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*the word  
is out .....*

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*see back cover*

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# THE SWEET TASTE

*A MANHUNT CLASSIC*

**BY DAVID GOODIS**

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**T**HEY spotted him on Race Street between Ninth and Tenth. It was Chinatown in the tenderloin of Philadelphia and he stood gazing into the window of the Wong Ho restaurant and wishing he had the cash to buy himself some egg-foo-yung. The menu in the window priced egg-foo-yung at eighty cents an order and he had exactly thirty-one cents in his pocket. He shrugged and started to turn away

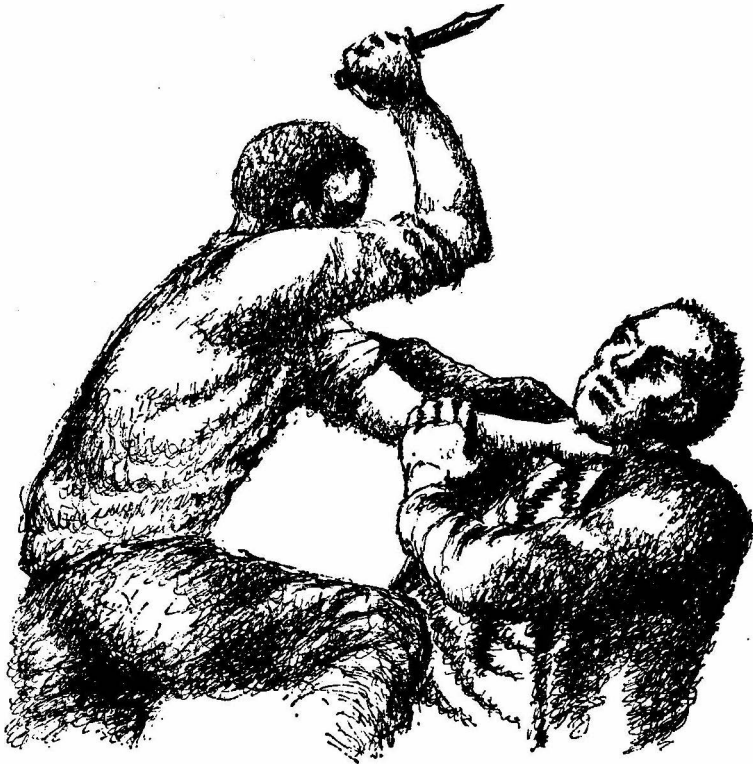
from the window and just then he heard them coming.

It was their footsteps that told him who they were. There was the squeaky sound of Oscar's brand-new shoes. And the clumping noise of Coley's heavy feet. It was nine years since he'd heard their footsteps but he remembered that Oscar had a weakness for new shoes and Coley always walked heavily.

He faced them. They were smil-



*He hadn't wanted revenge. He'd just wanted to be left alone. But they forced it on him . . . and the taste was sweet.*



ing at him, their features somewhat greenish under the green neon glow that drifted through after-midnight blackness. He saw the weasel eyes and buzzard nose of little Oscar. He transferred his gaze to the thick lips and puffed-out cheeks of tall, obese Coley.

"Hello, Ken." It was Oscar's purring voice, Oscar's lips scarcely moving.

"Hello," he said to both of them.

He blinked a few times. Now the shock was coming. He could feel the waves of shock surging toward him.

"We been looking for you," Coley said. He flipped his thick thumb over his shoulder to indicate the black Olds 88 parked across the street. "We've driven that car clear across the country."

Ken blinked again. The shock had hit him and now it was past

and he was blinking from worry. He knew why they'd been looking for him and he was very worried.

He said quietly, "How'd you know I was in Philly?"

"Grapevine," Oscar said. "It's strictly coast-to-coast. It starts from San Quentin and we get tipped-off in Los Angeles. It's a letter telling the Boss you been paroled. That's three weeks ago. Then we get letters from Denver and Omaha and a wire from Chicago. And then a phone call from Detroit. We wait to see how far east you'll travel. Finally we get the call from Philly, and the man tells us you're on the bum around Skid Row."

Ken shrugged. He tried to sound casual as he said, "Three thousand miles is a long trip. You must have been anxious to see me."

Oscar nodded. "Very anxious." He sort of floated closer to Ken. And Coley also moved in. It was slow and quiet and it didn't seem like menace but they were crowding him and finally they had him backed up against the restaurant window.

He said to himself, *They've got you, they've found you and they've got you and you're finished.*

He shrugged again. "You can't do it here."

"Can't we?" Oscar purred.

"It's a crowded street," Ken said. He turned his head to look at the lazy parade of tenderloin citizens on both sides of the street. He saw the bums and the beggars, the

winos and the ginheads, the yellow faces of middle-aged opium smokers and the grey faces of two-bit scufflers and hustlers.

"Don't look at them," Oscar said. "They can't help you. Even if they could, they wouldn't."

Ken's smile was sad and resigned. "You're so right," he said. His shoulders drooped and his head went down and he saw Oscar reaching into a jacket pocket and taking out the silver-handled tool that had a button on it to release a five-inch blade. He knew there would be no further talk, only action, and it would happen within the next split-second.

In that tiny fraction of time, some gears clanged to shift from low to high in Ken's brain. His senses and reflexes, dulled from nine years in prison, were suddenly keen and acutely technical and there was no emotion on his face as he moved. He moved very fast, his arms crossing to shape an X, the left hand flat and rigid and banging against Oscar's wrist, the right hand a fist that caught Coley in the mouth. It sent the two of them staggering backward and gave him the space he wanted and he darted through the gap, sprinting east on Race Street toward Ninth.

As he turned the corner to head north on Ninth, he glanced backward and saw them getting into the Olds. He took a deep breath and continued running up Ninth. He ran straight ahead for approximate-

ly fifteen yards and then turned again to make a dash down a narrow alley. In the middle of the alley he hopped a fence, ran across a backyard, hopped another fence, then a few more backyards with more fence-hopping, and then the opened window of a tenement cellar. He lunged at the window, went in head-first, groped for a handhold, couldn't find any, and plunged through eight feet of blackness onto a pile of empty boxes and tin cans. He landed on his side, his thigh taking most of the impact, so that it didn't hurt too much. He rolled over and hit the floor and lay there flat on his belly. From a few feet away a pair of green eyes stared at him and he stared back, and then he grinned as though to say, *Don't be afraid, pussy, stay here and keep me company, it's a tough life and an evil world and us alleycats got to stick together.*

But the cat wasn't trusting any living soul. It let out a soft meow and scampered away. Ken sighed and his grin faded and he felt the pressure of the blackness and the quiet and the loneliness. His mind reached slowly for the road going backward nine years . . .

It was Los Angeles, and they were a small outfit operating from a first-floor apartment near Figueroa and Jefferson. Their business was armed robbery and their work-area included Beverly Hills and Bel-Air and the wealthy residential

districts of Pasadena. They concentrated on expensive jewelry and wouldn't touch any job that offered less than a ten-grand haul.

There were five of them, Ken and Oscar and Coley and Ken's wife and the Boss. The name of the Boss was Riker and he was very kind to Ken until the face and body of Ken's wife became a need and then a craving and finally an obsession. It showed in Riker's eyes whenever he looked at her. She was a platinum blonde dazzler, a former burlesque dancer named Hilda. She'd been married to Ken for seven months when Riker reached the point where he couldn't stand it any longer and during a job in Bel-Air he banged Ken's skull with the butt end of a revolver. When the police arrived, Ken was unconscious on the floor and later in the hospital they asked him questions but he wouldn't answer. In the courtroom he sat with his head bandaged and they asked him more questions and he wouldn't answer. They gave him five-to-twenty and during his first month in San Quentin he learned from his lawyer that Hilda had obtained a Reno divorce and was married to Riker. He went more or less insane and couldn't be handled and they put him in solitary.

Later they had him in the infirmary, chained to the bed, and they tried some psychology. They told him he'd regain his emotional health if he'd talk and name some

names. He laughed at them. Whenever they coaxed him to talk, he laughed in their faces and presently they'd shrug and walk away.

His first few years in Quentin were spent either in solitary or the infirmary, or under special guard. Then, gradually, he quieted down. He became very quiet and in the laundry-room he worked very hard and was extremely cooperative. During the fifth year he was up for parole and they asked him about the Bel-Air job and he replied quite reasonably that he couldn't remember, he was afraid to remember, he wanted to forget all about it and arrange a new life for himself. They told him he'd talk or he'd do the limit. He said he was sorry but he couldn't give them the information they wanted. He explained that he was trying to get straight with himself and be clean inside and he wouldn't feel clean if he earned his freedom that way.

So then it was nine years and they were convinced he'd finally paid his debt to the people of California. They gave him a suit of clothes and a ten-dollar bill and told him he was a free man.

In a Sacramento hash-house he worked as a dishwasher just long enough to earn the bus-fare for a trip across the country. He was thinking in terms of the town where he'd been born and raised, telling himself he'd made a wrong start in Philadelphia and the thing to do was go back there and start

again and make it right this time, really legitimate. The parole board okayed the job he'd been promised. That was a healthy thought and it made the bus-trip very enjoyable. But the nicest thing about the bus was its fast engine that took him away from California, far away from certain faces he didn't want to see.

Yet now, as he rested on the floor of the tenement cellar, he could see the faces again. The faces were worried and frightened and he saw them in his brain and heard their trembling voices. He heard Riker saying, "They've released him from Quentin. We'll have to do something." And Hilda saying, "What can we do?" And Riker replying, "We'll get him before he gets us."

He sat up, colliding with an empty tin can that rolled across the floor and made a clatter. For some moments there was quiet and then he heard a shuffling sound and a voice saying, "Who's there?"

It was a female voice, sort of a cracked whisper. It had a touch of asthma in it, some alcohol, and something else that had no connection with health or happiness.

Ken didn't say anything. He hoped she'd go away. Maybe she'd figure it was a rat that had knocked over the tin can and she wouldn't bother to investigate.

But he heard the shuffling footsteps approaching through the blackness. He focused directly ahead and saw the silhouette com-



ing toward him. She was on the slender side, neatly constructed. It was a very interesting silhouette. Her height was approximately five-five and he estimated her weight in the neighborhood of one-ten. He sat up straighter. He was very anxious to get a look at her face.

She came closer and there was the scratchy sound of a match against a matchbook. The match flared and he saw her face. She had medium-brown eyes that matched the color of her hair, and her nose and lips were nicely sculptured, somewhat delicate but blending prettily with the shape of her head. He told himself she was a very pretty girl. But just then he saw the scar.

It was a wide jagged scar that started high on her forehead and crawled down the side of her face and ended less than an inch above her upper lip. The color of it was a livid purple with lateral streaks of pink and white. It was a terrible scar, really hideous.

She saw that he was wincing, but it didn't seem to bother her. The lit match stayed lit and she was sizing him up. She saw a man of medium height and weight, about thirty-six years old, with yellow hair that needed cutting, a face that needed shaving, and sad lonely grey eyes that needed someone's smile.

She tried to smile for him. But only one side of her mouth could manage it. On the other side the scar was like a hook that pulled at

her flesh and caused a grimace that was more anguish than physical pain. He told himself it was a damn shame. Such a pretty girl. And so young. She couldn't be more than twenty-five. Well, some people had all the luck. All the rotten luck.

The match was burned halfway down when she reached into the pocket of a tattered dress and took out a candle. She went through the process of lighting the candle and melting the base of it. The softened wax adhered to the cement floor of the cellar and she sat down facing him and said quietly, "All right, let's have it. What's the pitch?"

He pointed backward to the opened window to indicate the November night. He said, "It's chilly out there. I came in to get warm."

She leaned forward just a little to peer at his eyes. Then, shaking her head slowly, she murmured, "No sale."

He shrugged. He didn't say anything.

"Come on," she urged gently. "Let's try it again."

"All right." He grinned at her. And then it came out easily. "I'm hiding."

"From the Law?"

"No," he said. "From trouble."

He started to tell her about it. He couldn't understand why he was telling her. It didn't make sense that he should be spilling the story to someone he'd just met in a dark cellar, someone out of nowhere. But she was company and he needed

company. He went on telling her.

It took more than an hour. He was providing all the details of events stretched across nine years. The candlelight showed her sitting there, not moving, her eyes riveted to his face as he spoke in low tones. Sometimes there were pauses, some of them long, some very long, but she never interrupted, she waited patiently while he groped for the words to make the meaning clear.

Finally he said, "—It's a cinch they won't stop, they'll get me sooner or later."

"If they find you," she said.

"They'll find me."

"Not here."

He stared at the flickering candle. "They'll spend money to get information. There's more than one big mouth in this neighborhood. And the biggest mouths of all belong to the landlords."

"There's no landlord here," she told him. "There's no tenants except me and you."

"Nobody upstairs?"

"Only mice and rats and roaches. It's a condemned house and City Hall calls it a firetrap and from the first floor up the windows are boarded. You can't get up because there's no stairs. One of these days the City'll tear down this dump but I'll worry about that when it happens."

He looked at her. "You live here in the cellar?"

She nodded. "It's a good place to play solitaire."

He smiled and murmured, "Some people like to be alone."

"I don't like it," she said. Then, with a shrug, she pointed to the scar on her face. "What man would live with me?"

He stopped smiling. He didn't say anything.

She said, "It's a long drop when you're tossed out of a third-story window. Most folks are lucky and they land on their feet or their fanny. I came down head first, cracked my collar-bone and got a fractured skull, and split my face wide open."

He took a closer look at the livid scar. For some moments he was quiet and then he frowned thoughtfully and said, "Maybe it won't be there for long. It's not as deep as I thought it was. If you had it treated —"

"No," she said. "The hell with it."

"You wouldn't need much cash," he urged quietly. "You could go to a clinic. They're doing fancy tricks with plastic surgery these days."

"Yeah, I know." Her voice was toneless. She wasn't looking at him. "The point is, I want the scar to stay there. It keeps me away from men. I've had too many problems with men and now, whenever they see my face, they turn their heads the other way. And that's fine with me. That's just how I want it."

He frowned again. This time it was a deeper frown and it wasn't just thoughtful. He said, "Who threw you out of the window?"

"My husband." She laughed without sound. "My wonderful husband."

"Where is he now?"

"In the cemetery," she said. She shrugged again, and her tone was matter-of-fact. "It happened while I was in the hospital. I think he got to the point where he couldn't stand to live with himself. Or maybe he just did it for kicks, I don't know. Anyway, he got hold of a meat-cleaver and chopped his own throat. When they found him, he damn near didn't have a head."

"Well, that's one way of ending a marriage."

Again she uttered the soundless laugh. "It was a fine marriage while it lasted. I was drunk most of the time. I had to get drunk to take what he dished out. He had some weird notions about wedding vows."

"He went with other women?"

"No," she said. "He made me go with other men."

And then she went on, "We lived here in this neighborhood. It's a perfect neighborhood for that sort of deal. He had me out on the street looking for customers and bringing the money home to him, and when I came in with excuses instead of cash he'd throw me on the floor and kick me. I'd beg him to stop and he'd laugh and go on kicking me. Some nights I have bad dreams and he's kicking me. So then I need the sweet dreams, and that's when I reach for the pipe."

"The pipe?"

"Opium," she said. She said it with fondness and affection. "Opium." There was tenderness in her eyes. "That's my new husband."

He nodded understandingly.

She said, "I get it from a Chinaman on Ninth Street. He's a user himself and he's more than eighty years old and still in there pitching, so I guess with O it's like anything else, it's all a matter of how you use it." Her voice dropped off just a little and her eyes were dull and sort of dismal as she added, "I wish I didn't need so much of it. It takes most of my weekly salary."

"What kind of work you do?"

"I scrub floors," she said. "In night-clubs and dance-halls. All day long I scrub the floors to make them clean and shiny for the night-time customers. Some nights I sit here and think of the pretty girls dancing on them polished floors. The pretty girls with flowers in their hair and no scars on their faces—" She broke it off abruptly, her hand making a brushing gesture as though to disparage the self-pity. She stood up and said, "I gotta go out to do some shopping. You wanna wait here till I come back?"

Without waiting for his answer, she moved across the cellar toward a battered door leading to the backyard. As she opened the door, she turned and looked at him. "Make yourself comfortable," she said. "There's a mattress in the next room. It ain't the Ritz Carlton ex-

actly, but it's better than nothing."

He was asking himself whether he should stay there.

He heard her saying, "Incidentally, my name is Tillie."

She stood there waiting.

"Kenneth," he said. "Kenneth Rockland."

But that wasn't what she was waiting for. Several moments passed, and then somehow he knew what she wanted him to say.

He said, "I'll be here when you come back."

"Good." The candlelight showed her crooked grin, a grimace on the scarred face. But what he saw was a gentle smile. It seemed to drift toward him like a soothing caress. And then he heard her saying, "Maybe I'll come back with some news. You told me it was two men. There's a chance I can check on them if you'll tell me what they look like."

He shook his head. "You better stay out of it. You might get hurt."

"Nothing can hurt me," she said. She pointed her finger at the wreckage of her face. Her tone was almost pleading as she said, "Come on, tell me what they look like."

He shrugged. He gave a brief description of Oscar and Coley. And the Olds 88.

"Check," Tillie said. "I don't have 20-20 but I'll keep them open and see what's happening."

She turned and walked out and the door closed. Ken lifted himself from the floor and picked up the

candle. He walked across the cement floor and the candle showed him a small space off to one side, a former coal-bin arranged with a mattress against the wall, a splintered chair and a splintered bureau and a table stacked with books. There was a candleholder on the table and he set the candle on it and then he had a look at the books.

It was an odd mixture of literature. There were books dealing with idyllic romance, strictly from fluttering hearts and soft moonlight and violins. And there were books that probed much deeper, explaining the scientific side of sex, with drawings and photos to show what it was all about. There was one book in particular that looked as though she'd been concentrating on it. The pages were considerably thumbed and she'd used a pencil to underline certain paragraphs. The title was, "The Sex Problem of the Single Woman."

He shook his head slowly. He thought, *It's a damn shame . . .*

And then, for some unaccountable reason, he thought of Hilda. She flowed into his mind with a rustling of silk that sheathed the exquisite contours of her slender torso and legs. Her platinum blonde hair was glimmering and her long-lashed green eyes were beckoning to say, Come on, take my hand and we'll go down Memory Lane.

He shut his eyes tightly. He wondered why he was thinking about



her. A long time ago he'd managed to get her out of his mind and he couldn't understand what brought her back again. He begged himself to get rid of the thought, but now it was more than a thought, it was the white-hot memory of tasting that mouth and possessing that elegant body. Without sound he said, *Goddamn her.*

And suddenly he realized why he was thinking of Hilda. It was like a curtain lifted to reveal the hidden channels of his brain. He was comparing Hilda's physical perfection with the scarred face of Tillie. His eyes were open and he gazed down at the mattress on the floor and for a moment he saw Hilda naked on the mattress. She smiled teasingly and then she shook her head and said, *Nothing doing.* So then she vanished and in the next moment it was Tillie on the mattress but somehow he didn't feel bitter or disappointed; he had the feeling that the perfection was all on Tillie's side.

He took off his shoes and lowered himself to the mattress. He yawned a few times and then he fell asleep.

A voice said, "Kenneth—"

He was instantly awake. He looked up and saw Tillie. He smiled at her and said, "What time is it?"

"Half-past five." She had a paper bag in her hand and she was taking things out of the bag and putting

them on the table. There was some dried fish and a package of tea leaves and some cold fried noodles. She reached deeper into the bag and took out a bottle containing colorless liquid.

"Rice wine," she said. She set the bottle on the table. Then again she reached into the bag and her hand came out holding a cardboard box.

"Opium?" he murmured.

She nodded. "I got some cigarettes, too." She took a pack of Luckies from her pocket, opened the pack and extended it to him.

He sat up and put a cigarette in his mouth and used the candle to light it. He said, "You going to smoke the opium?"

"No, I'll smoke what you're smoking."

He put another cigarette in his mouth and lit it and handed it to her.

She took a few drags and then she said quietly, "I didn't want to wake you up, but I thought you'd want to hear the news."

He blinked a few times. "What news?"

"I saw them," she said.

He blinked again. "Where?"

"On Tenth Street." She took more smoke into her mouth and let it come out of her nose. "It was a couple hours ago, after I come out of the Chinaman's."

He sat up straighter. "You been watching them for two hours?"

"Watching them? I been with them. They took me for a ride."

He stared at her. His mouth was open but no sound came out.

Tillie grinned. "They didn't know I was in the car."

He took a deep breath. "How'd you manage it?"

She shrugged. "It was easy. I saw them sitting in the car and then they got out and I followed them. They were taking a stroll around the block and peeping into alleys and finally I heard the little one saying they might as well powder and come back tomorrow. The big one said they should keep on searching the neighborhood. They got into an argument and I had a feeling the little one would win. So I walked back to the car. The door was open and I climbed in the back and got flat on the floor. About five minutes later they're up front and the car starts and we're riding."

His eyes were narrow. "Where?"

"Downtown," she said. "It wasn't much of a ride. It only took a few minutes. They parked in front of a house on Spruce near Eleventh. I watched them go in. Then I got out of the car—"

"And walked back here?"

"Not right away," she said. "First I cased the house."

*Silly Tillie*, he thought. *If they'd seen her they'd have dragged her in and killed her.*

She said, "It's one of them little old-fashioned houses. There's a vacant lot on one side and on the other side there's an alley. I went down the alley and came up on the back

porch and peeped through the window. They were in the kitchen. the four of them."

He made no sound, but his lips shaped the word. "Four?" And then, with sound, "Who were the other two?"

"A man and a woman."

He stiffened. He tried to get up from the mattress and couldn't move. His eyes aimed past Tillie as he said tightly, "Describe them."

"The man was about five-ten and sort of beefy. I figure about two hundred. He looked about forty or so. Had a suntan and wore expensive clothes. Brown wavy hair and brown eyes and—"

"That's Riker," he murmured. He managed to lift himself from the mattress. His voice was a whisper as he said, "Now let's have the woman."

"She was something," Tillie said. "She was really something."

"Blonde?" And with both hands he made a gesture begging Tillie to speed the reply.

"Platinum blonde," Tillie said. "With the kind of a face that makes men sweat in the wintertime. That kind of a face, and a shape that goes along with it. She was wearing—"

"Pearls," he said. "She always had a weakness for pearls."

Tillie didn't say anything.

He moved past Tillie. He stood facing the dark wall of the cellar and seeing the yellow-black play of candlelight and shadow on the

cracked plaster. "Hilda," he said. "Hilda."

It was quiet for some moments. He told himself it was wintertime and he wondered if he was sweating.

Then very slowly he turned and looked at Tillie. She was sitting on the edge of the mattress and drinking from the bottle of rice-wine. She took it in short, measured gulps, taking it down slowly to get the full effect of it. When the bottle was half-empty she raised her head and grinned at him and said, "Have some?"

He nodded. She handed him the bottle and he drank. The Chinese wine was mostly fire and it burned all the way going down and when it hit his belly it was electric-hot. But the climate it sent to his brain was cool and mild and the mildness showed in his eyes. His voice was quiet and relaxed as he said, "I thought Oscar and Coley made the trip alone. It didn't figure that Riker and Hilda would come with them. But now it adds."

"It's a long ride from Los Angeles," Tillie said.

"They didn't mind. They enjoyed the ride."

"The scenery?"

"No," he said. "They weren't looking at the scenery. They were thinking of the setup here in Philly. With Oscar putting the blade in me and then the funeral and Riker seeing me in the coffin and telling himself his worries were over."

"And Hilda?"

"The same," he said. "She's been worried just as much as Riker. Maybe more."

Tillie nodded slowly. "From the story you told me, she's got more reason to worry."

He laughed lightly. He liked the sound of it and went on with it. He said, through the easy laughter, "They really don't need to worry. They're making it a big thing and it's nothing at all. I forgot all about them a long time ago. But they couldn't forget about me."

Tillie had her head inclined and she seemed to be studying the sound of his laughter. Some moments passed and then she said quietly, "You don't like black pudding?"

He didn't get the drift of that. He stopped laughing and his eyes were asking what she meant.

"There's an old saying," she said. "Revenge is black pudding."

He laughed again.

"Don't pull away from it," Tillie said. "Just listen to it. Let it hit you and sink in. Revenge is black pudding."

He went on laughing, shaking his head and saying, "I'm not in the market."

"You sure?"

"Positive," he said. Then, with a grin, "Only pudding I like is vanilla."

"The black tastes better," Tillie said. "I've had some, and I know. I had it when they told me what he

did to himself with the meat-cleaver."

He winced slightly. He saw Tillie getting up from the mattress and moving toward him. He heard her saying, "That black pudding has a wonderful flavor. You ought to try a spoonful."

"No," he said. "No, Tillie."

She came closer. She spoke very slowly and there was a slight hissing in her voice. "They put you in prison for nine years. They cheated you and robbed you and tortured you."

"That's all past," he said. "That's from yesterday."

"It's from now." She stood very close to him. "They're itching to hit you again and see you dead. They won't stop until you're dead. That puts a poison label on them. And there's only one way to deal with poison. Get rid of it."

"No," he said. "I'll let it stay the way it is."

"You can't," Tillie said. "It's a choice you have to make. Either you'll drink bitter poison or you'll taste that sweet black pudding."

He grinned again. "There's a third choice."

"Like what?"

"This." And he pointed to the bottle of rice-wine. "I like the taste of this. Let's stay with it until it's empty."

"That won't solve the problem," Tillie said.

"The hell with the problem." His grin was wide. It was very wide

and he didn't realize that it was forced.

"You fool," Tillie said.

He had the bottle raised and he was taking a drink.

"You poor fool," she said. Then she shrugged and turned away from him and lowered herself to the mattress.

The forced grin stayed on his face as he went on drinking. Now he was drinking slowly because the rice-wine dulled the action in his brain and he had difficulty lifting the bottle to his mouth. Gradually he became aware of a change taking place in the air of the cellar; it was thicker, sort of smoky. His eyes tried to focus and there was too much wine in him and he couldn't see straight. But then the smoke came up in front of his eyes and into his eyes. He looked down and saw the white clay pipe in Tillie's hand. She was sitting on the mattress with her legs crossed, Buddha-like, puffing at the opium, taking it in very slowly, the smoke coming out past the corners of her lips.

The grin faded from his face. And somehow the alcohol-mist was drifting away from his brain. He thought, *She smokes it because she's been kicked around.* But there was no pity in his eyes, just the level look of clear thinking. He said to himself, *There's only two kinds of people in this world, the ones who get kicked around and the ones who do the kicking.*

He lowered the bottle to the ta-



ble. He turned and took a few steps going away and then heard Tillie saying, "Moving out?"

"No," he said. "Just taking a walk."

"Where?"

"Spruce Street," he said.

"Good," she said. "I'll go with you."

He shook his head. He faced her and saw that she'd put the pipe aside. She was getting up from the mattress. He went on shaking his head and saying, "It can't be played that way. I gotta do this alone."

She moved toward him. "Maybe it's good-bye."

"If it is," he said, "there's only one way to say it."

His eyes told her to come closer. He put his arms around her and held her with a tenderness and a feeling of not wanting to let her go. He kissed her. He knew she felt the meaning of the kiss, she was returning it and as her breath went into him it was sweet and pure and somehow like nectar.

Then, very gently, she pulled away from him. She said, "Go now. It's still dark outside. It'll be another hour before the sun comes up."

He grinned. It was a soft grin that wasn't forced. "This job won't take more than an hour," he said. "Whichever way it goes, it'll be a matter of minutes. Either I'll get them or they'll get me."

He turned away and walked across the cellar toward the splin-

tered door. Tillie stood there watching him as he opened the door and went out.

It was less than three minutes later and they had him. He was walking south on Ninth, between Race Street and Arch, and the black Olds 88 was cruising on Arch and he didn't see them but they saw him, with Oscar grinning at Coley and saying, "There's our boy."

Oscar drove the car past the intersection and parked it on the north side of Arch about twenty feet away from the corner. They got out and walked toward the corner and stayed close to the brick wall of the corner building. They listened to the approaching footsteps and grinned at each other and a few moments later he arrived on the corner and they grabbed him.

He felt Coley's thick arm wrapped tight around his throat, pulling his head back. He saw the glimmer of the five-inch blade in Oscar's hand. He told himself to think fast and he thought very fast and managed to say, "You'll be the losers. I made a connection."

Oscar hesitated. He blinked puzzledly. "What connection?"

He smiled at Oscar. Then he waited for Coley to loosen the armhold on his throat. Coley loosened it, then lowered it to his chest, using both arms to clamp him and prevent him from moving.

He made no attempt to move. He went on smiling at Oscar, and say-

ing, "An important connection. It's important enough to louse you up."

"Prove it," Oscar said.

"You're traced." He narrowed the smile just a little. "If anything happens to me, they know where to get you."

"He's faking," Coley said. Then urgently, "Go on, Oscar, give him the knife."

"Not yet," Oscar murmured. He was studying Ken's eyes and his own eyes were somewhat worried. He said to Ken, "Who did the tracing?"

"I'll tell that to Riker."

Oscar laughed without sound, "Riker's in Los Angeles."

"No he isn't," Ken said. "He's here in Philly."

Oscar stopped laughing. The worry deepened in his eyes. He stared past Ken, focusing on Coley.

"He's here with Hilda," Ken said.

"It's just a guess," Coley said, "It's gotta be a guess." He tightened his bear-hug on Ken. "Do it, Oscar. Don't let him stall you. Put the knife in him."

Oscar looked at Ken and said, "You making this a quiz game?"

Ken shrugged. "It's more like stud poker."

"Maybe," Oscar admitted. "But you're not the dealer."

Ken shrugged again. He didn't say anything.

Oscar said, "You're not the dealer and all you can do is hope for the right card."

"I got it already," Ken said. "It fills an inside straight."

Oscar bit the edge of his lip. "All right, I'll take a look." He had the knife aiming at Ken's chest, and then he lowered it and moved in closer and the tip of the blade was touching Ken's belly. "Let's see your hole-card, sonny. All you gotta do is name the street and the house."

"Spruce Street," Ken said. "Near Eleventh."

Oscar's face became pale. Again he was staring at Coley.

Ken said, "It's an old house, detached. On one side there's a vacant lot and on the other side there's an alley."

It was quiet for some moments and then Oscar was talking aloud to himself, saying, "He knows, he really knows."

"What's the move?" Coley asked. He sounded somewhat unhappy.

"We gotta think," Oscar said. "This makes it complicated and we gotta think it through very careful."

Coley muttered a four-letter word. He said, "We ain't getting paid to do our own thinking. Riker gave us orders to find him and bump him."

"We can't bump him now," Oscar said. "Not under these conditions. The way it stacks up, it's Riker's play. We'll have to take him to Riker."

"Riker won't like that," Coley said.

Oscar didn't reply. Again he was biting his lip and it went on that way for some moments and then he made a gesture toward the parked car. He told Coley to take the wheel and said he'd sit in the back with Rockland. As he opened the rear door he had the blade touching Ken's side, gently urging Ken to get in first. Coley was up front behind the wheel and then Oscar and Ken occupied the rear seat and the knife in Oscar's hand was aimed at Ken's abdomen.

The engine started and the Olds 88 moved east on Arch and went past Eighth and turned south on Seventh. There was no talk in the car as they passed Market and Chestnut and Walnut. They had a red light on Locust but Coley ignored it and went through at forty-five.

"Slow down," Oscar said.

Coley was hunched low over the wheel and the speedometer went up to fifty and Oscar yelled, "For Christ's sake, slow down. You wanna be stopped by a red car?"

"There's one now," Ken said, and he pointed toward the side window that showed only the front of a grocery store. But Oscar thought it might really be a side-street with a police car approaching, and the thought was in his brain for a tiny fraction of a second. In that segment of time he turned his head to have a look. Ken's hand moved automatically to grab Oscar's wrist and twist hard. The knife fell away

from Oscar's fingers and Ken's other hand caught it. Oscar let out a screech and Ken put the knife in Oscar's throat and had it in there deep just under the ear, pulled it out and put it in again. The car was skidding to a stop as Ken stabbed Oscar a third time to finish him. Coley was screaming curses and trying to hurl himself sideways and backward toward the rear seat and Ken showed him the knife and it didn't stop him. Ken ducked as Coley came vaulting over the top of the front seat, the knife slashing upward to catch Coley in the belly, slashing sideways to rip from navel to kidney, then across again to the other kidney, then up to the ribs to his bone with Coley gurgling and trying to sob, doubled over with his knees on the floor and his chin on the edge of the back seat, his arms flung over the sprawled corpse of Oscar.

"I'm dying," Coley gurgled. "I'm —" That was his final sound. His eyes opened very wide and his head snapped sideways and he was through for this night and all nights.

Ken opened the rear door and got out. He had the knife in his pocket as he walked with medium-fast stride going south on Seventh to Spruce. Then he turned west on Spruce and walked just a bit faster. Every now and then he glanced backward to see if there were any red cars but all he saw was the empty street and some alley cats mooch-

ing around under the street lamps.

In the blackness above the rooftops the bright yellow face of the City Hall clock showed ten minutes past six. He estimated the sky would be dark for another half-hour. It wasn't much time, but it was time enough for what he intended to do. He told himself he wouldn't enjoy the action, and yet somehow his mouth was watering, almost like anticipating a tasty dish. Something on the order of pudding, and the color of it was black.

He quickened his pace just a little, crossed Eighth Street and Ninth, and walked faster as he passed Tenth. There were no lit windows on Spruce Street but as he neared Eleventh the moonlight blended with the glow of a street lamp and showed him the vacant lot. He gazed across the empty space to the wall of the old-fashioned house.

Then he was on the vacant lot and moving slowly and quietly toward the rear of the house. He worked his way to the sagging steps of the back porch, saw a light in the kitchen window, climbed two steps and three and four and then he was on the porch and peering through the window and seeing Hilda.

She was alone in the kitchen, sitting at a white-topped table and smoking a cigarette. There was a cup and saucer on the table, the saucer littered with coffee-stained cigarette butts. As he watched, she

got up from the table and went to the stove to lift a percolator off the fire and pour another cup of coffee.

She moved with a slow weaving of her shoulders and a flow of her hips that was more drifting than walking. He thought, *She still has it, that certain way of moving around, using that body like a long-stemmed lily in a quiet breeze. That's what got you the first time you laid eyes on her. The way she moves. And one time very long ago you said to her, "To set me on fire, all you have to do is walk across a room." You couldn't believe you were actually married to that hot-house-prize, that platinum blonde hair like melted eighteen-karat, that face, she still has it, that body, she still has it. It's been nine years, and she still has it.*

She was wearing bottle-green velvet that set off the pale green of her eyes. The dress was cut low, went in tight around her very narrow waist and stayed tight going down all the way past her knees. She featured pearls around her throat and in her ears and on her wrists. He thought, *You gave her pearls for her birthday and Christmas and you wanted to give her more for the first wedding anniversary. But they don't sell pearls in San Quentin. All they sell is plans for getting out. Like lessons in how to crawl through a pipe, or how to conceal tools, or how to disguise the voice. The lessons never paid off, but maybe now's the time to*



*use what you learned. Let's try Coley's voice.*

His knuckles rapped the kitchen door, and his mouth opened to let out Coley's thick, low-pitched voice saying, "It's me and Oscar."

He stood there counting off the seconds. It was four seconds and then the door opened. It opened wide and Hilda's mouth opened wider. Then she had her hand to her mouth and she was stepping backward.

"Hello, Hilda." He came into the kitchen and closed the door behind him.

She took another backward step. She shook her head and spoke through the trembling fingers that pressed against her lips. "It isn't—"

"Yes," he said. "It is."

Her hand fell away from her mouth. The moment was too much for her and it seemed she was going to collapse. But somehow she managed to stay on her feet. Then her eyes were shut tightly and she went on shaking her head.

"Look at me," he said. "Take a good look."

She opened her eyes. She looked him up and down and up again. Then, very slowly, she summoned air into her lungs and he knew she was going to let out a scream. His hand moved fast to his coat pocket and he took out Oscar's knife and said quietly, "No noise, Hilda."

She stared at the knife. The air went out of her without sound. Her arms were limp at her sides.

She spoke in a half-whisper, talking to herself. "I don't believe it. Just can't believe it—"

"Why not?" His tone was mild. "It figures, doesn't it? You came to Philly to look for me. And here I am."

For some moments she stayed limp. Then, gradually, her shoulders straightened. She seemed to be getting a grip on herself. Her eyes narrowed just a little, as she went on looking at the silver-handled switchblade in his hand. She said, "That's Oscar's knife—?"

He nodded.

"Where is Oscar?" she asked. "Where's Coley?"

"They're dead." He pressed the button on the handle and the blade flicked out. It glimmered red with Oscar's blood and Coley's blood. He said, "It's a damn shame. They wouldn't be dead if they'd let me alone."

Hilda didn't say anything. She gave a little shrug, as though to indicate there was nothing she could say. He told himself it didn't make sense to wait any longer and the thing to do was put the knife in her heart. He wondered if the knife was sharp enough to cut through ice.

He took a forward step, then stopped. He wondered what was holding him back. Maybe he was waiting for her to break, to fall on her knees and beg for mercy.

But she didn't kneel and she didn't plead. Her voice was matter-

of-fact as she said, "I'm wondering if we can make a deal."

It caught him off balance. He frowned slightly. "What kind of deal?"

"Fair trade," she said. "You give me a break and I'll give you Riker."

He changed the frown to a dim smile. "I've got him anyway. It's a crah he's upstairs sound asleep."

"That's fifty percent right," she said. "He's a very light sleeper. Especially lately, since he heard you were out of Quentin."

He widened the smile. "In Quentin I learned to walk on tip-toe. There won't be any noise."

"There's always noise when you break down a door."

The frown came back. "You playing it shrewd?"

"I'm playing it straight," she said. "He keeps the door locked. Another thing he keeps is a .38 under his pillow."

He slanted his head just a little. "You expect me to buy that?"

"You don't have to buy it. I'm giving it to you."

He began to see what she was getting at. He said, "All right, thanks for the freebee. Now tell me what you're selling."

"A key," she said. "The key to his room. He has one and I have one. I'll sell you mine at bargain rates. All I want is your promise."

He didn't say anything.

She shrugged and said, "It's a gamble on both sides. I'll take a chance that you'll keep your word

and let me stay alive. You'll be betting even-money that I'm telling the truth."

He smiled again. He saw she was looking past him, at the kitchen door. He said, "So the deal is, you give me the key to his room and I let you walk out that door."

"That's it." She was gazing hungrily at the door. Her lips scarcely moved as she murmured, "Fair enough?"

"No," he said. "It needs a tighter contact."

Her face was expressionless. She held her breath.

He let her hold it for awhile, and then he said, "Let's do it so there's no gamble. You get the key and I'll follow you upstairs. I'll be right in back of you when you walk into the room. I'll have the blade touching your spine."

She blinked a few times.

"Well?" he said.

She reached into a flap of the bottle-green velvet and took out a door-key. Then she turned slowly and started out of the kitchen. He moved in close behind her and followed the platinum blonde hair and elegant torso going through the small dining-room and the parlor and toward the dimly-lit stairway. He came up at her side as they climbed the stairs, the knife-blade scarcely an inch away from the shimmering velvet that covered her ribs.

They reached the top of the stairs and she pointed to the door of the

front bedroom. He let the blade touch the velvet and his voice was a whisper saying, "Slow and quiet. Very quiet."

Then again he moved behind her. They walked slowly toward the bedroom door. The blade kissed the velvet and it told her to use the key with a minimum of sound. She put the key in the lock and there was no sound as she turned the key. There was only a slight clicking sound as the lock opened. Then no sound while she opened the door.

They entered the room and he saw Riker in the bed. He saw the brown wavy hair and there was some grey in it along the temples. In the suntanned face there were wrinkles and lines of dissipation and other lines that told of too much worry. Riker's eyes were shut tightly and it was the kind of slumber that rests the limbs but not the brain.

