the front room, withdrew one glove, the right one, and sat down. All the while he'd tried to call the young man's name from memory, couldn't.

"Don't know me, do you?"

Stern examined the fellow. Blond, twenty-two or three, good-looking. Flushed, a little drunk, perhaps, tonight. Eyes too bright. Elated, very sure—and therefore, no doubt, stupid. "I recall seeing you last night. Beyond that, your face is annoyingly familiar."

"I remind you, don't I, of your associate, Dr. Dunhill?"

Stern had it. He'd heard Dunhill speak of a brother, here, in college. He said dryly, "The resemblance seems to be purely physical."

Young Dunhill grinned. "Isn't there a black sheep in most families? But I promised you a drink."

"Not yet."

"Mind if I have one?"

Bottle and two glasses on a stand. Stern looked at them unblinkingly a moment. Observed Dunhill's hand shake as he held the bottle. Nerves twangy tight? Stern nodded to himself with satisfaction, calmly.

"You see, Doctor," Dunhill smacked his lips, still grinning as he turned, "there are always two sides to a story. Cigarette?"

"No, thanks. I have my own."

Dunhill flipped a lighter, inhaled deeply. Then he sat down. He sprawled, his long legs outstretched, the cigarette dangling between his lips.

"I mean, suppose I wasn't going *up* the street last night, as I said. Suppose I was going *down?* Suppose, therefore, when I heard the child scream I didn't have my back turned, but was coming along Vine Street, walking toward the corner. I mean suppose I saw the whole damned thing, exactly as it happened?"

"Interesting," Stern said. "But I don't deal in suppositions."

Dunhill removed the cigarette, held it up between his thumb and third finger, looked at it as he continued. "It's no supposition. It's a fact. I saw the accident. You didn't even try to avoid hitting the child."

"I beg your pardon, Dunhill. I didn't see the child."

Dunhill looked at him directly. Then he said with irritating slowness, "Y'know, you puzzle me, Doctor. In my book, you saw that kid and deliberately ran her down. In my book, you committed murder. The hell of it is, I can't make a motive. So I don't get it—yet. I might poke around though. Should I?"

"I repeat," Stern said levelly, "I did not see the child. Apparently I've wasted my time and my curiosity, coming to see you."

"On the contrary, you were smart."

"Indeed?"

"You're damned right you were smart. I've got merchandise to sell, Stern, and I'm giving you first look—"

"A theory," Stern snapped.

"Theory, hell. You rolled right into that kid. I saw it. But consider this, Doctor—you're peculiarly in a position to give *me* value."

Dunhill leaned forward abruptly. "Look, Stern. I played ball last night. I gave you a clean bill with the cops. Then I got my car and drove over to the hospital and hung around until the clinic was over. I wanted to let you *know* that I'd played ball—and that's where I got my break, because you got away too fast for me."

"And apparently you followed me?" Stern smiled slightly. "Has it occured to you, Dunhill, that I'm a doctor? That I make emergency calls?"

Dunhill began to laugh. "Emergency, all right. I tried hard to date Hilma Jerrold myself, a while back."

"Suppose I say I don't know what you're talking about?"

Now Dunhill's bright eyes were mocking. "I thought you never dealt in suppositions?"

"Damn it, Dunhill—"

"Shut up. I'm in a jam, and it's serious. It involves all my plans, my whole career. I won't bore you with the details—but you certainly rate with the school's regents. A

word from you and I won't be canned."

"Oh?" Stern settled back again. "And that's your proposition?"

"That's the beginning. I need money."

Stern wet his lips, pulled the pack of cigarettes from his vest. Then he paused, looked up and said cautiously, "How much?"

"Plenty."

"How much?"

THE GRIN on Dunhill's face had become hard and fixed. "I know Jake Weber. He was nuts about his kid. A word from me and he would blow his top. That could be—nasty. A word from me, and at the very least you'd go to trial. You're too big; you couldn't stand a mess like that, a trial. Then we come to this Jerrold thing, a nice juicy scandal. There'd be, maybe, a divorce, if your wife has any sense. In fact, Doc, I can break you."

"If you don't mind—" Stern drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly. His shoulders sagged, and then he rose, stood there uncertainly. "If you don't mind, I think I'll take that drink now, Dunhill."

"Help yourself." Dunhill leered and waved one arm. "How about ten thousand?"

"Ten thousand!" Stern half turned from the table, fumbled with his pack of cigarettes, drew one. "That's a lot of money."

"You're buying a lot of merchandise."

"I'm buying silence, and I still have no positive assurance I'll get it."

"Your check? All I want is this one break. I'm no professional and I don't intend to milk you."

The cigarette was between Stern's lips, unlighted. He had filled both glasses. One for Dunhill—from his gloved hand, the other for himself.

"All right. You've made a sale, Dunhill."

"Fine!"

"And here's to your silence."

"Doctor—to your crime!"

He said one more word, a gasp, a curse; then the empty glass fell. He tried to rise, and succeeded only in jerking spasmodically.

Stern emptied his glass, licked his lips, put the unlighted cigarette and the empty glass in his pocket. Then he pulled on his right glove. The bottle he'd brought in his coat had to show young Dunhill's prints, but that was relatively simple. So would be the explanation—a lad in a jam, forced to take the quick way out. Stern set the bottle precisely on the stand then.

Here's to crime, eh, Dunhill?

He was humming now, softly.

* * *

He drew the cold, outside, deep into his lungs. Cold like wine, fermenting, bubbling. Murder was like surgery; proper antiseptics, prophylaxis. Then you cut and sutured. He had only now to suture, tie it all up tightly. So he remained a long moment outside in the shadows, waiting. Then he walked the tree-shrouded street two houses, to the Webers. Two flights up, an outside stairway, an old home. Beneath the eaves, what once had been an attic.

They were very poor and very sad, the Webers.

"I'm Dr. Louis Stern. . . ."

They waited, looked at him, just waited.

"I—" Deliberately he overplayed it, had to; they were over-wrought. He sat down abruptly, put both hands to his face, then let his hands fall limply. "For twenty years I've had one goal—"

Jake Weber said, "We know about you, Doctor."

"To pioneer. To save lives—"

Huskily, Jake Weber said, "We know how you feel about it, Doctor. We talked it over, my wife and I. We don't hold a grudge."

Oh, yes, have you heard? Stern offered them a job. Took them in his home, as his cook and chauffeur. Well, hadn't Marcia asked him to be generous?

"Yes, sir, we know how you feel about it, Doctor," said Jake Weber, and he put his hand on Stern's square shoulder. The tears were rolling down Jake Weber's face now, without shame, and his wife was sobbing.

Leaving, later, Stern did not even glance toward Dunhill's. That affair was all over. The evening was still young, and Hilma soon would be broiling thick steaks over charcoal, to serve them sizzling hot. Hilma would serve wine and tempting lips to send his blood racing.

He decided that he was very, very hungry. . . .

Now suddenly this spring morning, he was anything but hungry. *Your last day on earth. . . .*

This emptiness he felt was the reaction to—well, shock? He would admit to shock. Only fools saw danger without—fear? *Wait a minute, Stern. Only an idiot would give you warning like this. So why fear?* Six long months had passed without one hint of danger. So why fear, at a thing like this, a stupid warning?

The letter lay like lead in his pocket. He clenched both hands then, grimly, opened them again and reached out for his coffee. Every muscle in his body was abruptly tense. It occurred to him that Mrs. Weber had just made and served the coffee.

He sat another moment, staring. Two typewritten lines: *this day will be your last on earth.* Just how serious was that threat? Who would make it? Why? He reexamined the words now as he would have malignant tissue, and the thing he didn't like at all was their essential calmness. He had a healthy respect for calculation, calmness. He knew intuitively that a grave had been opened, that the dead had risen to confront him. He knew that someone was intent now on revenge. He knew that every move he made today must first be weighed, and that death would come, *could* come, with the slightest failure.

"Mrs. Weber!"

"Yes, Doctor?" She came in quickly from the kitchen.

"A clean cup, please."

She was looking at him, flushed and puzzled. Marcia, too, paused to look up, with a queer look, puzzled. Then Mrs. Weber brought a clean cup and obediently filled it.

"Now drink it," he said flatly.

"Isn't it—all right?"

"Drink it," he insisted.

She took a good swallow; he smiled grimly. His last day indeed! The first hurdle was over.

"Now, Mrs. Weber, tell Jake I shan't need him to drive me in today."

"But Louis—" Marcia began.

He waved her silent, continue, "Mrs. Stern will accompany me and keep the car in town."

Yes, Doctor. . . .

Jake Weber brought the car around. *Yes, Doctor.* To hell with them! If Mrs. Weber had thought she'd poison him, she had another guess coming. If Jake Weber thought he'd get a chance—but how could they have learned he'd murdered their brat? Young Dunhill alone had known it. Young Dunhill was gone, rotting in his grave. . . .

Could Dunhill have left some sort of paper?

The thought came from nowhere, came like lightning. *Dear Mr. Weber: If ever your read this something will have happened to me. Here, then, are the full facts about the rabbit's death. . . .*

Stern cursed the Webers under his breath, discovered that his heart had leaped almost to his throat, that he was almost panting.

"You'll have to step on it, Doctor," Jake Weber was saying, grinning. "You're running late this morning!"

Oh, race into town? Brakes to slip or lock, a crackup on a sharp curve, going down the mountain? Had the letter, after all, been clever?

Weber held the door now for Marcia. "Good-bye, Ma'am. And good-bye, sir!"

He supposed Weber said "Good-bye, sir," every morning. And yet, today, it sounded strangely ominous and final.

CHAPTER THREE

The Missing Glass

BUT NOTHING happened. There were rocky shelves to pass, curves sheering off to drop a dizzy thousand feet. Still nothing happened. Stern stopped below, at the first roadside stand, phoned the hospital and canceled the morning schedule. He drove on again then with the utmost care, and if Marcia looked at him with wonder—well, she was along as insurance. No one wanted *her* death. Let her look then! Always he had charted his own course, and today caution was the watchword, and through it he could still shape his destiny.

Nothing happened—but the sky was grim, foreboding. From far off Stern could hear low rumblings, thunder. Nothing happened—until Marcia smiled and waved and called, "Good-bye, dear!"

Stern just stood there, frowning, at the curb. Then he turned into the building,

aware of sudden stares. But why should people look at him like this? Because he was late? Because they could see—*see what?* No change in his calm exterior. He wore grey, a pin-stripe, very neat. He walked briskly, square-shouldered and alert. But his eyes—too bright today? Staring straight at death today? The elevator was waiting, Hilma in its doorway, waiting, and Stern faltered.

He'd wanted Hilma Jerrold here, all these days, every day, at work; his attentions were bestowed, and always she must see that. He'd cared nothing for the Webers, but posing as their benefactor had amused him. Until today, all irony amused him. Now, suddenly, the corridor was filled with silent, staring ghosts. He could see, far down, a man whose wife had died beneath his probing knife. And a woman shuffled past whose life he had—altered. Tumor of the brain. Everywhere, it seemed, were ghosts, the husks he'd gathered to prove that he was great, that he was kind; husks he'd really gathered in grim glee, to study their reactions.

Reactions? *This will be your last day on earth.* He faltered, held his breath a moment, then slipped inside the cage. Instantly the door was shut. Steel, no more escape. He was alone here, with Hilma, and too late he saw her whiteness, her tension.

"Louis!" The elevator was humming, they were rising, and her breath caught. He had never seen her like this. "Louis! I couldn't call you last night, at home. This morning you were late—" Her words were tumbling out so fast that they got blocked. She put one hand to her throat then. "All night—I would doze. I would wake up in sheer fright. . . ."

"Fright?"

She closed her eyes, and they rose steadily. He was thinking now, thinking that some fool might have talked, an interne, nurse, someone who had known the Jerrold case and felt that Jerrold could have been saved. Or perhaps she had known all along and had been planning—

The elevator stopped suddenly.

"Hilma!"

"I've got to talk to you! Louis, you don't understand. This may be the one chance we will have—"

"Not here, you little fool!"

"Louis, I don't care—"

"Stop it!" He gripped both wrists, hurt her, held her. Her whole body was shaking. Then her expression changed and she stiffened. She looked at him, shuddered, said then, dully, "I—I'm sorry."

"Get this thing going."

"Yes, Louis." *Yes, Doctor.*

"Obviously something has happened to alarm you."

"Yes, Louis."

"Not here." He should worry now, today, about *her* problems? "Tonight, if I can make it—early. Or tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" The cage had reached the top floor, again stopped, and the door slid open. She seemed now almost glad that it was open. She seemed—what was it he saw in her eyes now—fear? And on her lips—was that a smile?

"Don't worry, dear. Tonight, early, if I can possibly make it."

He walked briskly to his door, and Dr. Dunhill sat there in his office, waiting.

THE RESEMBLANCE to the brother who had passed away was suddenly striking. Dr. Dunhill sat sprawled in a chair, legs out—just as young Cliff Dunhill had that night last fall. And the grin he wore was forced, too wide, just as his brother's had been. *Careful,* Stern thought, closing the door behind him warily.

"Judgment Day," said Dunhill with a chuckle. Then added, "I mean that you're late."

Judgment Day? Stern said, "A beastly day," and sat down at his desk.

"Seriously, Doctor, could you give me a few minutes?"

It occurred to Stern that Dunhill's hands were curiously busy. That he was toying with a small scalpel. Dunhill held the point against one thumb and was turning it, boring with it nervously. "Doctor, it's about my brother."

Careful, Stern thought again. He said, "The one who—died?"

"The one," Dunhill's voice was flat, the grin now gone, "who was murdered."

The walls constricted. The floor rose; there seemed barely space to breathe between it and the ceiling. Then the tight, cramped feeling passed, and Stern rearranged his mail to keep his trembling fingers busy.

"I don't understand, Dunhill."

"You will."

"Something the police . . .?"

"Don't make me laugh. Motive? Certainly. The kid was in a jam. Access to the drug? He was a medical student. He had ample access. Psychotic personality? Well, I suppose it could be. He was either riding the crest or in the slough of despondency. I suppose it *could* have been suicide. I admit the cops built a case, but—"

"But six months have passed, Dunhill!"

"I know." Dunhill looked down at the scalpel, made a vicious motion with it, a stab. "My brother, Cliff, phoned me that day, the day after Hallowe'en, at noon. He was bubbling over with plans. Unfortunately, he didn't confide in me, but I knew he'd had some kind of problem, and he indicated that noon that everything was fine again at last. To me, it was damned strange then, that at seven o'clock that evening he should die by his own hand."

"Obviously something happened," Stern murmured cautiously.

"Something happened, all right, but not the way you say it. The way you say it, he analyzed his difficulties, he realized defeat, fell into despair and then killed himself. I don't see it that way at all, and I'll show you what I mean if you have the time."

"I have the time," Stern murmured.

"Okay." Dunhill took a deep breath, twirled the scalpel, watched it as he went on: "It so happened birthdays were important in our family, and two weeks before his death Cliff had a birthday. It happened that I bought him a cocktail service, a very unusual pattern in glass. The point is, there were six shot glasses included, and one of these was found near the body, the one he had used. There were four others in the house. One was missing."

"That would seem," Stern pursed his lips, then wet them, "simple to explain. He'd broken the sixth glass."

"The obvious answer? But we—the police and I—couldn't find the pieces."

"But two weeks had elapsed since you'd made the gift, Dunhill," Stern pointed out quickly.

"Yes, I know." Dunhill nodded, sat back. The grin he wore again was without humor, peculiar. "I know. Rubbish collected weekly. But shards of glass, a distinctive pattern—you'd think a piece would have escaped the trash barrel, wouldn't you?"

"Not necessarily. Anyway, perhaps the glass had only been cracked. He might have disposed of it whole."

"You sound," Dunhill muttered with annoyance, "like the cops."

"I sound," Stern answered testily, "like any sensible man who can look at facts dispassionately."

"But do you?" Dunhill's stare was irritatingly level. "Well, *I* didn't go for the cracked glass theory. *My* idea was that Cliff had company that night. I think his excitement on the phone that noon meant that he'd cooked up some deal—"

"And *I* think," Stern interrupted sharply, "you're going off the deep end, Dunhill. The case is closed."

"Oh, no. The case *was* closed—but it's not concluded. You see," Dunhill's voice was very soft now, "I found the missing glass last night, Doctor."

STERN sat very still, and the first raindrops splashed against the window at that moment. He heard a sudden crack, thunder. Spring shower, no significance in it at all, and yet—yet the rain, seemingly, was frantic, clawing at the window in warning.

Dunhill sat there too, looking at him, grey eyes frowning and intense, and then Dunhill added, "That's why I'm here this morning. Because the missing glass concerns you, Doctor."

Oh, no, Stern whispered to himself. *I put the glass in my pocket that night. I went directly to the Webers that night. I wasn't there ten minutes. . . .*

"Look here," Dunhill said, and leaned stiffly forward. "You know me pretty well. You know I'm obstinate and thorough. When something puzzles me, I always run it down. And when I want something, I always try my best to get it. Well, in this case it—it was a girl." He flushed. "I'll put the cards down frankly. It was Mrs. Jerrold."

Oh, no, Stern whispered to himself. *I had the glass in my pocket. I went that night directly from the Webers to see Hilma. . . .*

"I couldn't get a date," continued Dunhill. "She wouldn't give me a tumble. Then

last night I forced the issue. I dropped in at her place."

He stopped. The rain, abruptly, also stopped. But far off, so it seemed, Stern heard a high wind whining. He knew it would gather force, return swooping. The window, any moment, would shudder with the blast. Rigid, he sat waiting for the impact.

"Mrs. Jerrold killed my brother, Doctor."

Hilma? The window rattled; Stern shook his head to clear it. The blast, as it were, had come too soon, had caught him from behind.

"I think," Dunhill went on harshly, "Cliff had been seeing her. He was involved with some woman, and I recall now that he'd mentioned Mrs. Jerrold to me more than once, her beauty. I think Hilma Jerrold came to see Cliff that night, realized his danger was her danger, scandal, spiked his drink—"

Stern whispered, "And then saved the glass? Dunhill, that's fantastic!"

"I found the glass last night at Hilma Jerrold's, the same pattern," Dunhill said stubbornly. "And she didn't have a set, only that one glass. I asked her where she'd got that glass, and the minute I said that—"

She'd frozen. If Dunhill had at all tied his brother's case to the glass, all color must have drained out of her face. She'd remembered, no doubt, where she'd got the glass—that she'd taken it from his, Stern's, pocket. She'd remembered that he'd crushed her to him that night, hurt her with the pressure of the glass. She'd said that night, "Darling, you old soak!" The great Doctor Stern carrying his own glass! And laughed. And he, because her unawareness had amused him that night, had laughed. And she'd set the glass aside because—because they'd had hands only for each other, and lips only for each other; and he'd gone away at last without the glass, had forgotten it completely.

She knew now. That accounted for her queer appearance this morning. She knew that Cliff Dunhill's was the midnight voice, the man who'd phoned her last October and then laughed. She knew now, if Dunhill still did not, how Dunhill's brother had met death and who had killed him.

Stern sat there, his mind awhirl, his heart pounding at his ribs and in his throat and at his temples, madly. Here was danger. Not simply two typewritten lines, cold print, words which could be fought by watchful waiting. Here was real danger. Hilma, the dynamite, and Dunhill, the ignition cap. Now he understood her frantic mien this morning. She had intended only warning, sought only his denial. But now he understood the queer look. *Yes, she knew how Cliff Dunhill had met death and who had killed him.*

"So I came to you," Dunhill's voice was droning, almost finished now, at last. "I know, of course, the fine interest you've taken in Mrs. Jerrold. . . ."

Wait a minute, Dunhill. Meaning you don't want her guilty? Meaning that you've fallen for her so hard that you came to me hoping that I'd somehow pull a rabbit from the hat, convince you she is innocent. Stern looked honestly surprised. "Then you didn't actually accuse her last night?"

Dunhill flushed. "That's right."

"You haven't gone to the police yet?"

"No, not yet."

Stern's hands lay limply on his desk, the palms moist, clammy. "Thank you, Dunhill. Naturally I would like to weigh this shocking information."

"Today, sir."

"Yes." Stern sighed. "I understand. Today."

"Okay." Dunhill rose. "Here's your scalpel, Doctor."

To plunge into your own black heart? To give you a way out? Nonsense. Dunhill couldn't have written the threat. He had learned of the glass only last evening, too late to have sent the note. Stern sat there, looking at the scalpel, fighting for decision.

The door opened again then, and John Bennett entered.

"I rapped," Bennett said from the doorway, blinking, "but I guess you didn't hear me." Bennett closed the door, paused there, owlish and surprised, "What happened? You look awful."