Ken thought, *He's aged a lot in nine years; it used to be mostly muscle and now it's mostly fat.*

Riker was curled up, his knees close to his paunch. He had his shoes off but otherwise he was fully dressed. He wore a silk shirt and a hand-painted necktie, his jacket was dark grey cashmere and his slacks were pale grey high-grade flannel. He had on a pair of argyle socks that must have set him back at least twenty dollars. On the wrist of his left hand there was a platinum watch to match the large star-emerald he wore on his little finger.

On the third finger of his left hand he had a three-karat diamond. Ken was looking at the expensive clothes and the jewelry and thinking, *He travels first-class, he really rides the gravy train.*

It was a bitter thought and it bit deeper into Ken's brain. He said to himself, *Nine years ago this man of distinction pistol-whipped your skull and left you for dead. You've had nine years in Quentin and he's had the sunshine, the peaches-and-cream, the thousands of nights with the extra-lovely Mrs. Riker while you slept alone in a cell—*

He looked at the extra-lovely Mrs. Riker. She stood motionless at the side of the bed and he stood beside her with the switchblade aiming at her velvet-sheathed flesh. She was looking at the blade and waiting for him to aim it at Riker, to put it in the sleeping man and send it in deep.

But that wasn't the play. He smiled dimly to let her know he had something else in mind.

Riker's left hand dangled over the side of the bed and his right hand rested on the pillow. Ken kept the knife aimed at Hilda as he reached under the pillow. His fingers touched metal. It was the barrel of a revolver and he got a hold on it and eased it out from under the pillow. The butt came into his palm and his middle finger went through the trigger-guard and nestled against the back of the guard, not touching the trigger.

He closed the switchblade and put it in his pocket. He stepped back and away from the bed and said, "Now you can wake up your husband."

She was staring at the muzzle of the .38. It wasn't aiming at anything in particular.

"Wake him up," Ken murmured. "I want him to see his gun in my hand. I want him to know how I got it."

Hilda gasped and it became a sob and then a wail and it was a hook of sound that awakened Riker. At first he was looking at Hilda. Then he saw Ken and he sat up very slowly, as though he was something made of stone and ropes were pulling him up. His eyes were riveted to Ken's face and he hadn't yet noticed the .38. His hand crept down along the side of the pillow and then under the pillow.

There was no noise in the room as Riker's hand groped for the gun. Some moments passed and then there was sweat on Riker's forehead and under his lip and he went on searching for the gun and suddenly he seemed to realize it wasn't there. He focused on the weapon in Ken's hand and his body began to quiver. His lips scarcely moved as he said, "The gun—the gun—"

"It's yours," Ken said. "Mind if I borrow it?"

Riker stared at the revolver. Then very slowly his head turned and he was staring at Hilda. "You gave it to him."

"Not exactly," Ken said. "All she did was tell me where it was."

Riker shut his eyes very tightly, as though he was tied to a rack and it was pulling him apart.

Hilda's face was expressionless. She was looking at Ken and saying, "You promised to let me walk out—"

"I'm not stopping you," he said. Then, with a shrug and a Jim smile, "I'm not stopping anyone from doing what they want to do." And he slipped the gun into his pocket.

Hilda started for the door. Riker was up from the bed and lunging at her, grabbing her wrist and hurling her across the room. Then Riker lunged again and his hands reached for her throat as she tried to get up from the floor. Hilda began to make gurgling sounds but the noise was drowned in the torrent of insane screaming that came from Riker's lips. Riker choked her until she died. When Riker realized she was dead his screaming became louder and he went on choking her.

Ken stood there, watching it happen. He saw the corpse flapping like a rag-doll in the clutching hands of the screaming madman. He thought, *Well, they wanted each other, and now they got each other.*

He walked out of the room and down the hall and down the stairs. As he went out of the house he could still hear the screaming. On

Spruce, walking toward Eleventh, he glanced back and saw a crowd gathering outside the house and then he heard the sound of approaching sirens. He waited there and saw the police-cars stopping in front of the house, the policemen rushing in with drawn guns. Some moments later he heard the shots and he knew that the screaming man was trying to make a getaway. Then there was silence. He knew they'd be carrying two corpses out of the house.

He turned away from what was happening back there, walked along the curb toward the sewer-hole on the corner, took Riker's gun from his pocket and threw it into the sewer. In the instant that

he did it, there was a warm sweet taste in his mouth. He smiled, knowing what it was. Again he could hear Tillie saying, "Revenge is black pudding."

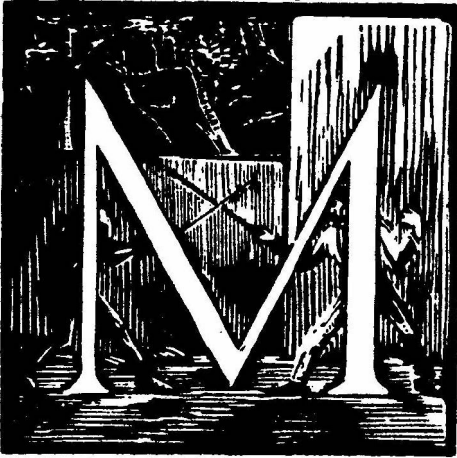
*Tillie*, he thought. And the smile stayed on his face as he walked north on Eleventh. He was remembering the feeling he'd had when he'd kissed her. It was the feeling of wanting to take her out of that dark cellar, away from the loneliness and the opium. To carry her upward toward the world where they had such things as clinics, with plastic specialists who repaired scarred faces.

The feeling hit him again and he was anxious to be with Tillie and he walked faster.



*The colonel was a tough, stubborn little man who suffered his illusions like a hero.*

BY CHARLES A. FREYLIN



# an's an

COLONEL KELMONT was short and red faced, with a vitriolic temper. He was vulgar with nurses, abusive to doctors, over-friendly with the other patients, and profane with everybody.

He'd lie for hours hyperextended in a Balkan frame and entertain anyone who'd listen to his stories of the South Pacific.

Once a year like clockwork the Colonel would be admitted to

Weymouth-Bright and we'd be stuck with him. This was year in and year out.

While I did like him personally, I confess I never could understand him. The first time he was admitted to W-B General Hospital was two years after the war. I saw on the chart he was Elmer Pickle's patient—Elmer being my chief in neurosurgery.

Diagnosis was no problem; you

only had to listen to him, and of course, look at the scar on his back.

Pickle showed me the black shadow on X ray. "There it is, Macker. Colonel Kelmont's bullet, or shrapnel. A foreign body, anyway."

"Between the sixth and seventh thoracic vertebrae," I said.

"No. Seventh and eighth. That coincides with the hyperesthesia he's experiencing in the ensiform area. My guess is it's lodge in the lamina midway between the posterior root of the transverse process and the angle of the spinous process."

"Why hasn't it been giving him more trouble? Is there a periodicity to flare-ups like this?" I asked.

"These things are temperamental as hell, Charlie. Chances are the tip of the slug rests from time to time against the spinal cord. That might account for his headaches. Now and then, God knows why, it kicks up on him. I'm sure the spinous muscle is periodically insulted—possibly the transverse as well."

"Operable, isn't it?"

"I'd certainly think so—routine laminectomy. They discharged him from the service with the thing still in there. But he wouldn't let them operate."

"For goodness' sake, why? You saw the agony he was in yesterday."

Pickle shook his bald head, smiling and frowning at once. "I

don't know. Let's try and talk him into it."

It was no use. At first I thought he might be using the slug as a device to get morphine, but when we discontinued narcotics, it didn't faze him at all. No addict behaves that way. After a few days in traction and complete bed rest his back trouble subsided.

Another week in a wheel chair along with tranquilizers and special exercise and Colonel Kelmont was ready for discharge from the hospital. So it went.

Although as a rule he shied away from the hospital staff, I got to know the Colonel as well as anybody. Of course, I had to listen to my share of his war exploits. He was always the hero. I've got to admit one thing: he was never offensive with these anecdotes. He had a certain way of projecting himself as a swashbuckler; if you couldn't believe him you got a big kick out of him anyway.

After my tenth year on the staff at Weymouth-Bright I nudged Pickle into retirement and took over neurosurgery altogether. By that time the Colonel's treatments had become routine, as well as my office consultations with him.

They would admit him. He'd come rolling in on a wheel stretcher groaning in agony, begging us to stop the pain, all the while calling us frightful names.

If the Colonel had any family I never heard of it. Maybe that's one



reason he raised such particular hell with the staff. The day he goosed Miss Carpenter out in the solarium, I called him into my ward office.

"Sit down, Colonel." We were old friends by this time so I skipped the professional nonsense and stuck my feet on the desk.

"I suppose you're going to give me hell, Charlie," he said cheerfully.

"Jesus, Colonel. Can't you keep your hands off the nurses? What'd you do that to Lily for?"

He snorted disgustedly. "All right. Let her make a Federal case out of it. Ask her what she was doing with Sullivan last night—the guy in the airplane cast."

I winced and quickly changed the subject. "Look, Colonel; this is your eleventh year coming in and out of this place. Why in heaven's name don't you let me take that slug out of your back?"

He sighed. "We've been all over that, Charlie."

"You're a stubborn fool. You know, that just *might* kill you one day. Cerebrospinal fever, for example."

"Never killed me on Guadalcanal," he said.

"What kind of childish logic is that, Colonel? I know about your tour on Guadalcanal. I don't get the connection." I did, of course; he was cranking up his pet subject.

"I was a man then, Charlie."

"You still are."

He shook his head. "When you retire you die. Back in those days the regiment looked up to me; loved me like I was their father."

"So I've heard, Colonel."

"Not a manjack of 'em would've hesitated to crawl into hell for me."

"I'm sure of it, Colonel."

"Tiger Kelmont, my boys called me. Who do you think laid the groundwork for stopping the Japs at the Tenaru?"

"You, Colonel?"

"Ycs, mc, Colonel. Kelmont and his boys, God bless 'em. And I led 'em. We stopped those bastards on a sand spit like gutted mackerel. You heard of Bloody Ridge? Why . . ." He made a chopping gesture, then grumbled off into silence.

Again, I felt sorry for the little man. His reddish hair was much thinner now, his complexion ruddier and markedly hypertensive. Only his eyes hadn't changed over the years; they were still black and remarkably piercing.

"That bullet, Charlie . . ."

"Let's get it out of there, Colonel. I'll do it in an hour. What do you say? Tomorrow?"

"It's like an old friend, Charlie. Let it be."

"You're a stubborn, stupid ass. On top of that you won't go to a veterans' hospital. No. But you spend nearly a thousand dollars here every year."

"Ha. No vets' hospitals for me. I'd sooner go to the city dump."

Thus the years rolled by. Each time the Colonel turned up he was a little thinner, a little redder of face. His stories never varied, except in the manner of telling, for he was getting shorter of breath. The shorter the breath, the more fiercely he recounted his tales of combat, the fire in his face compensating for his failing oratory.

Nurse Lily Carpenter collapsed in a chair one day with a theatrical groan.

"Oh, not again, Lily. The Colonel didn't . . ."

She smiled a little. She was getting a little gray herself. "No, Dr. Macker. Only I just had to listen to the good Colonel stand in a clearing near Henderson Field the evening of August 14 with a loaded BER—"

"BAR, Lily."

"—BAR, and cut five Japanese snipers to pieces. They were hidden in the coconut palms . . ."

"I know, Lily. I've heard that one. Well, he *was* there, you know; I've seen his record."

"Until a Jap got me in the back," she mimicked, without rancor.

"Colonel's getting old, Lily."

"Ho. That's what *you* think. *Why* doesn't he permit an operation, Dr. Macker?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

In the spring of the following year, Colonel Kelmont died. As it turned out, it had nothing to do

with the foreign body in his spine. He died from a more ominous mesenteric thrombosis.

When we admitted him, he was bent double with exquisite abdominal pain and his blood pressure was falling. He died that same night.

I had to see a post mortem on the Colonel. After all those years, that slug really intrigued me. Having no family to object, it was easily arranged.

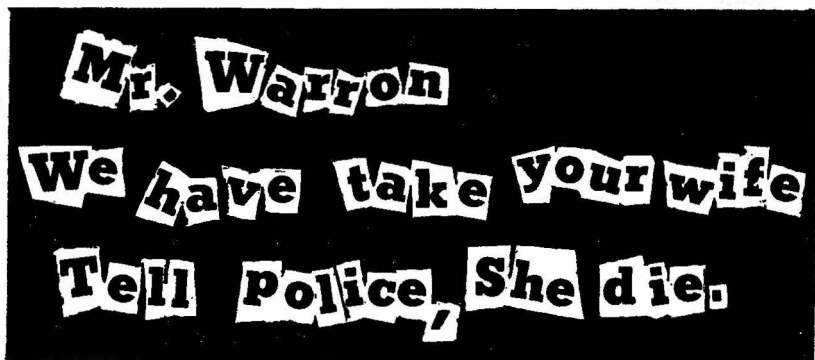
All those years it had lurked like a malignant torpedo in the bony hangar it had bored for itself—the roughened nose barely rubbing the dura of the spinal cord, the spinous muscle settling over it like an omental web.

I told the pathologist, "I'd like to have that slug, O'Brien. It's not a medicolegal case and there's no sense burying him with it."

I never told anyone what I learned afterwards—long after Colonel Kelmont had been given his military burial. I never told anyone, for I think the Colonel was a real hero; I had no right to nullify that.

I understand what those years of suffering cost him, and what it was all about. The Japanese had used two different slugs in their small arms on Guadalcanal, twenty-five and thirty-one caliber.

The bullet we took out of the Colonel was a 30-06 from a U.S. Springfield rifle.



**J**AMES WARREN was both a sophisticated and wordly man. A shrewd executive with two university degrees (one honorary) in finance, he looked the part of an important man: tall and still quite trim for his 56 years, with brushed silver hair above a well-groomed face ending on a square jaw. He had interests in several holding companies, was on the board of directors of a bank and a senior partner in a stock brokerage firm. He averaged \$100,000 yearly, after taxes.

But at the moment Mr. Warren

was sitting on the floor of his room in the athletic club, naked except for gloves, tongue pressed between his lips like an overgrown idiot trying to concentrate. He was cutting out words and letters from three out-of-town-newspapers purchased weeks ago from a stand specializing in all kinds of newspapers except local ones. The radio was on and when the announcer stated that heavy rains were expected later in the evening, Mr. Warren nodded as if the message was meant only for himself. He pasted the words cut

## "the specialists"

BY  
ED LACY

*In this age of specialization, the wise bird  
who moves out of his own field is a dead pigeon.*

from the newspapers on a hunk of crude brown wrapping paper, which he had taken from a corner trash can 10 days before. He finally had a note which read:

*Mr. Warron. We have taken your wife. Tell police—she die! Wait our instructions and get \$50,000 ready. Old money & small bills. No monkey business or we kill Maddy. Sure!*

Mr. Warren held the note at arm's length, examining it from all angles, wondering if he had overdone the broken English and misspelling, then decided the note was crudely perfect. Mr. Warren had spent near four months figuring out a way to murder his wife, more time than he gave his biggest business deals.

Taking an envelope purchased in a five and dime store and using letters and numbers cut from the newspapers, he pasted his name and address on the outside. Inserting the note, he wet a stamp and pressed it on, then sealed the letter and wrapped it in a new handkerchief.

Gathering the bits of newspaper, the odds and ends of wrapping paper and the flour he'd made the paste from, he carefully put them in a paper bag. Then he stood very still in the center of the room, checking every inch of the rug. Thoroughly washing the glass he'd mixed the paste in, he showered and shaved and quickly dressed. Putting on his overcoat and a new pair of gloves, he stuffed the old gloves into

the paper bag, which he placed inside his attache case. He dropped some after-shave powder on the rug and rang for the maid. Handing her a dollar he said, "I stupidly soiled the rug. Kindly vacuum it at once."

She thanked him and said she certainly would. It was 6:10 p.m. and the sky already heavy and dark with rain clouds as he walked to the main post office, untied the handkerchief and let the letter fall into a mail box. The scissors were dropped down a sewer. Passing a corner trash can some blocks away, Mr. Warren lit a cigarette as he opened his attache case and threw the paper bag into the can. He stopped to casually inspect ties in a store window and then walked away, neatly thumbing his lit cigarette into the trash can. Glancing back from the next corner, he saw the trash burning brightly in the dark twilight. His gloves were left in two different garbage cans as he walked to his garage, then drove home in his foreign sport sedan.

Madeline Warren was a few inches over five feet tall and almost as wide, weighing 234 pounds. She was a 52 year old bleached blonde and if not very bright, neither was she stupid. A dozen years ago when one of his stock deals swayed on the brink of disaster, James Warren had quickly put all his assets in his wife's name. Madeline was smart enough to still keep matters that way, which was why Warren had to kill Maddy instead of divorcing or

leaving her. During their marriage Maddy had been interested in many projects but for the last dozen years only one thing occupied her mind—food. When he suggested they drive to a roadhouse for a lobster snack before playing bridge, Maddy was delighted. “That’s a great fun idea. But we can’t be too late at the Prestons. It’s 7:45 now and we’re due there at 9.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll make it. I’ll be a hot-rod driver for a broiled lobster any day.”

He sped to the roadhouse where they ate and even danced a few times. Mr. Warren was not unaware of the amused glances they gathered—a woman of Maddy’s bulk dancing—and he held his soggy wife tightly, kissed her once while in the center of the dance floor. She giggled, “James, these last few months have been like . . . like when we first met, honeybun.”

“Aha,” he said, wanting to add that she was nearly three times the slim Maddy he had courted 31 years before. “Say, it’s 8:45, I think we’d better forget the coffee and dessert, start for the Prestons.”

“Well . . . Alright. The pastry here never was much.”

Leaving the roadhouse, Mr. Warren kept the gas pedal on the floor. Pointing a plump finger at the windshield Maddy said, “Not so fast, honeybun, it’s starting to rain.”

Mr. Warren nodded as he slowed to turn into a side road, told his wife, “This is a short cut which will

bring us out on that old road running back of the Prestons’ place.”

Maddy nodded as she belched.

The road was empty and at a spot he’d selected weeks before Mr. Warren let the car stall. Mumbling that something would go wrong with the motor when they were in a hurry, he stepped out and, raising the hood, took a stout hunk of wood from back of the battery. He called, “Maddy, sweet, there’s a flash in the glove compartment, bring it here, please.”

“I’m too full to move.”

“Dearest, you’ll have to hold it on the motor while I fool with the damn thing.”

She squeezed out of the front seat and as she approached—he hit her across the forehead with a vicious blow, practiced to make certain she fell away from the car. Making sure she was dead, he dragged her into thick bushes where he stripped her of most of her rings and jewels, ripped her bag pulling out the cash, but leaving the various credit cards. A good deal of Mr. Warren’s reading had been about actual crimes, of late, and he deliberately left some jewels and money to give the impression of a quick robbery.

Back on the road he looked about carefully, put the flash back in the glove compartment, and drove on, turning onto the main road as the rain really came down. Passing a bridge he hurled the club into a river running out to sea, then the jewels. He stopped once to soak his gloves

in lighter fluid and burn them, then let the lighter smell leave his hands before putting on his usual gloves and driving into town. He parked around the corner from a drugstore on a busy street, lit a cigarette and waited. As he expected, the beat cop came along minutes later, told him, "No parking here, mister."

"I'm waiting for my wife, officer. She went around the corner to use the phone in the drugstore. We're slightly late for an appointment. I can't imagine what's keeping her, I hope she isn't waiting for the rain to stop. Officer, will it be alright if I dash out and get her?"

"Well—make it snappy."

Mr. Warren was quite proud of the way he had himself under control. There had only been one moment of doubt—when he had actually hit Maddy he had felt a sort of dumb surprise that he *had* finally done it. But everything was going according to plan, and this rain—he'd been clever waiting for a rainy day—no possible tire tracks or foot prints. The druggist, of course, hadn't seen anyone use the phone in the last half hour. Putting on a frantic act, Mr. Warren phoned the Prestons to ask if Maddy had called, then in a state of hysteria he rushed back to the car and told the policeman Maddy had disappeared.

Sitting in the drab detective squad room, looking the part of a bewildered husband, Mr. Warren had a hard time not grinning at the lardy detective checking the hospitals; the

detective actually looked like a TV caricature of a thick-headed dick.

Six months before Mr. Warren had hired a new secretary. Janice was 22, sharp and excitingly beautiful. But after a couple of motel dates Janice told him backstreet romance wasn't for her, she insisted upon marriage. Warren knew a divorce was impossible but the thought of losing Janice was also impossible. He told her to wait. Knowing she had a good thing in Mr. Warren, Janice was perfectly willing to wait. Mr. Warren deliberately left lipstick on his collar. There was a scene with Maddy as he confessed being a fool and in tears pleaded with her for forgiveness. From then on he had been most attentive to Maddy; shows, suppers, parties, carefully building the picture of a happy couple. Janice had been sent to a branch office in the West Indies. Mr. Warren, knowing Janice was fond of money, had no doubts about her waiting or keeping her mouth shut, even when he told her there wouldn't be any letters.

Det. Tony Marcia had barely managed to graduate high school, and only made it because he was a valuable football tackle. But he had been a detective for the last 11 years. Hanging up he said, "Mrs. Warren hasn't been in any accident. Your wife have a history of amnesia, anything like that?"

"No sir."

"You know women," Det. Mar-

cia said with a corny wink. "I mean, she might have decided at the last second to buy a new hat or . . ."

"That's utterly ridiculous!" Mr. Warren cut in coldly, but with the proper quiver in his voice. "Maddy would never do a thing like that, in the rain, and at this hour, with most stores closed."

"Yes. You never know what a women will do."

"I know my wife!"

"Take it easy, Mr. Warren, she's only been missing for an hour. She'll probably show up soon. You go home if we learn anything, we'll call at once."

"Is that all you can do, sit there and dabble that my wife will *probably* show up soon!"

Det. Marcia said clamly, "I get cases like this every day. A husband and a wife have a spat and she . . ."

"Damn you, I said we didn't have a fight! Maddy left to call the Prestons, explain that we'd be a bit late. I only remained in the car because I was in a No Parking zone!"

"You don't have to shout, I know my business. At this point I can't do anything but wait and see what breaks. You've said you don't suspect foul play, so technically I can't even report your wife as missing for 24 hours. Go home, Mr. Warren. I know what I'm doing believe me."

The second Mr. Warren reached his house he asked the maid if Mrs. Warren phoned, then called his doctor and told him how upset he was. The doctor drove over and gave him

a sedative, told Mr. Warren not to worry.

Mr. Warren wasn't the least worried, he dozed off dreaming of Janice.

The maid was shaking him awake, telling him it was after 10 a.m. Mr. Warren usually left for the office by 9 a.m. Even in his sleepy daze, he had sense enough to ask, "Did Mrs. Warren come home? Did she phone?"

"No sir, Mrs. Madeline hasn't returned nor called. The mail arrived and there's an odd looking letter for you."

Mr. Warren said to call his office and say he wouldn't be down until later. He washed quickly and put on a robe, went down for breakfast. He got an unexpected break, as he reached the table the phone rang and he said, "I'll take it." A man's voice said, "This is a survey being made . . ."

Mr. Warren cut him off by pressing the receiver cradle down, then shouted, "What? Who is this?"

He was still standing with the phone in his hand, giving an Oscar performance of bewilderment, as the maid came in with his orange juice. He told her, "That's odd. Somebody, a man, said, 'Wait at home, I'll call again,' and hung up."

The phone rang again and a man said, "This is a survey being made of our charge accounts. Is this Mrs. James Warren?"

"She isn't in," Mr. Warren said, hanging up. As he sipped his orange

juice he looked at the mail, screamed upon opening *the* letter. He phoned the police and half way through explaining why he was calling, Mr. Warren suddenly hung up.

Within a dozen minutes three detectives, including Det. Marcia, were at the Warren house. They examined the note, questioned the maid and the cleaning woman. Warren sat around, obviously in a state of shock. As he told Det. Marcia, "I hung up because I suddenly realized I was . . . Oh God, I *shouldn't* have phoned! Do you think they're watching the house, know I've called the police? They said they would k-kill my wife, if I contacted the police!"

"You did the right thing in calling us, Mr. Warren," Det. Marcia said. "We've put a tap on your phone, will start checking out all your employees, past and present. About this phone call, did the man—and you're sure it was a man?—speak with an accent, anything odd about his voice?"

"I think it was a man's voice. No accent or . . . I was sort of half-asleep. On the advice of my doctor, I took a sleep pill last night."

"Did you first say hello? Did you say anything over the phone?"

"No, I don't think so. I merely picked up the phone, hoping it might be Maddy, and he started talking. I'm going to phone my bank this second. I'll have the money ready. Officer, I want one thing clearly understood, I am going to

pay the ransom! Once my wife is safely home, you can do what you wish, but her safety comes first!"

Det. Marcia rubbed his balding head as he said the words Warren was waiting to hear. "Okay, but best we play things by ear. We're concerned about your wife's safety, too, but I might as well level with you—even if you pay, *that's no guarantee Mrs. Warren will be returned alive*. You see, in snatch cases where the victim is old enough to . . ."

"But their letter, they said that if I pay no harm will come to her?"

"Mr. Warren, you gotta think like the kidnapper does, if a guy ends up in the chair the ransom loot won't do him much good. What I'm saying is, where the victim is old enough to identify the kidnappers, the chances are they'll kill her, whether you pay or not. In the . . ."

Mr. Warren expertly fainted.

Madeline Warren's corpse was found early that afternoon by kids hunting rabbits and the story made the evening headlines. Det. Marcia returned at 5 p.m. to relieve the man on duty at the Warren house, told Mr. Warren, "I'd like you to come downtown, answer some questions."

"Really, I'm in no condition to talk or . . ."

Adding a slight growl to his voice, Det. Marcia cut him off with, "Stop the act, Warren, I'm arresting you for the murder of your wife!"

There was no pretense in Warren's gaping mouth or the eyes wide with disbelief. But a second later he



was under control as he roared, "Why you fat boob, are you also crazy? Everybody knows I loved my wife, that I was attentive . . .!"

"Turn it off, you're out of your league," Det. Marcia said softly. "There's your office gossip, Janice is a well stacked murder motive."

"Fool! Ask the maid! I'll call her—she'll tell you my wife knew of my one . . . eh . . . moment of indiscretion, and forgave me!"

"Come on, Warren, why drag this crummy act out? The lab checked out your letter, the spit used under the stamp matches your's."

Mr. Warren's pale face seemed to shrink as he stammered a whispered, "W-why, that's impossible! The stamp was pasted on with . . ." The words died as a tiny smile crossed Det. Marcia's rough face.

The detective said, "Guess you're right, it is impossible to check spit. Or at least I think it is. I'm almost sorry you took the bait first time out, I had a couple of better ones. It never fails, you perfect crime nuts are comical. Take that alleged phone call—a real stupid touch on your

part. The call was too early and didn't make any sense, a snatch artist would have at least made certain he was talking to you. But you pulled a prize boner right from the jump, I would have colared you this morning, only I didn't think you were going for murder, merely trying to cover a money loss or . . . I'm talking too much, myself. But that letter, not even the work of a bad punk. I mean, a kidnapper would call her Madeline, or Mrs. Warren, but what the hell—never *Maddy!*"

"God! I . . . went . . . over . . . and over each detail . . . so many times. I was absolutely sure I . . . *Maddy!* I . . . Do you have to handcuff me?"

Det. Marcia shrugged. "Yeah. I don't work sloppy. Oh I bet you were sure, but like I said, you were way out of your league. As the old saw goes—every joker to his own trade. Take me, I tried a little killing myself, a few years ago. I was positive-like you—that I'd make a bundle selling short on the market. Man, I lost three hundred bucks in an afternoon. Well, let's go."



HALLORAN pushed the snub nosed revolver to one side of his desk. For a moment he regarded me moodily, his gray-green eyes almost wistful; a small, frail man with thinning red hair that always looked as if he'd forgotten to comb it.

"This evidence, Blaine," he said in his slow, tired voice, "I can't use it."

He was the district attorney and if he couldn't use it, that was that. I fished out a package of cigarettes and held it out to him. He shook his head. Then I remembered the doctor had cut him off smokes. Halloran used to be a three-pack-a-day man.

I lighted one myself. The D.A.'s office was hot and I wasn't in a good frame of mind.

"That gun can send Zellers up for keeps if anything can," I said, trying not to sound irritated. "There's no maybe in the ballistic lab report.

The slug that killed Marty Fish was fired from the gun on your desk. And that gun came from Zeller's place."

Halloran picked up the gun again. His thin fingers were knotted at the joints and you could almost hear them creak as he bent them. He held the gun in the palm of his hand carefully, as if it were some treasure.

"A couple of years ago, perhaps I could have got a conviction," he said patiently. "But you know the decisions the Supreme Court has handed down lately. You entered Zellers' place without a warrant. This evidence was secured illegally."

"You could argue I was in hot pursuit," I protested. I wasn't angry. I just felt defeated. "As a matter of fact, that's true. The wasn't time to swear out a warrant."

Halloran looked at me a little sadly.

BY  
WILL COTTON

*Sometimes it seemed to Blaine that the laws were made to protect the guilty. But he knew how to get a job done . . . one way or another.*

# CONVICTION

"You know what Zeller's smart lawyers would make of that. Blaine, when I bring a case to court, I want a fighting chance to win."

"Things are rough all over," I said bitterly. "How the hell can a cop operate nowadays? With all the restrictions you boys throw at us?"

"You could have got a search warrant, Blaine."

I crushed out the stub of my cigarette.

"Sure. And by that time, Zellers and the gun would be gone."

"So you try something else," Halloran said.

I looked at him. He wasn't kidding. I felt the closeness of the office making it hard to breathe. I wanted Zellers bad. I had for a long time. I shifted in my seat and reached for another smoke.

"I know those boys in the black robes are trying to protect the rights of the honest citizen," I said testily. "But it isn't protecting the innocent when they hamstringing the guys who are supposed to bring in the law breakers. Zellers is a killer. He controls every illegal racket in the city. But he's a smart operator and this is the first chance we've had to nail him. And you refuse to prosecute because of a technicality."

"Zellers has the same rights as any citizen, killer or not."

"You really believe that, Halloran?"

He was studying me again with those sad, wistful eyes.

"Yes, Blaine," he said slowly. "I believe it."

I got up. There was a dryness in my throat.

"You big boys make it harder for us all the time," I said. "Only the pay stays the same. Maybe I'm out of step with the times. I figure, when you go after a crook, you get him any way you can. Maybe it's about time for me to resign."

"You won't resign," Halloran said quietly.

He was probably right. I'd been a cop too long.

"So what do you suggest, now?" I asked him bluntly. "No unauthorized searches, no wire taps, no frisking suspicious characters on the street at four in the morning, no rubber hose persuasion. You think maybe I should invite Zellers for a cup of tea and ask him please, won't he give me a confession?"

"You're the cop, Blaine. You're one of the best or else you wouldn't have the position you do. You figure it out."

"Sure, Mr. D. A. Just like that."

Halloran had been holding the gun in his gnarled hands. Now he set it down carefully and ran his fingers through his thin, red hair. He looked more tired than I had ever seen him.

"I've got to order Zellers' release," he said then in his quiet way. "And I'll have to return his gun. On the other hand, Zellers hasn't a permit to carry a concealed weapon so he's liable if he does."

"Hell, he'll get rid of that murder gun so fast it'll be like it never existed. And bringing Zellers in for illegal possession of some weapon he might be toting is about as serious as nabbing him for spitting on the sidewalk."

Halloran shrugged his thin shoulders.

"You've probably right, Blaine."

He paused. He was a good D.A., the best we'd had for a long time, but he had something to learn about hunting down killers. I turned around, starting for the door of his office.

"Blaine," he said. "Nobody wants Zellers out of the way more than me."

"You said that," I told him, my hand on the door knob. "Remember, sometime, you said it."

You take a city like Radford and you take a character like Zellers moving in and you have trouble.

Radford wasn't the largest city in the state, but it was beginning to burst at the seams. The electronic plants were booming, the real estate developers were throwing up pink and blue matchbox houses wherever they could find a couple of free acres, the bars and sleazy night spots were spilling out all over town to take care of the easy money. And down by the train yards, where a few years ago the red brick buildings housed families who couldn't afford too much rent, it wasn't safe to walk alone.

There was always crime in Radford, like anywhere, but until Zellers showed up, it was small time crime. Zellers made it big time.

He brought a small, experienced organization with him and he recruited local talent to fill out the ranks. We heard he had some understanding with the syndicate; maybe he was the syndicate boy in our area. Anyway, he started by buying the Loma Casino, a big roundhouse in what was then the outskirts of the city. This remained more or less his headquarters.

He must have had his plans all set up, because soon after he arrived, the gambling, prostitution, dope pushing and extortion rackets mushroomed. As Radford grew, so did Zellers. As fast as we picked up some of his henchmen, new ones showed up to take their places. Or the smart battery of lawyers Zellers lined up convinced the juries Zellers' scum were really poor, misunderstood unfortunates and they went back to their old jobs.

But Zellers himself wasn't that careless about getting caught. He was the big boy, all right, but he was a genius at keeping his nose clean. He even began to move around in the country club set. He bought up one legitimate business after another, which gave him all the fronts he needed. The question was how to reach him. I thought I had. With a nice murder rap.

Marty Fish was gunned down from a passing car one spring eve-

ning. Marty was one of Zellers' boys, but it wasn't business with Zellers this time. It was a woman. Zellers' woman, a dark, seductive girl named Margo Allegro. A witness to the shooting telephoned headquarters and I got the radio message three minutes later. I reached Zellers' apartment a few minutes after he did and with the radio cars converging from all over the city, he didn't have a chance. I took him and his snub nosed gun down to the station.

Like I said, I wanted Zellers bad. Not only because I wanted to bust open his tight, ugly empire. But because of Josie. She used to live next door and I'd known her ever since she was a scraggly kid with pig tails. When she was fifteen, she'd had a schoolgirl crush on me; the big, monkey-faced cop who used to play with her sometimes on his day off. She went to work as a waitress one summer at the Loma Casino and a year later the vice squad picked her up with a man who'd paid her seven dollars in a room down by the railroad yards. I saw her afterwards in the cell, twisted up in agony, her eyes wild, screaming obscenities while the sweat ran down over her face because she needed a fix and no one would give it to her. She recognized me and she stopped screaming, thinking I could help her, but there wasn't anything I could do. Only remember the scraggly girl in pig tails. It was too late for anything else.

I left Halloran's office in the court house and walked around the corner to Police Headquarters. It was a crumbling, inadequate brown stone building. The city fathers were too busy planning a new auditorium for professional wrestling matches and such to worry about whether their police building would stand through the next big blow. I walked up the wide, creaking stairs, smelling of linseed oil and damp sawdust, to my second floor office. On the door it said: Lieutenant James Blaine, Special Investigator. That meant I handled cases none of the regular departments wanted. It suited me okeh. I'm not naturally a team man, preferring to work on my own.

The phone was ringing when I unlocked the door. It didn't take me long to reach my desk and pick it up; my office is the size of a moderately large closet.

It was the chief.

"Halloran just phoned. He's releasing Zellers."

"I know," I told him. "I was just with him. I got a lecture on civil rights."

"Don't let it bug you," the chief said. "But maybe you were too anxious with Zellers. Sometimes it doesn't pay. How long since you took some leave, Blaine?"

I knew what he meant by that. Getting Zellers had been on my mind for a long time. I said:

"I don't need leave. I just need to get Zellers."

Then I hung up, which wasn't the most tactful thing to do.

I took out my cigarettes and placed them on the desk where I could reach them easily. I felt tight inside, like I did once after a guy I'd picked up for a mugging surprised me by pulling a knife and slashing me. I was too experienced to let that happen.

I thought about Zellers, a big, dangerous guy, with all the immunity you can get with a stable of little guys to do his dirty work. But I had a pretty good idea not all the unsolved murders on the books were the work of Zellers' henchmen. He was a killer himself, and killers don't reform. Not when they enjoy it.

Then I thought about Josie. She was one of his victims I'd known and so what happened to her was a personal thing. But there were plenty of other victims. These ruined lives were only statistics to me, but each statistic had a family and friends. If Zellers wasn't personally responsible, he had to take the blame. He ran the show.

Then I tried to figure out what was wrong with our system when a guy like Zellers could escape justice because of the very laws he was breaking. I could see how the ordinary guy's rights should be protected. It wasn't anyone's business to let himself into my place and go through my stuff. Not that I had anything to hide. But there was still a box of letters Rachel had written

me before she decided she didn't want to marry a cop, and no one should read those letters but me. Maybe the laws couldn't make exceptions. Or compromise. The law had to say that what was right for me was right for someone like Zellers. But people were always making compromises. People, like me.

Then I knew what I would do. It might not work, but if it did, I'd get Zellers. And Halloran wouldn't be able to complain. Thinking about it made the tightness in me begin to loosen up.

The card in the mailbox said Margo Allegro. I pressed the appropriate button and in a few seconds I heard a click in the speaking tube and a girl's voice asked who I was.

"You wouldn't know the name," I answered. "I'm a friend of Marty Fish. I have to talk to you."

She hesitated. I could hear her suck in her breath.

"I can't see you," she said. "Go away, please."

"This is urgent. Marty told me to get in touch with you if anything happened to him. You'll want to hear what I've got to say."

Again she hesitated. It isn't easy to make an impression through one of these gadgets. I thought she'd gone away, but then I heard a buzz as she unlocked the door to the foyer.

The elevator carried me up to the fifth floor. She was waiting for me, her apartment door open a cou-

ple of inches, as I came down the corridor.

"What's this about Marty?" she asked, watching me through the crack.

I could see only part of her face. It was pretty in a rather sensual way, the mouth a little too small, the black hair pushed back over her ears. She was nervous, not knowing whether to trust me or not.

"I'm not really a friend of Marty's," I told her. "I'm from the police. I want to talk to you about Marty's murder."

Her expression changed and she tried to slam the door shut, but I had my foot in the crack.

"I know it was a dirty trick, but I wanted to get in," I told her. "I could get an order to bring you down to the station, but it would be pleasanter if you just open that door and invite me in for a chat."

"You couldn't . . ." she began.

"It's a simple procedure," I said. "I could detain you for twenty-four hours and when we weren't talking, you could get some rest in the cell along with some whores and drunks and hop heads."

Her eyes searched me, trying to figure out if I meant it.

"But you've got no reason to do that." She was trying to convince herself.

"I've got reasons. The best one is suspicion of your being an accessory in the murder of Marty Fish."

She let out a little gasp. The color went out of her cheeks.

"I didn't have anything to do with it," she cried. "You must know that."

"What I know doesn't matter. I just want you to see I hold the trump card. Now be a good girl and offer me your hospitality."

Reluctantly, she stepped back, swinging the door wide.

"If it ever comes up," I suggested, "remember you let me in of your own free will."

"Free will?" she said scornfully. "You threatened me . . ."

"You made the choice. I just pointed out the alternative."

She gave me a look of loathing. It didn't bother me. In my line, you get used to that.

It was a nice apartment, if you like that kind, which is sort of deluxe motel modern. She had done her best to make it cozy. There was a lot of frilly feminine furniture. A white long-fibre carpet on the floor. A large, gilt-framed mirror. The usual assortment of knick-knacks.

She shut the apartment door and when I told her to lock it, she did. I went out into the kitchenette, then into a little hall off of which there was a bedroom with more feminine things around. The bed was super king sized. I checked the closet. It was crowded with clothes and shoes. The tiled bath was nicely appointed and smelled of Arpege. There was another door in the little hall.

"What's in there?" I asked.

She'd been trailing after me.

"The guest room."

I opened the door and peered in. The room was completely bare, just the walls and floor and ceiling. No furnishings at all.

"If you have guests, I see you keep them somewhere else," I told her.

A bit of color flooded back into her cheeks.

"It seems to me you're being pretty nose-y," she said impatiently.

"I wanted to be sure we were alone."

We went back into the living room. Aside from the mirror, there was only one decoration on the wall, a picture of Gainsborough's Boy in Blue. Besides looking out of place, it wasn't hanging straight. I went over to it, started to adjust it, then lifted it off its hook. Behind it was a small wall safe.