Stern's hands closed into fists and his grey eyes narrowed as he looked at Bennett. Then he pushed his chair back, and his voice suddenly was strong, and once more the road lay straight ahead.

Straight ahead, with minutes piled like bricks on either side, yet to be laid. Laid slowly, carefully and slowly. Laid like chiseled stone or figured tile to form a pat-

tern, a firm picture. "Dr. Stern is occupied," his secretary would say on the phone. "I'm sorry." He would hear her say that, smile then. He was safe here, in his office. He had but to wait. . . .

"Miss Smith, please arrange to stay in for your lunch. I want to be quite sure I am not disturbed."

Yes, Doctor.

"And, Miss Smith—Dr. Bennett will lunch here also, in the office, with me. Order three trays, whatever you wish, but three trays exactly alike." No chance to poison him. Plans laid carefully and slowly. . . .

"Now get Dr. Dunhill on the phone, please."

Yes, Doctor.

Stern's voice was crisp, but without any show of tautness. This matter, after all, was like septic tissue to be cut. You simply took precautions. "Dunhill? About that matter we discussed earlier this morning. I've decided on a course of action. A brief talk. No, not here. Emphatically not in this office. Early this evening, I think, at the residence. Then I'll contact you promptly. Meantime, of course, the matter must rest strictly between us."

Well, hadn't Dunhill asked for his cooperation? Didn't Dunhill, in his mooning heart, want the girl to—to live, look at him with love, encourage his devotion? *Very nice, my dear Dunhill, to let emotion trick you, to put it on a platter for me.*

"Miss Smith, try my wife again, please. See if she is home now."

She was home now. Although she didn't know it, wouldn't ever know it, she would play a part tonight similar to the one she'd played by driving in the car with him, shielding him, this morning. Her voice showed her surprise that he had called her like this.

"No, Marcia, I'm quite all right," he said. "No, there's nothing wrong. I want you to bring the car in about six. No, I do not want Weber. Incidentally, we shall not return home for dinner."

You see, my precious, stupid wife, I shall be safe in crowds. You see, I know a thing or two about psychology. Hilma did not write that note; she tried this morning to fight suspicion of me, to tell me about Dunhill, to warn me. I know Dunhill did not write that note; finesse is not for him—he's too stubborn and direct. John Bennett? Hardly. Bennett has a cud to chew on, so he's happy. No, Marcia, the mind behind that note is cute. It wants me to worry and suffer.

He said again, "By six then, Marcia."

Fine now. Protect the flanks, attack. He was very sure again and calm now. He removed from his desk a new pack of cigarettes, tore the corner open. He removed from his desk a small thin vial. A murky liquid, a few drops—fine now.

"Miss Smith, you may go when my wife arrives."

Yes, Doctor.

"And, Miss Smith, Dr. Dunhill has no doubt gone home for the day. Will you try him at his rooms?" *Just to be sure that he won't spoil it.* "He's there? That's fine. Tell him I have been delayed. Tell him I'll call him as quickly as possible."

Cigarettes innocently showing in his vest—the vial upright and of course secreted. Hilma, dear, sit down now. We'll have a drink and talk this over intelligently. . . . Fine now.

"Is Bennett occupied, Miss Smith? He's still in the laboratory? That's all right. I'll buzz him if I want him."

EVERYTHING was ready. Your last day on earth, Dr. Stern? What nonsense. He and Marcia would dine at a hotel. And decide, naturally, to remain there for the night. Not drive the long road up the mountains after dark! Not sleep tonight in the same house with the Webers! They would have to go, of course—tomorrow. Tonight, though, a hotel room and safety.

"Doctor, Mrs. Stern is here."

"Tell her to come in, Miss Smith. And lock the door when you leave."

Yes, Doctor.

He grinned. He was feeling fine. He looked at Marcia—she'd paused in the doorway—and she was wearing black. White skin, dead white, against black. White fingers, dead white, around a purse of black patent leather. He looked at her and grinned and said, "Be with you as soon as I wash up."

"Not a formal dinner, Louis? You didn't say—"

He left the lavatory door open. "Just the two of us, my dear. I've a house call

to make though, by the way, darling."

He grinned at the mirror now. *Dr. Stern, I believe? Greetings to you, Dr. Stern!*

"Not an emergency, Louis?"

"Eh? Oh, no. An old case, a Mrs. Jerrold. It's not far from here. We'll stop on the way."

Smooth as the soap on his hands. "Yes, officer," he'd say tomorrow. "Dr. Dunhill asked me to speak to Mrs. Jerrold. I'd operated on her husband, you know. And then Dunhill was, I believe, rather emotionally interested. So my wife and I drove over on our way to dinner—"

A nice touch that—"my wife." He hadn't gone alone, no hint of intrigue. He'd gone openly, in daylight, with his wife. A nice touch.

"You see, officer," he'd say, "Dunhill discovered what he considered new evidence in the death of his brother. He's just told you? Well, naturally we, the hospital, didn't want any undue notoriety. I went, frankly, to spare Dunhill the task, tell her what we knew, and—"

Poor Hilma Jerrold. Lovely little thing—and to die like this, tonight. She'd realized that he'd go straight from her to the police, no doubt. She'd had, no doubt, more of the same drug that she'd used on young Cliff Dunhill. And no doubt—no doubt at all—she'd seen the one way out, suicide, and taken it.

The key to your success, Dr. Stern? That's simple. Let nothing stand in your way.

The water whirled around the washbowl, gurgled. "Hilma Jerrold, Louis?" Marcia was saying.

The man in the mirror stiffened and frowned. How the devil did she know the name was Hilma? And the queer note in her voice— Stern rinsed his hands, turned slowly, stared.

Marcia stood by the desk. She had a gun in her hand. Two bright spots of color appeared in her pale white cheeks.

"Hilma Jerrold, Louis?" she repeated slowly.

"Marcia!"

Dead white face, strained today, this morning. Good God, he should have known it in her pale white cheeks.

"Marcia, put that gun down!"

She smiled a little at him. Her mouth was stretched and tight. Meek, obedient Marcia—"So you sent that note! And all the time I—"

She smiled at him, nodded. "A woman's twisted point of view, perhaps. But I hoped you'd squirm."

"Marcia, for God's sake—"

"Don't move, Louis. Not one step, I warn you. Don't try to call to Doctor Bennett."

"But this is madness!"

"All right. So it's madnes. That's what I thought too, last fall. Incredible and vicious, madness in a man named Clifford Dunhill. No, don't interrupt. I still intend to see you squirm. Apparently Mr. Dunhill believed in building bridges behind him—in case. Apparently this man, Clifford Dunhill, put a letter in his mailbox, to be recovered by him if he chose, or be picked up by the mailman—in case. Yes, that's the way I felt about it, too, Louis, when I got and read that letter. Sheer madness, until—"

He saw her finger tighten on the trigger. He saw, in his mind, the vial found in his pocket. He saw the story that would break tomorrow: CLIFFORD DUNHILL—MURDERED. LITTLE WANDA WEBER—MURDERED.

Dr. Louis Stern, the killer—murdered by wife.

"Until I investigated, Louis," she was saying. "Until I saw, with my own eyes, your interest in this girl. Even that, I think, I could have forgiven. But not cold-blooded murder."

"Marcia, if you'll only listen to what I have to say—"

He lunged for her. He almost touched the gun. The flash, of course. It came then, stopped him, and he was stumbling, blinded. He heard one more report and then her groan.

He was Dr. Louis Stern, the Dr. Stern of Lakeview. The man whose scalpel opened windows—ah, only the most delicate in surgery! Cases one read of in the papers. . . . Marcia, I should have known! You spilled a drop of coffee. . . . You spilled a drop of blood. . . .

The silence whispered for him. Then it sang. Endless, endless silence.

THE END

DON'T SPEAK OF MRS. VRILL

"We don't talk much about Vrill," Ollie said. "He lived in that house there, and he left after his wife disappeared."

By GEORGE C. APPELL

"No one ever saw Mrs. Vrill again after she inherited that money," Ollie said. "But Vrill, now, he was around pretty often to buy that sauce he liked. . . ."

I MET Ollie in the wood lot behind the grocery store, and neither of us said anything. We just sniffed the new day and fingered our guns as if they—not us—would do the hunting and sighting. Out on the highway beyond town an automobile clattered to life.

"Burnett," Ollie said.

Burnett was the mailman. He had to get up at five o'clock and meet the mail train.

"When it gets light early, he can see the mail sack and dodge it," Ollie told me. "Today, he'll see it all right. In the winter, though, when it's dark, they try to hit him with it when they toss it off."

We started across the wood lot toward the marsh road. It would be good today, with just a wink of winter in the air, and quiet.

"Do they ever hit him?" I asked.

"Once. Knocked him off the platform." In the distance, Burnett's car chuggered and coughed. "Next morning he threw a stink bomb into the mail car."

I lifted my gun over the fence first, then climbed after it. Ollie swung over and we followed the marsh road through the dawn mist. We could talk; there wouldn't be anything for a while.

"What did they do after he threw the stink bomb?"

Ollie laughed. "Called it quits. In the winter he sits in the car till they drop the sack. Summers, he stands next to the vending machine. That way, they might break the glass in it."

"So it's an armed truce."

"It's an armed truce."

The road was sludgy now, and Ollie moved ahead. He knew the marshes better than anybody, even if he was the local groceryman, although his wife ran the place for him most of the time. Ollie was a good companion too. He talked when you talked, but otherwise kept his silence. That's one of the reasons I come out of the city each year to hunt with him.

We don't use dogs. Ollie says when you use dogs and get a bag of anything, you've got to split with the dogs. "It's a partnership, see? And why use a four-legged crutch? It's got to be you against the bird, or you against the coon, or you against whatever you're after. Dogs are not kitchens."

Ollie stopped and rested his gun against a tree. He looked at me, hands on hips, feet wide. "Well?"

We always have this delay. He always stops in the marshes and flatters the city visitor by asking him where he would like to hunt.

"How about Tory Meadows?"

Ollie spat. "Flushed out. Unless you want robins."

"Weren't there some runs out beyond Hunt's place?"

"There still are."

That was all I needed. We turned off the road and picked our way up the slope to high ground.

WE PASSED Hunt's place after a while and hopped a stream. "Anywhere, now," Ollie said. We moved up a hill and stood on the ridge. Down below were brown wavy meadows that humped into the distance and melted out into Douglas Woods.

Ollie's eyes slid to the right—he didn't turn his head—and I turned my head to look. Three of them darted loose and careened down a vale. Farther on, a half dozen broke cover and I raised my gun.

"Don't," Ollie said. He shook his head. "You'd have missed sure and scared the whole valley."

"I could have bagged them," I said in self-defense.

"Maybe," Ollie allowed. I followed him along the edge of the meadows and down to the point of a stand of birch. "Next time they break," Ollie said, "you lead plenty and fire. But be sure you lead. And see 'em plenty long."

The day stayed grey, with a spineless sort of a wind shoving the grass and the trees shiver. At eleven o'clock we stood half a mile to the right of Douglas Woods. In Ollie's bag were eight plump servings, and I had none.

"What's for lunch, Ollie?"

"Don't know what she put up."

We sat down and he pulled a brown paper bag from his sack. We chewed on cold meat sandwiches and surveyed the new location. It wasn't too good. There were too many timber stands and the ground was broken into washboard ridges. Let a bird glide into one of them and you might as well go home.

I stood up and stretched, and it was then that I saw it. I stared long at it, my arms stiff over my head, until Ollie stood beside me and he was looking too.

"What place is that?"

"That?" Ollie asked. He sat down again and began to roll the paper bag into a tight package. "That's the old Vrill place."

It was abandoned. I could tell that because looking at it reminded me not so much of an old house as of a mouldy shutter in a vacant window. Nothing moved in or near it, not even the feeble breeze, yet a sense of something came from it. Revulsion. Revulsion or fear, depending upon how you looked at it.

"Can we go over there, Ollie?"

He finished burying the paper bag and shot a hard look at me. "Why?"

"Well—why not?"

He stood up and lit my cigarette for me, then lit his own. For a moment he watched the blackened match, and when it smoked out he said, "There's nothing over there."

"When did Vrill leave it?"

"Why?"

I laughed at him. "What's the gag? Ghosts?"

Ollie looked straight into my eyes, halfway to my brain. "You ever heard of Vrill?"

"No, but old houses fascinate me." I wouldn't have gone into this one alone, but with Ollie I wanted to see it. It was very forlorn; maybe Vrill had left something there, something like a brittle old newspaper with faded doings of long ago, or perhaps he'd left an old gun.

"This old house won't fascinate you," Ollie said slowly. He glanced at the guns and then at the sky. He knew and I knew, in that moment, that the hunt was off. Something had spoiled it.

"Who was Vrill?"

Ollie stripped his cigarette and fanned tobacco off his fingers. "Nobody knew much about him. You see, most places will have a scandal or a murder or something, and they'll play it up. Talk about it all the time. But we don't talk much about Vrill. He wasn't here very long, anyway; he came after you left last year and he's gone now. Burnett took him to the morning train one day last spring."

We walked slowly toward the house, with idle guns and inattentive eyes. Now that Ollie had given tacit consent to a visit, he didn't seem to mind talking about the place.

I urged him with, "And he never came back?"

"He never came back."

"You think he was murdered?"

Ollie pulled his mouth into a sour grin. "Nobody knows much. *He* wasn't murdered. It was his wife."

"Murdered?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. She just disappeared."

"Out of the blue, eh?"

"Into the blue would be better."

We paused a few hundred yards away and studied the house from across the garden. Everything was weeds now, and this clearing with its building seemed like a cancer in the robust growth all around it. The house was small, a one-storied structure that had once been white. A kitchen had been added at right angles to it.

"No barn?" I asked.

"He wasn't a farmer. There used to be a barn, but what's left is grown over now. You can see the foundation over there."

"What was he—a hermit?"

"That's something else that nobody knows." We stepped through the garden and stopped at narrow porch. "Here's where he was waiting for Burnett, here on the porch, that morning he took the train. Burnett said he looked awful."

"What—beaten up?"

"No. Sick. Guess he had ulcers like fried eggs. God knows he bought enough stomach stuff from me."

"Maybe she couldn't cook."

"Maybe."

Inside was darkness surrounded by jagged frames of light that came in through the rotting walls and broken, dusty windows. The earth dampness rose through the floor, and I could almost bite it.

IT WAS in the kitchen that we found the most durable part of the house: a square brick oven. "That's the way to cook," I said. "You get wonderful heat."

"Hunt says they never used it much till after she disappeared. Then it was smoking most of the time."

Some empty jars stood on a shelf. The one table was covered with greasy oilcloth.

"Gives you the creeps," Ollie whispered.

The grease was still thick, and very rancid. I leaned closer and drew back. "No wonder he had ulcers. Smell that."

"I can."

The tiny bedroom contained a brass bed and a low bureau. On it were some hairpins, deep in dust. The drawers were open and empty.

Ollie pointed to the bed and said, "He must have slept alone. Only one pillow there."

"Maybe she slept on the floor."

"Maybe."

In the back yard we kicked at some old

cans, and Ollie picked up a muddy bottle with a torn label. "I used to sell him this." He broke the bottle on a stone.

"What is it?"

"Meat sauce. Thirty-nine cents."

"There are some more over there."

Ollie nodded. "He bought enough of it. A case, I think. Then he had to have baking soda to go with it. You'd think he was running a restaurant."

"Did he leave any bills?"

I lighted Ollie's cigarette and then my own. I wanted to keep him talking.

"Not that I know of. He always paid me over the counter when he bought, but he never really bought much. He was heeled, anyway."

"Rich?"

Ollie shrugged. "Someone—an aunt, I think—left her ten thousand dollars."

I sucked smoke for a moment and watched the wind shake it away. "Now I see: She inherited some money and left him. He couldn't stand it out here so—"

"Wait a minute. Do you think anyone can leave here without someone knowing about it? We're supposed to be close-mouthed, but we're not shut-eyed. The only way she or anyone else could leave this district without being seen is in a coffin, and nobody saw that."

"Didn't they start a search? Maybe she went to live with relatives or something."

"A search! God, man, they tore up the ground and looked in the trees. Besides, the only relative she had, far as we know, was the aunt who left her the money."

"Did she have it in the bank?"

"No—out here, some place. He said he didn't believe in banks."

"Just like it was his money. Nice guy."

"I guess he had a hold on her."

We poked around the ground some more; then Ollie noticed the blackening sky and sniffed the wind like he had that morning. "Let's get out of here."

He led the way down an overgrown lane that rounded Douglas Woods and came out on the other side of the Hunt place.

"This is the way he used to get to town," Ollie told me, "but no one's used it since."

Once, we saw a quick flight swoop down a meadow near the marshes, but neither of us even reached for his gun.

Ollie's wife had the trimmings simmering for us, and Ollie produced some ale which he declared helped down breast of quail like nothing else. The birds weren't ready, but Ollie said, "Let's have a bottle each before dinner. That'll sort of receive 'em." So we had a bottle each while his wife set the table.

It was when she put the sauce bottle on the table that I felt the jolt, because it was the same sauce Ollie had sold to the man who rode the morning train into oblivion after his wife had disappeared.

"How good is that sauce, Ollie?"

"It's for the meat more than fowl, but it tones things up and these birds are pretty slim."

Ollie's wife began to put plates down, and we finished the ale in time for two more. Ollie's wife looked at the sauce bottle and said, "We haven't sold a drop of that since that time. No one wants it now."

Ollie nodded at me. "He knows about it. We were down there today."

"Down *there?*"

"Ollie," I asked, "when did she get the money?"

"February," he answered.

"And when did she disappear?"

"No one saw her after middle of March."

"Yet when did he buy all this sauce and baking soda?"

"Just after she disappeared."

"And when did he leave, Ollie?"

"Toward the end of March." He watched with hungry eyes as his wife put the birds in the center of the table.

"Ollie ain't the tellin' sort," she said quickly. "He shouldn't have taken you there."

"I took *him,*" I said, feeling sick.

Ollie pushed an ale in front of me. "You look like you need a drink, man." He chuckled. "'Fraid I can't set up as good a table as old Vrill, but then—" he looked slyly at his wife—"somebody's got to run the store. . . ."

His wife pointed to the sauce with her fork. "Put some of that on your plate an' you'll feel better. Lord knows we got enough of it."

But I didn't feel hungry any more, and you can bet that I hitched a ride to the morning train with Burnett. You can also bet I got on before they threw the mail sack off.

HE WHO HUNTS THE TIGER

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

IT WAS SAID of Yok Kee that his mind was like a snake swallowing its tail. Which is to say that he held and nurtured but one thought, and that all-consuming. Tongues wagged and shoulders shrugged eloquently as he passed by; yet he gave no heed, padding along, withered and bent in his Western clothes. Some knew of the thing for which he searched, while others knew nothing and cared less.

He searched for a man, not just any man, but one as specific as a description

In a ceremonial pouch at his belt, Yok Kee carried the silken cord which he would tighten around Wong Soo's throat; and in his hand was a revolver. . . . For, so counselled the ancient sages, he who hunts the tiger must fight with the tiger's weapons. . . .

Yok Kee breathed a soft prayer to the gods, and then he took his first step forward.

could make. A man from the North of China, tall and thin, his skin almost lemon-yellow and over-patterned with an unhealthy ruddiness. His hands would be long and tapering and his eyes slitted, and shiny as obsidian. His tongue would be oily and sharp, and his mind would work with the flickering speed of quicksilver.

He would die very slowly, or very quickly, but he would die, that was a certainty. Yok Kee had decided that, deep in his heart. He had sworn an oath at the Joss of Quan Yin, and the Joss had smiled from its pedestal as though understanding and approving.

He had braided the silk thong himself, braiding stripes of Mei Mei's wedding dress into a three-foot supple rope which would strangle Wong Soo with neatness and dispatch. His worn fingers had worked the cloth until it was a thin silken rope which four men could not have torn apart. He carried it at his waist in a silk pouch, ready for use, always at reach of his fingers.

He had not wanted to kill, for such was not his nature. Always had he thought that the heated thoughts of other men were beyond his grasp. Always had be been gentle and soft-spoken in the manner of the Thousand Rituals. And yet, waking in the still hours of a summer morning, he had realized that he was like other men, that if need be, he was capable of violence.

He was small, and so his desire was even more terrible. He could not drink or have a woman or beat a servant and thus assuage his grief and rage. He was small, and his face was wrinkled with patient age, his mind overflowing with the knowledge of a long life well spent in living. He had worn a two-inch nail on the little finger of his left hand, not as a mark of vanity because of his wealth, but so that the world would know he was of the old, with its customs and its manner of life. Even his hair was of the past, reaching almost to his heels in a white-touched queue, braided in the five plaits of custom. He wore the queue in a curled bun atop his head, held there with fancy pins and concealed by a velvet cap.