"For the family jewels?" I asked.

"I don't have anything worth hiding away. As far as I know, the safe is empty."

I went over to the sofa with the flowered slip covers and sat down. She hovered in the middle of the room, uncertainly.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked after a moment.

"No, thanks. But I'll smoke."

She picked up a silver cigarette box, but I shook my head and took out my own pack. I looked her over, then. She was probably in her late twenties, rather tall with good lines. She was wearing tight sea-green slacks and a tan pullover

sweater which clung to her torso so that I didn't have to guess about the lines. The lips of her small mouth were full and ripe, the dark eyes under carefully tended eyebrows were liquid and deep, like pools of water with no bottom. She was a woman a lot of men would like to take to bed and I could guess they wouldn't be disappointed.

She was waiting for me to say something, her hands folded in her lap, but the thumbs rubbing each other nervously.

"Why did Zellers kill Marty Fish?" I asked, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

My directness seemed to shake her momentarily. Then she got hold of herself.

"I don't see why you expect me to know the answer to that," she said. She leaned back, her shoulders stiff. On the defensive.

"Oh, come off it," I said. "It's no secret you're not paying your own rent here. Or buying all those clothes with piggy-bank money. Zellers has staked out quite an investment in you. So of course he got sore at Marty when you and Marty began to get friendly. What I don't get is why a girl like you would take a chance with another guy when she had so much to lose. Including the guy."

"It's really none of your business." I shrugged.

"Murder's my business. And so is Zellers. You realize, don't you, you're pretty lucky to still be



around to talk to me. Zellers might have got it into his head to gun you, too. Or did you have a pretty good excuse to give him? Like it was all Marty's fault?"

I saw the shudder go through her and for a moment I could see into the depths of her eyes. What I saw was fear.

She looked at me a moment, then without a word she pushed up the sleeve of her sweater. I saw the purple bruise spreading up over her forearm.

"That isn't the only place," she said. Her voice had no expression in it. "I've got them all over. What's your angle, cop? What do you want from me?"

"I want to pin the murder on Zellers. I thought I had, but it didn't work out. So now I'm starting again."

She thought that over a minute. Her forehead wrinkled and her mouth was a tight red line. She reached into the cigarette box, her hand trembling. I went over and held out a lighted match.

"Okay, so you're scared of him," I said.

"He's too cagey. You'll never catch him."

"But if I do, you can stop being scared."

She drew in a lungful of smoke. The way she held the cigarette, between her thumb and forefinger, I could tell she didn't smoke much.

"I thought it was a pretty good deal when Zellers started getting in-

terested in me," she said, again in an almost expressionless voice. "He seemed like a real nice guy. Maybe he was more interested in himself than me, but that was all right. He found me this place and he was generous. Then, after a while . . . well, I don't have to spell it out, but he wasn't a very nice guy any more. But he wouldn't let me go. I'd met Marty earlier, in fact we were pretty friendly before Zellers got interested, and when I told Marty how it was, he said he'd take me away somewhere. I guess Marty always loved me. And he was fed up with working for Zellers, too. Marty had it all arranged, the tickets and everything. But Zellers found out about it."

She broke off. I saw the start of tears at the corners of her eyes, but she brushed them away with the back of her hand.

"You could still go away," I told her.

She gave a hard, mirthless laugh.

"Oh, that's so easy to say, cop. How far could I get without any money? You know, Zellers pays the bills but he hasn't loaded me down with jewelry I could cash in or anything like that. I get some spending money for my hair and groceries. I've got maybe ten dollars in my purse right now and that's all. And if I did go away, Zellers has friends all over. They'd find me for him. I wouldn't have a chance."

The cigarette was burning down in her fingers. I went over and took

it out of her hand, before it singed her skin.

"Does Zellers come here often?"

"It varies. Three or four times a week. Whenever he . . . whenever he wants to use me. I'm like a . . ."

"You don't have to tell me."

"What are you going to do?"

She looked up at me. She was reaching for a straw. I was a cop. A big boy who maybe could wave a wand and deliver her from her degradation. Only I didn't have any magic wand.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I told her. "And what I do may not be a damn bit of good."

I drove into the parking lot of the Loma Casino a little before midnight. As usual, the place was swinging. A man in a tuxedo at the door greeted me with a phony smile and edged abruptly away. He was called Rolly and he had just beaten a rap on an extortion charge. He would be pressing the panic button, wherever it was, alerting the boys in the back room that the law had shown up. By the time I could reach it, the back room would be innocent as hell. But tonight I wasn't interested in gambling, so his warning was a waste of time.

I went into the bar, finding a place between a girl in a sexy red dress and a stout man who was tearing matches out of a match book and forming them into geometric patterns on the bar top. It struck me as a fairly innocuous pastime.

When the bar man came over, I ordered a bitters and soda. It cost me ninety-five cents, the same as if it had been scotch.

The barman and most of the help recognized me. I'd been there before on various enterprises and I could feel them staring at me, wondering what I was up to this time. After about ten minutes, Rolly came over and tapped my shoulder.

"Mr. Zellers sent me to say he hopes you enjoy yourself," he told me. "The drinks are on the house."

"I didn't think Zellers was that kindly disposed towards me any more. But I appreciate his concern."

The sarcasm was lost on Rolly. He gave me that phony smile again.

"Mr. Z. also was hoping you'd have time to drop by his office."

I'd expected that. It was why I'd come.

"Sure," I agreed. "The pleasure is all mine."

I left my glass on the bar and followed Rolly through the main room, crowded with tables, with a girl singing in a pink spotlight on the bandstand. Behind her in the shadows, a piano dribbled her accompaniment. We went around, behind the stand, down a little corridor. Rolly tapped at a door, listened a moment, then opened it and stepped aside so I could enter.

It wasn't properly an office. There was no desk. No files. Nothing that prosaic. But of course, this was only one of Zellers' places of business. He was sitting on one end of a long

sofa. On the low table in front of him were some bottles, glasses, an ice bucket and a tray of sandwiches. As I came over, he set down what was left of the sandwich he was munching and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

He was a big man, dressed in a conservative gray pin-stripe and a white shirt with a button down collar. Terribly Ivy league. Only on him, it didn't look Ivy league. Just out of place. His head was almost square shaped, with a wide, heavy jaw, thick lips and green eyes that were almost lost under the puffy lids. His shoulders and body were those of a wrestler who was out of condition.

"Well, Blaine," he said, picking up a napkin and brushing the back of his hand, "you weren't as smart as you figured."

He gave me a nasty, self-satisfied grin.

"I never figured I was smart," I said.

He grunted.

"I guess if you were smart, you'd find another job," he said. "How about a drink?"

When I told him no, he poured himself one. He had two rings on his thick fingers, one sparkling with diamonds. I took out my cigarettes and lighted one. Maybe, like Halloran, I should give them up. Except that in my business, there were a lot more serious health hazards than smoking.

Zellers took a long drink. He

smacked his lips and set the glass down.

"Good stuff. The best. I don't even sell it outside. Blaine, you're a damn fool to waste your time worrying about an intra-mural quarrel." He really used the word intra-mural. "Fish had to go, that's all. I was sorry. He used to be a good man. But from your point of view, he's one less punk to worry about. You could put your time in where it really counts."

"Like what?" I asked.

He shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"You know. Like those juvenile gangs. They go around stomping old ladies and ripping each other up with switch knives. They're a menace to the community. Leave taking care of my boys to me."

His eyes, watching me, were as shiny as polished marble.

"I'm not really interested in Marty Fish," I said. "What I'm really interested in, Zellers, is you."

He thought that was funny. His body rocked as he laughed. Watching him, you'd think he was a great big overgrown imbecile. Only if you thought that, you were wrong. He might be overgrown, but his warped mind was deadly sharp.

"That could turn out to be a dangerous ambition, Blaine," he said when he had recovered. His tone was goodnatured, pal to pal like. "Anyway, you know you haven't got much of a chance to pin anything on me. I've got too much on my side."

I let the smoke filter out through my nostrils. He was right about having a lot on his side, but I had something on mine, too. When I didn't say anything, he went on, getting more cozy with each word.

"Why I really wanted to see you, Blaine, is because I don't see why we can't get along. I know you think I'm a bad influence in town, but hell, you have a lot less trouble here than if someone else was in control. I run my business pretty clean. If you should get me out of the way, it isn't going to change things very much. This town is going to keep on having gambling and prostitution and all the other rackets. It's just human nature. Only it could be a lot worse. Think that over."

"I have. It could be worse, but it could be better. We'll handle your successor when the time comes."

He picked up a fresh sandwich and took a mouthful.

"What I was thinking," he went on, "is that we could have an understanding. I realize a cop's pay isn't very handsome. Anyone can use a little extra cash now and then. I'd run my business so as to give you boys as little trouble as possible. And vice versa. That's a fair proposition, especially as I should be real bugged at you for trying to frame me for what happened to Marty Fish."

"Framed you, Zellers? That's a nice way to put it."

He ignored my sally. He was still

working on the sandwiches. He seemed to be waiting for my answer to his proposition. Finally I said:

"I had a visit with your girl friend Margo, this afternoon. She's quite a lot of woman."

He stopped munching and gave me a quick, hard glance.

"What did the bitch tell you?" he demanded.

I shrugged.

"Nothing, really. She covered for you plenty. But I've got to admit I was impressed. I wouldn't mind a piece of her myself."

I watched the anger take hold of him. His face flushed and the muscles around his jaw tightened. He spat out a bit of sandwich and leaned toward me.

"You know what happened to Marty Fish," he said harshly.

"Yeah, I know." I said, nodding. "But hell, Zellers, you can't blame a guy for having ideas."

He sputtered something. I could see where Margo was concerned he had strong feelings. Whatever she had, he wanted it for himself. Which was what I'd figured. I got up.

"About your suggestion, Zellers, you know damn well what my answer is. Next time you see Margo, give her my best. Tell her I sure enjoyed my visit with her."

I left him to finish his sandwiches.

For a few days, I spent some time

watching Margo's apartment building. People develop habits, even when they don't realize it. Margo, for instance, usually went out for a few hours every afternoon. Sometimes she came back with a bag of groceries or some packages. I didn't care where she went or what she did.

Zellers would show up about every day, usually in the early evening, but sometimes it was late, well after midnight, and then he wouldn't leave until morning. I made no attempt to keep my watch a secret. As a matter of fact, I wanted Zellers to see me. He couldn't figure out my angle, and I think it made him nervous. I got an idea, once, he had planned to sick some of his boys on me, but he held off. Maybe he figured I'd set up some kind of a trap. I had, but not in the way he might suspect.

There was a rainy night when he accosted me, coming across the street from the entrance to Margo's building to where I was leaning in the shelter of a doorway.

"What's eating you, cop," he asked sourly, his hulking body between me and the street light.

"Nothing much."

"You're taking a hell of an interest in my comings and goings."

"I like fresh air. This is a good place to get it."

He started to reach out for me, then thought better of it. He was breathing fast. I grinned at him and he didn't like that.

"You haven't got any ideas about Margo?" he asked. I got the not-too-carefully veiled threat in his words.

"After what happened to Marty Fish? I'm not that dumb."

He stood there a long minute, his big hands clenched. I had him worried. He couldn't dig me, which was what I counted on. Finally he turned and went back across the street in the drizzle.

This time I wasn't taking any chances with Halloran's preoccupation with the niceties of civil rights. I had a search warrant to Margo Allegro's apartment in my pocket. I'd explained there was a wall safe in her place that I had reason to suspect held some of Zellers' secret papers. Papers that might incriminate him.

When Margo took off for her afternoon outing, I let myself in her apartment. The spring locks were easy to manage with a strip of celluloid from a pocket calendar some bank had given me.

Once inside, I slipped my service revolver under the cushion of the sofa in the living room and went into the unfurnished room that was supposed to be for guests. At best, it would be a long wait. I couldn't even be sure Zellers would come that night. But if he didn't, there was tomorrow.

I'd brought plenty of cigarettes. I smoked them, one after another, building up a nice heap of butts in

the empty cup I took from the kitchen. There was nothing to sit on but the floor, with my back up against the wall. It got harder on my fanny as time wore on. I slipped off my shoes and paced for a while. Then I heard Margo come in and so I sat down again. I felt nothing except a desire to get this business over with.

When it got dark, I stripped down to my shorts. I listened to Margo moving around. The telephone rang once and she answered it, but I couldn't make out what she said. I was getting stiff from sitting against the wall and worse, I was getting low on cigarettes. I wondered if I should start rationing myself.

Then, a little after nine, I heard the buzzer, followed by the scurry of Margo's running feet. My nerves began to draw tight and there was a growing tension in my abdomen. The apartment door slammed. I heard Zellers' heavy voice. I gave them a coupe of minutes, then, as quietly as I could, I pushed the guest room door open and stepped out into the little hall. They were standing in the middle of the living room, Zellers' back to me, in an embrace that looked like the prelude to something. I could see his big hand moving up over her thigh and the look on Margo's face over his shoulder drove the breath out of me. It was an expression of complete, utter revulsion.

It was a long way to my gun

under the sofa cushion. I started to pull back, but Margo looked around and saw me. Her eyes went wide, her lips began to tremble and she seemed to freeze there. Zellers must have sensed something was wrong, because he suddenly let go of her and said:

"What the hell, Margo."

When she didn't move, he started to swing around.

It might not work. That was the chance I had to take. I had miscalculated in hiding my weapon. But my plan was for Zellers to go for me first. What would happen was that I would get him, or he would get me. But either way, I was hoping it was the end of Zellers. There was an envelop on my desk which someone would open if I didn't show up. A cop killer doesn't live very long afterwards. The whole fury of the force bears down on him. I didn't want to die, but if it wasn't Zellers it would probably be cigarettes.

As he came around, I said:

"I was right. Margo's a damn good piece."

It took him a second to react. I was counting on his shock at finding me there almost naked in Margo's place to jump to the obvious conclusion without considering the logic of it. Because if he stopped to think, it was a pretty dubious situation. But I had fed him on my interest in his woman and he wanted her all to himself.

His mouth dropped open and his

eyes took on a hard, glinting coldness. I went on goading him.

"I'm taking Margo away," I said, moving in closer. "Maybe Marty didn't make it, but I . . ."

I didn't get to finish. His hand darted under his jacket. For a big man, he was a fast draw. I was still too far from the sofa to try for my weapon. He started toward me in a crouch, his face working, the snub nosed gun coming around to bear on me. Closing in for the kill.

I threw myself at him in a twisting, sideways lurch. I wasn't quite fast enough. The room exploded in a shattering crash. Something slammed into my shoulder, streaking pain. The impact half swung me around and drove me back. I crashed into a table. The rug started to slip under my feet. I could feel a numbness beginning to run down my left arm and my eyes weren't focusing right. I heard him bellow, saw his big, hulking shape right in front of me, the outline blurred and vague. The hard nose of his gun punched against my stomach.

I shuffled my feet and they stopped sliding. It almost tore my arm off as I slashed the edge of my fist down over his gun wrist. Then, with my numbing hand, I grabbed his wrist and tried to twist it. That's what it says to do in the book. But I didn't have much strength left in that arm. So I brought my knee up hard to the place it would do the most good.

Margo was screaming. Zellers dropped his gun and he gave an angry, bellowing cry, but he didn't double up the way he was supposed to. I saw his fist coming down. He knew some tricks, too. I tried to dodge. I staggered as his hand cut into my neck and my chest seemed to collapse. A foggy grayness washed through my brain. I sank to the floor, thinking it was over.

I wasn't out. Not quite. Maybe when I dodged he missed the vulnerable pressure point that would have sent me off into a black sleep, if it hadn't broken my neck.

But I had to fight myself to keep my eyes open and hold on to consciousness. It would have been a lot easier just to let go. Then there wouldn't be all that pain.

I could see him stumbling around, trying to find his gun. He was making strange, guttural noises. He was hurt, too.

The sofa seemed a long, long way off. It really wasn't too far. I began slithering across the floor. The effort brought out sweat all over me: I found the pillow, reached under it, touched cool steel. My stomach was heaving.

Zellers had found his gun. He was trying to straighten up. Everything was unreal, like a movie un-reeling one frame at a time.

I had no time to aim right, even if my eyes had been clear. I just swung the barrel of my gun around and began to fire, until the hammer fell on a spent chamber.

Zellers went down on his knees first. His gun fell out of his hand again and he reached up, clawing at his chest. Then he fell over sideways. For a big man, he didn't bleed very much.

After a little, I pushed myself up and rested against the side of the sofa. My left arm hung limply at my side and I could feel the warm, stickiness of blood drying on my skin. Glancing around, I saw Margo sitting on the floor, her hands over her eyes. I said:

"You're a witness. Zellers pulled his gun first. Now, call headquarters and tell them to send someone around. I'll give you the number. Then find my clothes."

She dropped her hands, staring at me with wide, empty eyes that seemed to have lost all sanity.

"Go ahead, do what I say."

She got up unsteadily and moved over to the phone, walking as if she were in a trance. She dialed, repeating each number after me like someone who is trying to learn a lesson. While she waited for the connection, I told her:

"You better look for another apartment, kid. Zellers isn't going to pay the rent on this one any more."

She didn't seem to hear me. I didn't blame her.

Halloran ran his gnarled fingers through his thin red hair. His moody, green eyes were filled with something I couldn't get.

"You said nobody wanted Zellers

out of the way more than you," I told him. "Which made us even. We got what we wanted."

His face was gray from weariness and maybe the aches in his frail body.

"I didn't want it that way," he said slowly. "I wanted him alive, with evidence so tight the smartest lawyers in the world couldn't save him from a conviction. Even Zellers was entitled to a fair trial."

"He pulled a gun on me first. The girl explained in her statement. It was self defense."

"I'm familiar with her statement, Blaine."

"We might never have secured the evidence you needed. You realized that, Mr. D.A.?"

"Yes. I realize that, too."

"So sometimes, it's better the way it happened."

Halloran spread his thin hands out on the desk. He looked down at his knobby joints. I heard his soft, little sigh.

"I don't know, Blaine," he said quietly. "I just don't know."

I took out my cigarettes and lit one.

"It was all legal," I went on. "I had a warrant."

He didn't look up at me.

"What was in that safe, Blaine?"

"I forgot to look. Nothing, probably."

"You're right. We checked. The safe was empty. You knew all the time it would be."

"I was pretty sure, yes."



“And you set it up for Zellers. Fixed it so he had to go after you.”

“Like you, I wanted him bad. It was the best way I could figure to get him.”

Halloran looked up at me. I knew now what was in his eyes. It was a pain that came from deep inside him. Not physical pain. The pain that comes when you believe in something and aren't quite sure it's worth believing in.

“You're right about one thing, Blaine,” he said softly. “Our city's going to be better without Zellers.”

He got up from behind his desk and walked over to the window. I knew we'd finished talking, so I got up, too. He didn't look around as I went out, closing the door quietly behind me.

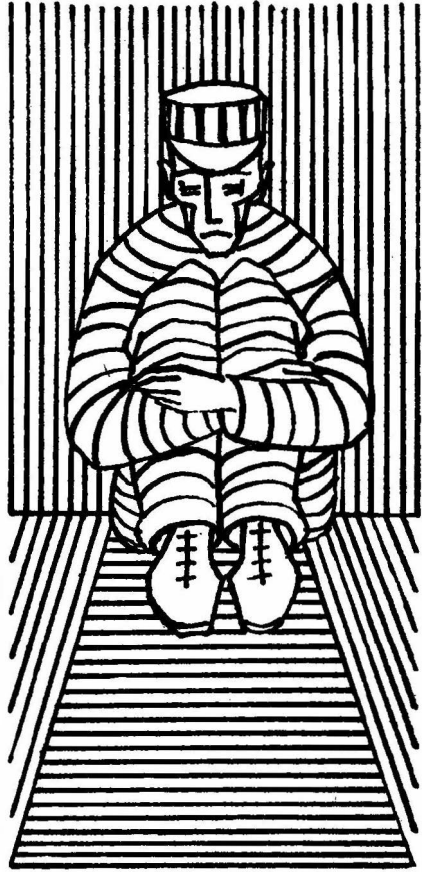
I knew how he was feeling.

I didn't quite believe in myself, either.



**E**RVIE was washing dishes when he decided to leave. The gray of his trousers was wetly grayer where he leaned against the sink. It was hot. The acrid, antiseptic steam condensed on his arms, mingled with sweat, and dribbled off his elbows. He rubbed his forehead against a hairless arm, hunched his shoulders and tried to wipe his eyes on his shirt. He fought the tears. He didn't dare cry. They wouldn't understand, they'd laugh at him. Then they'd spit on him when the screw wasn't looking. That screw'd never look when they wanted to spit on Ervie.

They knew, all of them, how he hated filth. That's why they gave him the nastiest jobs. He had to stand by the window after mess and stack the trays they would hand him. While they were still at the tables, they'd mix whatever was left on the tray with coffee. Then they'd tilt it toward Ervie so the slop would get on his clothes. They would smile then, they didn't dare laugh or even talk, but they would smirk as he would dodge and try



**BY W. SHERWOOD HARTMAN**

## the last freedom

*He was the lowest of the low in a lowly place . . . the bottom man on a subterranean totem pole.*

to keep from being soiled.

The garbage cans. That was the worst of all. Ervie was little, just over five feet tall, he weighed less than one-hundred and twenty pounds. They'd make him scrub the cans, leaning into the stench until he retched. Then they'd watch, grinning, as he cleaned it up.

Ervie didn't want to leave. He knew what would happen if he got outside, he didn't want to do that again. . . . If just one guy, just one, in that whole place would have been nice to him, he would have stayed. But there wasn't one. . . . He couldn't understand it. They had, most of them, killed somebody too, but they did it on purpose. Ervie never meant to kill anybody. He hadn't even wanted to hurt anyone. It had just happened that way, and Ervie was sorry. The rest of them didn't even care about what they had done.

Ervie looked at Big Fat, corpulent and greasy as the grill he was cleaning. What right did Big Fat have to spit on Ervie? He'd killed his own wife. That's why Big Fat was in. He'd shoved a kitchen knife in her belly when she was pregnant and he laughed about it yet. He said it wasn't his bastard, she had it coming. Ervie could almost cry when he thought about it. That poor woman with a man as mean as Big Fat.

Ervie had never had a woman. He had tried several times, but it had always been disgustingly the

same. He would envision his mother, and what he was trying to do would fill him with revulsion. It had been futile, Ervie's scratching for satisfaction, and the acute embarrassment of his ineptness had emptied him of normal desire.

Kay glided by. Ervie sniffed at the stray wiff of gay that pierced the pungent steam. Kay never spit on Ervie, he just swished by as though Ervie was some rotten thing below toleration. They all liked Kay. Even the screw would smile at his subtle obscenities. Kay had crushed his boy-friend's skull with a poker. It had been a lover's quarrel. He couldn't bear the thought of being rejected, so he had smashed the mean thing. Two of the guys were in solitary for fighting in the yard last week. It had been over Kay. He reveled in the adulation. Ervie couldn't understand how a stinking slut like Kay could feel so superior. He was just a damn bag, that's what he was.

After realizing that he could never make it with a woman, Ervie had tried the fairies too; but their puerile probings, their egregious lasciviousness, had sickened him to impotence. Still they had, at least, been kinder to his distress than the women. It was understandable, though. They had problems too, and could realize, much better than a woman, what a man's trouble could be.

The decision to leave was a big thing in Ervie's life. Even after he

had made up his mind, Ed could have changed it. He was Ervie's cellmate. No word of sympathy would have been necessary, no offer of friendship. If Ed had just given some indication that he knew Ervie was in the same cell with him, that would have been enough, Ervie would have stayed. But it didn't happen. Ervie was a living ghost in a world that didn't believe in spirits. An ectoplasm ignored. An abhorred phantom that had been born to give the foulest of men an excuse, something to point to and say, "You think I'm bad, look at him, look at Ervie. No matter what I've done, I'm a saint aside of him. Sure, I'll go to hell, but where will Ervie go?"

Ervie lay on his bunk facing the gray stone wall. He thought of what he had done, there were no tears; just relief and a nervous excitement at the thought of getting away. He could have escaped months ago. Everything was ready and waiting. He had only to pick the time.

The key to Ervie's escape leaned against the kitchen wall behind the row of garbage cans. It was a lid, smaller than the rest, unused, unnoticed, and for some reason never discarded. Ervie had punched a small hole at the center of the lid. He carried a short piece of cord in his pocket, knotted on one, waxed stiff with soap at the other. He had tested it several times. The knotted cord slipped through the hole and

served as a handle to the inverted lid. It would drop several inches into one of the larger cans, then hold, making a perfect false bottom.

Everything else was in Ervie's favor. The garbage truck came ~~three~~ times a week, always at the same time. Big Fat and Kay would carry out the cans and dump them into the truck, leaving Ervie alone in the kitchen. Since he had first thought of leaving, he had chosen this time to go to the lavatory, so that his absence wouldn't seem unusual when he did decide to go.

Now Ervie was ready. He had waited until the first can was full. Then he had put the lid in the second can and scattered trash on top. To all appearances, the second can was full too. Now all he had to do was wait.

When the time came, it was almost too simple. Big Fat and Kay carried out the first can. Ervie lifted the false top off the second, got in, and lowered it back in place. Then he felt himself being lifted, carried, and tossed into the yielding mess in the truck. He scrambled quickly away from the light of the open hatch and crouched motionless in the darkest corner. More cans were emptied, then the door clanged shut. Ervie was on his way.

He rationed his breath against the fetid odors, shivering sodden in the heat. He felt the truck stop at the main gate, pause, then rumble on. He would soon be free, but he felt more sad than elated.

Ervie could never understand about his trouble. Oh, he knew how terribly wrong it had been, but he couldn't understand why it had happened. Parts of it stayed clear in his mind, the rest was all confusion. He remembered the first time.

It had been a lazy summer Sunday. Ervie was sitting by a lake, watching the water gently lipping the pebbles at his feet. He had dozed for a while. Then an insistent tugging at his shirt had wakened him. It was a child, lost, but unafraid. Ervie liked children, but he always had felt awkwardly embarrassed by their presence. He took the child's hand, then he felt a hard core of passion rise in him. The child squirmed against his kisses. Then Ervie was engulfed in a kaleidoscope of frenzy. When it was over, all that was left of trusting innocence was a pitiful parcel of quivering flesh, its life seeping crimson into the sand.

Ervie had fled, screaming in silent terror at what he had done. When he could run no longer, he hid in a clump of brush beside a brook. He stripped, scrubbed the blood from himself and washed his clothes. After hanging them to dry, he fell exhausted and slept.

When he woke, he thought for a moment it had only been a dream. Then he heard the dogs. He dressed quickly and trotted away from their voices. When he came to the road, he continued, taking cover when cars passed. It was almost

dusk when he came to a roadside diner. He climbed the side of a parked cattle-truck and lay limp on the taut canvas top. The searching sound of the dogs grew louder and Ervie was about to leave his dubious haven when he heard the crunch of gravel, the slam of the truck door. Then the diesel roared, the truck moved slowly onto the highway and gathered speed into the coming night. Two days later, Ervie was seven-hundred miles away, working as a short order cook in an all-night restaurant.

Ervie prayed that it would never happen again, but it did: In an abandoned warehouse in south Chicago, in an alley in downtown Minneapolis, by the river in St. Louis, in the pines at Lake Tahoe. . . . He was glad when they finally caught him. He couldn't help himself. Maybe they would help him. They had. They put Ervie away where he couldn't hurt anyone anymore, but they had told the others what Ervie had done, and the yoke of their hate had been more than Ervie could bear. So now he was leaving.

Sitting in garbage, lurching with the truck's motion, Ervie felt a strange peace and a quiet inner dignity. He knew that he would never do a bad thing again. This time he was certain.

Ervie felt the truck stop, then back up and stop again. He heard the gears engage and the body started to tilt. The rear doors fell

open and the load started to slowly slide. Ervie covered his face with his hands. He had to remember not to make a sound as he pinwheeled down the ramp into the hellish inferno of consuming fire.

He knew, he had known all along, that after the truck left the prison, its next stop was the city incinerator.

Ervie's escape was complete. Now he was free.



# BLOOD MONEY



A  
Novlette

BY  
GARY JENNINGS

*One pint of blood brought five dollars. And  
with five dollars Doc could buy oblivion.*

Doc had brief periods of near-consciousness, when he would come alive long enough to fear for his good fortune. He would stumble to the sideboard in something like disbelief and, in something like wonder, find the decanters really there. Then he'd pour from one of them, or drink from the neck of the bottle, and quickly sink back into the blessed oblivion. That happened a number of times. But it was several days—he had no idea how many—before he sobered up sufficiently to take stock of his luxurious surroundings.

A room of his own. Royally appointed, it seemed to him, with both a divan and a bed, the latter now rather rumpled and sweat-and liquor-stained. There, an open door leading to his own private bathroom. There, a wide casement window letting in sunshine and birdsong.

And there, sweet sight, the hospitable sideboard with its riches of

bottles and decanters—glowing red, red-brown, amber, crystal-clear. The liquors were at various levels of depletion now, but they still held promise of plenty more binges, benders, blackouts; and he had vague memories of shadowy people having come in from time to time to refill them.

He also remembered the shadows bending over him at irregular intervals, and their manipulating one or the other of his arms. Then there would be the heavy thud-thud of a pulse beating in his elbow, and once a voice had said with callous sarcasm, "What do you know? He's got blood in his alcoholstream."

Doc got up from the soggy, sour-smelling sheets and moved to the window, trying to focus those vague memories in his mind. They began with his shoes. Why the shoes? He looked down (he was still wearing them, and the other forlorn clothes he had come here in) and gradually remembered.



He had been sitting on a sidewalk curb, staring then too at his shoes. They were probably the most expensive footwear on the Bowery: hand-lasted, hand-sewn bluchers. But De Busschere would likely have disowned them now; they were as dilapidated and sole-flapping as the Salvation Army handouts worn by the other bums who sat beside him on that curb.

They were all desperate for a drink, and finally one of them suggested horsely, "Le's go sell a pint o' blood."

That was a new dodge, for Doc. He had begun the long skid by selling his minor belongings: the gold fountain pen, the diamond-studded caduceus tie-pin. Then he had pawned his more valuable possessions—with a lingering delusion of someday redeeming them—the LeTourneau chronometer, the Mark Cross bag and the medical gear it contained. Then he had sold the pawn tickets. At that, he hadn't realized much money from the transactions. Somewhat to his surprise, he learned that doctors' kits were a drug on the Bowery market.

Speaking of drugs, he had resisted the temptation to trade on the little stock of them he still carried; they were flushed down a public toilet in City Hall Park. After that, he had lived by pan-handling, by shop-lifting and, once, by picking the pockets of a drunken man on a subway platform.

But he would never have thought to sell his blood for the price of paler wine. "They gives you five bucks first time you come," said the twitchy man who brought him to the blood bank on 23rd Street. "Six bucks the second time, and seven ev'ry time after that."

Doc protested, "You can't do it every day, surely."

"No," his mentor admitted. "But there's five-six o' these places in town. You makes the rounds. Stick out a diff'rent arm each time, and usually the prick-mark's done faded in between times so's they don't notice. After a coupla months, you can come back to the first one ag'in."

The waiting room was furnished in Efficiency Modern, bleak in its chrome and plastic antisepsis; the nurses at the row of desks were starched and robot-like. It all contrasted weirdly with the waiting dozen-or-so seedy, dirty tramps like Doc.

There was only one man in the room who didn't appear to have come straight from Skid Row. That was a mustached, expensively-dressed gentleman who scrutinized intently each supplicant who stepped up to the interview desks. Probably, thought Doc, some kind of Board of Health inspector, weeding out the known repeaters, or syphilitics, or something of the sort.

At a counter visible through a

doorway, three more derelicts were wolfing the free doughnut and paper cup of coffee provided after the ordeal; doubtless their only meal of the day before they hurried out to spend their blood money on smoke or sneaky-pete.

Doc wondered, with an ironic inner chuckle, how many of his own upper-crust patients he might have transfused with the bought blood of these scum. Perhaps—and the chuckle choked—even one of the nine pints so desperately pumped through Sylvia's flagging heart . . .

When his turn for interview came, and his card had been made out, and the nurse held the little pin above his fingertip he said, with some vestigial pride, "I already know my blood type. A:B, Rh negative."

Unhearing and uncaring, she said, "This won't hurt," as mechanically as she'd said it to all the others that morning. She jabbed the pin, picked up the bright red drop in a pipette, dripped it into a graduate of pale blue liquid, studied the whorls as it oozed down the cylinder, and made a note on the card under *Hemoglobin*.

"Take your seat," she said in her monotone rote. "When your name's called, step through that door and peel off your shirt."

Doc plodded back to his seat, and his twitchy companion went up in his turn. No sooner had that chair been vacated than someone

slid into it: the nattily-dressed man who had been observing from the sidelines. The man said, "Let me see your card," and Doc handed it over, quaking in a sudden panic. But the man just glanced at it, then smiled and said, "There are a good many ahead of you. What say you step out and join me in a drink?"

The need of a drink was what had brought Doc here, and the promise of the cash to buy one was all that had kept him, so far, from succumbing to a gibbering fit. But he objected feebly, "I don't want to lose my turn."

The mustached man shrugged. "A little conversation might be worth more than the measly few dollars you'll get here. Come on." And they went.

They sat on stools at the bar of a dingy saloon a few doors down the street, and a brimming double-shot of bar bourbon was set in front of Doc.

"What do you do for a living?" the stranger asked, sipping genteelly at his own plain ginger ale.

"Same old thing," Doc said hollowly, picking up the glass with a tremor that sloshed whiskey onto the bar-top. "Brain surgery."

The man chuckled humorlessly. "How would you like a job? Nothing at all to do, and no pay at all. But your own apartment, all you want to eat—if you ever do—and a bottomless supply of booze."

Doc didn't reply until a second

whiskey appeared. He managed to get most of that one down and, with the terrible immediacy of his need now somewhat slaked, he considered the proposition. Certainly no more appealing offer could be held out to an alcoholic. But there were two possible snags.

One. He couldn't place this stranger, but perhaps the man recognized *him*. Was this some roundabout way of trying to get him back on his unwilling feet, or of holding him up to still more ridicule and vilification?

Or. He had heard of winos being bribed this way, to act as pushers for a dope ring, or as victims of an insurance swindle, or as decoys for murder marks.

"Before you ask 'Who do I have to kill?'" said the man, "I tell you straight, you'll be helping someone live. You want to sell your blood. All right, I want to buy it."

Doc stared at the man.

"I won't deny that this is a little—extra-legal," the man went on. "Maybe you know that your blood type is a pretty rare one. My aunt has the same type, and she's in a bad way. Liable to pop off any minute, especially since we're 'way up in the country and it's not always possible to rush in a pint of AB-negative. I want you to live on the premises, ready for an emergency tap. It's extra-legal in the sense that we may have to tap you oftener than the once in two months that the law allows."

"Doesn't sound like a very long-term contract. I've only got so much in me."

"We won't bleed you dry," the man said impatiently. "You're not the first and you won't be the last. If and when we have to use you to the point of endangering your health, that's the end of your job and I hunt up somebody else. In the meantime, you'll be living better than you would down here. Everything your heart desires. Especially—that." And he pointed at the glass the bartender was already refilling.

There must have been several drinks before they left the saloon, because Doc could only muzzily recall the long drive upstate in the sleek, chauffeured Cadillac. The muzziness had persisted from that time to this.

He held his arm into the light from the casement window. There was a little red dot in the crook of each elbow, and he wondered how much had been sucked from each one. "No wonder I'm sober all of a sudden," he muttered. "They're draining it out of me as fast as I pour it in." He decided wryly that the aunt they were transfusing must be on a perpetual unwelcome jag.

From the window, he looked out over a parkland of formal gardens and lawns, framing a glimpse of an elegant mansion beyond a screen of pollars. Somewhere invisible, a fountain was giggling to it-

self. There was a small terrier playing all alone in a flowerbed, but no people in sight. A driveway wound through the scenery and ended at this building directly under his window. Apparently his little apartment was upstairs over the garage.

His apartment. He prowled around it and discovered that, in addition to the bed-living room he occupied, there was also a small kitchenette, with a refrigerator stocked for whenever he wanted to eat—"if you ever do," as the man had said.

In a closet and in a chest-of-drawers, he found all kinds of clothing that was very nearly a good fit for him. Probably the property of some chauffeur or gardener. No matter. He would shuck off these horrible rags of his and get cleaned up for a change.

When he had showered, shaved and dressed himself in borrowed shirt, slacks and loafers, he thought first of mixing a real, civilized cocktail and sitting down in the armchair by the window, to sip it and gaze out over the estate like the lord of all this manor. But somehow he found it more delicious to put off that pleasure. He really ought to survey his new surroundings. And, though it cost him a poignant wrench to walk away from the beckoning beakers, he knew the postponement would enhance the delight of returning to them.

He leaned heavily on the banister as he sidled down the stairs that led into the garage. It was big enough for four cars, but none was in residence at the moment. Doc stepped out through an open door into the sunlight and started aimlessly down the winding driveway. He was weak and trembly, he discovered. This first jaunt would have to be a short one. Then, just a hundred yards along, he came upon the first person he'd seen about the place. It was a young girl, in a sort of maid's uniform too big for her. She was kneeling, scattering crumbs to a bunch of birds, and she gave a start when she saw him.

"Oh, you're the new fella," she said breathlessly, rising to her feet. She had a pinched little clerk's face, mostly nose. Her tiny hands were tremulous, her brown eyes timorous.

"I guess I am," said Doc. "Who are you?"

"Beaky," she said; adding ingenuously, "They call me Beaky. I work in the kitchen."

Doc introduced himself as Doc and said, "I don't know where I work, yet."

"The other fellas didn't at all," she said, as if he should have known. "Work, I mean. They just—hung around."

"For how long?" Doc asked curiously. "And how many others have there been?" Beaky merely shrugged helplessly, so he said,

"Come to think of it, how long have I been here?"

Beaky looked nonplused and muttered, "Gee, I dunno. Don't you?"

Doc let that pass and tried again. "What kind of place is this? How long have they been bringing in—fellows like me?"

Beaky had begun imperceptibly to edge away from him. "It's old Miss Culverin's place. There's been all kinds of guys comin' and goin', ever since she took sick."

Well, that jibed with what Doc remembered of the stranger's tale. For a while he had half feared that he might have been tricked into some kind of sanitarium.

"There comes her doctor, now," said the girl. Doc looked up the stretch of lawn to the looming mansion house. The Cadillac limousine was parked beneath the porte-cochere. A portly, dignified typical-doctor, carrying a handbag, came down the wide stairs and climbed into the car. A man at the top of the stairs—the mustached nephew Doc had first met—waved perfunctrially as the limousine pulled away.

Doc stared after it. Something about the plump typical-doctor disturbed him; he frowned, trying to place the feeling. "What's the doctor's name?" he asked Beaky.

"I forget," she said, stolidly repeating, "I work in the kitchen, don't never have anythin' to do with the upstairs chambers."

So Doc asked what the nephew's name was, and raised his eyebrows when Beaky told him that was no nephew, that was Mr. Partridge, the old woman's lawyer.

"Just what's supposed to be wrong with Miss Culverin?" he inquired, still trying to place his subtle feeling that something here was wrong—and that he should recognize it.

Beaky professed to have no idea. "Jeez, you're full of questions," she added, boldly for her. "And I'm not s'posed to be talkin' to you. You're gonna get us both in a jam."

As she turned to start away, Doc reached out and caught her arm. Instantly the fright came back into her face, and her timid spaniel eyes widened. "How do you mean, not supposed to talk to me?" he demanded.

"I didn't mean nothin'!" she gasped. "I mean, none of the fellas before you cared about what was goin' on."

Doc studied her pale face. "What *is* going on?"

"I don't know! Nothin'!" she sobbed, now thoroughly terrified. "All I know is what they told me. Don't answer any questions—" With a quick twist she yanked out of Doc's weak clutch. "—and don't ask any!" she shrilled as she fled up the hill.

Doc stood still, troubled, uncomfortable, a little frightened himself. His mind had felt clear

there for a while, when he was talking to the homely little maid; now it was clouding over again. What *was* he doing here?

It was typical of an alcoholic, that Doc cared no more what was afoot in the big house than what was going on at the U.N., except as it affected him, right here, right now. He could only feel, undefinably, that something was dogging him—that he was somehow being tricked—that his suspiciously new-found security was in danger.

The bottles! He spun around, with a whimper, and stared back up the driveway. Had they just been waiting for him to wander out here, to steal away with his bottle? Suddenly he saw it all for a ruse and a snare. The bottles had only been bait, and now he was caught and they were gone!

Moaning softly, he started back the way he had come, shambling awkwardly on legs too unsteady to be coaxed into a run. When he hauled himself up the banister of the garage stairs, his heart was pounding.

The bottles were still there.

The bourbon decanter chattered against the glass he filled and drained twice in quick succession.

His fright temporarily assuaged, Doc lurched to the window and gazed blearily up toward the manor house. What was it that had sent him scurrying back here to the comfortable cotton-wool of an alcoholic fog? What was it about the

Culverin house, that doctor, the spurious nephew, the little maid's birdlike terror, that meant something was quietly, darkly wrong here?

But the welcome fog rolled in too fast for him to puzzle further. Hell, he decided, it had nothing to do with him. The bottles were safe and so was he, and the hell with anything outside. Another glass and he was able to relax, at ease, across the rumpled bed. Another few minutes and Doc snored un-  
caringly, as the glass rolled out of his limp fingers and left a sticky trail of its dregs across the polished floor.

A great, vague while later, a bothersome series of tugs at his arm awakened him just enough to recognize the familiar cluster of shadowy shapes around his bed, and the familiar thump-thump of a pumping pulse in his elbow. Untroubled, he slid back into unconsciousness.

Then, still later, it was a banging noise that roused him. He sat up stiffly and, after shaking his head clear, realized that the insistent pounding was really just a timid pecking at his door.

Doc glanced at the sideboard for assurance, then at the window, to note that it was now almost dark. He stumbled to the door, opened it and squinted at his visitor until he remembered her. Beaky was wearing a skirt and sweater now, and smiling.

"I hope I'm not disturbin' you,"

she said in a small voice, wringing her hands self-consciously.

He blinked and said hoarsely, "S'all right. Just having a li'l trouble waking up. C'min, c'min. S'matter?"

"Well, nothin'," she said, stepping into the room. "I just wanted to 'pologize. I thought maybe you thought I acted queer, but I didn't mean to."

He motioned her to a chair, and then ducked into the bathroom to hold his head under a faucet. The water revived him somewhat.

"I just got off work," Beaky said, as he returned to the room. "I haven't seen you around since—since I run away from you, and I thought maybe you're mad at me."

"No hard feelings," he said huskily, crossing to the sideboard. "Drink?" There was still plenty of it; he could afford to be hospitable; still, he was faintly glad when Beaky said a prim no-thank-you.

"Some of the fellas before you," she went on, "well, I didn't like 'em around. But after I'd run away from you, I made up my mind that you're sorta, well, diff'rent. I mean you looked clean and dressed neat and all. They didn't."

Doc grunted at the compliment, pouring and drinking four fingers of vodka. He shuddered, sighed, then braced up and said friendlily, "We'll let bygones be bygones, Beaky. We'll forget what happened this morning and be friends."

Beaky looked a little alarmed,

flicked her eyes at the darkening window and timidly corrected him, "This mornin'? That was yesterday."

"I meant yesterday," Doc said hastily. He must have been out for a good thirty hours. He looked meditatively at the empty glass in his hand, muttered, "Hour glass," and just as meditatively refilled it.

Beaky watched him with wary, worried eyes, then bravely resumed, "Anyhow. What we talked about yestetday—I shouldn't of cut you short like I did." Doc confusedly tried to recall what they *had* talked about, while she prattled on, "It's just that Mr. Partridge says the Culverins never have liked publicity, so none of the help should gossip about Miss Culverin bein' sick. He won't let us associate with the doctor or the nurses."

Doc remembered the earlier conversation and—simultaneously—something else that had been nagging at his subconscious.

"That doctor," he said. "Is his name Lotz? Or Blatz? Something like that?" He snapped his fingers. "*Lenz!* Is his name *Lenz?*"

Beaky sat up and beamed at him. "Gee, yeah, it is! I don't know why I couldn't remember—a funny name like that."

"Laszlo Lenz," Doc said to his glass. "Good' old Lazy Laszlo."

Beaky asked wonderingly, "How'd you know?"

Doc didn't reply at once. He was remembering Lenz from school-

days. The young man who could afford to buy his homework. The cribbed examinations, the prefabricated theses. And afterwards, the bungled diagnosis that had caused a patient's death and atrophied the smart young Dr. Lenz's career right at its start. And after that, the malpractice scandal . . .

"How'd you know?" Beaky asked again. "Have you seen him before somewheres?"

Doc shook himself and said, "We—have some things in common." He emptied the vodka bottle into his glass.

"Doc!" Beaky exclaimed his nickname, excited that she had caught on. "You're a doctor, too!"

His smile was bitter when he nodded. "Just as much a doctor as Laszlo Lenz is."

"Well! If that ain't somep'n," Beaky said, pleased. She sobered, watching him tilt his glass, and suggested, "Don't you think—for a doctor—you drink, well, a little . . .?"

"I drink a little," he wryly agreed. "I wonder that Lenz doesn't. Tell me—he whirled abruptly on Beaky—"is Miss Culverin still alive?"

The girl jumped slightly and squeaked, "Alive? Sure she's alive, but she's awful sick."

"She getting any better?" Doc persisted, wondering dully why he should give a hoot.

"I don't know," Beaky said sincerely. "There's always a nurse

with her; and they give her oxygen and blood, and—" Doc's hand slid to his elbow and he winced at the soreness. "—Is somep'n wrong?"

"There must be," he said thickly, "but I'm damned if I know what." The fog was closing in again, muffling him securely from all the things wrong outside.

He became aware that he was half lying across the sideboard's top, that the girl was shaking him and asking worriedly what was the matter. "Jus'—jus' thinking!" he blurted. He got up from the sideboard and nearly fell.

"Be all right," he growled, and sat down heavily in the chair she had occupied. "Li'l woozy."

"I'm not surprised," said Beaky with unaccustomed daring. "You put away almost a whole bottle of vodka while I've been here."

Stung, he replied with consummate dignity, "I was thinking. Thinking—remembering— makes me feel bad."

"I'll come again when you feel better," Beaky said, uneasily but not unsympathetically.

"Don't gol" he pleaded. "Got things to talk about. Things . . ." He pressed a hand to his eyes, trying to remember *what* things. "You have to help."

"Help?" she said in a quaking voice, reaching behind her for the doorknob. "I can't help you."

"You think I'm drunk!" he accused, lurching up from the chair to confront her. Beaky gave a little



shriek and clutched her arms protectively across her breast. Her pale little face seemed to shrink even smaller, her doe eyes dilated and darkened.

Doc barked a harsh laugh and said scornfully, "Oh, quit it. Li'l maiden virtue." His gaze wandered to the row of bottles and he said slowly, "Guy gets enough o' that stuff—" as if he'd just realized it—"he doesn' want women. Not that way. Just want you stay and talk."

"You—scare me," Beaky said pitifully.

"Sure you're scared," he grumbled. "Always scared. Always play it safe. You work here—how long?—never worry wha's going on here. Play it safe." His mind lit on something else entirely, and his voice sank even lower. "Bet you never made a mistake in your life."

Then the girl's face wavered, receded from his vision, and the darkness outside came in through the window to envelope him utterly.

He came to again, to find himself snug in bed. And for the first time in weeks, to his considerable surprise, he had not slept in his clothes. He clambered out from under the covers, wearing only his borrowed underwear and found all the outer garments neatly folded on a bedside chair. Only Beaky could have been responsible. He grinned in mingled gratitude, mirth and embarrassment.

The window was flooded with

sunlight again. Doc felt rested and hardly hungover at all, except for a persistent ringing in his head. It gradually occurred to him that the ringing was actually the muted call of a signal bell. Upon looking for it, and finding it tucked in a drawer of the sideboard, he learned for the first time that his apartment boasted a telephone. Its dial bore numbers, but no letters; it was obviously an extension of the house system.

He answered it with a cautious hello, and heard Beaky's shy, "Good mornin'."

Doc managed to stammer a gruff combination of thank-you and I'm-sorry for the previous night. Then Beaky said, "I bet you could use some hot coffee and breakfuss. I'll bring some right over." Doc abhorred breakfast on the best of days, but he could not bring himself to spurn the poor tyke's kindness.

"And Doc," she added earnestly, "don't take a drink till I get there, please. I want to ask you somep'n."

He hung up, inwardly sneering at her naivete. As if one drink could make him drunk, he thought, taking one. And then another. But only those two. He also managed to squeeze in a quick shower and a shave before she arrived.

She brought a tray: a small pot of black coffee, a plate of eggs, bacon and toast, all kept warm en route by a snowy linen cover. Because she stood sternly over him while he ate, Doc forced himself to put away all

of it, and even found it good.

She prattled commonplaces at him during the meal—"I gotta get right back to help with lunch"—and withheld the blockbuster until he had finished. "Doc, what do *you* think is wrong up there at the house?"

This intrusion of the world's problems instantly dissolved the euphoria induced by his drinks and his breakfast. He dropped his napkin onto the tray and stood up. "Nothing, Beaky. Nothing at all."

"But you said—"

"Forget what I said," he told her, more brusquely than he'd intended. "It was just the bottle talking."

She shook her head. "When you said Dr. Lenz's name I could tell you don't trust him—like maybe you know somep'n bad about him."

Why the hell couldn't this dumb little drab let him alone? If there was one thing he didn't want, it was responsibility, a mission, an obligation. Through his teeth he said, "I've got enough to worry about, just taking care of myself."

Beaky ignored that. "Miss Culverin's only got one relation in the world. That's the nephew that everybody's trying to find. Why'd you think Mr. Partridge was him?"

There was something interesting, there, but Doc wasn't about to examine it. "None of my business," he rasped, "and probably none of yours." he grabbed a bottle from the sideboard and filled a glass, avoiding Beaky's sad look.

"Doc," she ventured cautiously. "Is it on account of Sylvia that you drink?"

In spite of himself, the glass slipped through his fingers and bounced on the rug. Unsteadily he said, "Look what you've done," and watched the good Canadian whiskey soak into the broadloom. When it had disappeared, he raised red-rimmed eyes to Beaky and asked, "What do you know about Sylvia?"

"N-nothin'," she replied, looking ready to run. "But last night, when I was und—when I was helpin' you to bed, you said her name. I thought maybe she had somep'n to do with—"

"She had nothing to do with anything," said Doc, retrieving the glass and filling it again.

"Is she—your girl?" Beaky dared to inquire.

"She was my wife," Doc said bleakly. "She's dead."

There was a long silence in the room. Beaky turned and stood staring out the window. After a while she said, without looking around, "Doc?"

"Yeah?"

"Was she pretty? Sylvia?"

He tried to think of a comparison that would be less than odious. But he visualized Sylvia standing in silhouette there beside Beaky: tall, poised, beautiful, vivacious. Just as poor Beaky's graceless-outline was an adequate map of her mousy plainness and ignorant vul-

garity, Sylvia's imagined silhouette bespoke her impeccable breeding, intelligence and gracious manner.

All that Doc could reply was, "Yes, she was pretty."

"Oh," said Beaky, turning, a compassionate gaze on him, as if she understood now the fierce jab with which he jerked back the glass and gulped.

A tremor ran through him and he gasped for air before saying sardonically, "No, my little guardian angel. I don't drink because she's dead. She's dead because I drink."

Beaky's eyes widened.

"As long as you've stuck your big nose into my private life," he went on viciously, "you might as well get a snootful."

"I g-gotta get back and help with lunch," she quavered, but Doc continued, more to himself than to her.

"I'm no better than your Dr. Lenz up there. And no more of a doctor than he is." He poured another drink. "I was boozing—not as much as I do now, but enough. They were beginning to whisper. My practice was falling off. So when it came to Sylvia's operation, I felt I had to do it. Had to convince them that I wasn't worried, wasn't going to pieces. Show them my hand was as steady as ever."

The color had drained from Beaky's face, much as the liquor now drained out of Doc's upturned glass.

"But my hand wasn't steady. Had to fix that. One or two quick

ones, before I went up to the O.R., that would steady me. It certainly did." His knuckles whitened on the glass. "I was as calm as a butcher hacking lamb chops. Even while I hacked on through the portal vein. They gave her adrenalin, whole blood, heart massage; they didn't help. Nothing helped."

Beaky licked her quivering lips and said, "I'm—I'm sure sorry, Doc."

"Only thing helps is this," he mumbled, pouring again and splashing the whiskey all over the sideboard.

"Well," said Beaky, despairing of getting through to him again. "About that other business. I found this on a desk up at the house and I thought you might like to see it." She reached out, without stepping closer, and gingerly laid an oblong piece of white paper near his hand. "You can look at it later."

"It won't help," Doc said in a dull voice.

Beaky shook her head pityingly, picked up the breakfast things and walked to the door. She opened it and nearly dropped the tray at sight of the man standing there.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the lawyer Partridge.

"I just brought him some hot coffee," Beaky said breathlessly.

"If he wants coffee, let him make his own," the man snapped. "You stay away from here."

"Yessir," gasped Beaky, and fled down the stairs.

Doc stood leaning against the window frame, taking no interest in this exchange. The mustached man turned to him and said sarcastically, "I didn't know you were a lady's man."

Doc grunted and took a swallow of his drink.

"I want to remind you," the lawyer said, "your position here is temporary. Indefinite, yes, but not permanent. I don't want you associating with the servants."

"You running the place, Partridge?" Doc asked indifferently.

The man frowned and said, "That's what I mean. There's no need for you to know my name, or anything else. Servants gab. You're nothing but a walking blood bank—or a staggering one," he amended, as Doc collapsed heavily into a chair. "That's all I want you to be."

Partridge looked over the array of bottles on the sideboard and picked out two empty decanters. "I'll have these refilled. Jesus, you really put it away, don't you?"

"Good stuff," Doc said complacently.

"Well, guzzle as much as you please. But from now on keep clear of that girl and anybody else on the house staff. You stay here with your glass menagerie and be happy—alone."

Partridge left a frosty chuckle in the air as he departed and closed the door.

"Happy alone," Doc sang softly,

levering himself out of the chair and back to the sideboard. "Happy alone. Happy alone."

It was full dark in the room when he woke again. He was stretched diagonally across the bed, and he had a violent headache. The place was stuffy and stank of stale whiskey. Groaning slightly, Doc got himself up from the bed and tottered over to open the window. A gust of sweet-smelling night air came into the room with the moonlight. Doc stayed there and breathed deeply for a while, feeling the headache diminish.

Then he saw the white thing on the sideboard, picked out by the moonlight, and vaguely remembered Beaky's putting it there. He had to pry it up from a sticky smear of dried liquid. It was a legalsize envelope, unsealed, empty and unaddressed.

"What the hell'd she bring me this for?" he muttered to himself. Then he read the return address engraved in the upper left corner:

The Lenz Foundation  
7 Irving Road  
White Plains, N. Y.

His first thought was merely that old Lazy Laszlo must have prospered to an impressive extent, and he tossed the envelope back on the sideboard.

But his mind, dulled and clogged though it was, began to turn over the concept of a Lenz Foundation. The Lenz *What* Foundation? It had a nice ambiguous title, and the

White Plains address was nicely innocuous. But what kind of foundation? All he could imagine was a wholesale abortion mill. But no, damn it, Lenz couldn't be engaged in anything even smacking of medical work. Not any more. Not in this state.

Well, bless the girl, Doc thought suddenly. Beaky really had given him something to mull over. She hadn't seemed the type to get herself mixed up in an intrigue. To look at her and talk to her, you wouldn't have thought she had any more guts than she had brains. And now it appeared that she might have a trace of both. "I've got to stop calling her Beaky," he decided. "Her name is Becky." But would she follow through with the project? This envelope had raised a question that she would have to help answer.

Doc reached idly for the nearest decanter and looked about for a glass. But he stopped, considered, and put the bottle down again. If he got fuzzy right now, he might forget what he wanted to ask Beaky. There was plenty of liquor and plenty of time for it. He'd wait at least until daylight, when he could hunt up the girl. He would put off his next stint of drinking until after he'd talked to her.

He undressed, got back into bed and slept like a human being, to rise shortly before noon. He urgently desired an eye-opener, but again managed to postpone the pleasure.

He clumped down through the garage—noting that the big Cadillac was in residence—and trudged along the driveway to the place where he had first met Beaky. Apparently the birds were waiting, too, for their usual handout. He sat for half an hour in a thickening swarm of them before she came.

"Doc!" she said delightedly, and her pale little face shone.

"Beaky," he said, "I took a look at that envelope you brought—"

She cast a wary look back at the big house and led him out of sight of it, around a bank of shrubbery. Then she opened a crumpled paper bag and tossed crumbs to the birds as he talked.

"There *is* something peculiar going on in this place," he said urgently. "I don't know what. But I want to. Because I seem to be involved in it, somehow."

Beaky's eyes searched his face, with a kind of triumphant admiration.

"Tell me," he said. "Do you get a day off from work?"

"Uh huh. I'm off every weekend, like now. From noontime today till breakfast-time Monday."

That meant today was Saturday; Doc hadn't known.

"Okay. Now, is White Plains far from here?"

She shook her head. "Just down the river somewhere. There's a bus."

"Could you go there and check on something for me?"

She grinned exultantly. "That foundation place? Sure. Gee, Doc, you really get busy when you're—when you're not—"

He dropped his gaze self-consciously and muttered, "Well, I hate to ask you to do the legwork. But there's no way I can go myself."

"Gosh, that's okay. I'm glad to help. It's excitin' and—well, I didn't have nothin' else to do." She stood stanchly, tinily tall, but the oversized uniform remained slumped. "Besides, if there's somep'n crooked goin' on, it's our *duty*." Doc suppressed a smile. She looked absurdly like a schoolgirl playing Joan of Arc in some grown-up person's cast-off suit of armor.

"Just don't get carried away," he cautioned her. "All I want you to do is find number 7, Irving Road, in White Plains. Take a look at the place. Don't go in or get yourself noticed. Just come back and tell me what sort of joint it is."

"That's all?" she said, a little wistfully, as if she had anticipated dragons to slay.

"That's all for now, but it's really important."

She emptied out the crumb bag. "I'll go right now and come straight back."

"No," he said quickly. "Don't come back until Monday." He had reasons for wanting the leeway.

She started to protest, but "No," he said again. "We—we don't want to arouse any suspicions. Stick to the normal routine."

"Well, all right. You're the boss." And she smiled shyly. "I like workin' with you. I wish all the time you were . . ."

Doc said only, "Remember, I don't want you taking any chances."

She nodded and started up the hill. "I'll be all right," she said, and then, "But Doc—will *you*?"

"Don't worry about me," he said, with a trace of irritation. "I'll see you right here on Monday, same time."

He could barely make it back to the garage, his knees wobbling under him and his arms making jerky grabs at the air. The weakness was understandable, he reminded himself, considering the amount of blood that had been drained out of him and the amount of ethyl alcohol with which he was replacing it. Much more of this and he'd find it impossible even to leave his bed.

Still, when he dragged himself upstairs to the room, he was enjoying a sense of real accomplishment in having set Beaky on the trail. Time now to reward that accomplishment with a much-needed and to-long-delayed drink.

He made up amply for the dry spell. Before Beaky could possibly have arrived at White Plains, Doc was unconscious again—on the floor this time, his head pillowed in a puddle of mixed brandy, perspiration and drool. During the subsequent forty-eight hours, he never fully woke up again. But at inter-

vals he would painfully arrange himself upright and shamle back to the fountainhead. By Monday afternoon he was sprawled on the divan, a sticky glass wedged under his cheek.

When he finally was disturbed, he thought it was the shadows again, come with their needle. But the shadows were unnecessarily rough this time, pulling and shaking his arm, and gradually he drifted up to annoyed consciousness.

"Sakes," he mumbled around his cottony tongue. "Get it over with."

"Doc," said a tearful voice. "Oh, Doc, if he finds me here, we'll be in trouble. Please wake up!"

He opened his eyes, but her face was too close to his and he couldn't manage to focus on it.

"Good girl," he said, with a gruesome grimace intended to be a smile. "You go on Whi' Plains. Look at number . . . number . . ."

"Oh, Doc, I did!" she sobbed. "Can you hear me? I did."

"Goo' girl," he said, beginning to sink again.

"Please, Doc!" She shook him again, almost as violently as she herself was shaking. "I can't stay. Please hear me, Doc. I went to the place. It's a boardin' house, that's all. An old lady runs it. Just a boardin' house, do you understand?"

"Boar'n' house," he said, nodding. "Goo' girl."

She repeated it over and over

again, still shaking him, pausing only to jump erect at every imagined sound from outdoors. Finally the terror of imminent discovery overwhelmed her.

"Oh, dear God," she whimpered. "I got to go now, Doc, I'm scared to death. But what do we do next?"

He lay moribund for a long time after she had gone. But he hadn't sunk entirely into stupor, and eventually her "What do we do next?" penetrated the fog. Slowly he pulled himself to a sitting position on the couch. He sat with his throbbing head in his hands, trying to gather together the fragments of his mind. Boarding house? What did he want with a boarding house, when he had this nice place? Was that moronic little twist trying to get rid of him?

At last he sighed and stood up. He felt his way mechanically to the bathroom, twisted a faucet in the shower and lurched under it fully clothed. After fifteen minutes of the cold water, he was a little nearer being in his right senses. He changed into dry clothes, poured himself a really-necessary medicinal draught of Scotch, and sat down weakly to think.

Poor Beaky. He'd have to apologize. Here she'd been out doing his detective work, while he'd been home having fun. Fun? He looked at the glass trembling in his hand, and then at the stains on the carpet, the pile of smelly wet clothes on the bathroom floor. Some fun. Well,

that was a different question altogether. Meanwhile, back at the Lenz Foundation . . .

So Lazy Laszlo lived in a boarding house. Doc wondered how the man explained things to his landlady and fellow boarders; things like driving home in the Culverin limousine, and receiving mail addressed to the august-sounding Lenz Foundation. But of course he didn't have to explain anything at all. He doubtless never received any such mail, and he probably disembarked from the limousine at a discreet distance. The engraved stationery, the whole idea of the Lenz Foundation was just a front, a cover-up for something else.

Something else what? Old Miss Culverin obviously had a pile of money; was Lenz after that? And about a missing nephew; where did he fit in? And what about the slinky Lawyer Partridge? As well as Doc could recall, from his meager reading of crime fiction, situations like this usually involved a clever murder scheme.

But—murder? When the potters were taking so much trouble to provide life-giving blood for the sick woman? If there was any conspiracy here, Lenz and Partridge seemed more concerned with the quick than the dead.

An incongruous thought made Doc grin into his glass. In ancient China, it was said, the court doctors were paid as long as their royal patients stayed healthy; their stipend

stopped if a patient sickened, and they were beheaded if a patient died. Did that concept have some application here?

There was a sudden noise on the staircase, of several voices and heavy footfalls. Doc started to rise and meet them at the door, but an idea occurred to him. He slumped half-supine in the chair, deliberately dribbled the rest of his drink down his shirtfront and laid the glass on the floor. When the visitors entered, Doc had his eyes closed and was snoring slightly.

"Jeez, don't he look peaceful," said a voice, over the clumping of numerous feet.

Doc opened his eyes a cautious slit. The man who had spoken was one of two strangers in white uniforms; orderlies, apparently. Partridge was with them, carrying a couple of full whiskey bottles, which he proceeded to set down on the sideboard.

"No wonder he looks peaceful," said Partridge, calling the others' attention to the various empties scattered about the room.

"I just hope that stuff keeps him alive and producing," said another voice, which Doc recognized. Lenz was paler and paunchier than he remembered. For an instant he feared that the man might know *him*, but then decided, with something of a twinge, that he must have changed even more than Lenz.

"Which arm'd we use last time?" one of the orderlies asked.



"What's the diff?" said the other. "If he's sore he don't know it." The needle gouged into the bend of Doc's left elbow, but he determinedly gave no start.

Partridge asked Lenz, "Are you afraid he may run dry? I can't just dash out and pick up another—uh, donor—like a pack of cigarettes, you know."

Lenz answered, "We've got a three-way situation going here, and it makes for some damned precarious juggling. I can't keep up my two ends forever. When the hell are you coming through with yours?"

Doc saw, through his eyelashes, Partridge's shushing gesture to Lenz. Apparently the two orderlies weren't supposed to be in on all the details of whatever this was.

One of the men in white was carelessly holding the citrate flask as it slowly—very slowly—filled with blood. The other held Doc's hand upright and rhythmically clenched it into a fist to aid the flow. Partridge and Lenz looked on apathetically, until the latter spoke again:

"He is beginning to peter out. Got less iron in him than a marshmallow, by now. Unless you hope to conclude this business pretty soon—" he ignored Partridge's renewed shushing—"you'd better start scouting for a replacement."

That was the last of the conversation. The flask eventually filled; the tube was withdrawn from Doc's arm; the men trooped back downstairs and away to the house. Doc

ruefully decided he hadn't learned very much by playing possum.

He stood up, intending to seek inspiration at the sideboard. But the room suddenly whirled around him and he sat down again rather unexpectedly. Lenz was so right; this vampire game couldn't go on much longer or he'd blow away with the first strong breeze. He hung his head between his knees, to get some blood back in his brain, and thought about things.

Lenz had let slip that this business was a three-way proposition. "The old spinster and I make two," Doc murmured to himself. "Number three seems to be a loose end in Partridge's department." That could only refer to the nephew, who must be Miss Culverin's sole heir. It seemed they were hurrying to find him before she died, but why was that so necessary?

For that matter, Doc thought lethargically, why was he so concerned? Neither the old maid nor the nephew meant anything to him. When he ran too dry to be siphoned any longer, Partridge would dump him back on the Bowery. And then, with the booze suddenly cut off, he really would be in trouble. He'd forget all this mystery in a hurry—the Culverins, Lenz, Partridge, Beaky, the works—in his renewed desperation to cadge a drink.

The mere thought made him intolerably thirsty. He eased to his feet and groped over to the freshly-restocked sideboard. Not bothering

with a glass, he took a long pull at a bottle of bourbon. Then, past the bottle, through the window, he saw a movement on the lawn. It was Beaky, daringly walking from the house toward the garage. Without coming too close, she veered away and headed for the place where the birds congregated.

Doc put down the bottle and went to meet her. Little black flags waved menacingly around the edges of his vision, and he walked like a marionette devoid of strings, but somehow he negotiated the stairs and the long stretch of driveway. Beaky was waiting behind the protective screen of shrubbery. Doc shakily lowered himself to sit on the lawn, and hung his head again until the black flags ceased flapping.

Beaky surreptitiously sniffed the aroma of the air around him. With commingled woe, pity and exasperation, she asked, "Are you all right?"

Doc nodded silently, still recuperating.

"I seen all four of 'em go out to your place," she said. "I was worried what they might want."

"Nothing," Doc grunted. "Just a visit. Beaky, I want to say I'm sorry for—before. But I haven't time for a long-winded apology. Got to move fast. Beaky, I want to get inside that house."

She gave him an apprehensive stare, and stammered, "I guess you'd better not, Doc. You'd—you'd fall over somep'n."

"You think I'm plastered again!" he blurted. "Damn it, I'm just weak from . . ." He subsided suddenly; the flare-up had brought the black flags crowding back again. He shut his eyes and clenched his teeth to keep from fainting.

"Sure, Doc," Beaky crooned to humor him. "But listen. Have you had anything to eat?"

"You—must understand," he gritted. "I've got to have a look at the old woman. Talk to her, if I can."

"They won't let you get to Miss Culverin! Even if you was—"

"Beaky!" he implored. "It's life or death!"

After a moment, she murmured, "You mean it, don'tcha? Doc, how about I go look at her instead? If they catch me upstairs, I could always invent somep'n. But you . . ."

He made a face and shook his head.

"I know," she said, in a tragic whisper. "You think I'm too stupid to be any use."

"All right, damn it to hell! You're too stupid!"

"Well, I guess I am," she said humbly, accepting it. Then she added, without rancor or malice, "But I'm sober."

Doc drooped, half in defeat, half in shame. The girl's reasoning might be faulty, but she was right; in his condition, he had no hope of getting in and out of the sickroom unchallenged.

"Beaky, I'm a louse," he said

contritely. "You offer to take chances for me, and I cuss you out. You've got more sense than I have, by a long sight."

"Aw, Doc," she said, flustered.

"Will you sneak up there for me, to Miss Culverin's room?" he asked. Beaky nodded eagerly. "I don't know what you'll find. I mainly want to find out what sort of condition she's in. Ask her, if you can. But in God's name, don't let anybody catch you."

"I'll have to get the nurse away for a few minutes," Beaky mused. "I'll call her down to the kitchen for coffee, or somep'n."

"Swell!" said Doc encouragingly. "Now, how soon can you report back to me?"

"Gee," she said, with a frown. "I'd sooner get caught in her room than in yours. But . . . but . . . I could come late, after everybody's . . . gone to bed."

Her voice quirked oddly upward into a peep; Doc looked at her. Incredibly, Beaky was blushing. It was an unfortunate suffusion of emotion; most of it concerned in her nose. Doc fought down a rising laugh. Instead he patted her hand and said assuringly:

"Don't fret. I told you once, a guy pickled in alcohol doesn't have the urge to take advantage of even the prettiest young lady."

Whether or not that comforted her, Beaky slipped back to the house, intent on her mission of es-

pionage. Doc headed for the garage, along what had become the longest driveway in Christendom. He had to halt several times during the trip, to dangle his head until the black flags fluttered away. He took the stairs like mountains, each one a separate crisis, and finally crept into his apartment on hands and knees.

"One hell of a dashing cavalier you make," he growled, hauling himself into an armchair. He sprawled there, gasping, and endured a new parade of the black banners that all but obscured his vision entirely. How long could he hang on? he wondered fearfully. Unless he maintained a steel grip on himself, the next stage would be coma or the delirium of Korsakoff's syndrome. By which time he'd be of little use or interest to anybody, except maybe a mortician.

Would a few more drinks help? No, even if those bottles held the Elixir of Life, he couldn't take the chance of falling down on poor Beaky again. This was going to mean *real* heroism, he told himself. Then he laughed derisively at his pious posturing. Some herosim, just to lay off the sauce for a few hours.

But they were hours of agony. He soaked the chair with perspiration, and thrashed about in it helplessly, unable to find a position that would allow him any repose. The sun had set, and the room was

soon dark. But now the moon came up, and diabolically spotlighted the row of decanters on the sideboard. To Doc they seemed actors on a stage, awaiting only their cue to enthrall him with a performance of infinite allure and ecstasy. Had he not been so feeble, he would have leaped for them long ago. But whenever he gathered his strength to lurch for the sideboard, he somehow simultaneously summoned up the will power not to. Each time, he would return to thrashing and sweating, and try to repel the bottles' mute seduction.

After an incalculable period of this purgatory, he heard a faint step on the stairs, and then Beaky was in the room. She saw him splayed against the chair and moaned despairingly, "Oh, Doc!" "Haven't had a drop," he croaked, virtuously indignant.

She knelt beside the chair and peered closely at him. "Doc! You're sick!" she cried in alarm, and began to dab at his streaming face with a corner of her apron.

"Hell with me," he said sepulchrally. "Did you do it?"

"Yes, I saw her," she whispered. "It was easy. But wait—I'll put some coffee on for you."

She hurried to the kitchen alcove, and he called after her, "Keep talking. Nobody can hear us out here. Just don't turn on any lights."

"Okay. Well, like I said, it was easy. I could of done it any time. Miss Lucas—she's the night nurse

—was real nice. As soon as Cook went to bed, I invited her down for coffee and pie. She came down to the kitchen and I went up to watch over Miss Culverin while she had her coffee-and. When Miss Lucas was finished, she came back upstairs and her and me stayed in Miss Culverin's room together and talked for a good long time. Course, it wouldn't of been so easy if Mr. Partridge had come around and spotted me, but—"

Doc, who had been fidgeting through this recital of minutiae, finally interrupted, "Did you talk to the old lady? Did she tell you anything?"

Beaky came out of the kitchen and knelt beside his chair again. "Doc," she said somberly. "Miss Culverin ain't never goin' to talk to nobody again."

"She can't be dead!"

"No, but the next thing to it. She's just livin' on drugs and stuff. Nurse Lucas says she'd of died a long time ago, except for Dr. Lenz. She hasn't been awake for better'n two months now, Miss Lucas says, and then all she did was scream with the pain. Now she's got a cellophane tent over her head, and tubes in her arm and up her nose . . ." Beaky shuddered at the recollection.

"Did your chum Lucas tell you what's ailing Miss Culverin?"

Beaky nodded and said, "Cancer. She called it terminal cancer."

A bubbling noise came from the

kitchenette. Beaky got up again and went in there; she returned after a moment with two steaming mugs of black coffee. Doc sipped his gratefully, and began almost to feel a little healthier.

"Anything else to add?" he asked the girl.

She frowned in concentration. "I don't think so. I could tell you all that we talked about, but it was mostly just, uh, girl stuff."

"Tell me anyhow."

She did, and it was mostly girl stuff. Beaky had asked Miss Lucas what it was like to be a nurse, and Miss Lucas had gone into interminable detail to tell her. Then Beaky had asked her how she, Beaky, might go about becoming one, and Miss Lucas had gone into interminable detail to tell her. Then Beaky had asked if doctors ever fell in love with their nurses, and . . .

Doc coughed and interrupted, "Did she say anything about Dr. Lenz?"

Beaky cogitated. "She didn't say whether he ever fell in—"

"We'll skip his love life," Doc said drily. "Does she know anything else about him?"

"Oh. No. It's the first time she's worked for him."

They sat in the dark and sipped at their mugs in a contemplative silence. At last Beaky asked, "Did you ever doctor anybody with ternim—terminal cancer?"

He said uncomfortably, "I've run across a few cases."

"Could you—could *you* cure Miss Culverin?"

He smiled a little at the implied compliment, and said no, probably nobody could.

"I just thought," she said, cringing into that ready-to-run attitude of hers, "maybe if you could help her, it would make up for what—what happened to your wife."

Doc sighed heavily. "I did tell you about that, didn't I?" he said, remembering. He added, in some puzzlement, "But I didn't tell you about the cancer."

Now Beaky was puzzled. "Cancer? No, you said you cut—you said your hand slipped."

He shook his head. "It was no drunken accident; it was deliberate."

Beaky stared at him. "Oh, no, Doc . . ."

"Sylvia had been ill; I diagnosed cholecystitis. It shouldn't have been a very complicated operation. But when I opened her up, I found carcinoma, metastasis far advanced." Beaky still looked puzzled. "I mean Sylvia was just eaten away inside by cancer. It was only a matter of time, and not much of that . . ." His voice trailed away.

"Then what you did," Beaky said, after thinking about it, "You just saved her the pain and the waitin'."

"That's what I told myself," he said drearily. "But I probably wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been impelled by those couple of

drinks. Later, sober, I realized I had done it out of selfishness."

"How—selfishness?"

"I couldn't face having to tell her, having to watch her waste away and die. I couldn't face having to endure my own helplessness."

Beaky said, gently but positively, "She'd of wanted it your way."

"I'll never know. I didn't give her a choice; she never opened her eyes again. But Sylvia was no coward. She might have accepted it stoically, might have triumphed over it, made something glorious out of those last remaining months." His voice lowered again. "How many things she must have left unfinished, undone . . ."

He could sense the bottles winking at him again; he turned to look longingly at them, but did not succumb. Beaky tactfully got up and left him alone for a while, busying herself in the deeper darkness of the kitchenette. When she came back, with gooey cheese-spread sandwiches, the remembered pain had gone from his eyes.

Doc tried to decline the sandwich, but Beaky insisted. "I bet you ain't had anything to eat," she guessed, correctly, "since that dish of eggs I fixed Friday morning." Chewing was an ordeal to his alcohol-seared mouth, and swallowing was nearly impossible, but he obediently forced the food down.

Outside, the moon had changed position. It no longer lighted the

array of decanters; it was now shining on other villains. Beyond the lawn and behind the wind-break poplars, the Culverin mansion brooded in the moonlight, as dark and stark as the House of Usher.

Doc finished his sandwich and said, "We've got things to do."

Beaky helped him rise, a joint at a time, from his deep armchair. She followed him across the room, and looked slightly alarmed when he went to the sideboard. But Doc ignored what was on top, and took the telephone set out of its drawer.

"First," he said, "How does this work?"

"Why, it's just the house intercom," she pointed out. "You can't call outside on it, if that's what you mean."

"How many of these are there around the place?"

"Lemme see." She began to tick off, on her fingers, "One in the kitchen, one in the pantry, the library, Miss Culverin's room, the dinin' room, the greenhouses . . ." She caught Doc's look of dismay and said, "Oh, but nobody uses 'em hardly. Like I mean the greenhouses are empty, and the chauffeur lives at the house now, and all. I can't think when anybody *does* use the house phone, except if one of the nurses calls down to Cook, or some'n like that."

Doc said to himself, "Well, no harm trying." And then to Beaky, "Is there some special place in the

house where Lenz and Partridge get together to do their talking?"

"Uh huh. They're always shuttin' themselves up in the library. They got a bar set up in there, same as you have here."

"Beaky." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Could you slip into the library and lift the receiver off that phone?"

"Sure."

"You'd have to move the set where it wouldn't be noticed. The house phone, mind, not the outside one. And you'll have to sneak a look at it once in a while. If one of the other servants replaces the receiver, you'll have to lift it off again."

"I can do that. Except when Mr. Partridge and Dr. Lenz are in there. But that's what you want, huh? You want to listen in on them two?"

He nodded. "It's one hell of a long shot. After all these months of planning whatever it is they're up to, they're not going to stand around and play back a synopsis just for my benefit. But if I can only catch one little hint . . ."

"I'll fix it first thing, soon's I go back. And hey—" She pointed to the window. "I better scoot. Gee, Doc, we've sat up talkin' almost the whole night long."

The sky was indeed beginning to lighten out there. The house was a black, jagged cut-out against the approaching sunrise.

"It's been real fun," Beaky

said merrily. "And, Doc . . .?"

"Hm?"

"Can you—can you stop drinkin'?"

"Sure," he said, with heedless humor. "I've done it a thousand times."

"No, I mean it. I mean now, while you're doin' this telephone business, could you please not take any more liquor? You don't—" she tried to put it diplomatically—"you don't hold it very well."

Doc had to laugh outright at that. But he assured her that he would stay on the wagon as long as it seemed advisable. Satisfied, Beaky went to the door and out onto the landing. There she paused for a moment.

"Doc," she said meekly, with downcast eyes.

"What, Beaky?"

"That what you said, about a guy full of alcohol not ever foolin' with girls. Did you mean—?" She gulped audibly. "—Not *ever*?"

Doc managed to maintain a straight face. By way of reply, he leaned out suddenly from the doorway and kissed Beaky resoundingly on her tremulous lips.

She nearly fell down the stairs, scampering pell-mell from the surprise attack. But at the bottom, at the garage door, she turned back one last time, to flash a glowingly ecstatic smile at him. Then she disappeared into the half-light of the dawn.

On still-shaky legs, Doc groped

back to the sideboard and held the house phone receiver to his ear. After a not very long time, he heard a click, then a muffled scraping. "Okay," whispered Beaky's voice. "It's behind a African violet." There was a light clatter and, from a distance, the sound of a door easing shut. After that, there was no more to be heard but the nothing-sound of an empty room.

Doc put down the receiver and looked at it, then at the row of bottles ranged behind it. They were all shimmering brightly and delightfully as the apartment grew lighter. Doc swore silently. Ignoring them would be a lot easier if he could pour them all down the john, or at least shut them away in the closet. But if someone showed up unexpectedly, that would require explaining.