Sometimes it was hard for him to remember those days of good living. He wore no long nail now; his hands were scarred and calloused from the work he had done. His queue was worn beneath a Western hat, held by pins of gleaming painted steel. His lean body was always tired, for his years were of late winter; only his eyes were eager and alive, patient with a terrible patience burning upward from his heart.

"It is as though Death peered from his eyes," one man said in San Francisco, and he was strangely near the truth.

For Death was Yok Kee's bodymate, his bedfellow, his table companion. They were always together like twins yoked together through life by mutual flesh and racing blood.

He hated the role he played, sometimes; it was as though the gods asked him to bear more than one mortal's burden. But such was his nature, he made no complaint, traveling in his search, prying and peering, the noose always at hand for journey's end.

At night, lying on his roll-pallet wherever he might be, he hated his mission, and so he would turn his thoughts back to the better days which lay so close, and yet so far, in his past.

Mei Mei had been his heart, his very existence. Like a quince blossom was her face, soft and round, sloe eyes laughing at the world which lay so excitingly near. He had married late, bringing his bride from old China, and he had begotten one daughter. He had wanted a son, but the gods had not seen fit that he should have a man-child to carry on his name, and so he was content with the girl whom he had named Mei Mei.

THE YEARS had passed, and his fortunes had improved, until by the standards of his people he was a wealthy man. Bright hangings had colored the walls of his home, and servants had slipped softly about on their business under the watchful eye of his wife. Good books were in his reading room and from them, to his growing child, he had read the wisdom of the ages. Meiling, his wife, had not complained, although she could neither read nor write. Yok Kee was master and a good husband, and if he chose to bring Mei Mei up in heathen fashion, then such was his desire and so it would be.

And as the baby grew into a child and the child into a young girl, Yok Kee mar-

veled that he had ever wanted a son. No man could have his happiness, he thought, even with ten sons to take care of him in his old age. He was content and happy, and Mei Mei wore his heart like a rich jewel.

The war had come to China in those passing years, and because he was an honorable man, he sent one half of his fortune to help those who fought for right. Friends rocked their heads in awe, and men spoke of him at Fan Tan games. Honors were meant for him, but always did he refuse, for his modesty was such he could not receive personal honors for something which must be done.

He organized societies and parties and various exhibitions which swelled the war coffers of his people. Part of the collected funds went for battle, but most went for food and clothes and medicines. In a nation of generous people he was more generous, denying himself that more unfortunate might live.

It was then he had met Wong Soo. Wong had been of North China and his eyes had seen war's destruction. He spoke well, and his family was of the best. If his eyes were too close and his mouth too straight, well, that was unfortunate yet hardly enough to condemn him.

He was lately come to the United States, traveling for the government to raise funds for relief. And because they had a common cause, it was inevitable that Wong Soo and Yok Kee should meet. Yok Kee was pleased, then, at Wong, for the young man spoke in the ways of his ancestors, impressively and in honoring tones. He told of the horrors he had seen and of the deeds he had done to alleviate such sufferings; and because Yok Kee was an honorable man, he had accepted Wong Soo as such a man as he.

He had not liked Mei Mei's acceptance of the man, though, for even if he were tolerant and worldly minded, somehow it did not seem right that such easy familiarity between man and woman should be permitted. Yet he had held his counsel, knowing Mei Mei was of another generation, another mind, not as steeped in tradition as he. Too, because personal matters were of lesser importance, he decided after lengthy thought that the problem revolving about his daughter could wait.

He had worked with Wong Soo, liking the manner of the man. Funds had swelled and aid had been sent. The time came for leaving, and yet Wong stayed on. Day and night, Yok Kee heard soft laughter between Mei Mei and the man from North China. It was not good at first, and then it was less harsh to his mind, and at last it was natural. A tiny smile touched his mouth again and again, when he saw the look in his daughter's eyes as she watched Wong Soo.

He grew philosophical, at last. He had made no match for his daughter, as was the custom, instead planning to let her choose her husband. Meiling had disapproved of that, of course, but he had silenced her words by explaining that their daughter was of a new world, with new ideas. She had sniffed, but had said no more.

It was in the following spring that Meiling had died. There had been no warning, no prescience. She had gone to bed at night, and in the morning she was gone. The white doctors had given their verdict, heart trouble, and Yok Kee had accepted their word. There had been a fine funeral, with spiced cakes and much rice wine and false paper money burned to appease the gods. Friends had grieved, and white hangings replaced the colored hangings. A part of Yok Kee's heart died with his wife, and after that, some of the savor of living was gone.

He had sent Meiling's body back to China for burial in the soil which had given her birth, and after that the house was never the home it had been.

He centered his life more and more in Mei Mei and the cause for which he fought. With redoubled vigor, he talked and raised funds. Wong Soo helped, going from city to city, making speeches and aiding in every way. Money poured in, surpassing all hopes and predictions, and a bit of contentment came back to Yok Kee.

It was then that his honor was betrayed. He had thought his understanding of Wong Soo was that of father to son, and so he was the more gullible, as is always the way in such cases.

He had been away, making final arrangements for another great shipment of food and clothing and medicine to be sent to his people, and upon his return, he had stolen softly through the halls of his home, not wanting to disturb the sleepers. He had

written several letters, using a dainty brush and flowing black ink; and then, satisfied with what he had accomplished, had retired. Lying in the lonely bed, he had watched the starlit sky through a window.

A servant's scream had roused him to full consciousness. A fist had pounded on his door, and a frightened voice had called out in horror. In robe and slippers, he had raced for Mei Mei's room, and there found his daughter dying of self-given poison. Only a few words she had spoken—sobbing, hurt words which told of Wong Soo's treachery. Then she, like Meiling, was gone, and he was utterly alone.

Like a madman he had rushed to the place where Wong Soo had lived, but the man was gone. And in the cold light of morning, Yok Kee found, too, that the great fortune in relief funds had vanished with the man from North China.

THEN IT was that the full bitterness of living had come to gentle Yok Kee. He laughed no more, and his pride was as unyielding as his spine. He spurned the offers of his friends, for the wrong was his. His fortune was realized, dollar by dollar, without haggling and without regret. And when at last restitution was made, he was a pauper, his home and his books and his business vanished into other hands. Thus was the physical debt paid, and thus was Yok Kee's honor kept untarnished.

But that was the minor thing. There was yet the matter of Mei Mei and the man who had so shamefully betrayed her. Money could not erase that stain, not all of the wealth in the world. For Yok Kee was of the past and his mind was of the past, and only the blood of Wong Soo could cleanse the infamous thing which he had done.

And so he had fashioned the silken noose and searched for Wong Soo. None knew where the man had gone. The country was huge, and names meant nothing, and so Yok Kee became a wanderer, searching.

His money was little, and so he must stop his search again and again to earn the food which sustained his vengeful body. Washington, Oregon, New Orleans, New York, he followed the whispers which his ears caught in a thousand rumors. His body ached and his brain was tired, but always he continued his search, prying, seeking, asking questions.

That the man was still in the country, he had no doubt. Friends scanned those who left the country and they did not report that Wong Soo had left. There were those who knew why he searched, but they kept their counsel, for the honor was his and no man could do the task he had set for himself.

The days passed, and then weeks and finally months. A year went by and then the second, and the war was over in Europe, although it still raged in China. Yok Kee was older, yet he did not seem to age. Wheat fields in Kansas, grape arbors in California, steel mills in Michigan, all passed before his eyes. He traveled as best he could, walking, asking rides of motorists, even sneaking aboard dark trains in the middle of the night. He had a hopeless task, a lonely task, and there were times when he wondered if his mind had become crazed with thoughts of that which he had set himself to do.

He came close to his quarry again and again. At Wichita, he was a month behind. In Chicago, Wong Soo evaded him by hours. He lost the trail in Memphis and did not pick it up again until Buffalo. It was as though Wong Soo played a game with him, traveling at ease and laughing back at his plodding pursuer. It was maddening and tantalizing, and there were times when Yok Kee wondered if he could continue.

He became ill in Denver. Lungs, the doctors said, and from their words he knew that his search was numbered as to days. He was weaker than before, and because he needed medicines, he could not save as much money for his search as he had before.

His queue was entirely white now, coiled beneath his hat, and his body had shrunk into itself like a sere apple. He walked more slowly, his breath short, and when he coughed, the handkerchief came away stained.

But if his body weakened, his urge did not. It grew more and more as the days fled by, feeding on itself, growing apace. He nurtured it, recalling Mei Mei's laughing face and the dancing life she held cupped in her slender body. He remem-

bered the tinkle of her soft laughter and the teasing quality of her voice.

He told himself that he was a fool, and yet he searched. He told himself his single task was hopeless, and yet he asked questions. He told himself he was dying, and yet he went step by step along his lonely journey.

He could not quit, even had he so chosen. Three things he had held dear in his life: Meiling, Mei Mei and his honor. Two were gone and but one remained, and such a man was he, he would never rest until his honor was cleansed of every mark.

And so he went about his task, the noose at his waist, a burning desire in his heart.

He found the final clue at last. It was good, a fine clue, which came through the mail. He read the brush strokes and knew he had reached the end of his task. Wong Soo was placed at last, waiting for a ship to take him from the country. He wore another name, another identity, but there was no doubt that he was Wong Soo.

Yok Kee went to him. He went as he had gone before, stealing rides, denying himself food so that he might pay fares whenever necessary. His coughing was worse and his strength was at low ebb. He braced himself on a cane now, but always he went ahead, not looking back.

He found the traitor to his honor where the note had said he would be found. Wong Soo was different, playing a part, but there was no disguising his too-close eyes and his veined complexion. He waited the sailing of a ship, and the while, acted as a sweeper in a mechanic's shop.

Yok Kee found him, watching from afar; and satisfied that he was Wong Soo, he turned away. He purified himself at the shrine of a friend, donning the clothes which had been carried for months over the entire country. He combed and rebraided his silvery queue and coiled it neatly into place again. He hung the silken pouch at his waist, the noose soft and supple in its depths. There was an eagerness in him now; but because he had reached the end of his journey, he felt a sense of ease such as had not been in his mind for many weary months.

BECAUSE he was no fool, because he knew he could not match strength with the younger man, he took a revolver, too. It was more a threat than a weapon, for he had never fired a gun in his life. Its menace was to hold Wong Soo in thrall until Yok Kee could render him helpless. After that—well, after that, the rope plaited from Mei Mei's wedding dress would do its deadly work.

He cleansed himself at the shrine late one night, and then he said a formal farewell to his friend and went into the gloom. A light mist lay in the air, building weird nimbuses of paleness about the street lamps. A few cars whisked by, and out on the river foghorns bellowed like melancholy bulls.

He padded through the dimness, mist soiling his clothes. Muck smeared the soles of his slippers. His face was gaunt and starved, but a bit of peace was there now, relieving the strain. His hands were folded in his sleeves and one was weighted by the revolver. He looked straight ahead, ignoring the glances of the few passersby.

He came to the mechanic's shop and stood in a deep shadow for moments, thinking. This was the time for any changing of his purpose. He probed deep into his heart, wondering if he were right in his quest. He had not given much thought to that side of the problem.

He knew that law was not given to the individual to dispense, for that was not the way of this country which he had adopted and which had been so good to him in many ways. Yet he knew, too, that a tiger must be fought with its own weapons, guile and bitter attack. He searched his soul for a final answer, and receiving it, he went ahead.

He glided to the side door of the shop and tried the knob. Moisture touched his hand, and the metal was cool. The knob turned without noise, and he slipped through, revolver clear of his sleeve and dangerous in his worn fingers.

There was no light and no sound. Machines bulked like somnolent beasts about the room, barely discernible. He breathed a soft prayer to Quan Yin, and then he took his first step forward.

He knew that Wong Soo lived in a basement room, pretending to be a dull-witted man. He knew, from what his friend had said, that Wong Soo held another's papers of identity and that there would be no trouble in leaving the country. He knew

the stolen fortune had long since been sent to China, to be held there until Wong Soo arrived. He knew many things about his quarry.

But one thing he had not known. He had not realized that Wong Soo had known of his arrival in the city. Like a hound blundering after its prey, he had given no thought to what lay ahead, and so he stepped into a trap.

He took a second step, sliding one foot ahead of the other on the dirty floor. He felt the chain and automatically stepped over it; and in that second, the chain whipped like a snake, given uncanny life. It snapped ahead, gears grating oilily, and then Yok Kee was whirled aloft, like a rabbit in a spring trap.

He cried out involuntarily as he fell. His head struck the cement, and the gun clattered from dazed fingers. Then lights blazed from a thrown switch, and Wong Soo was pulling frantically at a cable hoist, lifting Yok Kee helplessly into the air.

Faintness came to Yok Kee. Blood rushed to his head, and he swung wildly, both feet caught in the sliding loop of chain. Wong Soo's laughter touched him, but he could not see the man for blind seconds.

The hoist locked, and Yok Kee was like a fowl trussed high, upside down, trying to bend double and free his legs. A fist smashed at his temple and he went slack, swinging idly. Hands caught his shoulders, and then he was still, peering upside down at the man he had chased for so many weary thousands of miles.

There is no need to relate the words which were spoken, nor the mocking laughter which was Wong Soos. Yok Kee, of course, did not call for help, for such a thing was hopeless. He felt the silken pouch jerked from his waist and saw the slim fingers handle it callously.

There was speech, of course, Yok Kee listening to the man who had no honor. He coughed at times, and the spittle was red, his lungs unable to stand the strain put upon them by his position. His cap was gone, and Wong Soo stripped away his robe, leaving his body naked except for breeches and slippers.

An Occidental would have had much trouble in understanding the calmness of both men. There was something in the scene which went back into the dim history of the land from which both sprang. The hunter had found the hunted, and the play had taken a strange twist which Yok Kee had not foreseen. But because he knew this was the wish of the gods, he made no complaint, although the grief in him at the final ending of his search almost broke his laboring heart.

He listened to Wong Soo's words. Death was to come for him, of course; such was Wong Soo's plan. But the death would be delayed for many minutes, until the last moment before Wong Soo's departure for the ship.

Wong Soo taunted him with words of Mei Mei. He flung his treason to Yok Kee's honor into the old man's face, and when Yok Kee fainted again and again from the strain of his position, brought him back to consciousness with splashings of water and brutal fist blows.

When at last he stopped, Yok Kee dangled unconsciously from the chains, beaten and almost at the end of life. He left Yok Kee for minutes, not gagging him, not fearful of his outcries, for this was a matter between them alone, and Yok Kee would not cry for help.

He drew the man high with the lift, making certain he could not swing in a great arc and catch a grip on machinery, thus enabling him to escape. He laid the silken noose close at hand so that Yok Kee could see it and enrage his brain with futile thinking. Then he returned to the basement rooms, finishing his packing.

YOK KEE tried, of course, to escape. He tried to bend upward and free his feet; but his strength would not permit such movement. His mind swam with blackness and he coughed again and again, wondering if he would drown in his own blood from his wounded lungs. He was high above the floor, his head fully ten feet in the air, and he closed his eyes, futility eating at his heart.

Agony was in his legs and body, and he squirmed for minutes, then hung limply. He had not thought of escape now, for such was impossible. And sight of the silk rope brought only a tightness to his mouth, for he would never use it and gain revenge.

He squirmed and twisted again in reflex. He could hear the sounds of Wong Soo below. He wondered if he could be

seen from outside, but a swinging glance told him that such was impossible. No animal could have been more trapped than he.

He heard the silence below, and he knew then that his minutes were but few. Wong Soo would reappear and after that, well, Yok Kee's long search would be forever over.

He thought of many things in those flashing seconds. He remembered his first years in this country. At first he had felt fear; then confidence had come. After that, he had grown to love this strange land where people accepted happiness as their birthright. He was grateful to those he had known for their friendship and their love. He remembered Meiling and Mei Mei, and he thanked the gods that he had been permitted to share their lives. And now that he was close to death, he felt the bitterness stealing from his heart. He made his peace with himself; and so, when Wong Soo appeared, his eyes were calm as they watched the man appear. They were calm and somehow dangerous.

"It is time now, old man," Wong Soo said, and his slim fingers caught up the silken noose.

Yok Kee said nothing. He could feel the hammering of his heart, and the rush of blood to his head kept him almost unconscious.

Wong Soo stood below him, looking up, smiling now, a killer light building in his eyes. He reached out and caught at the hoist chains, tugging. Gears whirred and then stuck, and Yok Kee still dangled far over Wong Soo's head. Cursing, Wong Soo tried to free the gears, but they were locked and so would not move.

Wong Soo drew a short ladder from the wall and brought it close to Yok Kee's side. He mounted it slowly, watchful of Yok Kee's hands. He came up five steps and then rested, the noose coming alive in his hands. He was smiling, yellow skin glistening with sudden perspiration.

"You will trouble me no more," he said softly.

He reached for Yok Kee's throat with the noose, handling it delicately and with familiarity. His eyes begged for Yok Kee to scream, to plead for mercy, but the old man said nothing, only lifting his hands as though to shield his eyes. Wong Soo's breathing was like the heavy rushing of water, and muscles knotted in his hands from the tension of the moment.

He found Yok Kee's throat, and the silken noose touched the withered flesh. There was sudden violent movement, the clatter of wood on the floor. There was a single choking scream, broken at birth. Then the chains about Yok Kee's legs grew taught as iron rods, swinging, swinging, and then going still, held by dragging weight. Yok Kee's long search was over at last.

* * *

Yok Kee's friend found him early in the morning, for he had not come earlier, as he had promised Yok Kee he would not. He found Yok Kee, and horror was in his eyes as he saw the dead body of his friend. He righted the ladder and freed the hoist and slowly, carefully, lowered Yok Kee to the floor.

His voice intoned a soft prayer for the soul of his friend, yet there was no grief in his voice, and he nodded his head as though pleased with what he saw. He freed the silken noose from stiffened dead fingers and held it in his own hands for a long moment. He knew the tale of Yok Kee's search, of course, for they had been friends without secrets from eath other.

He bent and cut away Yok Kee's queue and left it where it was. It was the mark of Yok Kee, and it was only fitting that it should be found in place, to show that Yok Kee had ended his vengeance search.

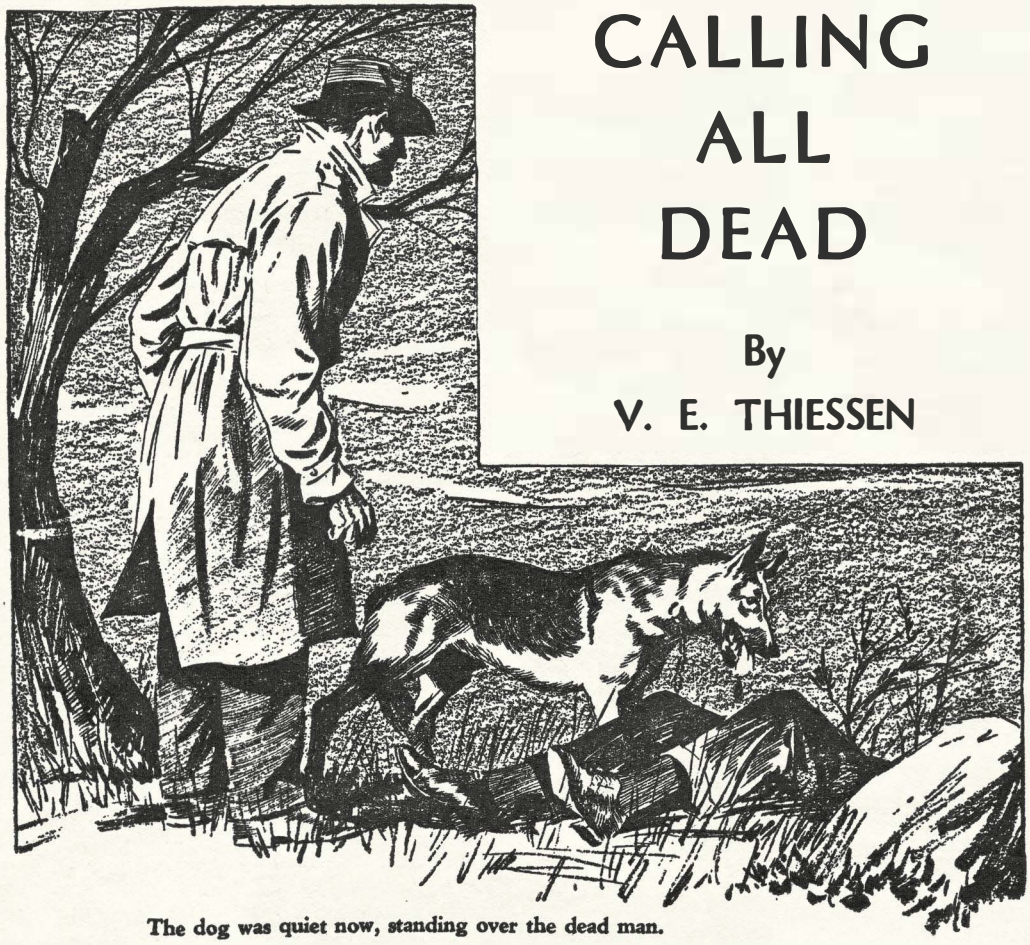
It was knotted and sunk deep in bruised flesh about Wong Soo's throat. For with his last movement, after noosing it while alone, Yok Kee had flung it over Wong Soo's head and then toppled the ladder. The man from North China had paid for his treachery, although the payment had been Yok Kee's last living act.