There wouldn't be anything to listen to on the phone for several hours. Maybe he should grab some sleep; it would keep his mind off his thirst. No—in his present state of debility there was too much danger of sleeping right around the clock. With a groan of resignation, Doc lowered himself onto an unrestfully uncomfortable straight-backed chair. He turned it away from the enticing bottles and settled himself for a weary, weary wait.

The sun came up by millimeters. After it had been well up for about a year and a half, the first birds awoke and began to sing their

sunrise song. It was easily another eighteen months before Doc glimpsed the first sign of life at the house: a wisp of smoke from the chimney of the kitchen ell. From then on, he made periodic trips to listen to the telephone. But he never heard more than an occasional dim susurrus, presumably the bustlings of early-morning activity in rooms far distant from the library.

But, after several glacial ages, Doc's forenoon was finally enlivened. He was sitting on his chair, feeling coeval with the dinosaurs and the Petrified Forest, when the telephone made a noise that carried across the room to him. He got up quickly but quietly and tiptoped over to pick it up.

It was emitting a rapid cluck-cluck-cluck that puzzled him until he realized that someone was dialing a number. Then, "*Drat ill!*" said a thick, suet-y voice in his ear, so suddenly that Doc jumped. The dialer on the other end hung up for a moment, then lifted the receiver and dialed again. Naturally, thought Doc, nothing would result so long as he was keeping the line open.

"Well, double drat!" said the fat-sounding voice. Doc guessed that it belonged to Cook. Sure enough, the voice veered away from the phone and barked, "This contraption is out of whack ag'in. Beaky, you trot up and ask that Nurse Whatsername how she wants her eggs this *clank!*" And the phone



was mute, lifeless, a vacuum again.

The mention of eggs had pierced Doc to the heart with exquisite misery. Almighty saints, after all these years, it was still just breakfast-time!

Those first hours were tedious, but not quite unbearable. Beaky's company through the night had revived Doc to an amazing degree. He was still weak and trembly, but her sandwiches and coffee had provided much-needed nourishment, and he could feel the improvement. The evening before, when he had first defied the beckoning bottles, had been a time of "cold turkey" anguish. But that was behind him now, and he felt ten times better because of it—he told himself. He could even contrive to find some humor in this dreary waiting. He could laugh at how he misjudged the passing of time. At least, for the first few hours he could.

But as the caterpillar day crawled on, his nerves began to coil with increasing tension. His senses were honed by the slow sandpaper of time, until they were sharp enough to see the bottles even when he wasn't looking at them—to smell and taste and, yes, hear the luscious liquids inside.

He could not sit still on his straight-backed chair for more than a minute at a time. When that position became intolerable, he would go over and listen at the phone for an alternative minute.

Then, for another minute, he would pace the floor, either whistling soundlessly or silently mouthing such things as, "Why the devil isn't there something to read around here?" He didn't dare to make more than a minimum of noise, for fear that someone at the house would pick up a phone and hear *him*.

So, with the telephone stubbornly silent and his own movements hushed, the loudest noise in the apartment came to be the bottles' insistent screeching for attention. To drown them out and, hopefully, to delude his mounting thirst, Doc went to the kitchenette and made a mug of instant coffee. The first sip nauseated him. He poured it out, went back to his chair and sat down, a sickly sweat beginning to glaze his face.

Like a bubble trapped in Jell-O, the sun crept up to the zenith, and seemed to dawdle there for an eon before it began to ooze down the other side of the sky. It was finally out of the sight of the man who writhed in the straight-back chair. His face contorted, his limbs twitching, his clothes again soaked through with perspiration, Doc was being scourged anew by the torments of total withdrawal.

He wrenched himself up from the chair and flung himself across the room to check the phone. When he picked up the receiver, the bottles roundabout seemed to crowd closer, begging, "Pick me up next."

The phone told him nothing; spoke only that clammy, mocking silence. But Doc knew there had to be a malignant presence at the other end, breathelessly waiting to hear him crack. Probably that African violet. What the hell *was* an African violet, anyhow?

Good God above, he thought, I am truly going insane. It's only just beginning to be afternoon, and already I'm out of my skull. And what for? Whatever happens, whatever action is called for, I'm no mortal use in this condition. But just one drink—

The very thought was surrender enough. He wheeled in his pacing and grabbed for the nearest bottle. But his hand froze on its neck. The telephone receiver, lying just under his outstretched arm, suddenly scolded him with a thin, shrill whine. For a moment, Doc stood transfixed, but slowly his hand uncurled from the bottle and slowly picked up the keening phone.

Doc listened. The feeble peal would go on for a second, pause and peal again, over and over. He had just decided that what he heard was the "outside" telephone ringing in the library, when he caught the unmistakable sound of a door opening and footsteps approaching.

The ringing ceased and Partridge's voice said hello. The subsequent conversation was necessarily one-sided and fragmentary.

"Yes, I'll accept the charges,"

said Partridge. "Hello . . . Yes, this is he . . . Calling collect from there, pal, you'd better have some good news . . . Is that right? . . . Are you sure? . . . Just dandy, just perfect, unless you've made a mistake in identification . . . Yes, bound to stay in a hotel . . . You canvass all of them if necessary, and call me back . . . I'll be sitting on top of the phone."

There came the small clash of the receiver being put down, and Doc thought he caught Partridge's familiar frosty chuckle. The same phone was immediately picked up again and Partridge dialed swiftly.

"Would you call Mr. Lenz to the phone, please? . . ." A long wait. So, Doc noted, Lenz was just plain Mister to his landlady.

"Lenz," the lawyer said sharply, "we've got him . . . No fooling. Do you think I'd fool about—yes, just this minute . . . Out on the Coast . . . You get right over here. I don't want to tie up the phone. I'm waiting for them to call back and verify . . . I'll send the car immediately."

The receiver was replaced again, and Doc could hear nothing now except a faint, cheery whistling and what sounded like the happy snapping of fingers.

Doc stepped away from his phone and did some quick cataloguing of what he had gleaned. The nephew had been tracked to some West Coast city, but had not yet been personally contacted—if

indeed that was intended. Meanwhile, Lenz and Partridge were gathering to gloat. Doc saw, through his window, the uniformed chauffeur come trotting across the lawn from the house. Doc covered the phone receiver, to shut out the roar of the Cadillac starting downstairs. An instant later, the long limousine slid out from under the window and disappeared down the drive.

Doc resumed listening. Partridge went on dancing his jig, or whatever he was doing; the few sounds gave no clue. A considerable time passed. Doc had shifted ears a half dozen times before he heard the arrival of Lenz. The two men made noises of hail-fellow-well-met at each other. Then Lenz said anxiously:

"There's no possibility of an error?"

"They're good men," said Partridge, "and they're cretain."

Lenz: "Where is he? You didn't say."

Partridge: "In *your* last port of call, my good doctor."

Lenz: "No, is that so? Well, I'm damned. But I suppose it's logical. You did say, didn't you, that he originally ran away to join the Navy?"

Partridge: "The Merchant Marine."

Lenz (with a laugh): "I hope it hasn't toughened him up too much. Wouldn't want him to be a match for your boys."

Partridge (also with a laugh, but humorless): "He'd better not be. For what I'm paying, I could have got Krushchev. Care for a drink?"

Lenz: "Scotch. Easy on the soda."

Doc licked his lips at that, and snarled soundlessly. Well, one thing was clear enough. They hadn't been seeking the old lady's nephew to pin a rose on him. Young Culverin seemed likely to end up at the bottom of some West Coast harbor. But which one?

The two men were now idly discussing the comparative merits of various brands of Scotch. Doc silently damned them both, in a passion of thirst and envy. Then he started, and covered the receiver, at another sound from directly beneath his feet. He craned to peer out the window. The chauffeur was nosing the limousine into the garage again.

Doc returned his attention to the phone. As he was unable to see the two men's expression and gestures, this eavesdropping was like hearing a playscript intoned in alternate parts by a duo of disembodied ghosts. But it told him enough to make him even sicker than he was.

Lenz: "... much longer, do you figure?"

Partridge: "Well, that detail on the Coast can be cleared-up in a matter of hours, if necessary. But we'll want a decent span of clearance. Say two-three days. You can coax her along that far, can't you?"

Lenz: "Christ, after all this time,

I should guss so. But I don't mind telling you, I was getting anx—"

Partridge: "You were! I thought we'd never find that boy."

Lenz: ". . . don't seem to credit the miracle I've been pulling off here. By rights, that old bat should have died six months ago."

Partridge: "Whoa there! Don't kill her off six months ago. She hadn't added the codicil then. She hadn't even heard of the foundation yet."

Lenz: "Neither had we."

(Laughter)

Lenz: ". . . me and my magic. Metrazol and Cořamine won't work miracles by themselves. Thanks to me, we've at least got a vegetable, a husk, a warm cadaver. Something less than a zombie, but technically alive. Certifiably so."

Partridge: "You know, I think it would be a nice ironic touch, now, if your foundation really *did* find a cure for cancer."

Lenz: "Could be. Never can tell *what* I might find on one of those balmy little Carib islands."

(Laughter)

Partridge: "I know what you'll find on one of those balmy . . ."

(Laughter)

Lenz: "Thank heaven they haven't found a cure for *that*, hey?"

(Laughter)

Doc began to have the feeling that he had tuned in on a performance by Smith & Dale. But at least, at last, all the pieces were in place. He could see the plot in its entire-

ty, from conception to planned execution. Thus:

Miss Culverin, dying of cancer, had willed her entire estate to the peregrinating nephew. But Partridge had weaseled Lenz in to doctor her, and Lenz had weaseled himself into the old lady's confidence. She would, naturally, be a sucker for some claptrap story about Lenz's "cancer research foundation." That had appealed to her enough to make her add a philanthropic codicil to her will. Should the nephew die before she did, the estate would go to the Foundation.

The two conspirators then had only one problem: to keep the old woman ticking until they could hunt down and dispose of the nephew. Then wait a short interval, so there'd be no question about the sequence of decease, and do the same with Miss Culverin. That would be simple enough: just kink one of her vital I.V. tubes for a minute.

Lawyer Partridge was doubtless to be the executor of the bequest. As an ostensibly disinterested party, he could do a quick, smooth job of turning the estate into cash, and turning the cash over to the Lenz Foundation. After which, he and the doctor would divide the spoils and go their separate, wealthy, wicked ways.

The two had faced only one stumbling-block, the necessity of procuring a fairly rare type of

blood for Miss Culverin's transfusions—but they had surmounted that, or thought they had. In so doing, through no fault of their own, they had unwittingly invited Nemesis. Doc blessed the string of circumstances that had enmeshed him in the affair. Now he lacked only one last fragment of information. He had to find out where and how they intended to erase the unsuspecting nephew. Then he could hunt up Beaky and send her scurrying to the local law.

The boys at the other end of the phone were discussing nothing of interest. After a time, a third person came into the library and made some indistinguishable announcement—Doc thought the voice sounded like Beaky's.

Lenz said, "How about us having trays in here?"

Partridge: "Oh, we might as well enjoy our dinner. If I leave the doors open in between, we can hear the phone."

They left the room, and left Doc in a swivet of suspense. He sat and sweated and thirsted, and watched it gradually get dark outside. For a very long time, nothing happened within his earshot. But when the "outside" telephone did ring, he heard it several times before they did. Apparently someone had moved that instrument very near his hidden house phone; it rang practically in his ear. Even so, when Partridge came galloping and picked it up, Doc could still

hear only the one end of the conversation.

"Good going," said Partridge. "Which one is it? . . . Wait, I want to make a note . . . The Hotel Goncourt, okay . . ."

Okay, but *where*? Doc wanted to shout.

"No, not if he's already sacked out," Partridge was saying. "Not in the hotel. Tomorrow will do . . . Well, that's your affair . . . Not the bridge. I don't want any suspicion of suicide . . ."

What bridge? Over what water?

"No, I *won't* be satisfied if it looks like an accident. I want it to *be* an accident! . . . You ought to know your business better than I do . . . Couldn't a seaman get fatally hurt in some waterfront dive? . . ."

Doc's nerve-ends screamed, What waterfront?

"Phone me again when it's completed. Then send me a newspaper that carries the item . . . Send it air-mail special . . ."

Oh, fine! thought Doc. After it's all over, I can intercept the newspaper and find out where it happened.

"No, I don't expect headlines, but I'll want some verifications . . . They're bound to carry a paragraph. Man falls off cable-car or whatever . . ."

Doc nearly cheered into the phone. Whatever was said after that was superfluous, and he only dimly noted the hanging-up of the

receiver. There was just one city in the nation—or on the West Coast, anyway—that had cable-car transportation.

The killing wouldn't come off before morning. That gave him at least twelve, probably as much as sixteen hours, to get Beaky and himself safely out of here, to spill the whole story to the nearest police station, and to flash a warning to Seaman Culverin at the Hotel Goncourt in San Francisco.

But then he heard the other voice, Lenz's, quite close, say idly, "How many phones do you talk on at one time?"

There was a sudden silence at that end, and a sudden quaking at this one. Doc heard Partridge's footsteps coming over.

"It was off," said Lenz, obviously referring to the house phone receiver. "You didn't do it?"

"Great Scott," muttered the lawyer. "And we've been blabbing . . ."

"Here behind this flowerpot," Lenz pointed out. "Doesn't look like any accident. Who would—?"

Doc stood paralyzed by horror.

"I have a good idea," said Partridge menacingly. "But he hasn't been in here. He got someb—"

"There's no hum," said Lenz, directly into Doc's ear. "Does that mean the line is—?"

"It means he's still . . . God damn it, Lenz, hang—!"

There was a loud clatter, a pause, and then the musical hum of the phone's dial tone. Doc put his re-

ceiver jitteringly back on the instrument cradle.

Well, that ploy was finished, he thought fatalistically, and took little consolation in the fact that it had at least lasted long enough to give him the lowdown. What good did that do, if they were equally on to him? To run, now, was out of the question. Doc looked down at his hands, twitching along the edge of the sideboard as if they were playing a piano arpeggio. No, he was a physical shambles; he probably wouldn't make the stairs without breaking his neck.

He thought of the old joke—"I'm driving, I'm too drunk to walk"—and of the car in the garage downstairs. But even if he could manage that much exertion, which he doubted, there wasn't much likelihood he'd find the keys in the Cadillac. Then a glance at the window told him it was too late to try. There came Partridge striding long-legged and purposeful through the deepening twilight.

One desperate idea occurred to Doc, and he cursed himself for not having asked Beaky for the kitchen's phone extension number. Try anyway—a shot in the dark. He whirled back to the house phone and dialed two digits at random. An extension did exist at that number; he sweated while it buzzed three times; but it could have been the shut-up greenhouse. He tried another, and another, with equal

futility; and Partridge would be coming up the stairs at any moment.

The fourth number brought a response. It rang twice, then a guarded voice murmured, "Yes?"

Without thinking, Doc blurted, "Beaky?"

There came only the sound of breathing from the other end, and then an oily chuckle. "No, this is not Beaky," said Dr. Lenz.

Doc slowly put down his receiver, realizing that he had just shattered the last remaining, fragile, tenuous hope—not only his, not only the Culverin boy's, but poor little Beaky's as well. He was still staring at the phone when Partridge came in the door and switched on the light in the room. The man was smiling almost friendly, and the thing he carried in his hand was not a gun but one more bottle.

"I found this in the cellars," he said jovially. "I knew it would appeal to you." Doc just looked at him. "It's absinthe," Partridge went on. "Real old French absinthe. *Regardez*—150 proof. How about that?"

"Swell," Doc said hesitantly.

"Well, come on, break out some glasses," said the lawyer, seating himself and starting to peel the seal off the bottle. "I want to try a snort of this, myself."

As he went reluctantly to the kitchen for glasses, Doc's mind was a squirrel in a wheel. Was the

idea to get him drunk and pump him? After all, Partridge didn't *know* for sure; he could only suspect—at least until he talked to Lenz again. Doc desperately needed a drink, but he was just as desperately anxious to keep his wits about him.

Partridge poured a tot for himself and nearly a full glass for Doc. Then he said, "Looking at you," and significantly held onto his until Doc returned the salute and tilted his glass.

"Whoo!" said Doc, jolted. "That's rough stuff, even for an old pro."

"It grows on you," Partridge said cynically. "Here." And before Doc could protest, his glass had been refilled to the brim.

He sat perched on the edge of his chair, trying to conceal the panic that had him almost screaming for relief. Partridge seemed not to notice, and made no mention of the issue closest to both their hearts. He blithely soliloquized about absinthe and its celebrated devotees: Robert Jordan, Toulouse-Lautrec

Suppose I play drunk? Doc thought. Partridge suddenly looked at him sharply, and Doc became aware that he had giggled out loud. It wouldn't be a question of *playing* drunk, then. After his night and day of abstinence, this wormwood juice was like a sudden push at the brink of a cliff. The nice thing about absinthe, Doc

thought wildly, was that you could either drink it or hit yourself over the head with the bottle, and get the same effect. That effect was obviously what Partridge had brought it for. Well, before the lights went out, damn it, he would at least have the satisfaction of letting Partridge know that he, Doc, was on to the whole dirty game.

He leaned over at a precarious angle, tapped the lawyer on his knee, and said portentously, "The sky is falling, Chicken Little."

That was telling him, all right, all right. He sat back and nodded sagely, irrefutably. Partridge gave him another speculative, half-amused stare. At that instant, the house phone rang. Doc rocketed to his feet as if triggered from underneath; Partridge was only a trifle slower in rising. The two men looked at each other while the phone rang again. Then Partridge disdainfully curled his lip, put out a hand and shoved gently; Doc crumpled helplessly back into his chair.

He tried to shake away the roaring that was growing in his head, and heard the lawyer say into the phone, "He won't be any problem." Then Partridge glanced over at Doc and said, "What? He did what?" He laughed harshly. "Well, that clinches it. Have you got hold of her? . . . Okay, get her over here."

From then on, things got dimmer and dimmer for Doc. One mo-

ment, he felt Partridge forcing yet another glass of absinthe between his lips and snarling, "Drink it! Go on, drink it down, you rumdum!" The next moment, he saw Lenz standing in the doorway, one hand tightly gripping Beaky's thin arm, the other holding his professional bag.

"What have you done to Doc?" the girl wailed.

"Has he said anything?" Lenz asked.

"Yeah," said Partridge, barking another laugh. "He said the sky is falling."

"Maybe he's not kidding," Lenz said heavily. "I pried one thing out of this little bitch. The guy knows me, somehow."

"What?"

"Here, hang onto her," said Lenz, handing over the whimpering Beaky. He stepped to Doc, seized a handful of his hair, wrenched his head back, and bent close to study his face. Finally he let go; Doc's head flopped limply over onto one shoulder. "Yeah, he knows me, all right," Lenz told Partridge. "I went to school with the bastard. Boy, I thought I had sunk pretty low."

"We're going to have to sink him even lower," Partridge said, without troubling to keep his voice down. "And his lady friend, too."

Beaky squealed and squirmed abruptly, without emotion, without a warning signal, Partridge fired a short, sharp uppercot to her



chin. It cut off the squeal and lifted the girl's feet a good four inches off the floor; when she fell back again, she fell full length and lay still.

Doc roused himself, at that, to lunge from his chair and do battle. He thrashed and flailed and cursed through rubbery lips, but only succeeded in sliding himself off the chair to lie flat on the floor. The two men watched his activity as incuriously as if he had been a cockroach.

Lenz said, "Four corpses involved in this bequest business is liable to slow it up, going through probate."

"Three," Partridge corrected him. "We'll just ditch the rummy. It's a sure thing nobody will ever wonder where he went. The others will be totally unrelated. A traffic accident in California; an old lady succumbing to natural causes; and a stupid little domestic getting herself gassed in a garage."

"Remember," said Lenz. "I can't sign any death certificate."

"Don't I know, dammit. Means I'll have to handle it alone. But first, just to safeguard our other interests, you'd better siphon one last pint of AB-negative out of Lushwell there."

Doc had his eyes open, but the goings-on in the room were obscured by the rank upon rank of black flags that were marching on him by now. He could only sketchily make out Lenz's movements, as

the man produced a flask and equipment from his satchel. Then he felt, as if far away, the itchy prick of the needle in his arm; the thud-thud of pumping might have been somebody else's pulse.

Meanwhile the two men went on talking, as if he were already dead and buried. Doc heard them dimly, as if through six feet of earth and a pine lid.

"I'll run you home first," Partridge was saying. "Wouldn't do to have us both mixed up in this. I'll get the keys from the chauffeur; I don't want him around here, either. Soon as I get back, I'll lug your school chum out of the neighborhood . . ."

"There's a compost pile out back of the greenhouses," Lenz suggested. "Dig him into that. Nobody'll be fooling around there before next spring, if ever. And by then all they'll find is some high-grade manure."

"Good. Then I'll prop the girl in the car and leave the engine running. Suicide, accident, who's to say? Any of the other servants will testify that she was a feeble-minded little nothing."

"That's a big garage," Lenz reminded him.

"All night ought to do it. She'll be found sometime tomorrow."

Doc heard all this and recognized the import of it, but somehow he just couldn't get worked up over it. The two men were mere voices, inventing impossibilities to be play-

acted by a couple of non-existent nobodies.

Doc did feel rather sorry about the "feeble-minded little nothing," mainly because that was how he, too, had so often thought of her. He had been too prone to compare her with Sylvia, and thereby to find her lacking. Actually, she had her own brand of intelligence and courage and warmth and—even lovability. If she was ignorant of grammar and cosmetics and manners, she was young enough and bright enough to learn; and she would undertake anything to please him. Come right down to it, she was worth a dozen Docs. Look at how she had inspired him to stay on the wagon for better than twenty-four hours. Himself, he was nothing but "high-grade manure." He would have smiled at that, but he hadn't the energy to work the smile-muscles in his face. Well, he thought resignedly, if I can't even manage a smile, I can't do anything else either. Relax. Surrender.

It took eternities to fill the flask with blood, but finally the job must have been finished, because Partridge's voice, a long way off, said, "No, leave the tube in his arm. That's as good a way as any. And help me put him in here."

Doc couldn't see very well, and he could feel even less, but he knew that his body was being handled, that he was being lifted and carried, and then that he was being doubled up, knees to chest, into a sort of

fetal position. Something cold and wet touched the back of his neck. It happened again, and continued to happen with monotonous regularity. Doc eventually divined that it was water dripping; that he had been folded up on the floor of the stall shower.

The two men were now consulting on some other planet in far outer space.

". . . Be all over with him, by the time I get back," came the ghost voice of Partridge. "And no mess to clean up."

"I'll give the girl a shot of Luminal," came the whisper of ghost-Lenz. "You don't want to have to keep socking her all night long."

Partridge's phantom voice protested something about ". . . drug show up in autopsy . . . ?"

And Lenz's shadowy sigh assured him, ". . . monoxide cover up . . . same test results. . ."

With that, the dream voices dwindled, faded, died away entirely. Doc abandoned his last thready interest in them, and philosophically prepared for his own dying away.

Time passed.

Doc looked down at his dead body, and laughed to see that Partridge had been wrong he *was* going to have to do some cleaning-up. He had sat the body squarely on top of the shower drain. Now the floor of the stall was awash with a skim of sticky liquid, and more was still trickling in faint-hearted spurts

from the plastic tube in the corpse's arm. The blood looked jet black in the darkness of the bathroom.

Then Doc became conscious that the bleeding arm ached like hell, and decided, almost regretfully, that he wasn't yet quite a corpse. Apparently the knees-to-chest position had acted rather like the head-dangling trick, to get rid of the encroaching black flags; he could see again. But could he do anything else?

He stared at the pulsing tube in his right arm, draining from him whatever few ounces of blood he had left. Then he looked at the left arm lying limp on the other side of him, and thought at it fiercely, "Get up and do something!" It stirred, then obediently rose and crossed in front of his chest. The fingers of it seized the tube and twitched the needle out of his vein. Then the fingers found a pressure point inside his elbow and squeezed it tightly until the dribble of blood slowed and stopped.

Now, if only a few of his other mechanism would obey and perform as well . . .

His standing-up machinery was cramp-bound and creaky, but eventually he was propped upright in the stall, his back against one tile wall, his feet braced against the other, his clothes dripping clots of blood. The altitude drained at his brain again, and brought a new attack of the figs. He had to stand there for a while and convalesce, be-

fore he could even consider what move to make next. Check on Beaky, obviously, he said to himself. Since he was evidently not yet in the manure pile, maybe she hadn't yet been gassed.

Sure enough, she hadn't, he discovered when he finally inched himself around the bathroom door. He hung there against it, gasping, and looked thankfully down on her unconscious but breathing body. Well, they were both still alive, for the nonce, but what did that signify? Partridge would inevitably come back, with every intention and capability of carrying out his announced plans.

Doc looked around the apartment, hopelessly seeking some escape-hatch, some hiding-place, some defensive weapon. All the lights in the place had been switched off by the departing men, but inexplicably the rooms were palely lit by a ghostly blue radiance. Doc scrunched out of the bathroom to lean against the living room wall, and bent around to see into the kitcheette. The blue radiation came from the little gas-plate in there, still burning from the time he had made coffee, back in an earlier century.

And then he stiffened, startled, as someone coughed outside, just under the apartment window. Doc made his halting way around the walls and looked out. Just as he did so, the person standing downstairs struck a match to his cigarette, and

the flare showed the visage of Dr. Lenz.

Doc lifted his gaze to peer farther into the night, and saw the bobbing spark of a flashlight approaching from the direction of the mansion. Doc realized then that he hadn't been "dead" as long as he had first thought. He had sat unconscious in the shower stall only long enough for Partridge to go to the house for the car keys. The lawyer was just now coming down to drive Lenz to his boarding house. But if the two of them could be stopped before they even started . . .

Doc turned again to the room, his eyes bright with more than fever. Well, there was his sideboard bar; could he maybe fling decanters at them? His eyes focussed on one particular bottle, standing apart from the others—the treacherous, opalescent, 150-proof absinthe—and his mind unaccountably harked back to a note in the *Pharmacopoeia* of a long-ago schoolday: "In concentrations above 40 per cent, ethyl alcohol is inflammable."

He glanced back quickly through the window; the winking flashlight was still some distance away. Moving more easily and surely than he would have thought possible for a man in his rag-doll condition, Doc hurried into action.

First he needed a piece of cloth. Beaky wore a brief apron, now bunched up under her, its strings undone. He reached down, nearly falling on his face, and plucked it

from beneath her body. He carried that to the sideboard, where he had to struggle with all his strength to drag the cork out of the absinthe bottle. Succeeding at last, he sloshed the liquor liberally over the apron, then recorked the bottle and wrapped the reeking wet cloth tightly around it.

He paused now to listen, and heard with dismay the men's voices murmuring together under the window, then receding immediately into the garage. God, after all this, was he going to be too late? He staggered panting into the kitchenette and jabbed his awkward bundle into the blue halo of the gas burner, just as he heard the double slam of car doors downstairs.

The package blazed up, and the flames licked agonizingly at his hands. But there was no time to make other arrangements; the floor quivered under his feet as the Cadillac's engine thrummed into life down there. Doc turned and hobbled from the kitchenette across the width of the living room. He poked the ball of fire out the window at arm's length, smelling his flesh scorch in the center of it. But he thought of nothing except the fortuitous fact that the absinthe-drenched cloth burned with a discreet blue flame; it would not alert the enemy below.

The limousine slid darkly and slowly out from under the lintel of the garage door, stern first. Now

Doc wished fervently that Partridge would hurry his cautious creeping. The fire was crisping and numbing his hands so that he feared he wouldn't be able to let go of his bomb.

But at last the long, slanting, swept-back windshield appeared. With a gasp of relief and the most heartfelt prayer of his life, Doc released the blue-burning bottle. It seemed to take all the rest of the night to fall.

It punched a neat hole in the safety-plate windshield, not shattering it; and for a breathless instant it appeared that was to be its only accomplishment. But then all the windows of the car shone with a blue-white glare, as if a photographer's flashbulb had gone off inside. Unlike a flashbulb, though, the light didn't wink off again; it increased in intensity, frosting the landscape for several yards around. The car stopped with a jerk, and Doc thought he heard a confused and hysterical babble from inside, but neither of the men got out.

He would have been satisfied with that result. But in some manner the white-hot, volatilizing alcohol fired the car's fuel line and touched off the gas tank. Doc had stepped back from the view, to beat out the smoulder of his shirt sleeves and examine the damage to his hands, when all of a sudden the limousine disintegrated in the driveway. Doc was flung backward into the room by the blast. Even as

he fell, he could see the curtains and the wall catch instant fire from the billowing orange bloom that roared up past the window.

In point of fact, that was the last he saw, to remember. But they told him later that he had—incredibly—picked up Beaky in his broiled arms and carried her, on his sapless legs, down the burning, crumbling garage stairs and out to the safety of the lawn.

And now Doc was no longer going it alone. The area was a mob scene of people from the estate, firemen, policemen and neighbors. The lawns were a fluorescent green in the searchlight illumination of the fire trucks. The pumpers were still conscientiously gushing foam into the garage foundations. The house servants, who had seen the explosion and sounded the alarm, stood in a frightened bunch on the driveway and watched the last sparks rush skyward from the ruins. On another part of the driveway, dampened blankets covered two still and formless shapes.

Beaky's friend Nurse Lucas had anointed and bandaged Doc's arms in enormous swaddlings of gauze. She had also succeeded in reviving Beaky to at least a groggy state of consciousness. Now the girl hovered protectively over Doc's pallet on the grass, and spooned hot black coffee into him, and told the pestering policemen to go away and let him alone.

These were understandably effe-

vescing with questions. They found it a little difficult to digest all of Doc's story at first audition. But one of the state troopers had acceded to Doc's urgently reiterated demand, and had radioed his troop headquarters; by now, an advice message was on its way to the San Francisco police.

Another message had gone to the local hospital, and now two ambulances appeared; one to rush Doc to the emergency room, the other to take Partridge and Lenz to the coroner's refrigerator.

"Nurse says you've lost a lot of blood, sir," said one of the ambulance attendants, as they put Doc on a stretcher. "You'll need an emergency transfusion first thing.

By any chance, do you know your blood type?"

So, Doc thought with weary amusement, we're right back at the beginning. But not quite, he told himself, as he looked up into the sleepy face of his little comrade-in-arms. It was smudged with soot and bruised blue along the jawline; but it was mainly distinctive for the quiet and shining pride with which it glowed down at him. She grinned and said reassuringly, "I'm comin' along with you."

The attendant fussily shushed her and repeated his query about Doc's blood type.

"I'll settle for some of whatever hers is," Doc said, smiling. "Becky's."

# THE WRONG MAN

BY  
STANLEY MOHR



*They'd had him neat alright. An eye-witness, some stolen money and a gun. He'd pulled seven years . . . and he was the wrong man.*

THEY WERE waiting for him when he stepped off the bus. He knew they would be. Two of the men were strangers, but the third man was more familiar. He was Sergeant Harvey Phillips, and there had been small changes in him the past seven years. He was a little heavier and grayer perhaps, but still the grim-faced, stone-like creature he remembered him to be.

Martin Sheenan did not approach the three men. Instead, he stood quietly holding the small overnight bag in his hand as Phillips led the other two police officers in his direction. Phillips was chewing on a half-smoked stub of a cigar that had

burned out hours previously. Martin could hardly recall a time not seeing a cigar clamped between the sergeant's teeth. It was as if nothing had changed in his absence; as though time had stood still, patiently awaiting his return.

"Welcome home, Martin," Phillips said, stopping a short distance away. His voice was as hard as his face, and few men could speak equally with him. The veteran police officer made certain of that.

"Hello, sergeant," Martin answered quietly.

"Lieutenant now."

"You should have written," Martin said dryly. "I would have sent

you a note of congratulations. We were permitted one letter a month, you know."

"It was pretty rough up there, huh?"

"Let's say Korea was a resort compared to it."

"Being out must feel pretty good. I bet you intend taking good care of your parole."

"I intend on taking good care of myself."

Phillips scowled angrily, and Martin told himself to go easy on the man. He made no protest when the police officer laid one club-like hand on his arm, stirring him toward the parking lot adjacent to the bus depot. The other two men fell into step behind them, wordlessly.

Martin had no idea where he was going, but he knew it would be pointless to ask or protest. The memory of prison still too fresh in his mind that had become accustomed to obeying authority without question.

"Eversince I learned you were coming out on parole, I've been doing a great deal of thinking about you."

"In terms of figures?" Martin couldn't control the small smile flickering across his face.

"About \$100,000. worth."

"That's a lot of money."

Phillips scrutinized him. They were in the parking lot now and Martin could recognize the black, unmarked police car sitting near the end of the lot.

"Enough money that some men wouldn't mind spending seven years in prison if they thought it would be waiting for them when they got out," Phillips said. "I've been wondering if you were one of those type of men."

Martin permitted the small smile to broaden. "Ten-thousand per year. Not a bad wage, huh?"

"If a person could keep it." Phillips continued: "If the state was to parole a guy after he served seven years for pulling a payroll job, they might become a little upset if the parolee was to suddenly start spending part of the holdup money that was never recovered."

"And the state just might send him back to prison for the rest of his sentence," Martin concluded.

"Plus an added sentence for having stolen property in his possession."

"It would be a big risk."

"Hardly worth it, wouldn't you say, Martin?"

They had reached the car and Martin slid into the back seat, moving over for the big man to squeeze in beside him. The other two men crawled into the front, and within a few seconds the car was nosing its way into the street.

Martin lit a cigarette, glancing out the window. Some of the buildings were unfamiliar to him. New stores, new fronts, and for the first time he was beginning to feel the sense of time lost.

"You know, Martin," Phillips



said, removing the cigar from his mouth, "There was one part of your story in court that I really believed."

"It would have made those seven years a little easier if I had known that."

"Don't be sarcastic," Phillips warned quietly, with just the right edge in his voice to show he meant it. Martin remained quiet. "I was positive you were being truthful when you claimed no knowledge of where the stolen money was hidden. My guess is your partner, Sam Hellman, hid the bulk of the payroll money before he was killed."

"If you believed that much of my story, why not the part that I was innocent?"

"Because you and Sam Hellman were positively identified by Purdy and Sheerwood."

"Wrong. Only Purdy identified me—positively. Sheerwood stated in court he wasn't sure I was the man with Sam."

"But five thousand dollars of the stolen money was found in your room when we went there to question you."

"It was planted."

"By whom? Sam Hellman?"

"Sam wouldn't frame me. It was his partner."

"The mysterious man who doesn't exist."

"There had to be another man with Sam. Because I wasn't."

"You had no alibi for your whereabouts at the time of the robbery. Purdy identified you. Sheerwood

heard Sam Hellman call you by name at the time of the robbery. And part of the money was found in your possession. I'm a man of facts, Martin, and those facts convicted you."

Martin flipped his cigarette out the car window. They were in the downtown area, sweeping past the dark store windows advertising the spring clear-out sells.

"Suppose we play it your way for a minute," Phillips said after a moment of silence. "Suppose you were framed by the someone who had pulled the job with Sam Hellman. Then, why didn't that someone start spending the money later? The bills would have eventually showed up, but they haven't."

"Because that someone doesn't know where the money is anymore than you do. After the job my guess is they both got scared and decided to stash most of the payroll. Each man took ten grand apiece. Then, whoever it was with Sam, decided he wanted a patsy. He took half of that ten grand and planted it in my apartment. He remembered Sam had mistakenly called him by my name during the robbery and that Purdy had recognized Sam. With Sam and me as close as brothers, I'd be the likely suspect. Meantime, Sam hid the bulk of the money in a safe place, then tried to make it out of town until things cooled down. But he had a wooden leg and he was hardly able to walk, let alone run. Crossing the railroad yards, he

tripped over a rail. The freight train cut him in half before he could get up."

"Not bad. I figured out that angle during the trial."

"Then why didn't you believe me in court?"

"Like I said, Martin, I'm a man of facts—not hunches or daydreams. The facts placed you there at the time of the robbery. There was no proof of there being another man in on the job. One and one makes two. Sam Hellman and Martin Sheenan make two. Simple."

Martin reluctantly agreed. The evidence against him had been strong and damning. Briefly he thought back over the trial, putting the events into their proper perspective as he had so many nights lying awake in his cell.

The state had presented its case as such: James Purdy, a bookkeeper for Sheerwood's Trucking, had been working late in the office when two masked men entered, both carrying guns. One of the men had a bad limp and Purdy recognized him as Sam Hellman, who also worked for the trucking concern. While forcing Purdy to open the safe, the second man had spoken and the bookkeeper had recognized Martin's voice. In court, he testified he took a close look at the second man and remembered seeing the small scar over the left eyebrow that Martin bore from Korea.

Then Arnold Sheerwood, the owner, had walked in unexpectedly.

Hellman, according to Sheerwood and Purdy, had said quickly, "Martin, watch the boss!" And "Martin" had, and a few minutes later both men ran out with over a hundred thousand dollars in payroll money.

The police had been called. After hearing details of the robbery, the police went to Martin's apartment. He had just come home and was getting ready for bed, when the police broke in, led by Phillips. What followed next was confusing and unbelievable. Before this stunned eyes, they had found part of the money and the holdup gun in his closet. He was unable to explain how they came to be in his possession.

An alarm was put out for Sam Hellman. A few hours after Martin's arrest, what was left of a man was identified as Hellman. Part of the money was found near the body that had been mangled by the freighttrain.

It had been like a nightmare, with each scene passing so rapidly in front of him that Martin had been merely a dazed spectator in a drama too frightening to be real. Only it had been real.

He shook his head, his voice barely audible, " 'Martin, watch the boss.' "

Phillips grinned sardonically. "What was that?"

"You heard be."

"Your friend really hung you with that," the lieutenant replied, watching for his reaction.

"He made a mistake. Sam wouldn't have made a deliberate statement that would implicate me and himself. Besides, somebody lied on that witness stand, Phillips, and I think you know it."

The car swung off the main drag and cruised slowly down a street lined with small shops. Martin easily recognized the neighborhood at a glance. Several blocks away was the Sheerwood Trucking buildings, and, to the west about a mile, was the railroad yards where Hellman's body had been discovered.

"I'm not blind to the possibility that you might have been innocent," Phillips said. "I don't believe that you were, but I'll admit you could have been. But I'm not concerned with that now. All I want is the money that was never recovered."

"I don't know where it is."

"I believe you, but I think you'll find it."

Martin looked incredulously at the big man, then shook his head, laughing shortly. "I understand the police tore the city apart looking for that money and couldn't even find a trace. What makes you think I will?"

"Because you knew Hellman better than anyone. And you knew his wife. You've had seven years to figure out where he might have hidden it, and if you don't have a pretty good idea by now, you're not as smart as I give you credit for."

"Thanks," Martin said dryly.

"Martin, play it smart. If you find

the money, turn it over to us."

"I don't intend looking for it."

Phillips scowled, started to say something, then changed his mind. He decided to let him finish.

"All I want is the second man in that robbery. When I find him, I'll clear myself and then sue the city for twice the amount of that payroll job."

Phillips studied him quietly for a moment, then broke into a slow, crooked grin. It was one of the few times Martin had ever seen the man even remotely resemble a smile.

"I almost believe," he said, surprised, "that you actually mean it."

"I do, Phillips. I really do."

Twenty minutes later, he found himself standing alone on a street corner. There had been more questions from Phillips, and finally, a stiff warning. Phillips was going to personally keep an eye on him, he knew, but he really didn't care.

Looking around him, he identified his surroundings. Phillips had guessed where he was going, and had dropped him within a block of his destination. Picking up his overnight bag, he started walking slowly.

The house was old, but the owner had kept up its appearance so that it shone majestically among the other less-cared-for brownstone tenement houses that sandwiched it. Going up the stoop, he found the front door unlocked and he climbed to the third floor, stopping outside the second door on the landing. He knocked once and waited.

Judy Hellman opened the door, looked curiously out for a moment, then uttered a small cry. She threw her arms around him and he hugged her close. She kissed him once on the cheek, then drew away, her cheeks flushed. Together, they both laughed, finding words inappropriate.

When their first reaction subsided, she took his hand, leading him into the room. It was a small apartment; the main room served as bedroom and living quarters. A small kitchen was off to the side, flanked by the bathroom. Only the bare necessities of furniture was there, but the room was cleaned and the air smelled of freshly scrubbed floors.

Finding her voice, she said, "Martin, it's been such a long time."

"Too long, Judy."

"You must be hungry. Sit down while I make you something."

"Don't bother. I had something on the way down. Maybe coffee, huh?"

They went into the kitchen and he sat down at the small table while she started preparing the coffee. They were both talking insensibly, trying to cover the seven years in a scant few minutes. He watched her, remembering her through the years. She had gained a few pounds and looked her age of thirty-two, but her physical attractiveness was still present. Inevitably, he found his eyes moving over her full breasts, straining against the sweater, down over her hips and thighs outlined in the

tweed skirt. Her legs were shaped nicely and the knee-length skirt revealed more today than he remembered the skirts had before. The long absence of a woman in his arms began to stir him, and he looked away, reminding himself this was Sam's wife.

He had known Judy almost as long as he had known Sam, ever since their first year in high school. Sam was dating her steady when he and Martin had entered into the service together. The war in Korea came and both men had been in one of the first companies shipped over.

They had hardly been in the trenches six months when Sam caught a piece of an exploding shell in his left leg, resulting in necessary amputation. Martin had been far enough away to receive only minor injuries, but both men had been shipped back to the states together.

A year after their discharge, Sam and Judy were married, and for awhile he seemed content despite the loss of his leg. He was working as a checker, recording numerous figures on a log sheet, at the Sheerwood Trucking Company where Martin drove a truck. But his leg kept him from advancing in the company and he became increasingly dissatisfied with the small wage he was earning.

Once, when having too many beers, he had spoken to Martin about the company being an easy mark for a stickup. Martin laughed at him, thinking he was only jok-

ing. But Sam had brought it up a month later, and this time he was cold sober. Martin had told him he was crazy and to forget the idea. Sam gave every indication that he had, until that night when Phillips broke into Martin's apartment.

The coffee was hot and good. He lit a cigarette for both of them and savored his coffee. She smiled warmly at him across the table.

"Were you able to obtain a place for me?" he asked.

"Yes, on the floor below me. Martin, I spoke to my boss and he said he's willing to let you work there. Being a dishwasher isn't much, but at least it's a start. You can see him in the morning."

"Right." He had other things more important, but he had to protect his parole. The parole officer would want to know immediately if he had a job.

Clearing his throat nervously, he said, "Judy, I hate to bring this up so sudden, but there are some things I'd like to know." He saw the smile leave her face, replaced by apprehension. "Did you know Sam intended to pull that job?"

She shook her head, her voice strained. "I'd rather not talk about it, Martin. It's over and done with now. Let's not bring it up, please."

"I'm sorry, Judy. I know it hasn't been easy on you either, but you know as well as I do I wasn't in on that job with Sam."

She was strangely silent, staring at the coffee cup before her. He went

on, too occupied with his own thoughts to notice her.

"Sam must of met someone else he could trust. Who he was, I have no idea. For the past seven years, I've been racking my brain trying to figure out who it could be, but I'll be damned if I can. Judy, you must of heard Sam mention something that could help me."

"No, Martin. I—I didn't even know he intended a robbery. Yes, I knew he was dissatisfied with his job, but I never dreamed he would do anything like that. Had I only known I would have stopped him."

Martin nodded, feeling his first hope crushed. Disgustedly, he left the table and walked into the other room, dropping down in an old, faded arm chair. She followed him, perching on the edge of the bed across from him. Watching him, silently, she tried to guess what was going through his mind.

"Somebody framed me, Judy," he told her, his voice going hard. "I'm going to find out who it was."

"Don't," she pleaded softly. "It will only lead to more trouble."

"Maybe, but it has to be done. It's all I've been thinking about ever since they turned that key on me."

"What will you gain by it?"

"Once I'm clear, I'll be in a position to be compensated by the state. That means money for both of us, Judy."

"You don't owe me anything. If it wasn't for Sam, you would never have gotten into trouble."

"You had nothing to do with it. Sam was bitter because of his leg. Maybe he thought he had it coming. Anyway, you shouldn't suffer because he made one mistake."

"You're too good, Martin."

Smiling, she slid off the bed and crossed to him, bending down to kiss him lightly on the cheek. Her nearness swept over him, the smell of her body tightening every nerve within him. Before she could step back, he pulled her down on top of him and covered her face with his mouth. She gasped, trying to pull free, but her movement only increased his excitement and insistence.

"No, Martin," she whispered hoarsely. "Please don't."

"It's been too long for both of us."

She struggled away, jumping to her feet but he was up in a second, forcing her back onto the bed. He felt her resistance and heard her cries, but his own urgency was too great, and soon she ceased to struggle, because it didn't matter any more.

He did not go to his own room that night and in the morning they had breakfast together, neither one speaking of the night before. Watching her, he thought she looked happier today. What had happened between them had been good, and he felt certain it would happen again. He thought of marriage but said nothing. It would come soon enough.

After breakfast, he took the bus

downtown with her and she introduced him to her boss who owned the restaurant where she worked as a waitress. After talking to him for fifteen minutes, the man agreed to hire Martin. He was to start in two days when the regular dishwasher quit. This pleased Martin for it would give him two days of freedom.

About ten that morning, he was in police headquarters, registering with the police, a small technicality in the law that could later prove troublesome. His next visit was to his parole officer, a short, fat man he decided to dislike immediately. He was kept there over an hour, then he was on his own. He went straight to the public library.

He spent better than two hours in the basement of the library, poring over old newspapers. He covered the time of his trial, finding it difficult to picture himself as the principal involved. He, then, tried to cover as many papers as possible over a period of time, glancing through each paper rapidly, looking for some item that might be of help.

He was ready to give up when his attention was drawn to a picture on page seven of a paper dated two months after his arrest. It was a photograph of a young woman sitting on a rail, her legs crossed, and she was smiling seductively into the lens. Her name was Virginia Adams, and he knew her well.

She had been a barmaid in a saloon across the street from Sheer-

wood Trucking Company. There wasn't a man who worked for the company that didn't know Virginia. Her husband owned the bar and hovered around her constantly, his jealous eyes never once leaving her, but she was a delight to the men and more than one had scored with her.

The news article stated she was being divorced by her husband. He had nearly suffered a mental breakdown and was unable to take any more of his wife's unfaithfulness. Martin was unable to suppress a smile as he read the husband's testimony of how she had tormented him with histories of her lovers and how one had even bought her an expensive diamond bracelet.

Leaving the article, he thumbed through several papers before growing tired of the tedious task. He would return to it later. Time was of no real importance now.

He was leaving the library when something occurred to him. A minute incident hidden in the past suddenly emerged from the black sea of subconsciousness, and he stopped dumbfounded on the bottom step of the library. He was thinking of the diamond bracelet mentioned in the news article.

It brought back memories now. He remembered a hot midsummer afternoon less than a month before his arrest. Thirsty, he and Sam and a few others had gone into the bar for a drink. Virginia had served them and she had been wearing a

diamond bracelet. Sam had noticed it and kidded her about having a rich boy friend. She had only laughed.

Then someone else had walked in, looking around nervously before taking a stool at the far end of the bar. Martin remembered being surprised at seeing him there, for it was the first time the man had come into the place. The thought had passed quickly from his mind, and Martin had resumed talking with the others. The incident had been forgotten until now.

Curiously, he wondered if there was any connection to Virginia's bracelet, the robbery, and the man who had come into the bar that hot midsummer afternoon. The man had been James Purdy, the bookkeeper for Arnold Sheerwood.

He took a bus across town, jumping off a few blocks from the trucking company. He walked rapidly, afraid that if he allowed himself time to think he might become too frightened to continue.

Reaching the building, he hesitated a moment, watching the men on the loading platform. Some of the men he recognized, but most of them were strangers. Not wanting to be noticed, he went quickly around the corner and toward the side entrance that led to Sheerwood's office.

He half expected, and wanted, to see the bent, huddle figure of James Purdy, his bald head shining brilliantly in the overhead light as he

worked with a loving passion over his books. Instead, he found an attractive young girl in Purdy's place. Sheerwood had added a secretary as well, and she was an older woman, appearing quite efficient at her desk flanking the entrance to Sheerwood's private office.

She smiled mechanically at Martin, glancing briefly over his dark, inexpensive suit. "Yes, may I help you?" she asked.

"I would like to see Mr. Sheerwood."

"And what is your name and business, please?"

"Martin Sheenan." There was no recognition in her eyes. "Just give my name and that I would like to see him. Mr. Sheerwood knows me."

She hesitated a moment, then rose and went into the other office. He waited nervously, using the time to look around the office. Very little had changed, except the noted absence of Purdy. He was pondering that when the secretary returned.

"Mr. Sheerwood said you may come in."

He had not expected to get in that easy. It seemed unlikely to think Sheerwood would be particularly anxious to see the man he had help send to prison unless there was a personal interest behind his willingness. He went in, wondering what the man's nature would be.

Sheerwood was pleasant and polite, as he he only could be. The man was big and ruggedly good-looking in spite of his fifty-some years. He

wore the expression of a self-made man, which was what he was. He had built the company from scratch owing few favors and making few enemies, which is not an easy feat.

"Hello, Martin," he said pleasantly. "When did you arrive home?"

"Last night."

"I'm glad to hear it. Won't you sit down?"

Martin took a seat, crossing one leg over another. Sheerwood leaned back in his desk, smiling calmly.

"Now, what can I do for you?" he asked pointedly.

"First, I want to thank you."

"For what? Helping send you to prison?"

"No, for not trying to railroad me into prison."

"I helped identify you as one of the holdup men."

"You only repeated what Sam said during the holdup. Then you gave a positive identification of Sam, but stated you did not think the second man was me in spite of what Sam had said."

"Why, then, do you think Sam used your name?"

"Nervousness, force of habit. We were usually partners in everything. I think he said 'Martin' without even thinking. Sam wasn't a professional criminal, you know."

"Yes, true. I'm sorry about what happened in court though. The evidence against you was pretty strong."

"So I've been told, but let me ask you one straight question. Is there



any room in your mind that I might be innocent?"

Sheerwood took his time answering, weighing each word carefully. It was evident, he was not going to hang himself. "As I said, I was not as sure as Purdy that you were the second man. However, I have great faith in our courts, and you were tried and found guilty in one. True, our justice is not infallible, and there is a possibility that you were convicted through a miscarriage of justice, but that is not for I to say."

Martin nodded, satisfied. "That's good enough, Mr. Sheerwood. I would like to ask a favor now."

Sheerwood laughed uneasily. "I hope it's not a job you want."

"No, I have a job lined up. But first I'm going to try and find the second man involved in that holdup. I think you might be able to help me if you want to."

Sheerwood shrugged. "I don't see how or what you intend to gain, but I see no harm in helping you if I can."

"I intend to gain a great deal, Mr. Sheerwood. I spent quite a few years behind bars for something I never did and I intend to be compensated for it."

"Oh, I see. Well, how can I be of service to you?"

"Earlier today I was looking through some old newspapers and came across an article on a man-and-wife divorce suit. The girl was Virginia Adams. She worked across the street in the bar."

"Yes, I know of the case. Mr. Purdy ceased to work for me shortly after that. I don't like my employees to become involved in such things—creates a bad image for the company."

"Purdy was involved?" It came as a shock in spite of his earlier suspicions.

"Definitely—although it was never made public."

It was almost too good to be true.

"But why Purdy?" Martin began to think aloud. "Virginia was no angel, granted, but she picked her boy friends. She liked them big and strong and rugged . . ."

"Not at all like our Purdy, huh, Martin?"

A slow grin played on Martin's face. "Precisely what I was driving at. For Virginia to go for Purdy in such a big way that her husband finally called it quits, Purdy had to have something going for him. But what?"

"I think, from your tone, you have your own answer to the question."

"Just a hunch. Less than a month before that holdup, Virginia was supporting a diamond bracelet that must of cost a nice little sum of cash. The bracelet was mentioned in the papers. She claimed one of her boy-friends gave it to her. That boy-friend was Purdy."

"Where would Purdy get that type of money? I . . ." Sheerwood paused, and Martin knew he was getting the idea. "I see your point. Purdy was stealing funds."

"Right. Stealing ready cash, balancing the books the best he could but he knew he couldn't hide it from you forever. Eventually, by a routine check of the books, it would be discovered."

"So Purdy helped stage the hold-up, figuring the robbery would cover up the shortage."

"The only trouble came when you walked unexpectedly into the office while Purdy was opening the safe. Sam and his partner played it cagey, letting you think Purdy had been forced to open the safe. Later, when Sam was discovered dead, Purdy decided to protect his partner by framing me."

Sheerwood shook his head sadly, then smiled. "Your amateurish detective methods are showing all ready. First of all, Purdy knew I was coming back to the office that night. And secondly, Sam Hellman and his partner were masked when I walked in. Third, your name was mentioned immediately, not by Purdy but by Sam himself. Fourth, the money was found in your possession before Hellman's body was discovered."

Four reasons knocked his story out the window. Disgustedly, Martin rose and began pacing the room. Sheerwood watched him quietly for a moment.

"You know, Martin," he said at length, "if you are going to clear yourself, there is one thing you have to admit right now. Sam Hellman framed you from the start."

Martin looked sharply at him but said nothing. He knew that Sheerwood was right. It had to be a frame-up from the start. Sam and his partner knew Sheerwood was coming back to the office that night. They wanted him too, for he could witness Sam calling his partner "Martin". And Purdy had identified them both immediately. But something was wrong. Why did Sam want himself tied into the job unless he had been double-crossed by Purdy and the second man. The whole thing didn't make sense—unless Purdy was innocent.

"Whatever happened to Purdy, Mr. Sheerwood?"

"He left town shortly after I fired him. To tell you the truth, he didn't seem too broken up about losing his job. Almost relieved. Anyway, he and Virginia Adams left together."

That made Martin's theory even more logical. More and more, Purdy was emerging as a stronger possibility than before. If he could only figure out the motive behind his own frame-up. Someone had benefited by it. Not Purdy, and certainly not Sam Hellman, who, in fact, stood more to lose by framing him.

"You ever hear of Purdy after he left town?"

"Oh, Purdy returned here about a year ago—without Virginia Adams. I don't know what became of her, but I know Purdy was hardly anything like himself. He never was much of a man, as you well know, and when he came back he was even

thinner and paler, almost like a dead man."

"Where is he now?"

"He works for a small firm—doesn't make much money from what I understand. He lives in a bordering house on Macon Street. The one that used to be a nursery."

Martin said he knew the place.

"Sorry I can't help you any more than that, Martin."

Marting shook his hand, saying he had been a great help. Leaving with the promise that Sheerwood would be willing to have his old records rechecked for possible embezzlement by Purdy if Martin was to learn anything new, Martin took the bus crosstown.

Macon Street was a quiet place. The houses lining both sides of the block were old, dating back close to a hundred years. The many shade trees seemed as ancient, and the whole feeling was that of placidness so deeply rooted nothing could break its spell.

Martin went up the broken, uneven paved walk leading to the old white-frame house that had served as a nursery twenty-some years before. He knocked once on the door and waited. In a few minutes, he heard the shuffle of slippers and the door opened a crack. An aged, weather-beaten woman's face peered out suspiciously.

"Yes?" her voice cracked.

"I'd like to see Mr. Purdy."

"What's your name?" she asked sharply.

"Martin . . ." He hesitated, thought of giving an alias, then changed his mind. He was on parole and the slightest trouble would send him back to prison. If Purdy seen him, it would have to be willingly.

"Martin Sheenan."

The old woman closed the door and he heard the lock click. Minutes went by slowly and he became worried. He was on the verge of knocking again when he heard the car pull up in front. Turning, he was stunned to see the patrol car.

Grimly, he went down the walk and met the uniformed man half way. The officer looked curiously at him, then asked gruffly, "What's your name?"

"Martin Sheenan."

"We got a call that you were trying to break into that house."

"Did it look like I was trying to break in?"

"Don't get sassy, mister, or I'll pull you in for disorderly conduct. For a guy on parole, that wouldn't be good at all."

"I see you know who I am."

"Uh-huh, and what you're doing here."

"I only wanted to speak with Mr. Purdy, not harm him. Their calling the police was unnecessary."

"Maybe so, fellow. I know the old lady in that house is pretty eccentric and delights in making phone calls to the police, but you're in no position to be making house calls to people who don't want to see you. Especially if that person happens to

be the man who sent you to prison. So be a smart boy. Go home—and stay home.”

He had little choice but to go home and stay there. On the way, he picked up two six packs of beer and went up to Judy’s place but she had not come home yet. He tried his own apartment, seeing it for the first time. It was similar to Judy’s only not as clean. Compared to his living quarters in the passed seven years, it was a luxury suite.

He proceeded to drink the beer alone, and soon discovered he did not have the capacity he had once before. Six cans and he was drunk. The faster, the better.

It was nearly six when he heard someone going upstairs. Jumping off the bed, he stumbled to the door, jerking it open. Judy stopped, looking in surprise down at him. She was on the stairs above him, one foot resting on the next step. Standing below, he was afforded a view of her legs under the dress. He grinned sheepishly.

“Sexy,” he said.

She stepped back stiffly, pressing her skirt to her legs. “Martin, are you drunk?”

“Like a louse. Come here, I want to talk to you.”

“No, I don’t think I should.”

“Then, I’ll come up to your place.”

“No, Martin. Not now.”

Inspite of her protest, he followed her up to the next floor and into her place. Inside, he tried to kiss her but she pulled away roughly

and he almost lost his balance.

“Hey!”

“Leave me alone!”

“You’re drunk!” she said curtly.

Her refusal sobered him slightly, enough where he could feel ashamed. Apologizing, he slumped down in a chair, rubbing his face with both hands. She started making coffee.

“It’s worthless, Judy,” he said later, holding the half empty cup in his curled hands. “I started out today with all kinds of theories—good ones, too. Then I went to see Purdy and couldn’t even get pass the front door. How in the hell can I prove my innocence if I can’t even talk to the people who helped frame me?”

She looked curiously at him for a long time, like she was studying a rare specimen. He didn’t even notice her look.

“Some day Purdy and I will cross paths. I’ll make sure of it. There won’t be any witnesses, either. And Purdy will talk. I swear to God he’ll talk.”

“And you’ll go back to prison.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head doggedly. “When I’m through with Purdy, I’ll know the truth. Then so will Phillips.”

“Forget it, Martin. For your own sake, please stop this crazy idea of yours.”

Grinning, he shook his head again. Leaning closer over the table, he whispered to her as if telling a great secret. “Judy, you and I have something coming to us. When I

prove my innocence, I'll sue this state for enough money to set us up for life. We'll blow this berg and go further east. You and I."

A strange, clouded expression crossed her eyes, and he thought she was surprised at his proposal. He reached for her hand but she drew it back quickly.

"Judy, we had something good last night. There's no reason why we can't have it again—for always."

"No, Martin. It wasn't good like you think. I let you have me because I knew you were hungry for a woman and I—felt obligated."

"Judy . . ."

"Yes, it's true! And do you know what I kept thinking while you made love to me? I kept thinking you were Sam. Over and over in my mind I kept calling you Sam. Do you want that, Martin? Everytime you take me in your arms you'll lose your identity and will become a dead man. Is that what you want?"

The beer had lost all of its effects now. He had never known a more sober moment. Standing slowly, he muttered, "Thanks for the coffee," and made his way downstairs.

In his own room, he tried to sleep but it was impossible. Finally, he finished the second six pack and fell into bed in a drunken stupor, and only that way did sleep come.

The following morning, he Hellman and his partner had taken covered the route he thought Sam the night of the robbery. It led him to the apartment house Martin had

lived in. Sam had possessed a key and had no trouble gaining entry to plant the money.

Next to the railroad yards where Sam's body had been found near a huge water tank. From here to the trucking company it was more than a mile, and the money could have been hidden at any point.

The rest of the day he tried to think, but it was useless. By evening, he was only more troubled and disgusted. He went to a movie out of desperation for something to do—to let his mind rest for a few hours at least. When he returned home, it was nearly 10:30 and hardly the time for visitors.

He had just reached the front door of his place when he heard the voice call out from behind. "Martin!" it said gruffly. He didn't have to turn to know who the speaker was.

"Hello, lieutenant," he said. "Just checking?"

"No, Martin, You'd better get into the car and come with us."

"Why? I haven't broken parole."

"Purdy was murdered about an hour ago. Someone shot him in the back of the head while he was having supper in his boarding house."

They questioned him on the way to headquarters and more questions followed later. He told them his whereabouts and the story was checked. Luckily, the girl behind the candy counter had thought he was "cute" and remembered selling him a bag of popcorn about the same time someone had sneaked up to

an open window and shot Purdy.

"Too bad," Martin said.

Phillips arched one eyebrow up. "You sound like you mean it."

"Purdy was my ticket of freedom. Without that ticket, I can't go anywhere."

"Someone must of thought it would be better if Purdy was killed."

"Then maybe you believe me now."

Phillips shrugged, then said seriously, "If you are innocent of the holdup, that means Purdy's murderer is the same one who helped pull the job with Hellman. With you coming out of prison, the guy probably got scared. Figured if you ever got your hands on Purdy, he would talk."

"He would have, too. Purdy, I figure, was juggling Sheerwood's books. He was running around with Virginia Adams, and to keep a girl like Virginia interested in him, he had to dole out a lot of cash. Sam must of gotten wind of it somehow—probably through the girl—and approached Purdy with a proposition. Purdy was all for it. Sam had already asked me if I was interested and I thought he was joking. I guess the joke was on me."

"Nice friend you had."

"He gave his left leg in Korea to save my life."

Phillip's eyes turned to small slits. "Oh? I remember when his wife identified the body—or what was left of it. She could only tell by the wooden leg."

"It doesn't make sense, does it? A man does that for you, then turns around and frames you for something you wanted no part of."

"Maybe not. Anyway, I think we can reopen the investigation."

"How? Purdy is dead. He was our only lead."

"There's the Adams dame. It won't be hard running her down. It may take time, but we'll find her."

"Then I can go home?"

"Right, but take it easy, Martin. You may not be as safe as you think."

It was nearly midnight when Martin reached the street. The buses stop running about then and he lacked the money for cab fare. It was a long walk back to his place, but he had little choice. It was a warm summer night and the walk was not bad. He took his time, thinking over the past couple of days. He had someone worried, all right. Only who?

He reached his place around one and started upstairs. He was putting the key in the lock when he heard the sound above him. A heavy thump, then a lighter one. The landing overhead squeaked once, then a door opened and closed gently. It sounded like it came from Judy's place.

Frowning, he hesitated, then started up the stairs quietly. A light shone under Judy's door but as he reached the landing, it went out. He knocked on the door, hard.

"Judy, open up. It's Martin."

Silence.

"Judy!"

He could hear light footsteps coming to the door, then her voice pitched low. "I'm in bed now, Martin. Come back in the morning, please."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course."

Something was wrong. He couldn't quite pinpoint it, but he knew the queer feeling in his stomach was too strong to ignore.

"Open the door, Judy. I want to make sure you're all right."

"Don't be silly. I told you nothing was wrong."

"Either open up or I'll call the police. Purdy was killed tonight and that means a murderer is running around loose. I can't take any chances."

She did not answer for a moment and he waited, apprehensive. He was ready to knock again when the door suddenly swung open. It was dark inside and he felt his body tighten. Judy stood far enough back where he could not see her.

"Come in, Martin."

Her voice was strange, almost like a warning. He went in, quickly reaching for the light switch. The room was flooded with light and he saw her before him, fully dressed.

"You said you were in bed . . ." he began, then stopped, seeing the closed suitcase on the bed.

"Close the door, Judy."

The voice had come from his left, and he whirled, stopping as if he

had rammed into a brick wall. The man stood near the kitchen, a .38 revolver in his right hand. He was grinning crookedly, and he took a step toward Martin, his left leg stiff and heavy in step. Martin's mouth dropped open in stupefied amazement, and Sam Hellman laughed.

"Relax, Martin. It's I all right—and very much alive."

He was unable to answer at first. He looked at Judy, but she would not return his stare. Back at Sam, the truth slowly dawned on him and the shock gave away to hate.

"Sure," he said. "Now it makes sense. Now I know why you made it a point to frame me. You were planning all along to double-cross your partner, killing him and letting his body be identified as yours. Judy even knew it and did as you told her."

Hellman laughed, shifting to his right and motioning Judy to move further away from Martin. There had been little change in Sam. A little heavier and his hair was gray, possibly dyed. He was dressed conservatively and expensively.

"You should have gone in with me on the job, Martin, then I wouldn't of had to frame you. But I made a mistake thinking you were a good friend. I gave my leg for you, pal, but you couldn't stick your neck out to help me."

"I didn't ask you to give your leg, Sam. I would have done the same and never expected any thanks."

"Can it!" he snapped curtly. "It's

pretty easy talking big now, but it wasn't you had your leg blown off. It wasn't you who was stuck on a job making sixty-five a week with no chance of going any farther because you were a cripple. You were making good money, I wasn't."

"Is that why you framed me?"

"I had to. I already told you my idea, and I knew when I pulled the job, you would guess it was I."

"I wouldn't have said anything."

"No? How would I know for sure, pal?"

"So you intended to frame me all along?"

"That's right. Purdy was into the company for about ten grand. He needed a way out and jumped at my plan. Then I found a drifter with a bum leg like mine. It wasn't hard talking him into the job."

"You made sure Sheerwood would catch you in the act of forcing Purdy to open the safe. You called the drifter by my name for Sheerwood's benefit, then you both stashed the money in my place. One question, how did you get the drifter to take your place?"

"He thought we were going to hop a freight out of town. When we got to the railroad yards, I clubbed him over the head and changed clothes. Then I stood behind the water tank and waited for a freight to come through. I had already timed the trains and knew one was due in a few minutes. When I heard it coming, I stepped out in view and shoved the guy under the

train. I figured the engineer would get a glimpse of me and later you would be charged with my murder—the police thinking you had doubled-crossed me. Luckily for you, the engineer never seen me."

Martin turned slowly to face Judy. She was watching Sam.

"And you knew it all along," he said bitterly. "You even identified the drifter's body as Sam and let me sit out seven years in prison for something I was never a part of."

"Lay off of her pal."

Martin laughed. "Lay off of her? Too bad you weren't there to tell me that the first night I was back. Now I know why you felt obligated to me that night, Judy."

She looked angrily at him, but the anger turned to shame quickly. Sam, watching them both, understood the meaning behind his words and laughed gently.

"I guess you had something coming, all right," he said.

"Sam, I thought I knew you pretty good. Now I don't know you at all."

"Can the dramatics, pal."

"After you set me up for a patsy, you skipped town. Judging from the way you're dressed, you must of put the money to good use. And during the past seven years, you've been living high on the hog while I sat behind bars and your wife slaved to make a living."

"Too bad you got out so soon. A little more time and I could have sent for Judy, and no one would have ever known the truth."



"You never intended to send for her. If I had never gotten out of prison you would not have to return here. But you found out I was back and knew that Purdy was also in town, his share of the money gone because Virginia Adams took him for a cleaning. You became worried, figured I'd make Purdy talk, so you sneaked back into town and bumped him off. Now you want to get Judy away before the police start re-questioning her and learn the truth."

"Don't listen to him, baby," Hellman said, his eyes narrowed.

"He's telling the truth, Sam," she said softly.

"Baby . . ."

"No, Sam. I know it's the truth, but I don't care. Maybe I'm crazy but I love you too much to care."

Hellman broke into a wide grin. "How's that for loyalty, pal?"

"Sam, I hope you rot in hell."

"I probably will, but it's going to be heaven on earth."

Martin felt exasperated. He wanted to scream, to hit, to unleash the fury that burned inside him, but he knew there was nothing he could do. Sam had been an excellent pistol shot in the army. He would cut him down before he could take two steps forward.

"So what happens now?" Martin asked dryly.

"The three of us will go for a little drive. You won't go far—maybe about ten miles out in the country. Then I'll take Judy up to

Baltimore. I have a few clubs up there, pal. I can hide Judy out for a year with no trouble. Then, I'll sell my clubs, and Judy and I will quietly leave the country."

"It won't work, Sam. The police are already reopening the case. My disappearance won't help any. Eventually, they'll learn the truth."

"Maybe, but it won't be easy finding me. I've done a pretty good job of covering up my tracks. Let's go now."

He motioned toward the door with the revolver. Martin turned, looked once at Judy, then walked slowly toward the door. They were close behind him going downstairs. Outside, Hellman told him to walk to the corner. Martin could see Sam's big car waiting. He had noticed it when he first came home, but had not given it much attention.

They were half way to the corner when two men quietly emerged from the shadows on their left. Martin seen them first, recognizing both men as the two police officers that had been with Phillips at the bus depot. Seeing his only chance, Martin lunged to his right.

"It's Sam Hellman! He's got a gun!" He screamed as he dove for the pavement and even before the hard surface slammed into his shoulder, gun shots blasted the night air to pieces. He rolled onto his back, looking for cover, but it was not necessary.

Sam Hellman lay face down, one arm stretched out with the 38

clutched tightly in one hand. Judy threw herself beside him, crying hysterically. One of the police officers quickly removed the .38 revolver from the dead man's hand, then stood back and watched the woman, his face expressionless.

The other officer helped Martin to his feet. Except for a slight pain in his shoulder, Martin was all right. He smiled weakly at the officer.

"Nice shooting," he said.

"It was a good thing you jumped out of the way."

"What brought you here anyway?"

"Lieutenant Phillips told us to stake out Mrs. Hellman's apartment after you left headquarters. It seems you tipped the lieutenant off that Hellman was still alive."

"I did?"

The officer nodded. "You told the lieutenant Hellman had lost his left

leg in Korea saving your life. Only when the body on the tracks was discovered, it was the right leg that was wooden. He checked back over the reports to make sure, then sent us here to watch Mrs. Hellman. He figured her husband might try to contact her if he was back in town. Luckily for you, we just arrived a few minutes ago."

"Remind me," Martin said, "to kiss that lieutenant when I see him again."

Hellman's body was taken to the morgue and, according to law, the nearest living relative had to identify the body. Judy Hellman once again had this chore, only this time it was the body of her husband she stared at lying on the morgue table.

Dawn was breaking when Martin finally left police headquarters and walked home. It was a long walk, but he didn't mind it in the least.



# THE EXPLOSIVE TRIANGLE

BY  
FRANK  
GAY

*Barbara Catcher had two irritating problems . . . and a brief case full of death.*

THE idea of killing and even the weapon, curiously enough, had been supplied to Barbara Catcher by her husband two days before.

He had broken the cold silence in which they usually drove home from the office by announcing angrily, "I'm going to kill Henrickson, and I want your help."

Barbara always pretended to be bored with her husband's hatred of his business partner. She replied, without emotion, "Don't be ridiculous, Fred."

She was slender and still beautiful sitting beside him on the front

seat of the station wagon. Her dark eyes affected a vacant stare past the windshield wipers as he pushed along the expressway through the rain and the wet shine.

She waited, wondering which of his usual tirades would follow: the one about men of brains and no money who are forced to form partnerships with men of money and no brains. Or the one about the ruinous loss of clients and accounts which follows the breaking up of a partnership in an advertising firm.

Instead he hissed, "Henrickson's been stealing us blind."

She almost panicked, then got control of herself. Fearfully she asked (but only because she knew he expected her to), "What do you mean?"

"He's taken at least \$20,000 from the firm. Probably more."

The real figure, she knew, was closer to \$50,000. She wondered, not without terror, if he also knew and was taunting and trapping her. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He was breathing heavily. He had added 40 pounds of weight in the last year, thickening his ruddy features and rounding his small frame. Part of the heavy breathing was the weight, but the other part, she sensed, was plain fury.

He said nothing more all the way home. But once there he made highballs, ushered her into the living room and began again, "I need your help in this, Barbara."

He did not wait for her answer, but took it for granted and plunged into his plan. She was chilled by the edge of violence that lay just beneath his words.

His plan was simple enough. He had obtained a brief case which was an exact duplicate of the one Henrickson carried, even down to the embossed-gold name. He had had it rigged with a bomb which would go off when the brief case was opened.

On Wednesday, immediately after he and Henrickson lunched with a client, Henrickson was flying to

New Orleans. Henrickson undoubtedly would pack his brief case before lunch, pick it up after lunch, and be on his way. She was to switch brief cases during lunch.

Barbara Catcher knew there was only one answer to give him. If he suspected and she refused, she would confirm his suspicion. If he did not suspect and she refused, she might, in his present state of mind, invite suspicion.

She accepted.

But she also began considering the possibility of switching the brief cases in accordance with a plan of her own.

Each Monday night Barbara Catcher went out to bowl with a group of girl friends from her school days. She always invited Fred along, and he always refused. This Monday night was no exception.

The lone difference this Monday was that he helped her on with her raincoat and kissed her lightly on the forehead. She could not remember when he'd last done that. She speculated that all she had to do to resurrect her marriage was agree more often to help him with murder.

She tossed her bowling shoes on the front seat of the big station wagon and drove briskly through suburbia into the wet night. The bowling alley was to the east. After three blocks, she turned west.

Fifteen minutes later she pulled

into the parking lot of the plush Hamilton Place Garden Apartments, parked and walked to the side entrance. She entered quietly and inserted her key in the door of the first apartment on the right.

G. Wilson Henrickson was attired, appropriately enough, in pajamas and lounging robe. He was not quite 40, distinguished looking, trim and very tall, with a handsome graying at the temples. When he hurried toward her, she assumed it was to kiss her. Instead he said, "Your coat is dripping on the floor. Let me take it."

She gave it to him angrily, reminding herself that this was but the latest in a series of recent slights.

Then he did return to kiss her, but she pushed away, saying, "I want to wipe my lipstick." She went into the powder room and locked the door.

She was hurt and she was worried. The face and the dark, beautiful eyes that looked back at her from the mirror were filled with concern. She wondered what lay ahead for her—for all three of them—in the next few days.

Absently, without attention to what she was doing, she removed a facial tissue from the box and wiped her lipstick. When the tissue was covered, she tossed it toward the waste container. It missed and she stooped to retrieve it.

Another tissue inside the container caught her eye. She removed it. It too was smeared with lip-

stick, but the shade was pink. Barbara Catcher did not wear pink.

She was stunned. She loved this man. She had clung to him after the complete failure of her marriage. She had given him everything, and then she had helped him steal some \$50,000 from the firm.

He knocked on the door and called, "Are you all right?"

His voice startled her. She unlocked the door and rushed past him back to the living room. When he caught up with her, she held out the lipsticked tissue and said, "That's not my shade. It's not even close."

He started to say something, then stopped and said nothing. They stood there and looked at each other.

Finally, she said, "Get my coat." He did, and she left. She had told him nothing.

She drove around in the rain for the next two hours. She had little idea where she was driving. She was preoccupied with a question: which of them did she most want to see dead?

The question remained unanswered until 1:50 P.M. on Wednesday. At precisely that moment Barbara Catcher stopped pacing the floor of her office and removed a handsome brief case from her stationery cabinet. She carried it in a straight line from her office across the space occupied by the Art Department to her husband's office.

She emerged empty-handed a moment later, went next to Henrickson's office and then returned to her own carrying a brief case which appeared identical in every particular. She opened the briefcase, removed an envelope of money, glared angrily at the envelope, then placed the brief case in the stationery cabinet and the envelope in the top, center drawer of her desk.

When the two partners returned from lunch fifteen minutes later, Fred Catcher put his head in her door and asked, "Everything okay?"

It was a recurring surprise to her to note how puffy his eyes and cheeks had become. "Fine," she replied. "Exactly as planned."

He nodded and went to his own office. When she saw his door close, she called Henrickson on the intercom. "Your brief case is in his office, in the drawer of his file cabinet. He had me put it there so he could search it before you left."

She added with sarcasm, "He thinks you're less than honorable

and that you'd secret money in out-of-town banks. Imagine!" Then she reassured him, "But everything's okay—I removed the envelope." She could almost hear his sigh of relief.

She continued, "This is the time to beard the lion in his den. Storm in, drag the brief case out of the file drawer and show him there's nothing in it. Raise hell."

"He'll know you told me."

"Say one of the artists saw me carrying it into his office," she said.

He hesitated momentarily, then said, "I'll never have another chance like this." He put the phone down sharply.

She watched as he crossed from his office and entered Fred's. She got up hurriedly and closed her office door, went back behind her desk and lay on the floor. "No," she said, "you'll never have another chance like this."

As the building shook and glass shattered in the roar of a violent explosion, Barbara Catcher added, "Neither will Fred."



# Alien Hero



*A Novelette*

**BY JOHN CHANCELLOR**

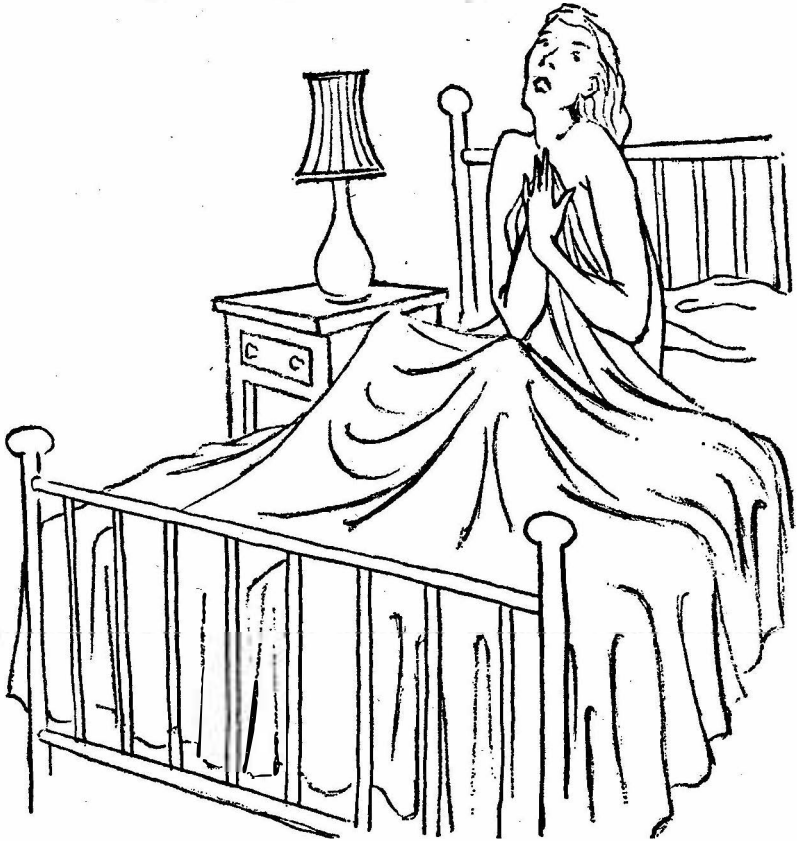
*The blonde, at best, had been a frustrating mistake . . . when she was killed, it was murder.*

I'd ditched the blonde at the Polish Volunteer, that Surrey roadhouse run by the Polish Battle of Britain pilot that everybody calls Preez.

I was fed up with her. She'd known all right what I meant when I asked her to come for a spin in the country that summer weekend, have a few drinks and a dinner,

and then stop overnight at a roadhouse. I'd spent money and done the job well. I'd even booked two adjoining bedrooms at the Polish Volunteer to make it look respectable. Not that Preez would have cared. Not asking questions paid his overheads.

We'd had lashings of gin and French, the best dinner the Volun-



teer could put on, a bottle of bubbly and a couple of dances to the three-piece band.

Then at half-past nine—nice and early, I'd thought—we'd gone upstairs, my heart knocking and full of anticipation.

But the damn bitch had just locked herself in her room and laughed at me through the door.

"Good night, Jeff," she'd said. "See you at breakfast."

I didn't say much. I couldn't stand on the landing arguing through the door with the place full of people. But I was hopping mad. No bloody woman stands me up like that.