The friend bent and placed the silken noose about Yok Kee's fingers, tied in the double knot proscribed by custom when revenge is attained. The movement turned Yok Kee's head, and in the light, his mouth smiled at his friend.

"Peace!" the friend said and lifted the old Chinese in gentle arms.

CALLING ALL DEAD

By V. E. THIESSEN



The dog was quiet now, standing over the dead man.

THAT DAMNED English fog was at it again, obscuring the house numbers, so that I had to get right up to one of the houses to be sure I was in the right block.

I had the right block, all right, but the house I wanted was across the street. I hugged the collar of my raincoat a little tighter against the chill mist and turned back to the street. Halfway across, I heard a violin begin its sobbing.

It was as if Baxter were still alive, the way that violin was being played.

"He must have taught the boy to play," I told myself. Even so, I had a funny feeling along my spine, one of those things that Baxter used to say was your subconscious mind trying to tell you something.

Baxter had been with British Intelligence, on liason with our own Counter Intelligence Corps. Even after the war ended there had been a few odd jobs left for us, and in one of these he had been killed. We got the people that killed him, the ones we were after, and it was all cleaned up. I hadn't come here on business at all.

I had come to see Baxter's boy.

Before I saw the boy, I saw Baxter's dog,

Somewhere in the murky depths of that English fog, a strange, soundless whistle blew, calling Michael Baxter to his death. . . .

chained outside the house. As near as I could tell in this fog, it was the same dog I knew. The dog was a big German Shepherd, trained in police work and a number of useful things.

But if this was the same dog, he had forgotten me. He was lunging fiercely at his chain as I mounted the three steps to the doorbell. Even though I could hear that heavy steel chain clanking in the fog, it made me shudder, and I could almost feel that dog tearing at my throat.

The violin inside the house stopped playing. Before I could get my finger on the doorbell the door opened and a boy came running out.

I caught a glimpse of him as he passed, racing madly down the three steps and into the foggy street.

"The fairies!" I heard him cry excitedly. "The fairy whistle!"

I listened. I couldn't hear a thing.

The dog could. He was straining at his chain in the direction the boy had taken, and he had gone absolutely insane with anger.

I shook my head sharply to be sure I wasn't imagining things, and put my finger on the bell.

The door opened and a flood of warm air rushed out around me. Through the opened door I could see lumped coal glowing in a fireplace grate and hear its cheerful crackle. A woman stood in the doorway. She had a pleasing silhouette, against the fire.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm Major Nard," I told her. "I came to see Charlie Baxter's son. I knew Baxter well before he was killed."

"Come in." She held the door wide. "Let me take your raincoat. You must be chilled by the fog."

I shrugged out of my coat. The fire was warm and I put my back to it a moment. Even in this early Fall season, a fire felt good.

"As I came in I was almost knocked down by a boy running. That wouldn't be Baxter's boy, would it?" I asked.

"It would. I'm the boy's aunt, Charlie's sister Nora."

"Oh yes, you're the—" I stopped in confusion.

Baxter had spoken of a bad marriage, but this was no time or place to mention it.

"I'm Mrs. Lonnin. My husband and I are the only relatives that Michael has."

"You have no children of your own?" I asked.

"No."

"It must seem strange, having a ten-year-old boy so suddenly."

"No stranger than to be living in this house. I was glad to have the boy. That is, we were—" She stopped in some confusion.

"This was Baxter's house?" I covered her confusion with the question. Obviously her husband must not have wanted the child.

"Yes, of course. We never could have afforded one so large."

Thinking about it, I realized I hadn't noticed the house much. But if this room was any indication, it must have been a huge place. And judging from the furniture, Baxter must have been pretty well fixed financially.

"You must be chilled," she said again. "I'll put the tea water on. It's almost time for tea."

The doorbell tinkled once, faintly, and the door pushed open.

"There's my husband now," Nora Lonnin said.

I couldn't believe it. From what Baxter had told me, I expected one of those cold, cruel-looking persons. This man was thin and blond. He had soft, glossy hair that any woman would envy, and he was quite handsome in a feminine sort of way. Only his eyes were queer. They were too dark for the rest of his complexion, and they had little yellow flecks peppering their darkness.

His wife introduced us. He said, "Hullo," and thrust a hand out. "You're having tea with us, of course?" When I nodded he turned to his wife. "Is tea ready?"

"In a moment."

She hurried out of the room. The way she jumped at his command I suspected she must be afraid of him.

"You've seen the boy?" Lonnin asked.

"Only glimpsed him. He ran out as I got here, muttering something about fairies and fairy whistles. What was that all about?"

Lonnin shrugged his shoulders. His gold-flecked eyes met mine. "I've no idea. Children get foolish ideas."

Although he looked me squarely in the eye I knew he was lying. In my business you get to where you can tell most of the time.

Mrs. Lonnin returned with our tea. The boy came in the door. He was eating an American chocolate bar.

YOU COULD have told right away he was Baxter's son. He had those same wide-set eyes, that same grave way of looking at you.

"Look, Aunt Nora. Look what the fairies left me," he said, holding the candy bar aloft.

"Michael! You know how sick you were last week. You shouldn't be eating that."

"It won't hurt the boy," Lonnin said.

"He was terribly sick with his stomach last weekend," Mrs. Lonnin explained to me. "We had to have the doctor. I tell you, he had me scared."

"Nonsense. Children are always having indigestion," Lonnin said.

I could tell he was angry because she had mentioned the illness.

"What's this about the fairies?" I asked the boy.

"Across the street there's a fairy ring. You know—mushrooms in a big circle. Uncle Lonnin showed it to me. Lately the fairies have been whistling to me, and if I hurry they leave me something."

"I see." I looked at Lonnin.

He shrugged thin shoulders. "I did say something to the boy about the fairy ring. That's an old name for such mushrooms, but he must imagine the rest of it. He probably got the candy from some soldier, and the rest is imagination."

"It's not imagination," the boy protested. "It's real, a high whistle. Here—I'll show you." He ran out and returned with his violin.

He held the E string down, way up the violin, and pulled the bow over it. He tried it again, a note so high and shrill that it hurt my ears. He dropped the violin, disgusted.

"The violin won't play high enough, but there's really a whistle," he said.

I believed him. I remembered the dog. That high whistle was agony in the dog's ears. I had a funny feeling in my back. Why would anyone call a child with a whistle too high for ordinary people to hear? Why had Lonnin been angry when I was told of the boy's illness?

"I'm sorry you were sick," I said to the boy.

"Oh, I'm all over that now."

"You must have a good doctor. Who is he?"

"Dr. Gillem. He's a very nice man."

I looked up to meet Lonnin's eyes. I swear I don't know why he affected me so. It must have been those odd eyes, but I felt almost cold for an instant.

Mrs. Lonnin sensed something of it, too. "Have more tea," she urged me.

"No thank you. I have to get back." I could sense Mrs. Lonnin's relief as I rose. I wondered if Lonnin raged at her or hurt her physically, that she should be so sensitive to his moods—and so frightened of him.

I got into my coat and went out into the fog.

* * *

It took me an hour to find Doctor Gillem. It was after office hours by the time I had located him, so I went out to his house. He was a big, genial man, with a growing bald spot and a bit of a paunch.

I introduced myself and told him I was a friend of Baxter's. We talked about that for a couple minutes and I got an opening so I could ask about the boy.

"Fine boy," the doctor said. "Fine little chap."

"His aunt said he had been very sick recently."

"Yes, must have gotten some bad meat. Shrimp I think it was."

"Would you be violating any professional confidence if you told me his symptoms?"

"Not at all. But I don't quite see why you ask."

"If I'm wrong I'd rather not explain. It's just an idea. How about it?"

Doctor Gillem shrugged. "The usual thing. He vomited quite violently before I got there. Had pains in the stomach. Had it pretty bad; the poor little chap's face was quite green when I got there."

"You didn't by any chance do any analysis work?"

"Of course not. What in the devil are you driving at?"

"These symptoms, Doctor, aren't they characteristic of arsenic poisoning?"

"That's ridiculous. Nora Lonnin would no more think of such a—" He paused abruptly.

"I wasn't thinking of Mrs. Lonnin, either," I told him.

"No! You're wrong." The doctor shook

his head thoughtfully. "Absolutely wrong."

I noticed that he paused a moment before he said that. Little things like that are important if you look for them. I knew I had set him wondering.

I rose to go. "Thank you, Doctor. Would you give me one more bit of information? Who was Baxter's solictor?"

I wrote the name and address he gave me, and left him.

Having the name and address was a big help this time and I found Baxter's solicitor right away. Baxter's name was an open sesame again, and in a few moments I was able to ask what I wanted to know.

"No, Baxter died with no other relatives than his child and his sister," the solicitor informed me. "The courts appointed the Lonnins as legal guardians for the boy."

"They would inherit Baxter's property if the child died."

"Yes."

"The estate is quite large?"

The solicitor became suddenly suspicious. "Why are you asking all this? This is more than the usual American curiosity."

"Baxter's boy was very ill last week," I told him. "The doctor says it was ptomaine, but could have been arsenic."

He looked at me, wide-eyed. "You bloody, scandal-mongering Yankee!"

I left him.

THE PICTURE was beginning to clear; yet I didn't quite know how the arsenic had been administered. I wondered if it had been in one of the chocolate bars that the fairies left for the boy.

I decided against that. It was too complex, too unreasonable. More likely, with the failure of the poison, some new attempt was being set in motion.

I asked myself the question for the twentieth time since I had left that house in the fog: Why would anyone condition a boy to answer a whistle, as a dog is taught to answer? And why a whistle so high that only an unusual musical ear, like the boy's, could hear it?

I caught the midnight train back to Chester. I had a long talk with my colonel. We put some pressure on the local police, through our new British liason, and the upshot of it all was that I went back down to Crewe, and took quarters in a house that had a view of Baxter's place. I also got Sergeant Plume of the Crewe police, and a week's leave from my job.

I don't know what I figured I could do in a week. If there was anything Lonnin had plenty of, it was time. This week, next week, next month—when the boy died the estate was his.

And meanwhile the boy was getting gifts from the fairies.

We used field glasses, and took turns watching the Baxter house.

"There's nothing to worry about," Sergeant Plume assured me. "If anything happens, we're right here."

"Sure," I said. "We can catch a murderer all right, but can we prevent a murder? We're outside, watching, and Lonnin is in that other house with the child. We don't even understand this devilish scheme he's set in motion."

The second day of watching, the boy heard the fairy whistle again. We saw him come dashing out of the house and cross the street. There was a little low creek there that had kept the ground from being built on. We came out of our house to follow the boy, but we were too late. By the time we got there, he was on the way back home, eating another chocolate bar.

We did walk along the stream till we found the fairy ring. There wasn't anything there to help us, just a circle of mushrooms on the hillside, and a discarded candy wrapper where the boy had stripped his latest gift from the fairies.

We looked at each other.

"You're right so far," Sergeant Plume told me, "but I didn't hear any whistle."

"Did you see the dog?" I asked. "He heard the whistle all right. It must hurt his ears like blazes to make him carry on like that."

Sergeant Plume's eyes were thoughtful. "The bloody louse," he said, and I knew that he was thinking of Lonnin and that at last he entirely believed the danger was real.

"Where do you suppose Lonnin gets the candy?"

"We can try to trace that, though there's a lot of sources," Sergeant Plume said. He made a telephone call to headquarters, and I called my colonel and had him go to the Post Exchange in Chester and send me down a dozen of the same brand of candy bars.

It was three days before we got a chance

to use them. Finally Mrs. Lonnin went out to do her week's shopping, and we got a chance at the house.

It was a pleasure to work with a man like Sergeant Plume. We searched that house and didn't miss a spot. Yet, you couldn't have told we touched a thing. Hidden in Lonnin's closet, in a box with some out-of-season clothes, we found four chocolate bars. I left four of the ones I had brought, and took the four that he had hidden. We didn't find anything else in the house. We sent the chocolate bars to the laboratory.

The next day, police headquarters called Sergeant Plume. He listened a while and then hung up.

"We've had it about the candy," he told me.

"Nothing in the chocolate bars?"

"Nothing but pure candy. Whatever this fairy candy business is, it's not poison."

I agreed. I didn't think Lonnin would try poison twice anyway. He was too smart for that, and he had all the time in the world.

I had only three more days. I thought of Baxter and of the promise I had made him that if anything happened I would see that his boy was all right. I prayed that night before I went to sleep.

I talked to Baxter in my dreams.

"We got him, Baxter," I was saying. "We got the man that killed your boy."

"You let him kill my boy."

"I couldn't help it, Baxter. We weren't in the house. We were watching, but we didn't know when or how he was going to do it."

"You let him kill my boy."

I woke up with that accusation reverberating in my mind. I got up, wiped the palms of my hands dry on a towel and cursed Lonnin. Then I went back to sleep.

THE NEXT day, that damned fog enveloped the city so that we couldn't even see the Baxter house from our window. We tried standing under a tree across the street, but the fog was too thick and all we got was the penetrating dampness through our clothes.

I don't see how anyone could drive in that fog, but the street between us and Baxter's house led to the highway, and an occasional car did go by, its lights making twin haloes in the fog. Late in the afternoon a convoy of British lorries went by, proving that no weather is too severe for the British army, either.

They rumbled along the street below our rooms, traveling too fast for safety, close together, an interminable convoy. I heard the sharp blatting of one of the horns, and it turned some switch in my brain.

"My God! Come on, Plume!" I cried.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I know why the fairy whistle sounds. . . . Come on!"

I don't know how I got across the street between those lumbering lorries. I only knew that I had to get to Lonnin's house before the fairies did.

I made it. I got to the porch when the fairy whistle sounded. Not that I heard it, but the big dog went insane with rage, tugging at his chain till I thought it would come loose. I moved over and put my hand on the snap that held the chain to the post. All the time I was watching the front door. When that door opened, I was going to grab the boy. No fairies for him this time. I sent Sergeant Plume to cover the side door.

The boy came out the side door. Sergeant Plume hadn't reached his position yet, and the boy went by us in a twinkle of legs, hurrying for his fairy gift, his ears hearing only that devil's piping.

The lorries rumbled. I knew I could never catch the child before he reached the street.

There was only one chance. I hoped the dog remembered his training.

"Fetch him back!" I pointed at the running child, and snapped the dog's leash free. Then I began to run, and I heard Sergeant Plume's big boots pounding beside me.

The dog flashed into the fog and vanished, following the boy.

There was a mad screeching of brakes and the high shrill cry of the child. There was terror in that cry, and the screech of brakes mounted to a devil's crescendo, as lorries behind jammed brakes to the floor.

The boy was lying at the edge of the street. Fast as we were, the driver of the British lorry was faster. He was a young lance corporal, bending over Baxter's son.

"He can't be dead," the corporal was crying. "Please God, he can't be dead."

I dropped beside the child. He was breathing, but he was obviously in shock.

(Continued on page 96)

KILLERS LEAVE ME COLD!

His hands left her shoulders. She knew they were going to her throat, and she screamed.

"Good evening, Mrs. Callender," he said softly as he wrapped his big, bony hands around her throat. . . .

By BRUNO FISCHER

SHE KNEW that he would have to kill her. He had been only a tall, unrecognizable male form and a quiet voice saying, "Good evening, Mrs. Callender." But she had seen him enter that house.

"He'll have to kill me," Hertha Callender said aloud to the two detectives.

Lieutenant Clock was reading a typewritten paper on his desk. He didn't look up. He didn't seem to hear her.

"You're just scaring yourself, ma'am." That was Detective Maguire, swinging his leg against another desk on which he half-sat. He looked hard and tough, but from the first his manner had been gentle. Toward her, anyway.

"No." Sitting on the edge of her chair, her legs straight down like a school girl's in a principal's office, Hertha Callender learned toward the lieutenant. "If you were the murderer and afraid that I could give you away, what would you do?"

Lieutenant Clock raised somber brown eyes to her face. He was too slight, too stiffly and conservatively dressed for a policeman, but a pugnacious jaw redeemed the effect. "Afraid maybe, Mrs. Callender, but not sure." He glanced at the typewritten paper. "Let's go over it again in case you missed telling me anything last night. At around ten-thirty last night you were driving east on November Road, and in front of Woodson's house your car broke down."

"The fuel line was clogged," she said. "I didn't know that then, of course. I walked two or three blocks to a drugstore and phoned my husband."

"Your husband was at his job on the

Morning Post at the time, wasn't he?"

"He's cable editor. He works nights. He could leave for a few minutes if necessary."

"But why call your husband? Why not a service station?"

Hertha realized that she was opening and closing her handbag zipper. She stopped.

"I called several garages and they were closed," she explained, "and I didn't care to walk home alone that late at night."

"And when you returned to your car to wait for your husband," the lieutenant said, "you saw the man go into Woodson's house."

"He was coming toward me when I reached my car. He stopped and looked at me."

"Looked at you?" Maguire's leg ceased swinging. "And you didn't see his face?"

"No. It was very dark in the street. I knew that he was a man because he wore a man's hat and coat and was tall, and I knew that his face was turned to me because it was paler than the rest of him. He said, 'Good evening, Mrs. Callender!' You see, I was standing in the headlights of my car and was perfectly visible to him, though he was only a shadow to me. I remember thinking that if I knew him well enough I'd ask him to look at the car, but he didn't come as far as the headlights. He turned suddenly and went up the long walk to the house."

Lieutenant Clock asked, "Couldn't you see anything of him by the house lights?"

"I didn't look after him. There was no reason why I should. I got into the car and sat behind the wheel, waiting for my husband. Then somebody screamed in the house. I just sat there, petrified. The screams stopped almost at once, and the street was very quiet and dark. There are no other houses near, you know. I stared at the house, and I saw the front door open, and he stood there looking at me. There was a light behind him, but it was so dim and so far back that it only outlined him."

"You told the newspaper reporters that you might be able to identify him," Maguire said. "It's in this morning's paper."

"I didn't know what I was saying at the time. But perhaps—" Hertha paused, frowning at her knees. "There was something about him, perhaps the way he stood, that sticks in my mind. I can't describe just what, but perhaps if I saw him again—"

Her voice drifted off. Lieutenant Clock brought her back to her story.

"I knew something terrible had happended in that house," she went on. "As he stood in the doorway, I was terrified that he would come over to me. Just then headlights approached, and a cab stopped next to my car and my husband got out. When I looked again at the house, I saw that the door was closed and the man was not in sight. He must have left through a back door when he saw the cab stop." She felt her voice become strident. "I think that if I had remained alone out there he would have come to the car and killed me."

The lieutenant ran the side of his thumb along his nose. "Your husband didn't go into the house?"

"He sent the cab driver."

"And the cab driver found Sidney Woodson with his thead bashed in," Lieutenant Clock said. "He came out and went for the police. While you and your husband did what?"

"Exactly what we told you last night. We waited in the car. I was upset, of course, and anxious to go home, but Frank thought that we should wait for the police."

THERE was a silence. Then Lieutenant Clock said. "Did you ever borrow money, Mrs. Callender?"

Hertha frowned. "You mean from a bank?"

"Or from a shylock?"

"Shylock?"

"From an unlicensed loan shark like Sidney Woodson. That was his racket. Lent money at exorbitant interest and his collection methods were pretty rough."

"I'd never heard of Sidney Woodson before last night," she said.

The lieutenant nodded. "If your story is straight, here's the way it figures. The killer didn't go to Woodson's last night to murder him. Otherwise he wouldn't have greeted you and let you see him enter that house. Probably he went to see Woodson to plead for an extension on the loan. When Woodson told him that he would have a lot of grief if he didn't pay up, the visitor got panicky and snatched up an iron bookend from the table and smashed

in Woodson's head. That much is clear."

She was hardly listening. She was thinking of what he had said when he had started to speak: *If your story is straight . . . .*

"You don't believe anything I've told you," she said.

Lieutenant Clock spoke without looking at her. "You're the only witness to this unknown man having entered Woodson's house. There's no reason we should doubt you—"

Hertha completed it for him. "And there's no reason why you should believe me. Is that it?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "We have to keep in mind all angles."

She was on her feet. She stood slim and straight, giving no sign that her knees were shaky. "And so you'll let him kill me?"

"Relax, Mrs. Callender. Why should he want to harm you?"

"Because I saw him enter the house."

"But you say you can't identify him."

Hertha clung to her terror. "But he's not sure that I can't. If he knows me, it follows that I know him. And I made that statement to the press that perhaps I could identify him if I saw him again. He must have read it already, and by now he knows that he isn't safe as long as I'm alive."

She reached for the edge of the desk and held on. Perhaps they didn't want to unnerve her further by putting into words their helplessness. Because what could they do to protect her? Set a guard over her day and night—while she worked in the house, while she shopped and visited and went to the movies, while she slept? They could tell no more than she from which tall man, of the many who knew her by sight, the menace would come. It would need only a moment to slip a knife into her, shoot her down from a distance, sneak into the house and drop arsenic into the sugar bowl.

SHE lived in one of a row of compact two-story frame houses, detached from each other by driveways. She pulled her car into the driveway to within ten feet of the back door and opened the car trunk. The box of groceries she had bought on her way home had been brought out for her by one of the clerks in the food market; she found now that it was almost heavier than she could manage. Frank was in the house, but it was only eleven in the morning, and as he worked nights he generally slept until noon. She pulled the box out as far as the bumper and tensed her muscles to lift it.

"Can I help you, Mrs. Callender?" a soft voice asked.

Clifford Hessler stood beside her. He lived five or six houses down the street. He must have been passing when, from the sidewalk, he had seen her struggling with the box.

"Well—" she said, straightening up without the box.

She was tall, but Hessler towered a full head over her. A tall man who knew her by name.

Already the box was in his hands, and he was moving with it to the back door. She remained where she was, one hip supporting her against a fender. Through her frantic mind flashed what she knew of him. A hardware salesman, a bachelor living in a house just like her own with two spinster sisters. Then she laughed to herself. Why should she fear a man who offered to do for her what any other good neighbor would do?

At the door he paused and turned his head to her. She went forward, opened the door, entered the kitchen ahead of him.

"Just put it on the table," Hertha said. "Thanks awfully."

He was so very tall. He rubbed his big, bony hands as if the box had dirtied them, and stood looking down at her with a tight smile on his somewhat gaunt face.

"I read in the morning paper you had some trouble last night," he said.

"Yes," she said, "I just came from the police."

Why didn't he leave? He waited as a delivery boy might wait for a tip. What did he want?

And why didn't he say anything? Why did he just keep looking at her? Because she was young and attractive? Was that all it was?

"Thank you," she said again and turned to the hall door. She was, without being conscious of the act, attempting to flee from him.

Hessler took a quick step sideways, and that put his long body directly between her and the rest of the house.

"The paper says you saw the murderer

going into Woodson's house," he said.

Almost, she screamed. A scream would rouse Frank, asleep upstairs. And then what? He would find her with a neighbor who had kindly brought a box into the kitchen for her. Or if it was worse than that, if this man had come here to kill, how could poor, meek, fumbling Frank cope with him? He was not made for emergencies. He would only get himself killed too.

She kept her voice calm. She said, "I didn't see his face. I'll never be able to identify him."

His smile tightened at the corners of a thin mouth. She tried to remember in precise detail that shape last night in the doorway. But Hessler was without a coat, without a hat, and there was no comparison possible. As she looked at him, he started to sway toward her like a tall, thin tree bowing in the wind.

She cringed away from him. Now she wanted to scream, but she couldn't get a scream out. She was watching his hands, held in horrified fascination by them, and one of them lifted.

That big, bony hand rose toward her and dropped. Although he didn't move his feet, she had an impression that he was going away from her.

Then she heard the slapping of slippered feet in the hall, and she heard Frank say, "Hello, Hessler."

Her husband came into the kitchen. He wore his threadbare, faded bathrobe over his pajamas and his floppy slippers on bare feet. His brown hair was rumpled more than usual; his mild blue eyes were sleepy; a pre-breakfast cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth.

"I carried those groceries in for your missus." Hessler waved toward the table, as if evidence were required. He was completely at ease. "We were discussing her experience last night," he added.

"Quite an experience," Frank agreed.

There was silence then. Hertha realized that she was hugging herself with her arms, that she was holding herself together. She waited, not sure for what.

"Well, I've got work to do," Hessler said. "So long."

As soon as he was gone, Hertha flung herself into Frank's arm. She trembled against his lean, rangy body.

"There, there, sweetheart," Frank said, holding her tight. "Did the cops give you a bad time this morning?"

She spoke against the side of his neck. "I told them that the man who murdered Woodson would try to kill me, too, but they refused to believe me."

"Well, look, sweetheart, you didn't see him."

"This morning's paper quoted me as saying that I might be able to identify him. And then, Mr. Hessler acted so strange."

"Strange?"

She told him about Hessler, and when she finished he laughed.

"Sweetheart, don't you see you're just scaring yourself? Wouldn't any man bring a heavy box into a house for a woman?"

"But then he didn't leave. And the way he looked at me."

"There'd be something wrong with a man who didn't want to keep looking at you."

"He was about to touch me when he heard you in the hall," she persisted.

"About to? The way you told it, he was moving his hand. Probably to scratch his nose or something. Was there anything definitely menacing he said or did?"

"No-o," Hertha had to admit.

"So you see." Frank sounded triumphant, as if he had scored a debating point. The back of his hand covered a yawn. "Got to shower and shave. How about some eats when I come down?"

SHE LISTENED to his slippers flag up the stairs. She could not make him understand that if it was not Clifford Hessler, it was somebody like him. And the police, who were tough-minded and realistic enough to understand, had an idea that she alone or with her husband might have murdered Woodson. Either point of view came to the same thing; it left her alone and undefended.

During the meal, and for a few hours after, she managed to push aside a little of her fear. Going through the usual household routine, being with the man she loved, was like a salve on torn nerves.

But at three o'clock Frank put on his topcoat. "I don't think I'll be home for supper," he told her.

She stared at him. "Where are you going?"

"I told you yesterday. I've got a News-

paper Guild meeting this afternoon. I'll go right to work from there."

She threw her arms about him. "Darling, don't leave me. I can't bear to be alone."

"Sweetheart, you're seeing ghosts." He trailed nibbling kisses over her brow.

She abandoned the fight to keep him with her. She didn't ask bitterly if a union meeting was more important to him than, at the least, her peace of mind. Whether he stayed now or went, this lanky, easy-going man who held her had failed her when she needed him most. He was not made for situations like this, and because he couldn't cope with them, he rejected their existence.

He kissed her cold, unresponsive mouth and was gone.

The emptiness of the house oppressed her, but the fact that she was a finicky housewife imposed certain demands. She hated to leave unwashed dishes, unmade beds. She went into the kitchen and started to stack dirty dishes in the sink.

The back door buzzer sounded.

A dozen times a day she heard that buzzer, but now it made something inside of her jump. Looking over her shoulder, she saw through the door window that it was only Olsen, the laundry man. She went to the door.

Her hand froze on the doorknob as she was about to turn it. Today was Tuesday, and Olsen wasn't supposed to deliver her laundry until Thursday. And he was tall.

She leaned against the door, slanting her gaze down through the window. She could see as far as his knees, and he had no laundry bundle. Her eyes moved up the long length of him. He was not as tall as Clifford Hessler, but tall enough. As tall as a tall man seen only as a shape might be.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Callender." Olsen said through the door.

The doorknob started to turn under her hand. He was turning it on his side of the door. Frantically her fingers dropped to the key in the lock. Somehow her fingers were incredibly stiff; for a small eternity they fumbled helplessly. Then the lock clicked shut, and she stepped back, panting.

Olsen's square, freckled face scowled at her through the window. "Anything the matter, Mrs. Callender?"

Was it coincidence that he had come to the door so soon after Frank left? Had he been watching the house, waiting for Frank to leave? Waiting to find her—alone?

"I made a mistake in the last bill," the laundry man was saying. "I want to show you—"

"Go away!" she shouted. She strove to control herself, subdued her tone. "I mean, not now. I'm busy."

His tongue ran over his cheek. His eyes, looking steadily at her through the window, became hard and angry. "You underpaid me ninety-three cents last time. I got the bill right here."

"Next time. Go away."

He turned from the door and slowly walked up the driveway.

For a long minute Hertha stood against the door, as if barricading it with her weight. He had heard her lock the door. If he was the murderer, he would be certain now that she was afraid of him because she had recognized him last night. In that case, he would return.

Or another tall man would come.

SHE ROUSED herself. Her sister Gertrude's house would be a haven, at least for the rest of the afternoon and the night. She threw on her coat, snatched up her handbag, left through the back door, backed her car out of the driveway. There was no laundry truck in the street. When she passed Hessler's house, her right foot instinctively pressed down harder on the accelerator.

Gertrude lived at the other end of the city. The low white stucco house sat in the middle of a well-kept acre.

Hertha's brother-in-law Arthur heard her car pull up and came out. "Hi, Hertha," his silky voice greeted her. His manner made every woman feel as if he considered it an honor to know her. He put a hand on her elbow and led her into the house.

Gertrude wasn't in.

"One of her afternoon bridge games," Arthur explained after he had taken Hertha's coat and she was settled comfortably in a green leather living room chair. "But I'm here and, of course, delighted to have your company. I've nothing to do till ten tonight."

Probably a poker game, she thought. Arthur was a professional gambler. One day he would be very rich and the next day very poor. More than once Gertrude had

come to her in her mink coat and swanky convertible to borrow money for household expenses.

"Drink?" Arthur asked.

She seldom drank, but this afternoon was different. She nodded.

As Arthur mixed highballs, he kept up a sprightly chatter. What he said was seldom important, but he was a good talker. He was a big man, and he had a big man's lazy, casual manner of speech and movement. There was something relaxing about him. She sank back in her chair and for once did not disapprove of him as her sister's husband.

He handed her a glass and sat opposite her.

"So last night you were standing right outside Sid Woodson's house while he was being knocked off, and you saw the killer too," he said. "Guess it wasn't pleasant for you."

Sid he had called him—intimately. "Did you know Sidney Woodson?" she asked.

Arthur chuckled. "A guy in my racket gets to know every shylock in town. Yeah, I knew him. There'll be no weeping over that heel's death." His heavy face set into solemn lines. "The paper says you think you can identify him."

"Not really. But there was something about him as he stood in the doorway. . . ."

"Something?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm sure he was tall."

"Tall, eh?" Arthur finished his drink. His eyes studied her. "What else?"

"Actually, that's all I'm sure of."

He stood up and came to her chair and looked down at her. "There must be a reason you think you can identify him."

"If there is, I can't think of it."

He smiled then. He stretched out a hand for her empty glass. "Fill it up again, Mrs. Callender?"

Abruptly there was no air in the room. *Mrs. Callender!* It was an affectation of his sometimes to address with mock formality people he knew very well, including his wife and his sister-in-law.

Sitting deep in her chair, she stared up at him. It seemed to her now that the man last night had been big all around as well as tall—like Arthur. Arthur would perhaps have greeted her, "Good evening, Mrs. Callender," if he met her in the street, and because he would have been in a hurry to see Woodson, he wouldn't have stopped to say anything further to her.

"What's the matter?" Arthur said. "You look positively scared of me."

"I'm—it's nothing. Last night upset me." She thrust her glass at him, not wanting another drink, but wanting to get him away from in front of her chair. "More cocktail, please," she said.

He took the glass from her hand and went to the table. She stood up.

It was absurd, she thought. Not Arthur. But why not Arthur—a tall man who knew her and who admitted that he had borrowed money from Woodson and who was questioning her closely as to whether she could identify the murderer?

"About the killer's identity—" Arthur was saying.

"I've got to be leaving now," Hertha broke in.

He turned from the table. "So soon?"

She snatched up her handbag, moved toward the door, mumbling, "I stopped in for only a minute." She was in flight—unsure of every man now that could conceivably be the murderer.

Quickly he went after her. His hand closed over her arm.

"Come on, have another drink," he said. "And I'd like to talk to you about last night."

"No!" The word came out as a scream. She jerked her arm away from Arthur's grip and ran out to the hall.

The maid was coming through a door. Perhaps the scream had brought her. What was important was that the maid was here, a third person, and Arthur could not harm her now.

If he wanted to harm her. She did not know. She knew only that she wanted to get away from him, from every tall man that knew her.

Hertha fumbled her coat out of the hall closet. The maid came forward to help her. Glancing around as she got into the coat, Hertha saw Arthur standing in the living room doorway, his hands in his trouser pockets and his eyes gravely watching her.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Callander," she heard him say as she went through the door.

There seemed to be a mocking inflection in his tone. She wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything but her terror.

HERTHA drove away from the city. She drove until she was forty miles from home and night had fallen. Then she became aware of every headlight behind her—like eyes following her flight. How could she know that the murderer was not trailing her? She had no destination; she could not drive all night; and when she stopped to rest or sleep. . . .

Now that she was so far from home, home seemed the safest place after all. She was beyond thinking; she could only feel. At home, at least, she could lock herself in. She turned back.

At the outskirts of the city, fatigue overwhelmed her. She didn't think she could make the four additional miles to her home. For almost twenty-four hours now she had been tied in an emotional knot, and her reaction to it became a frenzied craving for coffee.

In front of a cafeteria in a broad business street she stopped her car.

She was halfway across the sidewalk when a quiet voice said, "Hello, Mrs. Callender."

One foot paused in the middle of a step. Frantically her eyes swirled, looking for him.

He stood half in shadow against the side of the building. He may or may not have been tall; she could not tell. All that mattered at the moment about him was that he was a shadowy shape that called her by name in a section of the city where nobody knew her. He could have been following her and only a moment ago stepped out of his car.

She fled back to her car. When she was behind the wheel, she turned her head. He was coming toward her. Light from the cafeteria window touched his face, and she saw that he was Jim Sackman, a reporter on her husband's paper.

"Anything the matter, Mrs. Callender?" he asked, coming to the car window. "You—"

The rest of his words were lost in the roar of the racing motor. The gears ground hideously; the car jerked forward.

She was laughing when she reached her house. She knew that it was the hysteria that had been just below the surface since last night, and she knew that she could not go on like this much longer.

She parked at the curb and ran to the front door. No car had come up the street after her; no man was walking toward her. Home again, in familiar surroundings, her hysteria subsided. She told herself that she was a fool for having left at all.

As she was thrusting the key into the lock, her hand turned the knob and the door swung inward. She remembered then that in her hurried departure she had neglected to lock this door. She locked it now, from the inside.

The darkness and silence of the house weighed down on her. She snapped on the hall light and moved to the living room.

Inside the living room, only dimly lit from the hall, a man lay motionless on the floor.

"Frank!" she shrieked.

She dropped beside him on her knees. He was alive, breathing raggedly. He lay on one shoulder, like a child doubled up in sleep. Although his face was turned away from her, she realized that he couldn't be Frank. He wasn't tall or thin enough.

She pulled his raised shoulder down to the floor. His head flopped back; the face turned up to her. There was barely enough

She remembered the tallness, the slope of his shoulders. . . .

light from the hall for her to recognize the fleshy features of Detective Maguire.

One of his hands lifted feebly, but his eyes did not open. Then she saw the small patch of blood on the carpet and the dark splotch of it on his partly bald scalp.

She knew what had happened.

The police had not left her unprotected after all. For all she knew, he had been following her everywhere. Then he had lost her, probably when she had left the

city, and he had returned here to wait for her. He had seen somebody enter the house through the unlocked door, and he had followed, and whoever it was had knocked him unconscious.

Which meant that *he* was in the house now, had waited for her to return!

She leaped to her feet, and there he was very close behind her.

His hands were in his topcoat pockets; his face was shadowy under the pulled-down hat brim. The hall light was behind him, as it had been last night when she had seen him standing in the doorway of Sidney Woodson's house. There was that same tallness, that slope of shoulders, that characteristic of shape.

She did not have to see his face more clearly to know now who he was.

"Clifford Hessler!" she whispered.

THE SALESMAN and neighbor moved quickly. His hands came out of his pockets and seized her shoulders.

"I figured when you got scared of me this morning you knew me," he said harshly. "The trouble is your husband came into the kitchen and I didn't have a weapon to handle him."

He didn't have a weapon in sight now. But his big, bony hands were enough.

"I—I told the police you were the murderer," she whispered. "Killing me won't save you."

"Sure it will. They can't touch me without a witness, and you won't be around to testify."

His hands left her shoulders. She knew that they were going to her throat, and she screamed. Only the first note of the scream came out. The rest was locked inside her by the awful pressure of his fingers.

"Let her go, Hessler," Frank said.

It was a dying dream, she thought dully, in which she heard her husband's voice. But it could be no dream that the murderous hands fell from her throat and that Frank stood in the doorway with a gun in his hand.

"Don't!" Frank said shrilly.

Her head turned as if by itself. Hessler had moved back to the deeper shadows of the room and was pulling something out of his pocket.

A gun, she thought. She opened her mouth to warn Frank, but it was not necessary. Frank shot him.

There was an interval when the world blocked out in the fading thunder of the shot. Then she was back in the living room and Frank was standing over Hessler. Frank had a gun in each hand now and Hessler sat against the clubchair, clawing at his shoulder. The detective again flapped one arm weakly, but remained unconscious.

"Frank," she whispered, staring at her husband as if she had never before really seen him. "Frank."

He turned a strained face on which he forced his boyish grin. "Pretty close at that, sweetheart. I'm afraid I'm not so good at this sort of thing. I was plenty worried when you got away from me this afternoon."

"You didn't go to the meeting?" Speaking was an effort through her bruised throat.

"What kind of a guy do you think I am?" He sounded angry at her. "Did you think I'd leave you alone when you were in danger? I guess I did at that, but I thought it would be only for a few minutes. I went out to borrow a gun, and when I came back you were gone. I hopped a cab to your sister's house, but Arthur told me you'd just left. I went all over town looking for you. I came back here five or six times. When I came back a few minutes ago, I saw the car in front of the house. I had my key out to unlock the door when I heard a scream—anyway, a thin, short yelp. So I came in without making a sound."

He looked the way he always had, lanky and easy-going and inadequate to cope with any active situation, but he had become somebody she had not known before.

"And I thought you failed me," she muttered.

"You mean because I pretended to go to the meeting? I didn't want to upset you by telling you there was reason to be afraid."

"You didn't want to upset me!" She started to laugh again, but there was only a little hysteria in her voice now.

Frank glanced at the wounded murderer, then at the unconscious detective, then went to where she stood. "Take it easy, sweetheart. Everything is all right now."

Hertha clung to him. "Everything is all right," she echoed.

Macabre Museum

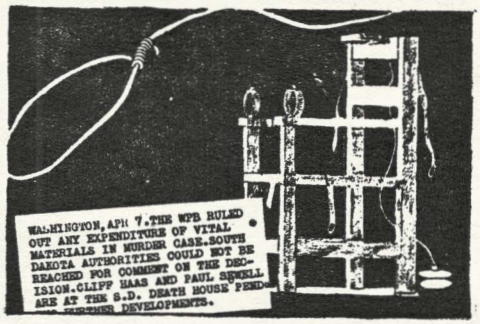
Mayan & Jakobsson

Some thirty years ago, New York City was hit by a practical joker—a killer who started sending explosive packages through the mails, apparently for no other reason than to get a laugh. With no connection between victims, no clues but a piece of paper with a couple of words of typewritten address, police doggedly set about the since unparalleled job of checking *every* typewriter in New York City! They'd eliminated all but city-owned typewriters when a city employee named Gluck got one of the lethal packages, and was taken to the hospital seriously injured.

At Gluck's apartment, police found incontrovertible evidence Gluck was the guilty man and had taken this means of diverting suspicion from himself. They went back to the hospital to confront Gluck—and found an angry joker. Gluck refused to talk and died sullenly, his own victim. Nobody laughed.

Robert B. Greene was one of those fabulous figures—head of a million-dollar New York gambling syndicate that would bet on anything from national elections to a turn of the cards. He allegedly survived the Wilkie debacle by throwing his partner, Max Fox, to the wolves and switching his own bets at the last moment to Roosevelt. When Fox demanded redress, Greene simply froze him out of the firm. In 1942, he was sitting in a high-voltage bridge game when he had a premonition. He looked up and saw a masked man at the door of the room. The intruder shot him and his bodyguard, and escaped, surrendering later. He was Max Fox.