So I went. I cut my losses and got out. She could find her own



way back to London, and I didn't care if she walked.

There I was, my well-planned weekend busted to bits, driving away from the Polish Volunteer that Saturday evening with the red of the sunset still lingering in the sky.

I was in a vile temper, and it hadn't been improved when I got in the car and sat down painfully on my bedroom key, which I'd forgotten to give back and still had in my hip-pocket, attached to a lump of aluminum four inches square with the room number stamped on it.

But I'd had enough of the Polish Volunteer for one night, and I'd be hanged if I'd get out again and hand the key in. Preez could wait for it till next time I was around.

I rolled along, pretty grim, trying to make up my mind where I'd go and what I'd do. Above the purr of the engine I heard some shooting in the fields beside the narrow, winding lane—two or three guns, I thought—and wondered what the hell they were shooting at at that hour, nearly lighting-up time.

Then there was a metallic crash on the road and a hollow clatter, and I knew one of my wheel-discs had come off and was spinning away to lose itself.

That was the last straw. I drew up beside the ditch and got out, cursing and blinding.

You never find a wheel-disc. I've lost several in my time, and spent futile hours getting torn to bits in

hedges looking for them. But I always look, like everybody else.

There was no hedge here. Only a ditch, then a three-strand wire fence with a plantation of young trees on the other side of it, and beyond the trees what looked like an open field gleaming lighter in the distance.

I cast about under the trees, kicking up the thick mush of sodden leaves with the toe of my shoe, knowing it was hopeless and I'd never find the damn thing.

The shooting was still going on spasmodically.

I got interested. Then suddenly I forgot about the wheel-disc and stood listening. They were rifles, not shotguns—two or three of them. There must be a rifle-range here, though I'd never heard of one. But who would be shooting at this time, nearly dark?

Curious, I went on to the edge of the plantation and looked out at the field. No sign of a rifle-range there. It was just a field, with trees all round and nothing in it except a trailer caravan a few yards from where I stood.

I lighted a cigarette, keeping the flame of my lighter going for a few unnecessary seconds by way of a precaution. As I expected, there was no more shooting. By that time I'd hit on what I thought was the explanation. It was just the people from the caravan, down on their bellies somewhere in a hollow, blazing away at bottles.

I strolled towards the caravan. It was in darkness, but they'd come back in a minute, I thought, carrying their guns, and if there were kids, as there probably were, I'd offer them five bob to search for my wheel-disc in the morning.

It had just struck me that it was queer I didn't hear anybody talking when there was one more shot.

It came from back of me somewhere. I felt the wind of the bullet on my neck, which is a hell of a thing to feel. A window in the caravan crashed to bits and slivers of glass flew and tinkled all over the place.

I didn't stop to think. When things like that happen you don't. I'd have been safer on the ground, but I gave a yell and flung myself at the caravan door. I had it open and shut and me inside when the next shot came, and the bullet of that one went right through one wall and out the other.

"Stop shooting!" I yelled, crouching under the windows. "You bloody fools! What do you think you're doing?"

"They'll not stop because you ask them to," a girl's voice said.

It was just light enough to see the shape she had as I found her kneeling near me on the caravan floor, and I got the warm female smell of her. Even in my worst moments, and this was one of them, I notice things like that.

"You're mad!" I cried. "Do they want to murder somebody?"

"Yes," she said. "Me."

"You're crackers," I said.

But the shock had passed and I was calming down. We were silent, listening. There was no more shooting. There was nothing to hear except, a mile away on the main road, cars going by.

I stood up and looked through the broken window. There was nothing to see.

"They seem to have gone," I said, relaxing, and I crouched down again in front of her. "Now you and I are going to the police—now, at this minute. I've got a car on the road. Let's get these trigger-happy Teddies or whoever they are picked up before they really kill somebody. They've made a mess of your caravan already."

She gave a low laugh.

"They want to kill somebody. I told you. Me."

I flicked my lighter and took a look at her.

At any other time she'd have stopped my breath. Even then she registered all right. She was dark and young, about twenty, with wonderful deep brown eyes, and ripe red lips that looked as if they could kiss all the sense out of you. She was in ordinary country clothes, and her well-filled jumper rose and fell as we gazed at each other in the small yellow flame.

"They want to kill you?" I asked incredulously.

"They've killed Hans," she said.

I turned my head, holding the

lighter out towards where she was looking, and saw a man under the table, dead as mutton. He was lying on his face in a pool of blood, and there was a hole in his back I could have put my fist in.

"Good God!" I said, and doused the flame.

I crouched there, stunned but listening. There was still nothing to hear except our breathing and the thumping of my heart.

"I wonder if they've really gone?" I said in a whisper, listening for creeping footsteps in the grass.

"I don't know," she whispered back. "When you shouted at them they'll have known you were a stranger. But they'll be hanging about, waiting for us to come out."

I stood up and looked through the window again. By now the dusk was over, the night had come, but there were plenty of stars and I knew there'd be a moon before long.

That was a thing I'd counted on for softening up the blonde if she'd been coy. I'd never dreamed she'd planned to eat and drink all I'd pay for and then slam the door in my face.

Perhaps I was slipping. Perhaps I couldn't pick 'em any more.

"If they're still watching and we go out there," I said, "they'll knock us off like sitting ducks."

"And if we stay here they'll creep up on different sides and get us anyway."

My common sense revolted at it.

People couldn't be shot and killed only a mile from the main road and nobody pay any attention. But as I thought of it I realized that just that had been done already and could be done again. If one hears shots in the country at night one doesn't immediately assume that somebody is being murdered. I hadn't assumed it myself when I heard them.

"Are there any arms here?" I asked.

"Hans had a pistol. It's underneath him. I was trying to get it when you came."

"Let's draw the curtains," I said.

I saw to those on my side of the caravan; she attended to the others. Then I took another long look through the broken window, let the curtain fall over it, and bent down and flicked my lighter.

"Hold this for me," I said, and while she did so I turned Hans over and got a Luger from underneath him.

It made me feel better having it in my hand as we doused the lighter again and I returned to my post at the broken window.

"Now," I said. "Who are you? Who's Hans? Who's been shooting at you? What's it all about? Let's have it while I'm watching."

She was silent for so long that I looked back towards her. I couldn't see her at all now, it was so dark in the caravan with the curtains drawn—all but the crack I'd left open to see through—but with all

my senses I could feel her near me. She was something. She was getting into my nerves and under my skin.

"Well?" I said. "I'm waiting."

"Would you like to earn five thousand pounds?" she asked.

"Doing what?"

"What Hans was going to do."

"What's that?"

"Kidnap a Nazi war-criminal and take him back for trial."

"Now look," I said, "I may seem foolish but I'm not as bad as all that. If there's really a Nazi war-criminal loose in England you've only got to tip-off the police and they'll pick him up."

"Not this one," she said. "He's English."

"English!"

"Naturalized English. He's been living here for years."

I thought that one over as I stared out through the broken window. Still nothing to see. Not a sound except a few crickets. The moon was coming up now behind the trees and the field was lightening with a milky light.

"I don't know what would happen about that," I said. "I'm no lawyer. Perhaps he'd be tried here. Anyway, the police would take care of it. And there's the murder of Hans to be hung on him too, if he did that. Did he?"

"I don't know. He did, or someone with him. It was all so quick I didn't see. But he's got to be taken back to Austria to be tried."

"Very nice," I said. "But what are you doing in all this—an English girl?"

"I'm not an English girl. I'm Austrian. I was brought over here as a baby and I stayed here till two years ago. My father and mother went back, just as the war began. They ended up in the gas chamber in the interment camp that Wolfgang Skager was in charge of."

Her voice was just as low as before, but it had a passionate, ruthless throb in it now that just went through me.

"Wolfgang Skager?" I said. "Is he the man you're after?"

"Yes."

"Never heard of him. Is he on the list of war criminals?"

"No. He got away with it, hung around Germany for a year or two after the war, till he could get himself smuggled over here with all his loot. Then he got naturalized and settled down."

"Quite a boy," I said. "What does he call himself now?"

"I don't know. Hans knew, but he was jealous of me and wouldn't say."

"Petlet," I said, "it's a nice story but I don't believe a word of it. Who'd send you over here to kidnap a man whose name you don't know and whom you can't ever have seen? It seems more likely to me that you and boy-friend Hans had a bit of an argument in this love-nest and the Luger unfortunately went off."

"When there's some light," she said indifferently, "you can look at it, and you'll see it's not been fired. But somebody shot at you, didn't they, twice?"

"Yes," I said more slowly. "Yes, somebody did."

"I've been seeing Skager every day for the last three months," she went on, "and listening to his voice. On films, I'd know him anywhere now. He's as vain as a peacock. He was always getting himself filmed and photographed, and making speeches and having them recorded. The Bruderschaft found a whole pile of that stuff after the war and it's been used for training us."

"What's the Bruderschaft and who's us?"

"The Bruderschaft is five men. Two are French, one is German, and there's an Austrian and a Pole. They all lost loved ones in Skager's camp. Two of them were in it themselves. Now they're all rich men and what they want is Skager—just as I want him too."

"Why don't they do their own dirty work instead of sending you?"

"Because," she said, "they want to be sure of getting him, and they can't do it themselves. They're all elderly men now. All they've got is their money and a burning desire for revenge."

"All right, pet," I said. "Calm down. I'll try to believe you. Anyway, what's your name?"

"You can call me Trudi."

"Is that all?"

"It's enough for the time being, till we know where we stand."

"All right. Then you can call me Jeff . . . Ssh!"

I'd heard a twig crack underfoot and it made the flesh creep under my hair. I stared out through the crack in the curtains, the Luger tight in my hand. Two people came out from the trees that I'd come out from, walked slowly a short way across the grass and then stopped and embraced. After a few seconds the man spread his raincoat on the grass and they sat down and started necking.

We were even luckier than I thought, for when I looked again it was to see a second couple come strolling through the moonlight in search of a good place. This was obviously a local necking-field.

I had an idea.

"We'll get out through the end window," I said. "It's in the shadow, and if anybody's still watching they're likely to be staring at the door."

We got out easily enough and stood in the deep pool of shadow at the end of the caravan, listening and looking. It seemed all right.

"Now," I said, "do the job properly."

I put my arm round her waist and led her out into the moonlight. We strolled along slowly, so close together that we might have been glued. The mere fact that she was alive and by my side did things to

me. I even forgot the shooting and Hans back there in the caravan. When we had gone a few yards I stopped and turned her so that I could press her into my chest. Her body yielded wonderfully to mine, soft and resilient, and I felt her heart beating on me. I kissed her with all I knew. If she was acting as she kissed me back it was the best acting I'd ever known. Those ripe red lips were all I'd thought they'd be, warm and mobile and sweet as fruit. She made my head swim.

Five minutes later we were in the car and I was driving back towards the Polish Volunteer. I'd got it planned. There were plenty of loose ends to tie up and there was still plenty I wanted to know, and I hadn't decided yet how much I believed or where I stood. And there was Hans lying dead in the caravan, that the police would have to be told about pretty soon, for somebody'd look in through the broken window and see him there, and there were Skager's trigger-men at large and half a dozen other things to be considered. But I'd got a room at the Polish Volunteer and Trudi had nowhere to go.

I fished the key out of my back pocket and dropped it in her lap.

"That's a key of a bedroom in a roadhouse along here. It's my room, booked and paid for. Nobody'll disturb us and you'll be safe for the night."

She fingered the key and in the dash-light I saw her smiling at me.

"There's safe and safe, isn't there, Jeff? What were *you* doing at the caravan anyway?"

"Hell, woman!" I said. "You can't possibly suspect I'm one of Skager's men. He was shooting at me too. Remember?"

"I remember. But what *were* you doing at the caravan?"

I suddenly thought I'd tell her the lot. She was that sort of girl. So I did—all about Lucy the blonde, lying alone now behind her locked door in the Polish Volunteer, and the wheel-disc coming off and the rest of it.

She laughed. "So I've had my life saved because of a busted weekend?"

"What I'm counting on," I said, "is that my busted weekend's about to be repaired."

"You're a bit sudden, aren't you, Jeff?"

"Saving people's lives always makes me sudden. Now don't bilk me too. I'm tough, but I couldn't stand it twice in one night."

She looked at me reflectively in the dash-light.

"I believe you are tough, Jeff, and I need somebody tough. What do you do for a living?"

"By and sell, like everybody else. I've got a little import and export business, always working one step ahead of the Official Receiver."

"So you could use five thousand pounds?"

"I could name five thousand reasons why I could."

We pulled up outside the Polish Volunteer. It had a side door with a glass panel in it that led into a narrow passage and then straight up the stairs to the bedrooms. Nice and private, all away from the bar and the restaurant, which were across the hall on the right. Preez knew his stuff when he built that place.

We stepped in quickly, through the door and up the stairs. Nobody about. I had the bedroom door open and shut again, and Trudi in my arms before you could say knife.

We kissed again and it was as wonderful as before. She really liked me, that girl. You can always tell the difference. There are some things that can't be acted.

I sat on the edge of the bed and just watched her, saying nothing, just looking. She washed her face and hands and tidied herself up, put on a bit of lipstick and all that. I loved seeing her move about. She had grace, and that wonderful figure just got me. I could hardly wait.

"Stay here," I said. "I'll go down and get something for us to eat and drink. I'll have it sent up."

I went out. As I passed the door of the next room I couldn't resist hammering on it loudly with my knuckles.

"What is it? What is it?" the blonde asked in a sleepy cross voice.

"Goodnight," I said. "Sleep tight. So sorry you've been troubled."

Then I went down to the bar. It was crammed and noisy and smoky, with Preez there laying forth, his RAF-type handlebar moustache wagging up and down as he boasted out his same old boredoms in his squeaky little voice. Like everybody else, I take my hat off to the Polish squadron that fought in the Battle of Britain, but to hear Preez talk about it—and he never talked about anything else—you'd think he'd fought the bloody battle all by himself.

The bar reeked of RAF. There were photographs and flying helmets, wind-socks, broken props, medals and what-not all round the place. Preez would have hung up a Spitfire if he could have got one.

"A bottle of whisky, a siphon and sandwiches, Mr. Roxon?" Preez said, repeating my order. "At once."

"Sandwiches for two," I said, "and two glasses. Send it all up to room eighteen."

"For two, sir?" Preez said, with a roguish smile. "Of course."

I went back up again. Trudi had locked the door, but she let me in as soon as she heard my voice.

We sat on the edge of the bed, hand in hand, and I kissed her a bit and held her tight. She began telling me a few more things, but didn't get far before we heard the tray being carried tinkling up the stairs. There was a rap on the door and I stood up to go and open it.

"Your whisky and sandwiches, Mr. Rixon," said Preez outside.

I heard Trudi gasp and she snatched at my hand. I turned to look at her.

"That's Skager!" she whispered. "That's his voice!"

## PART TWO

Preez, the Polish hero who'd fought in the Battle of Britain, was really Wolfgang Skager, a Nazi war-criminal?

I couldn't grasp it.

Perhaps I was dim, but it had been a full session, what with Lucy Markham bilking me, the shooting, the murder of Hans, and then the wonderful opportunity of spending a night with Trudi, who could do more to me with a look of her eyes than most others could with all they'd got.

"Say something!" she breathed at me, as I stared stupidly at the locked bedroom door where Preez was waiting on the other side.

She was a cool one. She bounced the bedsprings, making them creak. I got the idea and recovered myself.

"Leave it outside, Preez," I called, and I slipped the safety-catch off the Luger. "I'll pick it up in a minute."

"Can't do that, old Fruit," said Preez, who was celebrated for his out-moded slang. "Somebody'll swipe it. I'll bring it in. I've got a key. Don't worry. I'll not look."

"Blast you, Preez!" I said. "I'm the shrinking violet type. Hold on. I'm coming."

"Wizard!" said Preez, with a gurgling laugh. "Don't catch cold."

I pressed hard down on the mattress and then let go, making a creak as if I were getting off the bed. I signalled to Trudi to scam out of the way, and then thought she'd gone nuts for she was holding a photograph for me to look at. I suppose she'd got it out of her bag while I was busy with the Luger. I stared at it hard in the bedroom light. It was Preez all right, in a Nazi uniform. He'd grown his moustache a couple of inches since then, but there could be no doubt. The photograph was signed "Heil Hitler! Wolfgang Skager."

I braced myself and walked over to the door, the Luger in my right hand hidden inside my jacket pocket.

I turned the key and opened up. There was Preez grinning away with the whisky and sandwiches, holding the tray in his left hand, his right hand hidden under it.

"Thanks, Preez," I said, and took the tray in my left hand.

Then I kicked him in the guts. He didn't shout or scream: he couldn't. He just gasped. The gun he'd been holding hidden under the tray flew out of his hand and slid across the landing like a curler's stone. He staggered backwards on his little short legs and went over and over down the stairs till his head hit the bottom with a crack.

I put the tray down, but slipped



the whisky bottle into my pocket. Preez lay in a sprawled and motionless heap at the bottom of the stairs, not making a sound.

It was near closing time on a Saturday night. There was a hell of a rumpus coming from the bar, all the boys and girls whooping it up and the radio going as well. Nobody seemed to have heard Preez going down the stairs.

"Let's get out of here," I said to Trudi.

"Yes," she said, "and take him too. That's what I came for."

I was bloody mad to let her talk me into it, but a couple of minutes later we were away in the car, Trudi on the back seat, pressing the Luger into Preez's guts and taking quick looks at him with a flashlight when he moved. He was groaning a good deal.

I knew I was in it now.

The fact dripped cold through my nerves.

This was assault and kidnaping.

Preez might be a Nazi war-criminal, but that had to be proved, and so far all I'd got was Trudi's word for it. In any event, he was a British subject, entitled to the full protection of the law.

I could do five years for this.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked. "I suppose you've got something laid on."

"Don't talk now," Trudi said. "He may be listening. Find somewhere quiet to park."

I'd been streaking along the main road as hard as I could. There was plenty of traffic, but most of it coming the other way. We'd done about ten miles from the Polish Volunteer.

My headlamps picked out a signpost pointing down a side road. I slowed and turned. We passed a line of cottages and a pub. I took another turning, into a narrow lane, and felt a bad surface under me. I rolled along for a couple of miles, passing a farm with a barking dog and a couple more cottages. Then there was nothing but fields and trees. I ran on the grass verge, pulled up and cut the lights.

Preez was conscious again. He was on his back on the floor where I'd rammed him in, his head against a door and his knees drawn up. His little bloodshot eyes were blinking at the flashlight and he had a lump on his forehead the size of a plum. His round fat face was pasty and damp with sweat and the RAF-type whiskers were limp and uncurled.

"Rixon, old bean," he said, breathing hard, "you are very stupid to believe this girl."

"Shut up," I said.

"But you know *me*, old fruit. Preez—the Battle of Britain. You don't know her."

It was too true, but I couldn't draw back now. I had to trust my judgment and keep on.

"Shut up!" I repeated, and said to Trudi: "Hit him with the gun if he talks again."

I went to the back of the car and got out my suitcase, but all I could find to tie him up with was my pyjama trousers. I tore them in half, and told myself that Trudi wouldn't bother about modesty once we were alone together in the dark with enough time on our hands. Even if I did five years for it in the end, I was going to have that girl.

We gagged Preez with the pyjama jacket, stuffing a screwed up lump of it in his mouth and tying the rest of it round his head. He could breathe, but that was about all. Then we tied his wrists and ankles with the torn trousers, and left him.

I walked Trudi along the road, my hand tucked under her arm so that I could feel my knuckles sinking in where it was soft and warm.

The moon was blanked out behind the trees and it was pretty dark where we were, though in the distance was a silver sheen where the road went through open fields. There was no sound except the hum of telegraph wires and the intermittent bark of the dog at the farm we had passed a couple of miles back.

When we were well away from the car I led her off the road and we sat down under the hedge.

Blood and excitement and sudden death light the fire between a man and a woman. Think of all the loving that went on in London when the bombs were dropping!

I pushed her down on the grass and put my arms round her.

"No," she said. "We've got to talk."

"Two minutes," I said. "Talking can wait that long. I want to lose the taste of Preez and get the taste of you in my mouth again."

So she let me. My hands went exploring and she didn't push me off. Her deep breathing made her swell against me, soft and hot and wonderful. I knew by the way she kissed and clung to me that she was feeling the same as I was feeling too.

I don't think I exceeded my two minutes, though I could have kept on like that all night. But common sense took hold again and we sat up and talked. Looking back along the road, I could just make out the dark mass of the car parked beneath the trees.

"Was it just you and Hans alone in this?" I asked. "Or is there somebody else?"

"There was a third man—Meister. He was sent over here a long time ago to locate Skager, but when he did he sold out to him. It was Meister and Skager together who attacked us in the caravan. Meister was supposed to meet Hans and me and lead us to Skager, but what he did was to lead Skager to us."

"I'll keep thinking of him as Preez," I said. "It's simpler."

The idea, she said, had been to kidnap Preez, take him to the caravan and keep him there a couple of

days tied up. A telephone call was to be put through to the Bruderschaft in Hamburg, and a German tramp would come over to Tilbury and get him. There was an imitation bale of wool—just a box with wool glued all over it so that it looked like the real thing—and Preez was to be smuggled aboard in that.”

It sounded simple—and daft. Could such things be done? Evidently some people thought so.

“It was just Hans and Meister at first,” Trudi said, “but neither of them could speak much English. So I got into it, too. They sent me because I can pass for an English girl, and because I need the money and the vengeance, and—well, because I’m a woman and can do things a man can’t.”

“You’re telling me!” I said, holding her again.

“No, Jeff. Not now. Later on you’ll have all of me you want.”

“You bet I will! Well, what are we going to do with Preez? And by the way, when do I get the five thousand quid?”

“When he’s delivered to Tilbury. We’re not to kill him, but if he gets killed in a fight or anything, we get paid just the same.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “What business were you in before this?”

“Don’t make a joke of it, Jeff. It isn’t funny.”

“I know. But it gets me that somebody as wonderful and loveable as you are . . .”

“They say my mother was wonderful and loveable too. She ended up in Skager’s gas-chamber.”

We were silent and I just sat there fondling her.

“Well, we can’t take him to the caravan,” I said, “not with the boyfriend Meister still at large. He’d be sure to look there. Somebody could have found Hans by now, anyway.”

“Where do you live?” Trudi asked.

I thought it over.

“It could be done,” I said. “It’s a little flat in Hampstead. You know—converted house with three self-contained flats in it. No porter or anybody to snoop. We could smuggle him in late tonight and phone Hamburg for instructions.”

“Look!” she breathed, and her body stiffened against me.

I looked back towards the car. There was a light wobbling towards it—a bicycle-lamp.

“Just somebody going home,” I said, hoping it was true. “He’ll take no notice of a parked car. He’ll think it’s just a couple necking.”

But the light stopped.

We got up and stood close together in the darkness, staring, straining to hear and scarcely daring to breathe in case we missed something.

I cursed myself for not having waited to lock the car, but it had seemed unnecessary, with Preez trussed up like a fowl and we only a few yards away. As it turned out

it would have made no difference anyhow.

I heard the door swing open on the squeaky hinge I'd meant to oil a dozen times, and then a voice saying something I couldn't catch. A moment later the back window was lighted up by a flashlight inside it.

"Wait here," I whispered.

I left Trudi and began creeping along the grass. I went on foot as far as I dared, then dropped on hands and knees and crawled. Like that I got up close enough to listen.

"I was assaulted, Officer!" I heard Preez squeaking excitedly. "You know who I am, don't you?"

"Lor' bless me, it's Mr. Preez from the Volunteer!" the constable said.

I got back to Trudi and she stepped out of the shadow of the hedge to meet me.

"Flaming bloody luck!" I whispered through my clenched teeth. "A copper of all people."

We got over a gate and into a field, and crept along beside the hedge till we were near enough to hear them talking. Preez was out on the road by now, stamping about to get the circulation back into his ankles.

"It would just waste time to start looking for them round here," he was saying. "They will be miles away."

"What I don't understand, sir," said the voice of the constable, "is why they just tied you up and left you. Didn't rob you or anything?"

"I don't know," said Preez. He hadn't thought out a story yet. "Drunks perhaps. Maybe somebody who had a down on me. You get a queer lot at a roadhouse. But I'm not going to hang about here. I've had a shaking up and I need a drink. You can call in tomorrow and we'll talk it over."

"I'd better come along with you now, sir. But how'll we get the car going? They've taken the key."

Preez gave his bumptious, gurgling laugh.

"Battle of Britain pilot, old fruit. Do you think there's anything about a petrol engine I don't know? Find me a bit of wire and I'll start the switch in two shakes."

He did too, while I crouched there behind the hedge, the Luger gripped in my hand, and knew I wouldn't do a single thing about it.

Preez wouldn't talk. So far as the police were concerned, I felt we were safe from Preez. He wouldn't want us picked up, for if that happened we'd be bound to spill the beans about him to get ourselves out of trouble. Then that marvellous front of the Battle of Britain pilot would be torn away, and Wolfgang Skager would face extradition, trial, hanging.

No. I felt pretty sure that Preez wouldn't prefer any charges against me, even though I'd kicked him in the guts and kidnapped him.

But it would be a different matter if I walked out on that road and threatened a police constable with a

gun. If I did that I'd be for the high jump *toute suite*.

So I just waited here, fuming, and had the pleasure of hearing Preez start up my car, with my suitcase in it and Trudi's handbag, leaving us with nothing but the Luger, a bottle of whisky, the clothes we stood up in and about thirty bob in cash.

The car hummed away into silence, and that was that. How, I wondered, would I ever get it back without having my neck broken or getting shot up like Hans? It wasn't even paid for yet.

Trudi voiced my thoughts at that moment by saying: "Now it's him or us, Jeff. We've got to get him. He daren't let us live, knowing what we know."

"I badly need five thousand pounds," I said, "and I need my car back, and there isn't much I wouldn't do to please you, but I've got a feeling that this is too hot to handle, and tomorrow we'll have to go to the police."

"No," she said.

"Well, let's sleep on it," I said.

"Where?" she asked. "Oh, Jeff, I'm tired and disappointed and frightened."

You never know about a woman. She crept into my arms and started crying—that girl who'd stood up against rifle-fire with a dead man beside her in the caravan, and helped me kidnap Preez.

I fondled her and comforted her, and we sat down again and I

opened up the bottle of whisky, and we had a few slugs each. I kissed her a bit and went exploring, and got her mind off Preez.

Here in the field there were no matted trees to blot out the moon, and it was riding low and beautiful. Then, just as if I'd arranged it, a nightingale started up, piping mournful and sweet and clear.

"Ever slept in the hay?" I whispered in her hair. "It's nice and warm and romantic on a night like this. It makes you feel young and free, and full of the dawn of loving, as if love was something you'd just invented and nobody else knew about."

So we walked across the fields in that wonderful moonlight, with the scent of the bruised grass let loose by our treading feet, and the cattle lying in steaming, knobbly hillocks here and there, and stag-beetles bumbling by.

In another field we found a haystack that hadn't been thatched. It was flat and loose on top, soft and springy, with a tarpaulin over it and a ladder laid against the side ready for the thatchers in the morning.

We climbed up, and got our things off and cuddled down.

I'll never forget that night, lying there in one another's arms in the sweet hay, looking up at the stars, with little wisps of cloud going by, and the moon slowly sinking, till at last there was nothing but the stars and the darkness and us.

Her skin looked like honey and it tasted sweet. Before the moon went in I'd seen, when she turned her head, a faint mist of down on her cheek. That's always a sign of real woman, a woman who knows what she was born for; that, and a turned-down lower lip.

She was the most gorgeous woman I'd ever known, and from the way she acted I guessed she found me pretty much of a man too.

It was late before we went to sleep. We lay burrowed in the hay, taking a slug from the whisky-bottle now and then and talking of this and that, lying close together, with my hand stroking tenderly over that honey-coloured silken skin.

Once I remembered Lucy in her locked bedroom in the Polish Volunteer, and thought what a break I'd had tonight, and I wondered what I'd ever seen in that cheap little piece, who guarded herself as if she were the Bank of England.

It was broad daylight when I awakened, and I sat up with a start and looked at my watch. It was seven o'clock. I looked round quickly and could see a long way from the top of the haystack. What time would the haymakers get here? But there was nobody in sight, except a man feeding chickens four fields away. Then I remembered it was Sunday and nobody would come to make hay today.

I kissed her awake, and she put her warm bare arms up, drew me

down to her and held me tight. I saw myself reflected in her eyes.

"It's Sunday," I said presently, "and there'll be no haymakers, but we'd better get along just the same. For one thing, I want some breakfast and we'll find none round here."

So we got out of the hay and dressed ourselves, pulled the tarpaulin back over the stack and got down the ladder.

Soon we were walking towards the main road. It took us all of an hour, but we were in luck, for just as we got there a London-bound coach came up, and either the driver was too sleepy to know what he was doing or else he felt sentimental about a couple of lovers waiting hand in hand, but he actually stopped and let us aboard.

At a quarter to ten we were at the terminus. At ten minutes past we were walking up the Hampstead street where my flat was, and I was thinking about bacon and eggs and getting a hot bath and a shave.

Then my heart gave a jerk. There was a police car standing outside my door.

"That's my house the police car's at," I said. "Look natural and come in here."

It was an Italian cafe, not properly open yet, but I knew Tony who ran the joint, and he didn't curse me much when we pushed in through the glass swing-doors and disturbed him at his cleaning-up.

"Couple of coffees, Tony."

"No coffee yet, Mister. Nota nothing yet. Nota water hot."

"We'll wait," I said, and pulled out a counter-stool for Trudi. "Let's have a couple of those sandwiches."

"Why nota go home for breakfast?" Tony grumbled.

"Too tired," I said. "We've been to an all-night party."

All the time I was taking quick looks through the window at the police car down the street. The driver was sitting alone behind his wheel, but there'd be some others in the house.

What for?

Perhaps it wasn't me they wanted. There were three flats in the house. This wasn't the best part of Hampstead: there were often police cars round here. The other people in my house could be dope-peddlars for all I knew.

Down beside the counter Trudi was holding my hand so tightly that it hurt.

"Eat something," I said, but she shook her head. Even I found Tony's stale sandwiches too much for a nervous stomach.

He came in from the back room with two cups of coffee.

"That was quick, Tony," I said.

"I boil up my own little kettle for you. Like the radio, yes?"

He switched it on and shuffled off into the back room again.

A few seconds later I knew why the police car was outside my door.

"In connection with the murder of the young woman Lucy Mark-

ham, in the Surrey roadhouse, the Polish Volunteer, last night," said the bland, emotionless voice of the BBC, "the police are anxious to interview Jeffrey Rixon, aged thirty-one, height five feet, eleven inches, brown hair and eyes, last seen wearing grey flannel trousers, white shirt, striped tie, brown tweed jacket, no hat. This man, who may be accompanied by a young woman, is armed and dangerous."

### PART THREE

Trudi's hand jerked out of mine, but I didn't notice. I sat there on the bar-stool, stunned, staring at the radio while the BBC man went on with the news. Trouble in Africa. Another sputnik in orbit. Mass meeting of strikers.

All the old stuff, except that somebody had murdered Lucy at the Polish Volunteer.

Lucy had meant nothing to me. She was just a piece of weekend fun that hadn't jelled. But I thought—Poor Lucy! And then my throat went dry, and my scalp was tingling and my knees were wobbling against the skirt of Tony's counter.

For a few seconds I was mentally out. I couldn't think, couldn't connect one thing with another, couldn't sort out what mattered and what didn't. I remember watching a fly sucking at a curled-up bit of ham sticking out of Tony's awful sandwiches, and listening to the BBC drooling on about the

strike, and noticing Trudi holding up her teaspoon stiff and straight, as if she were about to conduct an orchestra.

Then the fly took off and broke the spell. I followed its flight to the window and saw the police car again. It was moving away, and there was a policeman standing at the door of my house waving his hand to the driver.

The car went down the street and the policeman re-entered my house and shut the door.

So there I was, wanted for murder, with nowhere to go, practically no money and no way of getting any, with a policeman waiting for me in my flat, and the only places where I could cash a cheque places where I was known, and all the pawnshops closed because it was Sunday.

On top of that I was unwashed and unshaven, and the contrast with my good clothes would make even the dimmest copper give me a second glance.

I looked at Trudi. She was deathly white, her face stiff and strained, her eyes panic-stricken. I felt my lip lift as I made myself smile and I knew that what I was showing her was a pretty ghastly grin.

"That's what the police want me for," I said—the silliest remark on record.

She didn't answer.

But my brain was working again, aching and dizzy, but working.

I dug into my pocket and scooped out all I had—nine shillings and twopence and my bunch of keys.

It's queer what a big part keys played in that business. There had been the key of my bedroom at the Polish Volunteer, and now I saw two Yales on my bunch that had been there for a couple of years merely because I'd never bothered to take them off. I kept staring at those two keys as I fingered over the money in my palm, counting it out, thinking, my brain buzzing and wondering what to do; and then something clicked and I knew what my subconscious was telling me.

Once I'd had an office in Bollard House, one of those dingy old city buildings that escaped the blitz. When I'd left I'd flitted, not doing too well in those days. I'd posted them the back rent later on, but I hadn't bothered about the keys, knowing they'd have duplicate sets. And here were those two old keys still on my bunch.

If only they hadn't changed the locks in Bollard House! That would be a place to hole up in during the day. Nobody went to city offices on a Sunday. I'd be able to get my breath and decide what I was going to do. I was like a new man.

Tony shuffled in from the back room again.

"How much the coffees, Tony?" I asked. "And I'll take a couple of



things. Let's have a bottle of milk, a loaf and some butter. You wouldn't be able to sell me a razor, I suppose?"

"A razor?" said Tony. It was clear from the way he acted that he hadn't heard the broadcast, and knew nothing about me except that I was a customer who lived somewhere near and dropped in now and then.

"I've busted my electric shaver," I said, "and it's Sunday."

"Tut, tut, bad news," said Tony, and then diffidently added what I'd been hoping for: "Nota the razor for sale, but if you like I lenda you mine."

He took me into a cluttered-up room stinking like a dirty barracks, and I shaved in a broken mirror and washed in a plastic bowl.

When I went back to the cafe Trudi had gone. I waited, thinking she was in the ladies', then through the window I saw her at the top of the street, walking away very fast.

"Thanks, Tony," I said, gave him his money, whipped up the stuff I'd bought and went out.

I couldn't think what she'd done it for, but the nagging suspicions I'd had of her from the start flooded back. What did I know about her? All that Nazi stuff about Preez—I'd only her word for it.

But Preez must have murdered Lucy. Why? If he hadn't, who had? And again why? Could it have been the mysterious Meister, who'd sold out the Bruderschaft to Preez?

Why would anybody murder Lucy? She was a teaser. who got all she could out of a man and then bilked him. But you didn't murder a girl for that; you threw her out and got another.

I didn't dare walk fast till I was out of sight from my house. Was that policeman watching me out of my window? My nerves were screwed up to hear the blast of a police whistle, but none came.

I turned the corner into an empty street, sprinted and caught up with her. She heard my running feet and looked back at me with what seemed like terror.

"What's the matter with you?" I said, grabbing her arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

She was gasping. "I thought we'd be safer apart," she said faintly. I felt her dragging her arm away from my hand, but I wouldn't let go.

"I'll do the thinking," I said. "Look natural, for Pete's sake. Get that look of panic off your face."

"I can't."

"Here's somebody coming. Talk."

"I can't."

"Repeat this after me," I said. "Every second line—'Mary had a little lamb.'" She was silent. "Come on! Come on!"

"'It's fleece was white as snow,'" she whispered.

"Smile," I said. "Giggle or something. 'And everywhere that Mary went . . .'"

"'The lamb was sure to go.'"

Whispering together, me giggling like a fool, my head close to hers, we got past a man going home with the Sunday papers.

"I can't go on," Trudi said, when we were alone again. "I'm going to faint."

"No, you're not," I said. "Come on now—here are some more people. 'There was an old woman who lived in a shoe . . .'"

I got her to the Tube station, and we boarded a train with about a dozen Sunday morning travellers in the coach. She seemed calmer. Perhaps the talking and the walking had done it. I squeezed her arm and gave her a smile a bit less like a death's head's. But I kept wondering about her. Why was she trying to get away from me?

We got off at the Bank. There aren't many people in the City on a Sunday, but that doesn't mean it's empty. There was a west-bound bus, two or three family cars making towards Clacton or some place, and a few people walking. An enormous City of London policeman stood in the middle.

I bought a newspaper outside the station, then linked Trudi again and took her across the road. A cloud of pigeons flew overhead. Her arm was stiff as a rod.

"Where are we going?" she asked in a strained voice.

I told her about Bollard House. "It isn't far. All you've got to do is stroll along slow and easy, as if we're going to visit Uncle Bert

who's a caretaker round here." But I felt her holding back. "What's the matter with you?"

"I don't want to go."

"I don't care what you want. We're in this together, and if we get out of it we'll get out together. We've got to hole up somewhere and make plans. This is the best I can do."

We turned into Bollard Lane—narrow and short and dingy. Nothing in sight except a few fat pigeons pecking in the gutter. They flew away. If I let her go, I wondered, would she run? I had the feeling that she might. But though she gave a frightened look up and down when we stopped at the door of Bollard House, she didn't move when I took my hand away to get out my keys.

It was the same lock. The door opened. In a couple of seconds we were inside with the door closed against the street.

I never thought I'd be so glad to see that dump again, the dusty stone hall, the faded paint on the walls, the staircase with the grimy window throwing light down from the first floor, the board with all the names on it in tarnished gold leaf; grand, ringing names—Associated Office Supply Co., Golden Mountain Mining Corporation, Consolidated African Rollingstock, and so on and so on—everybody broke to the wide.

I leant back against the door, breathing. I suppose a man on the

run in the middle ages would have felt the same way when he got to the church, touched wood and was safe.

"Upstairs," I said. "There'll be nobody here."

But our footfalls and voices echoed and rang through the empty building, and we ended creeping up the stone steps like kids in a church.

On the third floor I tried the second key in the lock of my old office. "S. Berne," was painted on the door, "Imported Glass."

The key turned. The door creaked open.

S. Berne, whoever he was, had inherited all my old stuff, including the moth-eaten sofa I'd bought from the caretaker for twenty-five bob, telling him I liked a nap in the afternoon, though I didn't say that I rarely used the sofa alone.

With some men when they're worried it's drink they've got to have. They get tanked up and the sharp edge comes off the blade that's digging them. With me it's different. All that ever makes me forget my troubles is a woman. I'd had plenty of troubles when last I was in Bollard House, and I had plenty again now.

I locked the door, put the milk and the loaf and the rest of it on the desk, lifted the telephone and heard the dialling tone.

"S. Berne seems to have paid his telephone account," I said, "which is more than I was able to do half

the time. Put through a call to the Bruderschaft in Hamburg."

She perked up. "Oh, yes!" she said, and looked hopeful and happy, and she smiled. She hadn't looked like that since she'd reached for me in the haystack when we woke up.

She dialled for trunks, and while she was asking for the Hamburg number I looked at the paper I'd bought. There was nothing in it about the murder, not even a line in the stop press. The news must have broken very late. There were no evening papers on a Sunday and we had no radio, so I didn't know anything about Lucy's murder except that it had happened and the police wanted me for it. In all probability I wouldn't know all day.

Trudi hung up. There would be a forty minutes' delay, she said.

"Come and sit down," I said, patting a place beside me on the sofa. But she leant back against the desk instead. I didn't like that, but I let it pass. "Do you want to eat?" I asked, but she shook her head. "When Hamburg comes through," I said, "tell them we need help. But tell them first that we found their man and what happened."

"Yes," she said.

"Tell them about me, and get it confirmed that I'm on to the five thousand quid when Preez is handed over."

"All right."

But that was a laugh, with me holed up like a rat and all the police

in the country sniffing round for me.

I stood up and looked out through the window, which gave on a square well with a courtyard of damp stone flags at the bottom of it. Pigeons were flying from windowsill to windowsill, creaking as they went. I heard a bus in the distance. Far above me the sun was shining and a segment of warm light lay on one of the walls.