The reason for Greene's premonition? At the moment Gambler Fox killed Gambler Greene, the latter had just drawn—the Ace of Spades!



If you think war is a murderous business, we give you a pair of South Dakota killers, Cliff Haas and Paul Sewell. Both had been sentenced to the chair back in the early days of the recent war, but the rub was that South Dakota had no electric chair, having recently switched over from hanging. They won reprieves on a WPB decision—the nation was too busy shooting up this headachy world to spare materials for a hot squat!

To give you an idea of the mentality of murderers, here re some findings of the statisticians of one of our leading insurance companies:

1. Criminals are not murderous; less than 3% of our annual killings are committed by gangsters.

2. If somebody has a good reason for killing you, chances are you'll live to a ripe old age. Most killings are caused by trivial things or result from emotional explosions; not long ago a man was killed by a co-worker in an argument over a day off.

3. If you are the beloved one in a triangle, the chances are better than 61% that *you'll* be killed rather than either of the rivals for your affections!

GARDEN OF DOOM

By CHESTER B. CONANT

ABOUT eight o'clock, on a May morning in Seattle, Washington, a man and woman walked down Second Avenue. The woman was small and ordinary, but the man was a sight to behold. Framing a hooked nose and a pair of wild, fiercely glinting brown eyes, was an astonishing growth of red hair. His beard was long and full, flowing down over his chest and spreading out to left and right in a wild, unruly mass, while from his large head, thick, unkempt strands cascaded down over his shoulders.

The couple turned off Second Avenue at Cherry Street and walked to Quick's Drugstore.

Suddenly, a stranger stepped up behind the bearded man, and with a short, rapid motion, placed the muzzle of a revolver at his hairy left ear, and pulled the trigger.

The bearded man slumped to the sidewalk without a sound.

His wife turned and screamed; then she flew at the stranger like a wildcat, trying to wrest the gun from his hands. He fought her off, retaining his gun, but making no attempt to escape. The woman left him and bent over her husband who was lying in a pool of blood that was beginning to stream across the sidewalk. He was dead.

The murderer stood idly by, holding the gun in his hands. A policeman arrived within a few minutes and he handed the weapon over to him without a word.

The little woman arose from the sidewalk and began to babble hysterically. Then she suddenly calmed. Pointing a finger at the corpse on the sidewalk, she said tonelessly, "This man is my husband, Joshua the Prophet. He will arise in three days and walk."

The astonished policeman humored the little woman and called the wagon. But he might have paid her more heed had he known something of the dead man's fantastic history.

Early in the 1900's, Franz Edmund Creffield first appeared as a Salvation Army worker in Corvallis, Oregon. He was then thirty-five years old and unbearded.

Creffield left the religious group after only a few months of service and dropped from sight. Late in 1903, he reappeared in a full, flowing beard and long hair, and proclaimed himself Joshua II—sole prophet and sole communicant of the Church of the Bride of Christ. He was a completely changed man, even to the tone of his voice, once soft and gentle, now booming like a kettle-drum.

The new Joshua's magnetic, almost hypnotic, personality had a pronounced effect. Before a month was up, he had gathered a large group of converts—mostly women. With a stooge known as Brother Brooks, Joshua conducted his first meetings openly in the homes of converts.

As his flock increased, Joshua began to feel the need for more room and set up a camp in Kiger Island in the nearby river. Here meetings were held throughout the Summer of 1903 in a large wigwam of poles covered with boughs built by Joshua and Brother Brooks, with girls and women eagerly helping. One of the most willing workers was a beautiful young ash-blonde girl named Esther Mitchell.

The meetings contained all the elements of the old-time revival meetings: chanting, shrieking, and rolling about on the floor, as the self-styled prophet thundered, "Roll, ye sinners, roll!" And roll they did, all over the bare floor.

With the coming of cooler weather and heavy rains, the island retreat became an unhappy place to roll in. The home of O. P. Hunt, a respected citizen and member of a pioneer family of Corvallis, became the new meeting place.

From then on, according to reports in the local newspaper, the religious fanaticism of the members of the little cult increased to such outrageous proportions as to suggest insanity. All the walks around the Hunt house were torn away. Most of the house furnishings were burned in a huge bonfire held one night in the front yard. The shrubbery, fruit trees and flowers were dug

The earth rose up and doomed a city when that self-proclaimed prophet, Joshua II, called for the destruction of San Francisco. But not even Joshua could predict one event: His own murder!

up and destroyed, and kitchen utensils were beaten to pieces and buried. All these actions were alleged to have been the "will of God."

Joshua and Brother Brooks were finally taken to court for a sanity hearing. The men were found sane, but were advised by the officers to leave town. The prophet merely laughed quietly at them and walked out.

However, Joshua could well have profited by the wise counsel of those officers. For, not long afterward, a group of silent men, all highly respected citizens of Corvallis, called at the prophet's headquarters and took him and his assistant to the edge of town. There, the two were covered with an adequate coating of tar and feathers and told to keep out of Corvallis.

That was the last of Joshua's stooge. Brother Brooks was never seen again in that town. But not so, Joshua. Mrs. Hunt and her daughter, Maude, found the prophet in the woods and brought him home where his sticky coat of tar was removed. A few days later he married Maude Hunt.

In 1906, Joshua and his wife moved to Seattle with his brother and sister-in-law. Now he decided it was time to establish his Garden of Eden. With his hypnotic personality in full play, he persuaded Mr. and Mrs. Frank Hunt to sell their Seattle property and purchase a remote strip of land on the Pacific Coast, south of Waldport, Oregon. Here they would establish a colony for the faithful.

The Hunts and Joshua's wife were instructed to go on ahead while the prophet remained behind to gather the faithful. "You remain away from Eden at your own peril!" he warne them in his booming voice.

"Peril?" asked Mr. Hunt.

"Yes, peril!" Joshua boomed again. "Brother Hunt, I have called down the wrath of God on all these modern Sodoms, on Portland, on Seattle, on San Francisco —on Corvallis, itself. None will survive but the faithful who will leave all behind them and come to our Eden." And then he uttered a terrible curse:

"A curse, O Go , on Portland, on Seattle, on San Francisco, on Corvallis!"

That was on the morning of April 17, 1906. The next day Joshua arrived at Newport, Oregon, the nearest railroad station to the Garden, and smiled smugly as his wife and the two Hunts excitedly told him of the telegraphic despatches of the day reporting the total destruction of San Francisco by earthquake and fire.

Then started a great migration from the once serene little town of Corvallis. Young girls started out for school and disappeared. Husbands returned home from work to find their wives gone. Middle-aged women with grown daughters filled the two daily trains out of Corvallis, all making the pilgrimage to the bearded prophet whose mighty curses destroyed whole cities.

On April 26, one man whose daughter had disappeared somehow learned the whereabouts of Joshua. He was one of Corvallis' most highly respecte citizens and he meant business. He stopped at Newport to buy a revolver and a box of cartridges.

He went down to the waterfront, just missing the ferry that was carrying the prophet across Yaquima Bay. On the deck stood Joshua, surrounded by a group of his followers. The man pulled out his gun, aimed and fired while the converts screamed. But the gun only clicked five times in a row.

Joshua smiled gently at his followers. "No man can kill Joshua."

But the man on the dock was raging. He had a different answer for his failure. "The damned fool of a storekeeper sold me rim-fire cartridges for a center-fire gun. That's why that skunk is still alive!"

WHEN George Mitchell received the information of the latest failure to remove the prophet, he ma e his decision. His two sisters had given up everything and left home to join Joshua. Young Mitchell took a revolver and set out on the trail of the prophet. He arrived in Seattle on the morning of May 7, 1906 and carried

(Continued on page 97)

He saw the water of the East River, curling through the blackness of that March night.

EYES of the ENDLESS NIGHT

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

Flight into Darkness

"TONY'S furniture will be delivered in the morning. It looks pretty bad now, without anything except—well, the walls." Cliff's voice faded into an anxious silence. He unlocked the heavy door and played the beam of his flashlight over the bare floor.

Slowly Joan entered, seeming to tiptoe in her foolish little red shoes. Cliff moved the beam of light around the dusty walls.

"He says we can have this floor to ourselves," he continued. "All he wants is

●

Gripping Mystery Novelette

●

"Each time I kissed her, I dreamed of the time that would be so sad. She would die so beautifully. But I would keep her. There in my house I would keep her, in all her sleeping loveliness."

a bedroom upstairs and a part of the attic. I thought I would put the piano in here. This won't be a bad room, Joan. The whole place can be arranged some way so that—anyway, it *is* a place to live," he ended desperately.

"Darling, it's perfect. We'll make it perfect." She smiled. The flashlight produced glinting swirls of brightness in her black hair, and it glowed in her eyes. "And I promise: I will not be angry, no matter *what* Tony does. If he's generous enough to buy this house and let us live here, I promise to be good. Very good. Now show me the other rooms. It's an adventure, don't you see?"

Her voice was gay—almost. It's an adventure, Cliff thought. Yes, an adventure in an ugly old house in a decaying warehouse-block in Greenwich Village. Not the part of the Village where tidy gardens grew. The part where the rats grew.

Joan kept talking gaily. Curtains there. A bright rug here, maybe. . . .

An adventure . . . an adventure into deception. That was it. They would come here from the City Hall tomorrow afternoon. This would be their honeymoon. Within these walls. With Tony's furniture. And Tony. Tony, striding slowly, or gliding slowly through the rooms, his long fingers stroking his lean nose. His blond hair slipping over his forehead. His eyes growing dark, dismal. And then he would drink the queerly bitter liquor that he had brought from Spain. And he would murmur to himself.

Cliff said, "If we'd—if *I'd* only had money to buy one of those places on—"

"Cliff, don't. Please don't worry yourself." Joan turned and touched his cheek. "It won't be forever. Nothing is. Who knows? Five years from now we'll laugh and tell our friends how we spent our honeymoon in the most fantastic old place with a melancholy drunkard. By that time you'll be wonderful. They'll be asking you to give concerts everywhere. It's just an *adventure,* Cliff. That's the way to take it."

"Yes," he said distantly. "But you don't know how much—" He stopped. He couldn't tell her. Some day, perhaps. Some day when their love was older, stronger. He would tell her, then. But tonight. . . .

Tonight he could only feel the gradual crumbling of something within his chest. He was afraid. It was a fatalistic, blind sort of fear, yet not so blind that he did not know its source: Tony.

Tony was the web. The inescapable, suffocating web. The web of horrible delight. And Joan did not know.

* * *

He told Joan good night in the lobby of her midtown hotel.

"And I'll be seeing you tomorrow, Mr. Roberts?" she asked archly.

"Oh, maybe. I'll think about it. I—" Suddenly he needed to kiss her, desperately. He needed to hold her. He could not explain this feeling in him; this was the last good night that would part them. Nothing, *nothing* must happen this night. He must not leave her. And she must not leave him to the silent shadows and the taunting in the wind. He must hold her, or this night would never end.

But she was gone. The elevator door was closed and the cables were clattering in the shaft. He started to reach out, to press the button that would bring her back to him.

Slowly his hand returned to his side. It was idiotic. Nothing but nerves. What was the matter. . . .? Nothing, he told himself.

IT WAS almost midnight. The August night was hot and damp, and the glow of neon signs stained the night. Cliff wanted to walk. He wasn't sleepy. His hotel room would mock him. Cabs would roar beneath his window. The dead heat of the day would press against his throat. No. He wanted to walk. He didn't want to be alone. Somewhere he might have a beer. . . .

He scarcely realized how far he had gone, or where, until once more he stood before the narrow brown building, looking at the sunken-eyed windows, the naked door with its iron knocker fashioned in the shape of woman's head: an ugly woman with long wild hair and a throat that seemed to be straining to scream. For a moment there on the dark street, Cliff imagined that it was Joan's throat, that she was striving to call out a warning to him. What was she saying? He could almost hear her words: *Go! Go! Go away!*

"Joan. . . ." His hoarse voice echoed back from the door, as if the iron head had

hurled it into his face. It awakened him from the moment of fantasy. He shook his head and coughed.

"I've got to have that drink," he said abruptly. He turned from the house and hurried toward Seventh Avenue. Somewhere a cat howled mournfully; somewhere a paper rattled in the hot breeze.

Dear God, this is a weird way to spend the night before a wedding, he thought. It's just as though I were running away from— No. No, he realized harshly. No. I'm hunting. I'm going *toward*. . . .

His thoughts halted. He stood still on the dark street. Again the cat howled.

Going toward Tony Marlow . . . Hunting Tony . . . Hunting him as he had sought him for almost six months.

Why? Why? Cliff's mind cried out.

It was like a thirst. A hunger. A need, compelling and relentless, that crawled upon him. He felt it at nights when he could not sleep. He heard it whisper in open sunlight. He heard it stalking him on every street. And he could not tell why. . . .

That first night. . . . But he did not want to remember. Sickness filled him at the memory. Yet he coud not avoid the recollection. Darkness and the bridge. The awful yearning to die. He, Cliff Roberts, had trembled and begged for the courage to die.

If Joan ever knew. . . .

With a physical effort, he shook the memory away.

"I must be going crazy!" Cliff snapped at himself furiously. He crossed the street toward the Lantern Bar. It was a narrow, half-lighted room, extending back toward a cavelike opening filled with obscure booths. There was a piano in the room, and a melancholy pianist played music to the shadows and never spoke. A strange place. The place where Tony Marlow drank and smiled.

Tony was sitting there now, alone in a back booth, his long fingers lingering on his whiskey glass his glinting golden eyes drowsing on the pianist—as though the gaunt, grey features would presently reveal some secret. Only a motion of his brows acknowledged Cliff's arrival.

"Beer," Cliff said to the indolent waiter. "How long have you been here?" he asked Tony.

After almost a minute Tony spoke dreamily. "I think I see. I think I sense it, now."

"What?"

"The secret of Marcio's face," He nodded lazily at the pianist. "He is a murderer and he is hungering to kill again. That look is starvation. Starvation for the pleasure of killing."

Cliff stared abruptly at Marcio, then back at Tony. "You're drunk again," he said.

"Of course." Tony smiled dreamily. "That's when I understand. My other sense awakens. I *do* have another sense, you know." Slowly his golden eyes drifted up to meet Cliff's. "It's an intuition of death," he continued gently. "In the war I had it. I knew before the planes went out across the channel, which ones would perish. I knew it again when my father was to be killed. I told him; he laughed and called me a fool. That evening he reached out to close the window. I watched him. I knew. I *knew*. He leaned. He screamed. He vanished. I had known."

He lifted the whiskey to his lips, and suddenly his lean cheeks were sucked in, his eyes were dark with intensity. He seemed to be looking through the whiskey into a hateful pool; his eyes seemed to be locked in an agony of conflict with forces invisible. Then, with a shudder, he drained his glass and stared at Cliff. "When I'm drunk. That's the only time. And that's the reason I drink," he said harshly. "I like to imagine death, as I imagine it in Marcio's face."

CLIFF drew a slow breath and moved, loosening the stiff muscles in his shoulders. He felt himself, in his mind, striving to climb out of a gradually deepening hole. Each inch he gained was lost as hot mud sank beneath him. It was a nightmare he lived and relived: the hole from which he could not climb; the pit into which he was sinking. And Cliff knew too well when the nightmare had first come to him. It had come with Tony.

"I've got to go," he said suddenly. He started to rise.

"What does he want?" Tony asked distantly.

"Who? What does who want?"

"That man—the one who is following you."

"Following . . .?" Cliff turned. He saw the man. A strange man—small and soft, like a lump of damp clay. A forlorn little humpty-dumpty of a man with lonely sick eyes, a sack of a black suit, and fingers that tugged pathetically at each other in some timeless anxiety. As Cliff looked into the sick brown eyes, he knew indeed that the man *had* been following him. But for some reason he was not surprised. The night and everything about it was mad; anything could happen.

"Ask him," Tony said wearily. "See what he wants."

"But why should—" Cliff began uneasily. He did not want to approach the face of clay. Here, his mind told him, was the threshold of a corridor down which he must not go. He must leave this place, this formless lump of man. At once.

"Ask him," Tony repeated with a mournful monotony.

"Leave me alone! I'm going. Tomorrow I'm getting married and I'm damned if I'll—"

"You were standing there." The little man had come over now, and the words seemed to slide off his lips and flutter lifelessly to the floor. "I saw you. Standing there, and you were talking to it. I saw you."

"Talking to it?" Cliff echoed.

"The head. The head of the woman who wants to scream." He shuffled closer, looking up into Cliff's eyes. Slowly he extended his hand—a warm puffy-feeling hand—as if to assure himself that Cliff existed. "What did she say to you?" He began to twist a button on his blue and white shirt.

"She didn't say anything. She simply—My God, man! That's a door knocker! What are you talking about?"

"But you were talking to her. I know. I've watched a long, long time, ever since I remembered."

"What did you remember?" Tony asked with sudden softness.

The sick eyes shifted, as if seeing Tony for the first time. "I don't know," came the answer. "Everything. Nothing. Her throat, trying to scream. But mostly the golden girl with the rose and the blood. She was so beautiful. It was a shame."

"What . . .?" Cliff began. His throat was dry. He heard the fragile tinkling of the piano. It seemed to tell him he must go. At once. "What golden girl? What rose and blood?" The words, he realized, had come from his own lips.

"She was on the rug beyond the door where the woman tries to scream. I found her. The rose was here." He touched his shoulder. "A corsage, you know. And the blood was here." He touched his lips. "She was dead."

Cliff opened his mouth. Nothing happened. He heard a voice speaking like the rustle of a raw wind. Tony's voice. "The rug—tell me: Were there red temples woven in the rug? And in the center a ball of flame. *Tell me*!"

"Yes! Temples and the ball of flame! That's it! You know. You've seen it too!" the little man cried.

Cliff twisted to stare at Tony. The lean face was white. The golden eyes were brilliant. Perspiration beaded the forehead. "And then? What happened? For God's sake, *what happened*?"

"The darkness," said the little man.

Slowly Cliff fumbled behind him and sat down. He blinked at Tony, then at the sick brown eyes. He had the weird sensation of hurtling through the vast sphere of some dark nothingness. For the fragment of an instant, a window opened and Joan's dark eyes were there. Her hand was outstretched, and she was crying to him to stop, to come back. The window slammed shut and he was plunging on—further out into nothingness—and all the while Tony's softly hypnotic voice was speaking.

CHAPTER TWO

Seize the Rushing Wind

"BUT YOU *must* have seen something before the darkness. You must remember. You must tell me everything. You *said* you remembered."

"Everything and nothing. It's all tangled, don't you see?" The little man fumbled down at the booth and stared at his puffy fingers as he kneaded them together. "And I've tried so hard," he whispered. "I've waited and watched and listened. Then blackness comes again and they take me away and laugh at me. They always find me again."

"Who are *they*?" Cliff asked thinly.

"The people at the hospital. They don't

understand. They really don't under—"

"Of course they don't," Tony cut in. "But I understand. I swear I'll understand if you'll only try to remember. Tell me all you can."

The little man's eyes fixed themselves on the wall. Laboriously his lips twisted and the words came slowly: "There were a lot of us, you see. From all over the country, people who built houses. We came to New York for the—" He stopped. "Or did we build houses. . .?"

"A meeting? A convention?" Cliff prompted.

"A convention. That was the word," the little man said swiftly. "And then they were teasing me. I remember that part. It was the first night, wasn't it? I—I'm not sure, but they were teasing me about the drinking. Because I never had taken a drink, you see," he explained anxiously. "And they kept telling me to take one, but I wouldn't. Then they said I could drink a root beer and they brought it. But it wasn't really root beer. I know now," he murmured wistfully.

"By then it was too late. Everywhere there were shining lights and the walls kept slipping and drifting around, and faces were smiling in front of me. It was—was like floating through a cloud except—" He stopped and stared from Cliff's face to Tony's, and his eyes were dim and troubled. "Except the cloud ended," he whispered, "and everything seemed empty and lost. The walls were gone, and the people were gone. It was dark and the street was empty and I was all alone. Then I saw her head. She was trying to scream. The head on the door. I was standing there and she was trying to scream. Do you understand?"

"I understand. What else?" Tony urged breathlessly.

"I had to help her. Something was wrong. I tried to help her, but it was only a door and her head was made of iron, so cold and hard. It frightened me, and everything seemed to be falling and twisting around me. I was trying to stand up, trying to hold to the door. Somehow it opened, and there was the golden girl. There on the rug where the temples were, and the blood was at her lips—just the color of the rose. And then—then I touched her and—and the darkness came."

"You touched her. The darkness came. And after the darkness?" Tony whispered urgently.

"I can't explain. I don't understand," he said vacantly. His fingers began to knead themselves again, and his eyes were dim in their effort to remember. "There was whiteness everywhere, and I was in a bed. My head was hurting. It hurts all the time, sometimes so much I can't see. It's back here." He took off his battered hat. Cliff felt his eyes growing wide, his lips sagging open.

Across the bald head was a deep purplish crevice, as though an axe had once been driven in and twisted and dragged away.

Cliff whispered, "And then what happened?"

"They just stared at me, the men in the white coats. I tried to tell them about her—the golden girl and the head that was so hard and cold. They just kept staring. Then another man came. He had a beard and he sat there asking me questions. He wanted to know my name and where I lived and what had happened, but I—I couldn't," he stammered.

"You couldn't remember?" Cliff asked sharply.

Slowly the little man shook his head. "Only about building houses. About the convention. I tried to tell them. The man with the beard listened and came back after a while and asked me to try again. He said there hadn't been any convention like that. So—so it wasn't right," he said wistfully. "I think it is, but they say it isn't. They won't let me go anywhere. They just stare at me and sometimes they smile and they call me Mr. Nobody." He blinked and his face grew more lonely.

"But don't you see? If I could only—only start over. If I could find someone to help me. Someone who knew. . . . Don't you see?" he asked helplessly. "That's why I steal the clothes from the basement at the hospital and go back to watch, to wait and listen. Some day someone will be there who can help. Some day. . . ." He stopped and the dim haze cleared from his vision as he stared at Cliff. "But you were there. I remember. Just a while ago, and you were talking to the head. You! You're going to help me!" He clutched Cliff's arms desperately.

"But I—I never heard such a tale! I

can't help—" Cliff began hesitatingly.

"Look, you—little Mr. Nobody," Tony interrupted. "Can you remember how she looked, when you saw the golden girl and the blood! Tell me how she looked. Beautiful? Sad? Lonely? Tell me!

"When? Oh . . . I don't know. So long, it seems, and then again it seems just a moment. But she was beautiful. Oh, very beautiful."

"But think! It was cold that night. It was *snowing*!" Tony whispered. "Think of everything. Tell me."

"Snowing? But I—Yes! White! I remember!" the little man cried. "*You* understand! *You* can help me!"

Cliff turned and stared unbelievingly at Tony's flushed face. There was rapture burning there—rapture scarcely human in its intensity.

Cliff felt his lips struggling for words. "Tony—how did *you* know about the snow?"

"Because," Tony whispered, "I sent her the rose. I remember thinking: The red rose and the white snow. Beautiful."

"And you'll tell them for me, so they won't stare at me any more?" the little man said.

"Tell them? Perhaps. . . ."

"What is this damned nonsense?" Cliff raged. "That house and a girl and—" He stopped as Tony's burning eyes met his. He swallowed. "Tony, how long have you owned that house? When did you live there?"

"Two years, perhaps." He scarcely seemed to know he was speaking. "I bought it for her. Where she could sleep and they would not find her. Where she would be mine and I could remember the beautiful sadness.

The piano kept tinkling. The little man's wistfully puzzled eyes waited for them to speak to him. And Cliff kept staring into Tony's unbelievable face.

"Tony, what *are* you?"

"I? I am different," he murmured. "I—" He moved his hand dreamily. It hit his glass, knocking it to the floor. Tony's eyes flared wildly. He gasped. A shudder ran up his throat. He stared at the little man starkly, then at Cliff. Suddenly his lips curled. He half rose, his chest heaving.

"Get out! Get away from me, Cliff! You don't have any right to these things! You made a promise to me! Leave me alone! Haven't I done things for you? Get out!" he said furiously.

A sensation of nausea filled Cliff. He *wanted* to go. He *had* to go.

FOR HOURS he walked through the dark streets. It was hopeless to try to sleep, he knew. It was useless to try to think. He could not take another drink. How many had he drunk? Ten. A dozen. In this bar, in another.

Nowhere could he lose the echo of Tony's voice. Everywhere the monstrous scene trailed him. It reflected itself from jiggers; it glistened in mirror; it huddled in shadows. Tony's ecstatic face.

And that golden girl, Cliff thought. The rug. Temples. The snow. He bought the house for her. Where she could sleep. Where they could not find her.

They. . . . Tony's word had a curiously haunting shape in Cliff's memory. An unfinished sound, a doubtful sound. *They*. . . . When actually, Cliff was sure, he had meant something else. But what . . .?

He shook his head and lit another cigarette as he stood motionless for long minutes at the fringe of Washington Square. The black sky was just beginning to grow grey with the haze of dawn, and Cliff stood there, thinking of Tony Marlow. Retracing deliberately the queer trail of their friendship. Or was it even friendship?

It was scarcely six months since he'd first laid eyes on Tony Marlow. And that strange meeting—he'd never told Joan about it. A cold March night, hours after midnight, and Cliff had been standing on Brooklyn Bridge. Watching the blackness that was the water below, thinking, wondering how it would feel. . . . Perhaps a minute. They said you went down three times. Perhaps more than a minute, and the water would be very cold. But then it would all be over. One foot outward into the empty space. One minute then, and it would be over.

Dear God, Cliff thought, how grotesque it was to remember that he had stood there, thinking, almost ready to move that last foot. And then Tony's voice drifting out of the darkness beside him, asking, "Why do *you* want to?"

He had turned. He had not been able to see Tony's features, yet something in the

voice had told him: This man had come to this same bridge to be his comrade in death. In that instant, Cliff knew now, a weird sort of partnership, a brotherhood, had been born.

There on that bridge in the winter night, two strangers, they had begun to talk—to talk as they had talked to no other person in their lives. Cliff had told Tony of the injury to his hand, told him that he was a pianist who would never play again. Told him that he possessed exactly seventy cents in all the world.

But what had Tony told him, Cliff wondered. Yes, he remembered. "I am a freak. An unholy agent, damned with a scrap of soul. Only a scrap, not big enough to make me human; just enough to drive me mad. . . ."

Those were Tony's words.

And then, after so long, they had gone together from the bridge bound in the brotherhood of sick-minded men. Six months ago, Cliff realized again. And since then . . . Joan. The sanity of sunlight and reason. The operation on his hand. Those things, that path for him. But Tony? The same dark forest, filled with shadows Cliff could not even imagine—or escape from. No, he had never truly escaped. . . .

Cliff dropped his cigarette and stared at it as it lay smouldering on the walk. It was now full dawn. Dawn. Less than a dozen hours from now, he would marry Joan and take her into Tony's house. And she knew less than he did. He had lied to her, deceived her. And less than a dozen hours were left.

A dozen hours. Suddenly they seemed scarcely moments, plunging down to shatter on the walk. A frenzy rushed through his throat, a wave of near-hysteria that he could no more have explained than hands can seize the rushing wind.

He turned. Where were the cabs? Where in God's name were all the cabs? Would he never— A cab turned the corner. Cliff signaled wildly. He jerked open the door and gave the name of Joan's hotel.

"Please hurry, please," he begged. He leaned forward, his muscles striving to force the cab faster. For a moment, his eyes found his image reflected in the mirror. The shadow of dark beard coated his jaws. His black curly hair was disordered. His hat? Lost. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the truth, the end of the deception that was gnawing at his love. Hurry, hurry, hurry, his mind chanted.

CHAPTER THREE

A Scrap of Cloth

"CLIFF!" Joan exclaimed. "You look—"

"I know." He closed the door behind him and looked at her for a long moment. In her blue robe, with her feet bare, she looked more like a child—a lovely dark-eyed child—than ever before. Suddenly his throat was dry and tight. A feeling of bitter shame poured through him.

"Cliff, what *is* the matter? What's happened to—"

"Don't. Just let me talk." He turned away and stood at the window, his back to her, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the grey street below. "It's about me and about Tony Marlow, Joan. I've never told you the truth. I only told you my hand had once been hurt and that I'd had an operation. There's more to it than that. For a year I was in hell. You can't imagine. I had so little money. The doctors I could afford could do nothing. I became depressed, then frightened, then horribly melancholy. For months I did nothing, hardly shaving, drinking and sitting in whatever room I could pay for, staring at my twisted fingers, hating the world, fearing the world, despising myself. Finally, one night in March, I decided to kill myself. I—no, let me finish," he said harshly.

"I was standing there on Brooklyn Bridge looking down, when Tony came along. We stood there talking, and something happened between us—as if a current had passed between our brains.

"We left the bridge together. We needed each other. Don't misunderstand; it was the fear, the half insanity of the other that each of us needed. Oh, I knew even then there was something grotesque in his brain, but I *had* to have someone. And then, one night when we were talking—we used to stay up all night talking—he offered me a bargain.

"He had some money, he said. He would pay for the operation on my hand, no matter what it cost. I could spend anything, hunt for any specialist, so long as I came

back to him and granted him one promise. He would not tell what the promise was. I was almost hysterical with joy. I agreed instantly, scarcely caring what he might ask. As he had promised, he provided money. More than three thousand dollars —a fortune to me then. The operation was successful. Instead of a derelict, a broken tramp, I started to live again. And Tony— He would only drink and whisper to himself; he would stand at his window and stroke the casement gently. Sometimes he would gaze at me as if he were about to say the saddest things imaginable. I grew away from him . . . at times. Only at times. It returns—the spell, or whatever it is. Something happens and I need to sit and feel his terribly melancholy almost drowning me. I want to sit in his room, sink into the black world that he dwells in. It's like a—a link of madness between us. I can't break the last scrap of it."

"But Cliff, you must not—"

"Let me finish. There is a promise, remember. Two weeks ago I told him we were to be married. He stared at his hands a long time. He went to the window and stroked it. I thought he had gone to sleep, standing there. Then he spoke: 'There is a certain building in Greenwich Village, Cliff. Not a pretty place or a pretty street. But I have my reason to go there. To live there. I think this time I will be happy. I want you to promise to come there and live. Bring Joan, of course. I will need only a room. I have furniture. I want to go there and remember something that once happened to me. The most beautiful moment of my life. And I wasted it in an instant. In an instant—done and over with! I want to try again. This is the promise I ask: Go there, you and Joan, and stay until—well, you will know when the time comes to go. But promise me, Cliff? And I promised him," Cliff said. "I had to. I had sworn, you know." Mutely he held out his hand.

"But Cliff, that only makes it clearer. Of course you must keep the promise. If I'd known what he had done for you, I'd have been—"

"Wait. I must tell you about tonight," he said heavily. He swallowed and dragged down a deep breath. He told her. He told her everything, and he watched incredulity change into horror across her face. He watched the color ebb from her skin and her eyes grow black. And with each word, he felt, he was smashing a vision. He could see it in her eyes as she watched him, and he knew what she was thinking: *This man —this man I planned to marry. . . . This man is a maniac. . . .*

When he was through, a silence filled the room. He heard the alarm clock ticking, ticking louder, ticking like fate. He saw Joan's lips striving to summon words.

"But—but such things—Cliff, it's impossible! It's like something from—from an ugly sickness."

"Yes," he said slowly. "The sickness of insanity. That might be what you mean." Her face became a blur before him. He could see the water of the East River, curling through the blackness of that March night. He could see the shadowed room where he had sat, talking, talking the hours away with Tony Marlow. He could see the puffy hands of little Mr. Nobody, the broken crevice in his bald skull.

"Yes!" Cliff cried harshly. "I'm insane! I *must* be insane! Both of us—Tony and me! We are—"

"Cliff! Stop that! Listen to me! If you—oh, God, don't look at me that way, Cliff!"

"I'm insane. I *must* be insane," he repeated.

"You're not! It—It's Tony, can't you understand? *Tony!* It's all Tony. What do you know about him, really? Where did he come from; what has he done? What *is* he? If you knew, you'd see. He—oh, Cliff, you must not see him again."

"No . . . ?" He stared at the window. "How many times do you suppose I've told myself that? A hundred. A thousand—"

"But you must not! If we—Cliff, listen. We can be married and find someplace else; we'll save every penny. We'll pay back the money he lent you, but you *must* not keep that promise. You must not—"

"You don't understand. A night would come. Something would happen inside me. I'd start walking, looking for his face in every face I saw. I'd hear his voice everywhere, in every sound. And I would go back to him. So long as Tony Marlow is alive, I'll never be free to—" He stopped suddenly. He heard the echo again: So long as Tony Marlow is alive. . . .

He heard it and felt a strange coldness

moving through him. He looked at Joan, and her eyes were stark in mute perception. Her throat trembled. "No! Cliff, no!" she screamed. "If you could only *see* him—the truth of what he *really* is! Don't you understand? He's like some horribly fascinating fable to you now. But actually he's only flesh and bones and hair and teeth. Evil, yes, and twisted, but he has no real power over you. It's more like a—a trance. If you could see him for what he really is, you would laugh at him, pity him, perhaps, but you would be free."

"You make it sound so easy," he said bitterly. "You don't know—"

"But I *do* know! I can show you. I—wait while I dress, Cliff," she begged. "I'll show you."

"Where? What will you show me?"

"That he—" She paused, then for a moment she smiled at him. "That you can't be temperamental on *my* wedding day," she said softly. She did not say she was frightened, that she had not the slightest idea what she would do the next hours. Only her brain cried its frantic rebellion and her heart held an almost primitive fury. Tony—his ugliness of spirit, his sadism. . . . *She* could shatter him. She could—

She paused and then she smiled at herself in the mirror as she closed the bathroom door. An Irish smile—a vivid, dangerous smile—that for the moment soothed her fears.

Indeed, indeed, she thought to herself. It would be a pretty scene she would make! Him and his melancholy eyes!

"We're going to Tony's room," she announced as she stepped out of the bathroom.

"SO THIS is where the Great Man lives!" Joan said crisply. It was a massive and intensely ugly hotel on upper Broadway.

Cliff did not answer. He was looking up at the window seven floors above, and his mind echoed with the silent phrase: *So long as Tony Marlow is alive.* . . . It had a compelling fascination that made Cliff's breath come softly, that made his fingers itch and tighten against his palms.

What would the world be like—*his* world—if Tony ceased to exist? How would the freedom taste? No more to listen in the darkness for the echo of some word, to search for the long face and the dreamy eyes. What would life be like without the yearning to feel the drugging contamination of Tony's warped mind.

Oh, dear God, he thought wildly, I have got to be free! I'm going mad! I must be free! I must!

"Hey, watch where you're walking!" a voice called roughly.

Cliff woke abruptly as Joan caught his arm. Then he saw the sagging sign over the door into the cocktail lounge. Ropes were stretching up from it, and all save one of its bolts were torn from the building wall.

"Keep out from under it. You wanna get killed like the other guy did?" a workman demanded.

"Killed?" Cliff echoed blankly. He blinked at the sign, then he saw blood—as if red rain had spattered on the metal. And he saw the tattered scrap of blue and white cloth caught on the uneven edge of the sign.

Blue and white. Blue and white stripes. Puffy fingers plucking at the button of a shirt. A blue and white shirt, his mind kept repeating. Slowly his eyes moved to the workman's face. "A man was killed, you said?" Cliff asked strangely.

"What I said. Jumped from the roof, I guess. If he hadn't smashed into the sign, he'd have killed a poor devil standing right—"

"This man—did you see him? What did he look like?" Cliff interrupted.

"Not much like anything by the time I saw him. Short. Bald. Poor guy was crazy. Slipped out of the Hudson Asylum last night, police said."

"Oh," Cliff whispered. Inch by inch his eyes followed the drab red bricks of the building. Up, up. Seven floors. A window above this shattered sign.

Tony Marlow's window.

"Come on, Cliff," Joan said. "Don't you hear me?"

"Huh? Oh . . . yes," he said distantly. He was listening to an echo from the past. Tony's voice saying: "My father reached out to close the window. He vanished. . . ."

He followed Joan through the lobby to the elevator. Up, then along the hall to Tony's door. He knocked. There was no answer. Again he knocked, then twisted the knob. The door was locked.

"Perhaps he's at the house in Greenwich

Village," Joan suggested rather faintly.

"Perhaps," Cliff murmured. *My father reached out . . . and vanished. . . .*

Once again upon the sidewalk, he stared up at the fluttering scrap of cloth, and he thought of the puffy hands, twisting the buttons. And the fragment of another night was crawling back through his memory:

Tony's room. The shadows and the taste of the sickly sweet drink Tony had mixed. He, Cliff, had stood at the window and said something to Tony. What had it been? Something about going away. "I've got to go. I'm going mad. I've got to go away—far away." That's what he'd said.

Tony had touched his arms and said, "There's only one way to go, and it isn't time yet, Cliff." The voice had been so soft, like muffled music. Cliff remembered the tingling of his skin where Tony had touched him. He remembered the sudden fear that had come upon him. He had jerked away and stumbled from the window. Tony had smiled at him so sadly, so gently. "But I told you, Cliff, it isn't time yet. Don't be afraid."

"Come *on,* Cliff," Joan urged.

"In a moment," he whispered. For while he stood there, a thought of almost dream-like simplicity was passing through his brain. It was as if a clear light had suddenly been turned upon a forgotten corridor of the past. Windows . . . Windows. . . . He remembered words; he remembered Tony's long fingers, gently, lovingly, stroking a window; Tony looking out as he stroked.

He remembered one twilight, riding down Park Avenue with Tony. The top of the cab had been lowered. They had been stopped at a traffic light, and Tony had pointed upward at a glistening greystone apartment building. "See up there? The very top floor at the corner. My mother lives there. I haven't seen her since my father fell. I must drop in some day." There had been a momentary pause before he added, "There is a really lovely window up there, you know. . . ."

"Cliff, *please.* The cab is waiting," Joan called.

"What? Oh, yes. The cab," he said distantly. He followed her.

THE DOOR of the house was closed. The grotesque iron-headed knocker shone rust-green in the sunlight, and the throat strove to utter its timeless scream. Cliff's fingers were hot and damp as he fitted his key and unlocked the door.

"Oh, his furniture has been delivered," Joan said.

It was stacked against the walls, piled crate on crate along the hall. Cliff stared at it with a sensation of deep distaste. These things were Tony's, bought by him, cherished by him, filled with the shadows of him and his desires. They were strangely unclean. They—

He stopped. He looked more closely. Yes, it *was* a rug. The red fringe showed beyond the canvas wrapping. Cliff hesitated for a moment, then suddenly reached down and ripped the cord. He unfolded the rug.

There were the red temples, woven into the pile. In the center of the rug burned a ball of crimson sun.

This was the rug upon which the golden girl had died! And once before, on a snowy night, it had been part of this house.

Cliff could scarcely think. The pattern of the red temples seemed to hypnotize him. As if from far away, Joan's voice wandered to his ears. "He isn't here, so there's no use spending time in— Oh! But didn't you say that the little fat man said—" she began. There eyes met and her words evaporated. A silence crawled through the building. Joan swallowed.

"Cliff, we— For God's sake, Cliff, let's get out of here!"

* * *

"Now you know. You know what kind of man he is, Cliff," Joan said swiftly as they left the house. "You simply must not see him again. Whatever he is, it's something horrible. Not sane. Not natural."

"Yes. I've known, but I know more clearly, now."

"Then you won't see him again?" she asked breathlessly. "For any reason, Cliff. It's not your affair. Don't get involved again. Please, promise me."

Windows . . . Slim fingers stroking windows. Sad eyes looking out of windows . . . Cliff thought of those things as he promised a lie: "I promise."

"Oh, Cliff," Joan murmured. She held his arm and said foolish things he scarcely heard. Things about pianists being so silly

sometimes, things about jitters before the wedding, just things. . . .

But in the lobby of her hotel, the gaiety departed from her words and her dark eyes searched his. "I'm not just silly, Cliff. I'm afraid of him, and afraid of what he thinks behind his eyes. I never want to see him again, or for you to see him. I don't want us to touch him, anywhere. Leave him alone; what he is and what he's done. Let's not search into things like that. I'm afraid."

She waited.

"You remember, Cliff? Four-thirty this afternoon?"

"Of course I remember."

"But you seem so far away. Almost as if you couldn't hear me." She frowned. "I'm afraid for you to leave me, but there are things I've just *got* to do before—"

"No, I'll be all right," he said softly. "Don't worry."

"Yes. No," she said faintly. "I don't know. . . ."

"Four-thirty," he said distantly. He turned and crossed the lobby toward the door. He paused on the steps, on the fringe of the hurrying crowd. Windows . . . Windows. . . .

"Cliff, don't go! I'm afraid for you. . . ." Joan called suddenly from across the lobby. A cab honked, drowning her call. Cliff gestured to the cab and stepped into the crowd.