I pulled the blind down. "Come here," I said, and went towards her with my arms outstretched.

"No!" she said, cringing back. "I couldn't."

"Yes, you could," I said, getting hold of her. "It'll make you feel better and me too."

"No!"

"You weren't like this last night," I said.

"It was different last night. Please, Jeff, let me go."

"I'm the same man as I was last night and you're the same woman."

I gave her a slap and put her on the sofa. Women are queer, I know; there's only about one week in the month when they really want you, but she had wanted me all right last night and she couldn't have changed so fast. The danger and excitement ought to have made her keen again, but it hadn't.

"You told me you wanted somebody tough," I said, "and you've got me. But I'm getting fed up with you. I'm in this up to my neck just because of you, mixed up in kid-

napping and murder, with nothing in it for me except you and a half-baked promise of five thousand quid that I'll probably never see."

"Don't kill me, Jeff," she moaned. "Please don't kill me."

I stopped and stared at her. There was twilight in the office with the blind down, but I could see her face pretty well as she lay back on the sofa. She was terrified.

"You think I killed Lucy?" I asked. "Is that what all the trouble's about?"

"Didn't you?"

"Of course I didn't, you bloody fool. Preez did."

"Why should he?"

"How would I know? You still believe it's me, don't you?"

"Let me go, Jeff!"

But I wouldn't. I knew what was good for her and for me too, and in the end she was a lot more relaxed, though she was crying, which often happens and doesn't mean anything.

"Since you're sure I'm a murderer," I said, "I'll bring up a couple of points that I've been too refined to mention up to now. Preez was a Battle of Britain pilot. So were hundreds of other men. All the Polish pilots would have known him, so would lots of the British. Some of those people must go sometimes to the Polish Volunteer. Then why hasn't anybody said that the man who runs it isn't Preez the Battle of Britain pilot?"

"I don't know—I don't know."

"Neither do I. I wish I did. It worries me. Another thing—did Wolfgang Skager speak Polish?"

"I don't know. Probably. He came from the Polish border and all the Germans there know some Polish."

The phone rang. I got off the sofa and lifted the receiver. I could hear the trunk lines humming but there was nobody talking.

"Ja?" I said to nobody, watching Trudi as she got up and started tidying herself. "Wie? . . . Wie? . . . Lieber Gott, Fraulein, was machen Sie dort?"

That's about all the German I know. I used it just to warn her not to try any funny business on the phone, for I'd understand—I hoped.

The London operator came on the line: "What is your number, please?"

I told her.

"You are through to your Hamburg number," she said, and a man miles away said something in German.

"*Ein blick,*" I said, and handed the phone to Trudi.

She talked excitedly in German for a few minutes and I didn't understand a damn word. Then she put her hand over the phone and said:

"They can fly a man over to London almost right away. He can be here before dark. What do we want?"

"Tell him to bring some English

money, a suit of clothing that will fit me and something else for you. We'll wait here. This place is Bollard House, Bollard Lane, near the Mansion House. When he gets to London he can ring us up. Give him the number. It's written on the phone."

She talked away in German again and then hung up.

She was a lot better after that. Perhaps it was my treatment, or perhaps talking to her own people in Hamburg, but she was eager and smiling as she told me word for word what had been said, and even laughed a couple of times when I thought up something funny, and she didn't draw away too fast when I put the loving hand on her.

But still she wasn't the girl of yesterday, neither the cool-headed operator who had helped kidnap Preez, nor the melting flame I'd held in my arms in the haystack.

She still thought I might have murdered Lucy, and that made all the difference.

Now that the pressure had lifted a bit we felt hungry. I pushed S. Berne's stuff to the side of the desk and with my penknife sliced up the loaf from Tony's. We ate the lot, thick with butter, and shared the bottle of milk.

"I wonder if S. Berne keeps a drink round here," I said. "I used to."

I found his filing-cabinet unlocked, and that's the usual place for a bottle, but there was nothing

in there. Then I tried the drawers of his desk. They were unlocked too. In fact, there weren't any locks that worked. I remembered that desk of old. But I found a cash box with three one-pound notes in it and a few shillings. It made me feel better when I had that in my pocket. I wrote out a cheque for S. Berne and put it in the cash box with a note of explanation and apology.

After that I took the Luger out of my pocket. There was a gasp and I saw Trudi cowering in the corner of the sofa.

"Relax, petlet," I said. "You told me to look at this gun to see if it had been fired. Well, I'm looking at it."

She calmed down and I looked at the Luger. It hadn't been fired.

"I'm going to make sure that Preez is really Skager," I said, "and then I'm going right after him. He's annoyed me. Besides, I need the money."

I pulled the telephone across the desk.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Ring up Scotland Yard," I said, and dialled Whitehall one-two, one-two. "Is Superintendent Lazenby there?" I asked when the telephone clerk answered.

"I don't expect he is, sir, but I'll find out. Who's calling?"

"Tell him it's the secretary of the Hampstead Wanderers' Rugby Club," I said.

But Bill Lazenby wasn't at the Yard that Sunday afternoon.

"All right," I told the clerk. "I'll ring him up at his home. I know the number. It's just a private matter."

I dialled again, and this time it was Superintendent Lazenby's voice that answered me.

"Bill," I said, "this is Jeff Rixon."

There was a good long pause.

"Where are you, Jeff?" Bill Lazenby asked.

"Do you really think I'd tell you? And don't bother to send Mary next door to another phone to get this call traced, because I'll be miles away by the time anybody gets here."

"Don't be a fool, Jeff. Give yourself up."

"And let the police relax on their fat bottoms and stop looking for the right man? I'll give myself up when you don't want me any more, and when you don't want me any more you'll have the man who did the job. Here's his name and address, Bill. He's Preez who owns the Polish Volunteer. Check up on him and you'll find he's not a Polish hero at all. He's a Nazi war-criminal called Wolfgang Skager. Can you remember all that?"

"Yes, I'll remember. Now, Jeff, I'm speaking for your own good. If you're innocent you have nothing to fear. Go to your nearest police station. . . ."

I gave him the horse laugh.

"Have you forgotten the chap in Notting Hill who got hanged for the murder Christie did? And Christie sitting pretty all the time with five dead women hidden behind the wallpaper? Don't be daft, Bill. You check that stuff I gave you and I'll call you again some-time."

I hung up.

It was about an hour later that I lost Trudi again.

She'd been all right—still that subtle difference from last night, but nothing too bad. I'd fondled and kissed a bit, and we'd talked, and then gone for a stroll through the empty office building for exercise and a change of scenery.

Dusk was gathering and we were getting hungry. I thought it would be safe to send her out with some of S. Berne's money to get us something to eat. She'd be bound to come back again because of the telephone call.

So she went to the ladies' to wash and tidy up.

But she didn't come back.

I waited fifteen minutes. Women take a long time. Twenty. Then I was sure she'd bilked me.

I opened the office door without a sound and crept along the passage.

I listened outside the ladies' but couldn't hear anything. I called to her softly. No answer. I pushed the door open and went in.

Somebody hit me on the head and I went out like a light.

## PART FOUR

My hands hurt like hell, and it must have been the pain that brought me back so fast, for I wasn't out longer than a few seconds.

I woke up with that pain in my hands and found myself kneeling on a tiled floor, with my face flopped against a sheet of cold glass, and beyond it a stained brick wall fading in the evening light.

Preez had blackjacked me as I went into the Ladies' to look for Trudi, and then he'd dragged me to the window and rammed the sash down on my wrists to hold me.

With my head still swimming, I jerked my hands, trying to pull them away from the pain, but that made it worse and I yelled.

"Make all the noise you like," said Preez in his squeaky voice. "Nobody will hear."

I screwed my head round and looked.

Trudi was lying on her back on the tiled floor. She had her shoes and stockings off and her hands were underneath her and out of sight, so I guessed that one of the stockings was tied round her wrists. The other stocking was bound over her mouth to gag her. Her eyes stared up at me, terrified.

Preez was leaning back on one of the washbasins, clasping and unclasping his little fat hands together like a cheap actor finding the gold in an Ali Baba film. He

was grinning with delight and his RAF moustache was wiggling like wings. His eyes were popping and blood-shot and there was a trickle of spittle on his chin.

"No training, old thing—that's your trouble," he said. "You oughtn't to have got mixed up in this without the proper know-how. It didn't occur to you, did it, that it takes no longer to telephone from Hamburg to the Polish Volunteer than it does from here to Hamburg?"

So that was it. Somebody besides Meister was selling out the Bruderschaft—perhaps even the very man Trudi had spoken to. What a setup! And who was the bloody fool? Mel!

I gathered my nerve and strength and heaved myself to my feet, dragging upwards with my hands as I did it. The pain exploded in my wrists like a bomb and I almost bit my lip through, but though I got upright, the window didn't move.

Preez ran at me, pointing my Luger, but seeing me still held fast, he relaxed again.

"Not a chance, old bean," he said, "but you'll soon be out of your misery."

He bent over Trudi, hooked his fingers into the neck of her jumper and tried to tear it down the middle, but it wouldn't give. Then he got out a cut-throat razor and flicked it open.

"No!" I cried. "No!"

I didn't feel the pain then when I pulled my hands, but the window held them like a vice.

She tried to roll away, but he punched her shoulder and slammed her flat on her back again. Holding the jumper taut in one hand, he slit it down from neck to waist with one sweep of the razor, opened it like a coat and stared at her. I yelled at him to stop it, and he turned his head to grin at me, enjoying himself. He hadn't carved her yet, but he'd like making me think he was going to.

"Listen, Preez!" I said. "You've got one chance. Just one chance. You can skip out of the country today, before the ports are closed against you, and you may get away with it somewhere else, but if Interpol starts looking for you for our murder you'll not get far. And the police are coming here, Preez. They're on their way. I rang up Scotland Yard."

He had one hand pressed on her shoulder to keep her flat on the tiled floor, and with the other he played with the razor, sweeping it down towards her so that she shrank up and cringed and then lifting it away again.

"Don't be foolish," he said. "You'd never send for the police. You're on the run. You're hiding."

"I rang up Scotland Yard!" I cried.

It was true, and because it was true I must have got conviction



into my voice, for I could see he half-believed me.

"In that case," he said, "I'll have to hurry. A pity, because it is very interesting. A cut here, a cut there. One can make such nice patterns." He ran a fat hand over her honey-coloured flesh and it wrinkled up in terror. "If you do it properly, old man, the blood doesn't spurt and run. It lies on top of the cuts in red cords, like icing on a cake."

"If you cut her, Preez," I said, "and I get out of this I'll burn you alive."

"But you'll not get out of it, old thing. It's all been organized. Do you know what it's in aid of?"

He sat back on his haunches, damned pleased with himself, and told me. I didn't try to stop him. I let him talk, for his vanity was gaining us a respite, and with life there was hope. My wrists were growing numb now and didn't hurt so much.

"How many different women have you taken rooms for in the Polish Volunteer over the last three months?" he asked. "I'll tell you—it's seven. I've got my register to prove it. Last night you had two. You murdered one . . ."

"No, you murdered one," I said.

"And when I went upstairs to find what the noise was about, you and the other one—this one here—ran me out of my place, tied me up and left me in a car."

So that was the story he'd given to the police!

"Everybody will wonder why she helped you," he said, "but that's one of those mysteries that will never be solved, for tomorrow morning when the people get here you'll both be found dead. A horrible sex-crime, old man, just like the one at the Polish Volunteer, but this time you'll be dead too. You'll have bumped yourself off after carving Trudi up, because there'll be nothing else left for you. Nobody will doubt it. Your record's against you, old man."

"I've never committed a sex crime in my life!"

"You've had one woman after another, and sex-maniacs always begin that way. It doesn't matter what you've told the police about me, for they already know you're a sex-maniac—they've seen the dead woman in the Polish Volunteer—so they'll not believe a word you've said."

My head swam with pain and shock. I thought of silly, gold-digging, teasing Lucy and felt sick. What had he done to her before she died?

"I'm well covered-up," Preez said. "I've had years to do it. Suppose they check on me a bit, they'll find nothing. No ordinary investigation can harm me . . ."

Then he broke off, for he heard it at the same moment I did. Nobody could help hearing it. It boomed and reverberated though the empty building up from the ground floor—the slamming of the

front door.

He leapt up and listened, folding the razor and putting it away and getting my Luger out again.

"There's somebody coming, Preez," I said, "and if I start yelling or you fire a shot you'll never get away. But I don't want to tangle with the police any more than you do, so lift this window off my hands or I'll scream the place down."

Would he buy it? It was full of holes, but he had to make his mind up at once, and he knew that if I yelled he was sunk. There were telephones all over the building, and probably there were plenty of police cars roving about in search of me. An alert could go out in a few seconds, and what chance would he have of passing unnoticed through the empty City streets? On a Sunday evening like now the whole area could be sealed off.

"If I'm found fastened up like this, Preez, they'll know I couldn't have done it myself, so they'll start looking for somebody who did, and what I tell them about you then won't sound so wild."

I could see he didn't know what to do, but suddenly he decided, lifted the window off my wrists and backed away, threatening me with the gun. Not that I could have done anything with my numbed and useless hands. I couldn't have stopped a kitten.

He opened the door, looked outside and then nipped into the pass-

age. I heard him creeping away on tip-toes. A moment later there came the creak of the iron door of the fire-escape opening and shutting and he was gone. He got out of Bollard House the way he had got in.

All the time the place was echoing with the footsteps coming up the stone stairways, and now I could hear voices speaking but not what was being said.

I bent over Trudi, wriggled my crippled hands under her and got her up. She sagged against me, half-fainting. I got her behind the door somehow and propped her against the wall.

"Bear up, petlet," I whispered. "We'll be all right."

Queer things you notice, but to this day I can remember two of those pigeons creaking across the courtyard side by side, as I crept over the tiled floor to get her shoes and put them out of sight.

I joined her again behind the door, and started trying to untie her, but I had to stop, for the blood was pumping back into my hands, hurting like hell again, and I had no strength in my fingers.

The footsteps had reached our floor by now.

"Always something wrong!" said a mean and querulous voice that I well remembered from the past.

It was the voice of the caretaker of Bollard House. He lived in the basement of another office-building

down the street, and besides keeping the two buildings clean—after his fashion—he had the additional job of nagging and threatening those tenants who happened to get behind with the rent. From time to time he'd had occasion for quite a bit of chit-chat with me.

"This door appears to be unlocked," said a second voice, and I heard unoiled hinges creak that I thought were the hinges of S. Berne's office, and were.

"That don't mean anything," said the caretaker. "I'm always locking up after somebody or other. You coppers see trouble everywhere."

So it *was* the police!

That gave me a nasty turn. I knew damn well I was innocent of Lucy's murder, but I would have stayed holed up for months rather than let them put a hand on me before I had the proof. A fine body of men, no doubt, but human and fallible, and—as Preez had pointed out—my record was against me. Everybody knew that women were my weakness.

"It looks as if somebody's been in this office recently," I heard the policeman say. "Does Berne ever come here on a Sunday?"

"How would I know? It's unlikely, but he may do. He's got the keys."

"If it was an unauthorised person," said the policeman, "you letting the door slam would have warned him."

"How could I help letting the door slam? It slipped."

"How many ways out of this building?"

"Only the door and the fire-escape."

"Show me the fire-escape."

They came along the passage, walking quicker, passed our door and went to the end. I wondered if Preez had got out of sight by now, but he had, for I heard their footsteps on the iron platform and there was no excitement.

"Probably there's nothing wrong," said the policeman, coming back, "but the exchange thought it queer somebody putting through a Continental call from an apparently empty office building on a Sunday."

He tried the handles of the offices as he passed by. When he came to our door he pushed it open, with Trudi and me flattened behind it, but by now he had made up his mind that it was all a false alarm, and he only glanced in.

"We'll go back to your place and get Berne's address," he said, letting the door swing shut again. "Is he on the phone?"

"I think so. It's some boarding-house in Highgate."

"I'll just take a look round."

They went upstairs, trying doors and moving about, then down again, and I heard them going through the whole building, till at last the front door boomed behind them.

Before that happened I'd managed to get my penknife out of my pocket and cut Trudi loose, but I didn't know what to do about her jumper. She couldn't be seen like that. She'd attract attention immediately with a jumper slit all the way down and nothing underneath it except a bra. She hadn't a coat. The last thing I wanted was to attract attention.

I got her leaning over one of the washbasins, ran the cold water and bathed her face. At the same time I let the water play on my wrists, which were blue and puffy. She was half-fainting and kept holding me, afraid to let me go. When I went upstairs I had to take her with me.

Two years ago there'd been somebody in the rag-trade on the next floor up, and I certainly hoped he was still in business—they come and go in Bollard House. But he was, and I added to my crimes of that day by putting my shoulder to his door and breaking it in.

We found a sample cardigan that she could wear, and as soon as she'd got it on I hurried down the stairs to the first floor and then along the passage to the fire-escape. We mightn't have much time. It only needed that policeman to speak to S. Berne on the phone, or the caretaker to listen to his wireless and connect the wanted murderer with the tenant of S. Berne's office two years ago, and the place would swarm with coppers.

But we did it. We got down the fire-escape, the damn thing ringing under our feet like an alarm-bell, and walked along to the Royal Exchange.

"Look happy, for Pete's sake," I said, holding her arm. "Try the nursery rhymes again. Tell yourself funny stories. Do anything to concentrate your mind and get that look of death off your face."

She did her best, but just as we crossed over to the west-bound bus-stop we got a shock, for two black police-cars, one behind the other, shot past us, going towards Bollard Lane.

"Don't look," I said, and my fingers dug into her.

We boarded the first bus that came by, changed at Charing Cross and got on the Underground. That was a mistake, I thought as we did it. Charing Cross was one of the outlets the police would watch, and there seemed to be plenty of them about, but I steered Trudi into the middle of a swarm of passengers and we got away with it. After all, there are thousands of people who look like me.

I made for the coach terminal. That would be another bad place, I knew, but there was nothing for it: I had to go that way. However, we had a bit of luck and didn't have to hang about, for just as we arrived I saw the coach I wanted about to draw out, and we got into a seat at the back and were on our way without anything happening.

She had calmed down a lot. I kept my hand on hers, down between us on the seat and hidden by a fold of her skirt, and we talked in whispers. She told me how she'd been washing herself in the ladies' when suddenly she'd seen Preez behind her in the mirror. It must have been the sound of the running water that had drawn him to the right place as he came up the fire-escape. He'd cut off her cry with a hand over her mouth, used the blackjack on her, tied her up with her stockings and then waited for me.

I looked at the backs of the heads of the people in front of us, and was glad that nobody could stare at my face for an hour and a half and wonder who it reminded him of.

"Where are we going to?" Trudi asked.

I'd been expecting that. "Don't let it upset you," I said, "but we're going to the Polish Volunteer. We're going to eat there."

Her hand jerked in mine. "Are you mad?"

"No. Preez's place is the only place for me just now. There's not another place in the whole country where I could go."

She tried to talk me out of it as the coach rolled along in the darkness. I watched the people round us in case they showed any signs of trying to listen, but none of them did. She had got frightened again. For her this thing had started out

as a great and glorious adventure, a noble odyssey of vengeance with a nice five thousand quid as a sweetener, and the promise of a warm feeling of achievement for her to nurse for the rest of her life. But like so many great and glorious adventures it had got out of hand and turned and bitten her.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll park you somewhere till it's safe. Then you can come in and ring up Hamburg again, because that man they sent over to London won't get an answer when he rings S. Berne's number, unless it's the wrong answer—from a policeman. The man you phoned in Hamburg—could he be the one who's selling us out?"

"No. It was Count Borsen, and I've known him all my life. He's the leader, the man who founded the Bruderschaft."

"Then it's somebody who can listen in on his phone a—servant perhaps or a secretary. The Bruderschaft underrated Preez. He may have known all about them from the start. I daresay he's got some of his old Gestapo pals still on a private pay-roll to protect them. He's got all the dough he needs for things like that."

It was very dark when we got off the coach and walked along the side of the road in the direction of the Polish Volunteer, a couple of miles away. Cars zipped by all the time—Sunday motorists making for home. It was a comfort there were so many of them, though off

the roadway it was everywhere black and lonely.

"I must find a place for you to wait," I said, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"No, Jeff, I'm going with you. I feel better now. You need somebody. What can you do alone? It's madness. You haven't a gun, and with your poor hands . . ."

"There are no nails in my coffin yet," I said. "My hands may not be as good as they were, but they'll do."

"We ought to think it all out first, not just rush in."

"I've done all the thinking I need to and there's no time for more. I can't drift about like this for ever. I've got nowhere to hide and only a couple of quid left. The police may pick me up any time, and what chance'll I have then? It's got to be now, but if you're going to help me—and I admit it would be difficult alone—I'll shorten the risk so far as you're concerned."

"I'll help you," she said; so we turned back and walked along till we got to the village, and I put through a call to Superintendent Lazenby from a roadside telephone kiosk.

"Bill," I said, "This is Jeff again. I'll meet you and talk to you if you'll give me your word you'll keep it private and come alone."

"Where are you?"

"I want your word first. I'm not in the Metropolitan Police district, if that's what you mean."

"I can't make a private arrangement with you like that. You must go to your nearest police station . . ."

"Cut the guff, Bill. Haven't we known each other for years? I've never asked you a favour before, but this is it. If I don't convince you I'm innocent, then you can call in the local flatfoots and hand me over. Is it a deal?"

"All right," he said.

"Then hop into your car and come to the Polish Volunteer. You can be here inside an hour."

I hung up and joined Trudi outside.

"Whatever happens now," I said, "you should be all right."

We walked along the main road in the darkness, then turned off and made towards the Polish Volunteer. It was lonely and very dark, and on this road there were no cars going by. We walked carefully, watching and listening. She hung on my arm and I could feel her nerving herself.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

I began telling her what my idea was, but we came in sight of the Polish Volunteer and I stopped. There was only one window lighted, but I had expected that; no roadhouse would open for trade on the Sunday night following the Saturday in which a murder had been committed in it. Was Preez there? I supposed so. Who else? Miester perhaps and others. What

house-servants did he have—English or his own people?

I took her off the road and we stood under a tree a little way back in the fields while I finished telling her the plan and made sure she understood it.

I didn't feel het-up, but sad and sort of airy. Some part of me kept saying that this might be the last time that Trudi and I would ever be alone together. Anything might happen when I chanced it all, as I meant to do within the next half-hour.

We were closer together in spirit at that time than we had been since the haystack. Was that only last night? It seemed weeks away. Since then she'd been afraid of me and I'd suspected her. But now all that was over. We were together again, trusting and loving.

Suddenly I thought of something. "What's your name?" I asked. "All of it."

"Gertrude von Stauffenbach."

"Quite a mouthful," I said, "and a von in it too. You must feel like slumming being out with me. I'd rather have Trudi."

It was dry under the trees and the dead leaves smelt like Christmas. The darkness was thick and warm. I lay down and pulled her down after me. She didn't want to, because she felt nervous about going off guard, but I said: "This may be the last time for us. I could get killed tonight. Or I could get arrested and be hanged."

"Oh, Jeff, don't talk like that!"

"He's very sure of himself. Lots of old RAF men who knew Preez in the war must believe he's the same man now. How come? It's one of the things I must find out tonight if life's to be pleasant tomorrow. But now, petlet, we've got a few minutes we can call our own, and we may never have any more."

She lay hot in my arms, clinging and soft, yet fierce with desire for me, and those lips of hers, mobile and velvety, tasted like fruit again. It would have been easy to stay there with her, easy to go all the way again, but I kept hearing the minutes ticking away in my head.

"Time to go," I said at last, and helped her up.

So we crept across the dark fields hand in hand towards the Polish Volunteer.

## PART FIVE

I'm not a marrying man, I'm not a sentimental type; I'm tough; but I felt very tender towards Trudi as we crept across the dark fields with her hand hot and tied on mine. We were like kids clinging together as they go forward to an ordeal that frightens them.

The night was black as pitch, as nights often are when there's a moon to come up later, and silence hung over everything like a blanket.

We got to the back of the roadhouse, and nothing happened. There was no light showing on

this side and nothing to hear.

"Hide and listen," I whispered to her after we'd waited for a few minutes crouched down in the grass. "If it's all right I'll be back soon. If anything happens, get to the road quick and wait for Lazenby."

"Jeff," she said, and she put her hand on the back of my neck and kissed me passionately on the mouth. It was the first time she'd done a thing like that without an opening move from me.

I'd stayed at the Polish Volunteer at least a dozen times. Many a bright morning I'd opened the bedroom curtains and yawned down at the concrete yard at the back, and I had a photographic memory of it. I knew where about in the darkness the empty crates were stacked, where the barrels stood, where the non-returnable bottles lay on their sides, tier on tier, under the lean-to roof, where the long ladder rested propped up against the garage wall.

It was still there.

I went back for Trudi, because I didn't trust my hands and I needed her help.

Silently, foot by foot, we got the ladder across the yard and resting underneath the window of the room where last night she and I had been together.

We listened again. Nothing.

"Give me your lipstick," I said.

We listened again. Nothing.

"Then this is it." I said.

She gave me the lipstick dumbly and I put it in my pocket. I had a tyre-lever I'd picked up in the garage, and the key of my bedroom in the roadhouse with the four-inch lump of aluminum hanging from it. I had all I could hope for now, except luck, and I might get that too.

I led her back across the yard and out through the gate. It could have been fatal if she'd tripped over a crate or sent those empty bottles rolling.

Then I crept back alone and started climbing the ladder. The damn thing creaked and groaned, and I wondered if Preez was listening and staring out at me from one of the dark windows. The silence of everything got me, and I swallowed. It was as if the whole place was alive and waiting to spring.

I dug the tyre-lever under the sash and prised the window open. One sharp crack as the catch broke and that was all. I paused and listened. A train was going by far away in a world of law and order. I raised the sash, put my head in and listened again. Nothing to hear but the pumping of the blood in my ears.

I climbed in, felt my way across the room and unlocked the door with my key. The landing outside was dark and empty; the staircase going down was a black gulf with the glass door gleaming at the foot of it.



I went back to the window and lighted a match as a signal to Trudi. Then, with my ears straining I fumbled for her lipstick, and as well as I could in the darkness I wrote in large letters on the wall: "Bill. Trudi von Stauffenbach came here with me, Jeff."

If Preez saw that he wouldn't be able to wipe it off the wall in a hurry, and if Bill Lazenby didn't find us when he arrived he'd search the place from top to bottom. I'd done all I could to protect Trudi now.

I was standing inside the bedroom door, which I'd opened the merest crack, when Trudi rang the bell. I opened up long enough to look down the stairs and see the shadow of her head and shoulders outside the glass of the door. Then the lights went on below and I heard footsteps beneath me and an inside door opening.

It was a good thing that I had the bedroom door open so little, for as Preez came into the hall he gave a quick glance up the stairs—why, I don't know, except that it was up here that Lucy had been murdered and perhaps that was on his mind. Then he stared out through the glass to see who was ringing. Trudi was standing a bit back from the step, as I had told her to, and I did not think he recognised her. At any rate he didn't go for help, nor did he call or beckon anybody, but I saw him put his

right hand into his jacket pocket and keep it there as he opened the door with his left.

After that everything happened pretty fast, as such things do. She made to come in—spunky little piece that she was—he recognized her, and expecting me to be out there too, tried to slam the door shut while he dragged out the gun in his pocket.

I had crept to the head of the stairs and I jumped straight down on top of him. I knew my weight would flatten him out whatever he tried to do, and I just hoped I wouldn't stop a bullet or break any bones.

I didn't; but though I landed with an awful crash that knocked him cold, I nearly knocked myself out too, and I was reeling and dizzy as I ran through the ground floor rooms of the Polish Volunteer—kitchen, restaurant, bar, ballroom, offices and cloakrooms—with my Luger in my hand again, leaving Trudi to stand guard over him with his own gun, for he'd had both guns aboard.

But though I searched the whole ground floor I found nobody.

Together Trudi and I dragged Preez over the polished parquet into the kitchen and lashed him into a wooden chair with a clothes-line.

"So far, so good," I said, panting. "Now, petlet, the call to Hamburg—quick. Get it in the bar. If anything happens—yell."

The air seemed to me to be trembling like a taut-wire, as the air of places always does when there's violence and apprehension there.

I searched the whole place again, including the upper floor—everywhere except the bedroom where Lucy Markham had been murdered, and that was locked and had a police seal across the jamb of the door. There wouldn't be anybody in that room.

I could understand there being no servants living in. Preez wouldn't want strangers on his neck just now. But what had happened to Meister? All through this business he'd been in the background, a shadowy threat, though I'd never seen him.

I left the lights on everywhere and went back to the bar-room.

Trudi was already through to Hamburg, and this time I didn't even try to understand her flood of German. I trusted her. Besides I was too tired and dizzy and had too much on my mind.

I went in behind the bar-counter and got some drinks. The counter had one of those metal lattice grills padlocked across it, but the door at the end was standing open with Preez's bunch of keys hanging from the lock. Evidently he'd been sitting alone in the bar-room, eating sandwiches, drinking Hock and listening to the radio. There was an armchair with a table beside it and the things on it. The radio was still playing softly—ro-

mantic waltzes from some Viennese station—and there was a nice soft light in the bar-room, showing up the Battle of Britain souvenirs hanging all round the place. I gave myself a sandwich and shut the radio off. If there were going to be any footsteps creeping up on me I wanted to hear them.

Trudi hung up, but I made her knock back a man-size brandy before I let her talk. Then, while we polished off Preez's plate of sandwiches, she told me that two Bruderschaft men were in London. They had reported by phone to Count Borsen in Hamburg that they had got no reply from S. Berne's number and being a cautious pair, had not yet visited Bol-lard House. Hoping to hear from Trudi again, the Count had told them to call him back again in an hour. That hour was now pretty well up.

"We don't need them now," I said. "The play has altered. Anyway, the spy in Hamburg will call up here soon to find out how the land lies."

"I don't think he will," Trudi said. "They've got him."

"That's nice," I said, and gave her a kiss. "There's nothing much we can do now except wait for the law."

We went next door to the kitchen to look at Preez. He'd come round and was trying to struggle out of his ropes, without success. His RAF moustache was dragged,

there were scratches and a big blue bruise on his face, and he was sweating like a pig, not only from his struggles, but because there was a big anthracite range in the kitchen that the restaurant cooking was done on.

I slapped his face hard and he squealed. I thought of him using the razor on Trudi in Bollard House and I slapped him again, harder, and he squealed again. She looked on, beautiful and cold.

"Where's Meister, Preez?" I asked.

"I don't know. Old fruit, listen to me. We can make an arrangement. I have lots of money . . ."

I slapped him a few times more as hard as I could and he squealed a lot.

"Where's Meister?" I asked.

"He went out."

"What for?" I asked my hand raised.

"To bury . . ."

He tried to cover up, but he'd let it slip.

"To bury Hans," I said. "Just the tidying up, eh. That's it, is it? That's what he's doing. You thought the police would take care of me, and with the Hans job tidied up you'd be in the clear."

I heard a car stop outside and then the door bell rang. An indicator shook and flashed in a case on the kitchen wall.

"Stay here with him," I told Trudi, and before I went out to the entrance hall I kicked open the

door of the range and stuck a poker into the glowing anthracite.

It was Bill Lazenby all right. I made sure of that before I opened up and let him in. As good as his word, he had come alone.

"Hullo, Bill."

"Hullo, Jeff."

He stared at me sombrely as he came in. I didn't offer my hand. I didn't want to embarrass him and I didn't want to be snubbed. I liked him, and besides, I was about to play a pretty low trick on him.

"This way," I said. "I've got it all laid out for you."

"It had better be good," he said.

I walked back to the bar-room and he trod along heavily behind me. He was a big man, young for a Superintendent. I wondered if I would see him holding a gun on me when I looked round but he wasn't.

"Take a look at this," I said, and pointed in behind the counter.

He gave me a questioning glance, then stepped forward and looked down to where I was pointing.

I gave him a shove. He stumbled, shouted, lost his balance, crashed into the shelving and knocked half a dozen bottles down. Before he recovered himself I had the door of the bar counter locked on him and he was in a cage.

"Let me out!" he shouted furiously. "You bloody fool, Jeff! Don't you know what this means?"

"Assault and obstruction of a police officer. What'll I get for it, added to my other crimes of breaking and entering, burglary, theft, and so on? A couple of years perhaps. Not nice. But two years soon pass. A hanging lasts for ever."

"I came to help you, Jeff, but I'm warning you . . ."

"Oh, turn it off, Bill. I hate doing this but it's the only chance I've got. You all believe I'm a sex-maniac who murdered and mutilated a girl here last night and because I'm fond of women you think it all adds up. Well, I'm going to make Preez confess to that crime in front of you, because unless he's made to he never will, and I'll take the high jump for it. I can use methods that you as a policeman wouldn't dare to use."

And I did. I dragged Preez, tied to the chair, out into the bar-room, and I got the poker, red-hot, from the kitchen range.

"Now, Preez," I said, "or Wolfgang Skager—talk!"

He stared up at me in panic and defiance, and as I brought the hot iron down towards his face I wondered if he'd be tough enough to hold out, but it wasn't long before I had him screaming. Bill Lazenby roared and threatened behind the grill, shaking it and trying to force it open but I took no notice.

I can't say I enjoyed it. I'm no sadist. I did it because I had to, and after the first few moments, when I'd made him pay a bit in pain and

terror for the pain and terror he'd brought to Lucy and Trudi, it sickened me. Not that I hurt him all that much. But I broke his nerve. I changed him into a whimpering, slobbering parody of a man. But he told all I wanted him to tell.

He'd murdered Lucy in a panic, he said, thinking she was one of the Bruderschaft because she'd come with me. She'd wakened and screamed when he'd let himself into her room late last night after the roadhouse was closed, and he'd strangled her. Then he'd thought of the idea of making it look like a sex-crime and pinning it on me, linking it up with his kidnappng earlier in the evening, which he'd pretended to the police till then was a puzzle to him and probably nothing but a drunken practical joke. So he'd worked over her dead body with a razor and called the police in afterwards, saying he'd heard her moaning when he went up to bed, and had gone into her room to find her dying.

It came out too that he was Wolfgang Skager all right, though it wasn't Preez who told the whole of that. Bill Lazenby had spent the day checking up on RAF and Polish records and he'd dug out a lot of stuff which fitted in and which he told me about later.

The real Preez had been in hospital in England when the war ended, burned and disfigured, his vocal chords damaged, and as near

death as scarcely mattered. But he'd wanted to go back to Poland to die, so they'd flown him home.

At that time Skager was in hiding on the Eastern frontier of Germany, waiting to find some identity that would cover him comfortably for the rest of his life. He heard about Preez, found out that they were the same physical type, same height, same coloured hair and so on, and when the real Preez died—as he did—the phony Preez entered England as a Polish hero who'd been brought back from the grave by marvels of medical science and plastic surgery.

At that time Poland was roaring red with Communist revolution and there was no means of checking things up.

Over the years a few of the Battle of Britain pilots who'd known the real Preez felt puzzled about the phony now and then, but a man who's been smashed to pieces in an air crash and burned half to death can be forgiven if his face looks different afterwards, if his voice is squeaky and not the same as it was, and if his memory sometimes stumbles over details of the past.

So Wolfgang Skager had got away with it till the Bruderschaft caught up with him.

I unlocked the bar and let Bill Lazenby out. He was grim and didn't say much. I cut Preez's ropes to let his hands free, but not his feet, and I gave the bastard a tumbler half-full of brandy to pull

him round a bit. Anyway, it was his brandy. Silently, impersonally, Trudi put some stuff on his scorched face that she got out of a first-aid box fastened up on the bar-room wall.

"That's it, Bill," I said. "I hope you're satisfied. There's the phone. Ring up the local cops and the job's done."

"Perhaps not quite yet," he said, "but I'll ring up anyway. Meanwhile, let me have your arms. You aren't entitled to carry them without a license."

I'd always known Bill for a bit of a pompous so-and-so, as many high-ranking officials are. It grows on them with their promotions. So I grinned at him and handed over the Luger and the second gun I'd found on Preez.

"Thanks," he said drily, and put them away behind the bar. Then he rang up the local police station, told them who he was and where he was, and asked them to send down a squad car with some men to take in a prisoner.

He didn't say who the prisoner was, but I didn't pay much attention, for I'd taken Trudi into my arms to comfort her. She was in a pretty bad way, letting go, now that the strain was over.

"When the local poice get here," Bill said, hanging up, "you will be placed under arrest."

It took me a moment.

"Who? Me!" I cried. "You heard the man confess!"

"That confession's worthless. It was obtained under duress. The man was terrified. He would have said anything."

Preez, who'd been slumped in his chair, the brand glass tipping in a shaking hand, lifted himself excitedly.

"That's right, officer. It was all lies I told. I was terrified. I would have confessed to anything to stop the torture."

"You're crackers, Bill!" I cried. "Even if the confession won't stand up in a Court, you know I didn't do it."

"There is still a warrant out for your arrest for murder," Bill said. "I have no power to withdraw it. It will have to be executed. Cognisance will be taken of what has occurred here tonight, and we'll see what happens at the trial."

He was hopping mad, but so was I.

"Stop talking like a bloody policeman," I said, "and to hell with the trial!"

I'd been through a lot. Five minutes ago I'd relaxed, and I couldn't suddenly get into gear again. I felt now as if something was going to snap inside me. I looked wildly round, wondering if I could make a break for it, but knowing as the idea flashed in my mind, how stupid it was.

Then I saw somebody standing in the doorway. It was a tall thin man with a bony face, and he had a gun in his hand.

"Meister!" Trudi cried.

Meister barked something at her in German, but then a lot of things happened all at once. As Meister stepped over and cut Preez's ropes, and Bill Lazenby shouted, telling him with sublime stupidity to put down his gun and behave himself, two other men appeared in the hall outside the bar-room door. They looked queer because they had nylon stockings pulled over their heads as masks. They too had guns.

One of them rushed at Meister, the other at Preez. Somebody's gun went off, but nobody seemed to be hit. My head was swimming and I sat down, though the Lord knew it was no time for sitting. But I was out of it. I just sat there, dazed, while a rough-house took place all round me, ending by Preez and Meister getting taken out by the two masked men, while Bill Lazenby ran at them and got a kick in the belly for his pains.

The two men were, of course, the men from the Bruderschaft, but they didn't entirely get away with it, for outside the Polish Volunteer they met the police who had just arrived in the squad car.

Preez and Meister got arrested, but the Bruderschaft men ran off in the darkness and were not seen again. So far as I know they got safely back to Germany. I hope they did.

One thing I do know was that five thousand pounds got put to the

credit of my bank account, which made the bank manager give me the first smile I'd have from him for years.

Of course, I had some pretty rough interviews with Bill Lazenby, and I'm still getting called up to his office now and then, while the international lawyers work away on the Preez case. Nobody seems to know yet whether he'll be tried in England or whether his British citizenship will be withdrawn and he'll get extradited for trial in Western Germany.

I'm in the clear anyway, thanks largely to Meister, who panicked and turned Queen's Evidence, blowing the whole gaff on Preez.

When Bill Lazenby cooled down a bit he realized—with some help from me—that he'd look a pretty bloody fool if he had to let the whole world know that he'd been shut up like a monkey in a cage while I solved the crime at the Polish Volunteer, so as he and I have

our rather cold talks together in his office that embarrassing incident is never referred to. I don't know if it'll come out at the trial, but I hope not for everybody's sake. One oughtn't to take the law into one's own hands, though sometimes it's the only thing to do.

Regrettably, he and I will never be on quite the same good terms again.

I took Trudi away for a glorious, delirious, expense-no-object fortnight in Paris, and sometimes when I woke up beside her on one of those sparkling and scented Paris mornings, with the romantic sounds of Paris drifting up from the street into our hotel window, I looked at her lovely sleeping face and wondered if at last I could settle down with one alone.

But I'm afraid not. I'm not the marrying kind.

It's a pity.

She thought so too when we said goodbye.



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