"Cliff!" she cried. She was running across the lobby. "Cliff!" She reached the door. She stood there, her hand at her throat, her eyes searching desperately. He had gone from sight.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Girl With the Golden Hair

CLIFF LEFT the cab at the entrance of the greystone apartment building on Park Avenue and took the elevator to the top floor. This would be the entrance of Mrs. Marlow's apartment. He touched the stiff stubble on his chin and tried to smooth his hair. He heard the three-noted rhythm of the chimes. Presently, soft footsteps rustled and the door was opened by a thin, fleshless woman, her skin the color of dried paste, her eyes bright with an intense but vacant gleam of curiosity.

"Mrs. Marlow?" Cliff asked. "I'm Clifford Roberts. Could you spare a few minutes to talk to me, please?"

"Mrs. Marlow, you said" The voice was sharp, like the pecking of a hungry hen. "Odd, odd. Quite odd. Mrs. Marlow is dead. You didn't know that? I'm Mrs. Caswell, her sister. Umph. What did you want?"

"Dead . . . ?" Cliff echoed. "But—how did she die?" he asked suddenly.

"I doubt we shall ever know. Perhaps suicide. Heaven knows, her life was enough to worry the wits out of her. Or perhaps it was simply an accident. For myself," she snapped primly, "I wonder."

"Did she fall from a window?" Cliff whispered.

"Indeed she did. Same window that took her husband away. Same way, too. She had been brooding about him and—but what did you want?" she interrupted herself curiously.

Cliff closed the door behind him. His skin felt hot and dry. The bright, vacant eyes of the woman seemed to bore into his cheekbones. "Tell me, Mrs. Caswell, did you know her son, Tony?"

"Did I know him!" she almost snorted. "Most terrible tragedy a person could wish on a gentlewoman. Never could make Louise see the straight of it, though. Fact was, I guess you know," she said pointedly, "he wasn't their flesh and blood at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Adopted. Yes, indeed. It was the year after Louise lost her own son. Left a dreadful mark on her heart, too. So Fredrick took her to Europe and all over trying to brighten her up a little. That's where they found him—some missionary post in China. Two years old he was then, and left by Heaven knows who. And nothing would do but Louise must adopt him. Well, *I* told her. *I* told her, and she wouldn't listen." Mrs. Caswell's eyes began to peck again. "And what did you say you wanted?"

"What did he . . . do? What things made you . . . wonder about him?"

"Wonder? Young man, I can tell by a man's face. And some mighty curious things used to happen with him around, too. One summer. . . ." She pursed her lips. "I was living in Memphis, and Mr. Caswell was always a great one for raising dogs. Little poodles he was keeping then, and Louise came to spend a month with us. Brought

that child—guess he was ten by that time. Well, now I'm not taking one side or the other, I'm just saying what happened. But there were the dogs, and the first thing you knew, one of them was dead. Next thing, another was dead. Exactly the same place: down at the bottom of a cliff not far from the house.

"It worried Mr. Caswell half to death; he just couldn't see what made the dogs fall off that cliff. Anyway, he started keeping them locked up in a pen. You know what? Very next night, one was gone. Dead. In the very same place. Well! I said to myself," she announced tartly. "That night next, I just set myself by the window in the dark and watched. I saw him. Indeed I did. Tony, slipping straight out to that pen, getting one of Mr. Caswell's dogs, and starting off down the back road. Well, I went right along behind. First thing I knew, there he was sitting down on the edge of that cliff with the dog in his arms. Moonlight, and I could see. He was talking to the dog so softly and patting it gently, saying, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but it's time. It's too bad, but it's time, little puppy.' And then that boy *threw* the dog over the cliff and stood there looking down. After a while he sighed and said, 'It was too bad, but it was time.' Well," she snapped, "when I told Louise that, she packed right up and left. Furious at me. Said I was crazy." Mrs. Caswell cleared her throat.

"But later, when he was older," Cliff said thinly. "Do you know if he did anything else?"

"Well, to my mind he drove them both crazy, that's all. 'Course, Louise was never the same toward me. Not, that is, until her husband was killed. After that she was in a hospital a long time—breakdown. Then one day I got a letter from her. It just said for me to forgive her. It said that Tony had left home, and then there was a mighty strange sentence at the end of the letter. Said, 'I'm too sick at heart, too frightened to think. I don't know what will be the end of all this.' She never would explain what she'd meant, but I always had a feeling it was something about Tony. For my money," she said, "he is a bad one and always will be." She touched her temple with one finger. "Up here. Queer. I just don't know. Now, what did you say you wanted?"

"I—nothing. Not any more," Cliff said. A feeling of sickness filled him. He fumbled behind him, wrenched open the door and rushed down the hall. He did not wait for the elevator. He had to reach the sunlight—the sanity of the street, of traffic, of normal human sounds.

He stood on the walk, and a man walked by with a dog. An image flashed through Cliff's mind. The sick dismay swept back across him. He turned and rushed away from the dog. The sign of a bar caught his eye down a side street. A drink. Dear God, how he needed a drink! He opened the door.

Two drinks . . . Three drinks. . . . A burning sensation of fear—and anger—was growing in his chest. A coldness, too, the coldness of certainty. A night would come, so long as Tony lived, when the soft voice would murmur, and he would be drawn back to the pit of madness. *So long as Tony lived.* . . .

"Another one?" the bartender asked.

Cliff did not answer. He did not hear. His eyes were glassy and hot. He was rising from the stool, turning toward the door. He was going. . . .

THERE WAS no answer at Tony's door. Cliff returned to the dusty lobby and sat down. An hour passed; a dozen cigarettes were burned away. He went into the cocktail lounge and stood at the end of the bar where he could watch the lobby.

Another drink. Another. Voices grew pale around him. A core of fury was burning in his chest. He stared into his drink. There, in the pale amber, floated Tony's face. In his ears, he could hear Tony's whispering voice.

Then Cliff saw him, crossing the lobby toward the elevator. His blond head was bare. His face was radiant. He seemed to glide rather than walk. Slowly, Cliff put down his glass. He swayed as he started toward the lobby.

"Window," he murmured to himself. His voice sounded vacant in his ears. He shook his head and coughed. Then he remembered the other part: *So long as Tony Marlow lived.* . . .

Yes, that was it. He nodded to himself and stepped carefully into the lobby.

Tony opened the door when Cliff

knocked. "My God! Come in. Sit down or fall down. Have another drink with me. It's a splendid day, or did you know?"

"Splendid?" Cliff focused his eyes carefully. "What made it so splendid? I mean, what certain thing that happened today?"

"It's just the way I feel. A day like this . . . So beautifully bright and yet hot, sad. Heat and beauty mean violence to me. Dear God, I'd like to live every day just like today." He was pouring two drinks—the clear, sweet-acid drinks that were like warm tastes of tumult. From Spain, Tony had once told Cliff: It comes from Spain.

"Here's to today." Tony held out a glass. His curiously bright eyes locked with Cliff's "And what did you come to tell me?" he asked idly. "Don't lie. I hate lies. Anyway, I can see. What is it?"

Cliff pulled his eyes away. His throat felt dry. The room was suddenly chokingly hot. He pulled at his collar and swallowed. He sipped the thick liquid and felt its blade of heat slice down his throat.

How clear it made everything! How instantly simple! Everything flowed into a bright pattern, and his fingers tingled at their very tips. He gazed at Tony's white throat, and his fingers tingled more.

"Yes, Cliff?" Tony prompted gently. He was almost smiling. His eyes seemed to be dancing.

"I came to tell you about—about dogs. About dogs and the way they died. About that fat little man last night, His shirt was blue and white."

"But it got torn, didn't it?" Tony supplied after a moment. He still smiled. "I I noticed that, later." He picked up the bottle, filled his glass and held out his hand for Cliff's.

"I've been thinking about windows, too," Cliff said. He wasn't saying things the way they were in his mind. He frowned and tried to understand. It was the same dim sensation that so often came to him in this room. It was easier to let the brain drowse; it was much too hard to think.

He felt Tony's fingers taking his glass. Then it was full again and the warm knife was sliding through his throat. "You thought of windows and dogs and how they died. You saw a piece of cloth," Tony repeated gently.

"Drink your drink, Cliff, and I will explain. It's time to explain. It is sad, too. But I told you: It's a sad and beautiful day."

The dreamy words lulled Cliff.

"There are so many kinds of pleasure in this world, but so many of them are dull. But death . . . Did you ever see a body twisting down, down—shooting away from you! Then, in one incredible instant, stopping and never moving again! You've never seen *that*?"

"No, I—*No*!" Cliff cried out. "Only a maniac—"

"Cliff," Tony said gently. "Speak softly. I'm trying to explain. It's like the most divine thirst. You see it once. You dream of it. You scarcely live until you can see it again. Every face you pass, you picture it in your mind: How would that person look, twisting, plunging down? But then . . . You become more delicate. More sensitive. Millions of people in the world. They don't matter. Only certain people matter. Those whom you know, whom you can hate or love or move in certain ways, as players move the pieces of chess. Those are the ones, because there is joy and sadness in watching them plunging down. It is *beautiful!* So beautiful you almost weep!"

Cliff swallowed. Tony's eyes were immense, more brilliant than eyes had ever been before. The rapture of memory blazed in them. His voice sped on: "But it gets to be like something you've eaten until it is dull. You yearn for a more exotic meal. Something more sad, something even more lovely. And that was to have been Margo, the beautiful girl with the golden hair. God, how lovely! How sad it was to hear that little chap talking of her again. After you left, I made him tell me again.

"Ah, those days . . . Each time I kissed her, I dreamed of the time that would be so sad. The agonizingly delightful suspense! She would fall. So beautifully! But I would keep her. There in my house I would keep her. Do you know, I bought volumes on embalming! I would keep her in all her sleeping loveliness after she was dead. But I was cheated.

"One night—that night with the rose—we were standing at the head of the stairs. I could wait not an instant longer. *I couldn't!* I pushed her. She fell. Only a

few feet, but it was over. In an instant it was over. All my dreaming. Cheated! And *he* blundered in, and I was afraid to keep her there. Everything cheated me. But I swore to myself, the next time I would not be cheated! I realized that death came in an instant; the delight was in the planning, the moving toward death, as players in chess move carefully. Thinking, choosing, manipulating. Feeling the power of manipulating someone. And that, Cliff, was your entrance. I planned. Slowly I would move you toward the windows. In your mind, see? With words."

He sighed. "But you don't understand," he said heavily. "I even thought once, after you told me of Joan, that I might some day show you how it was. We could stand together at a window and watch her twisting, plunging down. And then perhaps you would understand the beautiful sadness and want to do it again and again. You would let me watch, and I would let you watch." Again he sighed. "But it is too late now."

He wandered across the room and gazed out the window. "Come here, Cliff. Here beside me," he said quietly.

CLIFF'S eyes began their slow journey toward the window. Over the brown walls, over the bookcase. Over the clock and the—

The clock. Strange. The clock, he thought vacantly. It meant something, didn't it? Time meant something. He should be going somewhere now. . . .

"Come here to the window, Cliff," Tony repeated.

To Joan! To freedom! It was time to go! And he couldn't go. Why . . . ? Then he remembered: *So long as Tony Marlow lived* . . .

"Cliff!"

"Yes. Yes, I'm coming," Cliff said strangely. He stared at Tony's pale throat. His fingers twitched. The glass fell from his hand and shattered. Tony turned abruptly. Cliff moved closer, his fingers rising toward the pale throat.

"Cliff! Cliff, damn you! Stop before—"

Cliff's fingers closed on the damp throat.

"Cliff—" Tony's scream choked thickly. Cliff felt Tony's fist smash into his face.

He felt the soft flesh pulling out of his grasp. Blow on blow pounded into his face. He reeled and fell and Tony fell with him, his fist working like a sledge on Cliff's face.

Dimly, through the growing haze of unconsciousness, Cliff could feel Tony scrambling to his feet, could feel himself being dragged toward the open window. His body shuddered and his lips strove to protest against this thing, but it was no good. He could feel Tony's hands under his shoulders now, raising him to window-sill height.

He was through now. He knew it. And a bitterness and rage swept through him as he thought of the many good things he had never known, and the many sweetnesses in life he had never tasted. Then, suddenly, his hands were lashing out, seizing Tony, pulling at him, wrenching at the blond man's arms, his shoulders, his throat—grabbing, pulling, shoving. . . .

Then it was over, and Cliff felt himself growing light. His head felt light.

He opened his lips to shout his freedom, Quietly he fell to the floor.

* * *

The image of Tony Marlow was gone when Cliff came to. He was lying on the floor by the window and Joan was bending over him. She smiled at him, and he relaxed, contented. His head felt tired, as though his brain had been stretched forever—pulled, twisted, almost ripped apart.

When he awoke again, Joan was still there. He was lying on the couch now, a pillow under his head, a blanket over him. He raised his eyes, mutely questioning. He was mad—didn't she know that?

She shook her head and kept smiling. "It wasn't you. Remember that, Cliff. It was what he was doing to you. He was hypnotizing you, taking your will-power away. But it's over now. You're free."

She could read the question still in his eyes. "He is dead, Cliff. So it's all over—that part, anyway.

She looked at her watch. "We're a little late for City Hall today, Cliff. But tomorrow, Cliff—tomorrow, bright and early. . . .

THE END

(Continued from page 68)

"Thank God for the dog," the corporal raved. "I slowed for the dog. I didn't see the boy at all, but I had slammed on my brakes to keep from hitting the dog."

"I think the boy will be all right," I told the lance corporal. "I think he's just been knocked unconscious."

Sergeant Plume had a doctor there in a matter of minutes. He confirmed my guess and said it would be safe to move the child. We picked him up and took him into the house.

I thought for a moment Mrs. Lonnin was going to faint, but she bore up and helped us get the boy to bed. After a while the doctor left and we were alone with her.

Sergeant Plume looked at her. "I'll have to call the inspector," he said. "We'll have to move the boy to a hospital. He can't stay here."

"Why?" She put the back of her hand to her mouth, suddenly, as though she wished she had not asked the question.

"He's not safe in this house," Sergeant Plume said. "I'm afraid he'll never be safe here."

She put her head forward in her hands and began to sob, without sound. There was only a convulsive shaking of her thin shoulders.

"I know you've tried to make your marriage last," the sergeant said softly. "This won't make it easier, but I have to think of the boy. I'm taking him from you. It's not you that would hurt him, we know that."

Then he called a hospital from the house while I went out to see if I could locate the dog.

I crossed the street, blundered through the fog, and walked up the little winding creek. I found a man lying there on his back, and near him I saw a little metal tube. I leaned over and picked the tube up. I knew that if I blew into that tube a sound would come out, a sound that was so high that I could not hear it. But more sensitive ears could hear: a child violinist's, or a dog's.

But I didn't blow the whistle. I was afraid of the dog. He stood beside me in the fog, very quiet and gentle now that he had torn Lonnin's throat out, and that hellish whistle had stopped.

(Continued from page 79)

out his decision without delay. How he knew where to find the prophet no one ever knew.

At King County, in Seattle, George Mitchell went on trial for the murder of Edmund Creffield, the prophet of Corvallis.

The jury was out only an hour before they returned a verdict of "not guilty."

Two days later George Mitchell and two brothers were waiting in Seattle's King Street station for the four-thirty train to Oregon.

Standing aloof near a pillar in the big depot, was the hero's sister, Esther.

One of the brothers left the group and asked his sister if she was going to bid good-by to George. The slim girl nodded an assent and joined the group. She took her brother's hand coldly, without response to his greeting.

Then the silent girl moved quickly as a panther. She reached a hand into a coat pocket and brought out a pearl-handled revolver. In a lightning-swift motion, she placed the muzzle against her brother's left ear and fired. George sank soundlessly to the floor.

Esther Mitchell was found not guilty because of an unsound mind and committed to the Washington State Asylum. And thus ended the strange case of Joshua II, a man who disrupted the lives of numerous innocent families in four states and drove one normally decent girl to fratricide. He made one lucky prediction which was borne out by a coincidental accident of nature—but he failed to predict his own untimely death.

MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS

ONCE upon a time there were three ghosts: a papa ghost, a mama ghost and a baby ghost. Well, on this day we are speaking of, the three ghosts came home to the graveyard after a busy day escorting killers from the hot-squat, and they were really beat.

First thing, of course, they wanted to eat. So they sat down on a big concrete mausoleum while the old lady ghost started to get the grub ready, setting out the urns and grinding up the bones and putting the blood up to boil—*you* know. . . .

Suddenly the head of the household let out a howl. "Somebody's been eating out of my urn!" he roared. And the old lady ghost looked down at *her* urn and cried the same thing, and the baby ghost looked down at *his* and squawked that his urn had also been eaten out of. So there was no chow that night.

Well, they decided to hit the sack then. And a moment later there was an outraged squeak from the kid ghost. "Someone has been sleeping on my tombstone!" he cried. And the older apparitions cried out that *their* tombstones were also mussed up.

Then the old man looked in his wardrobe closet, the one in the stone sepulchre, and bellowed that somebody had been wearing his shroud, and the old lady cried that someone had been wearing *hers*, and the half-pint ghost yelled that *his* had been worn too.

"Well," said the elderly spectre, "it looks as though there will be no sleeping *this* night." So he pulled out his copy of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE, being the type who enjoyed spine-tingling fiction—even though he didn't have a spine to tingle. For, as that greying ghost himself said, "This stuff will scare even a ghost to death!"

Well, kiddies, with this issue, papa ghost, as well as the rest of you readers, will be able to read DIME MYSTERY just twice as often as you have. For, starting now, DIME MYSTERY becomes a monthly, which means that you'll be getting just twice as much of the bizarre and eerie in crime, and at least twice as many goose-pimples.

For those unafraid of a good scare, next month's issue will be published October 3rd. See you then. . . .

—THE EDITOR

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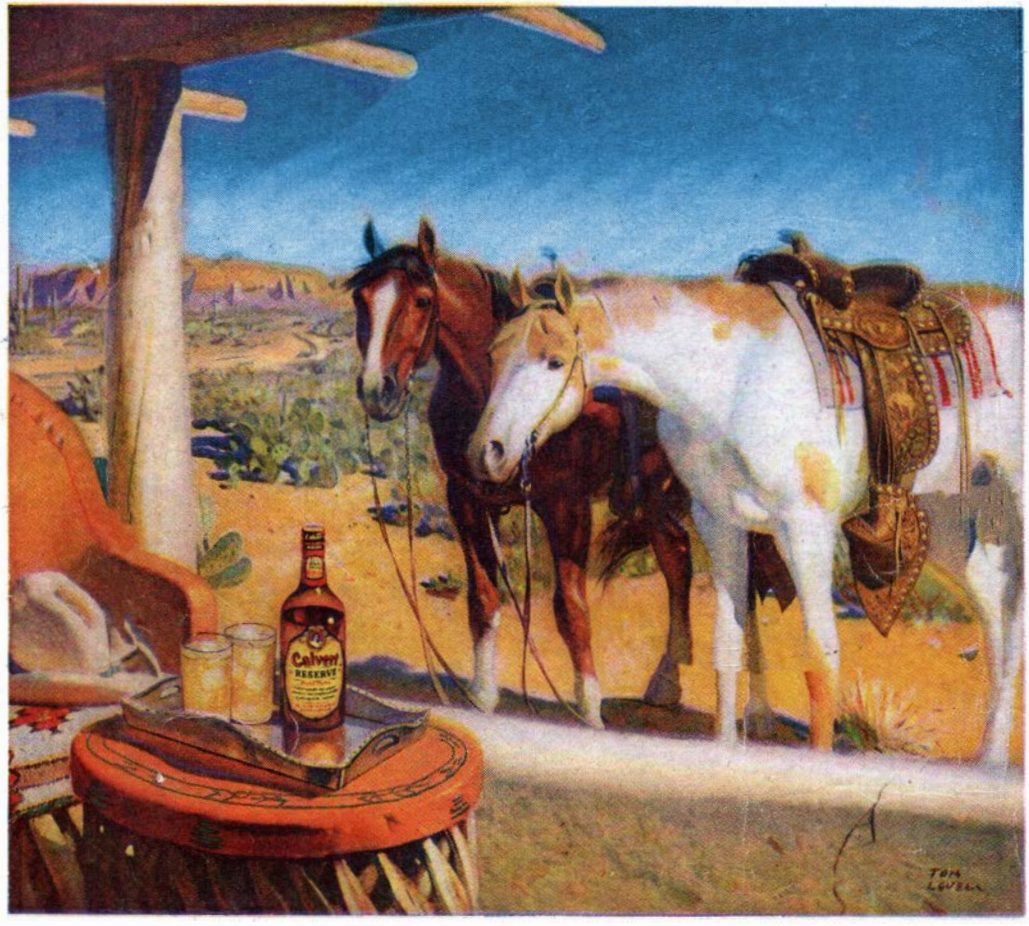

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