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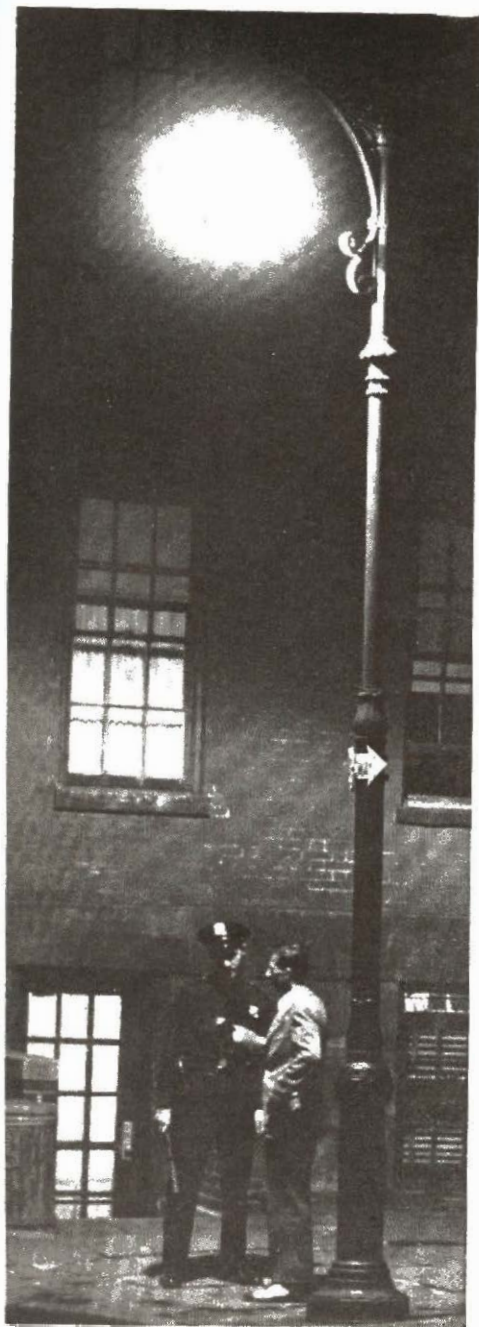
WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

FEB.-MAR., 1966
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a Craig Rice story . . .





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is out*

GET MAN— HUNT

**160 pages
of
MAYHEM
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MURDER
MALICE**

see back cover

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the anonymous body

The suddenness of the blow sent me sprawling. I struggled in a swirling fog to keep my feet . . . then the world came down on me and I slipped into a bottomless pit.

BY NANCY A. BLACK





IT STOOD THERE, rising stark against the sky. The barn next to it was weathered and discolored by years of rain, snow, and wind beating against it. The silo itself was old and nearly as weathered as the barn, although there was some evidence of the red paint that must have once shone brightly upon its wooden staves.

I drove my new station wagon into the rutted driveway, feeling each bump and jolt with the an-

guish only an owner of a new car can feel. When I saw Clyde Jenkins, the county sheriff, waiting for me some of my annoyance at being called out here to this part of the county vanished. Clyde had greater problems than my resentment. Ever since he'd taken office a little over two months ago, after Tom Rinehart died suddenly of a heart attack, he'd had more trouble than Tom had encountered in twelve months. Clyde, a short, undersized

man, was nearly dwarfed by the big western-cut hat the sheriffs in this state have taken to wearing. Following in the footsteps of a long line of big, bluff, stockily built sheriffs whose size alone had often been enough to quell a disturbance, Clyde had become the butt of some of the county's worst ruffians, who wouldn't hesitate to take a swing at a lawman they thought they could whip in a fight. Clyde's brow was knitted now in a frown which he seemed to wear continuously these days.

As I left the wagon and walked toward him, Clyde beckoned me to follow him and trudged off toward the barn. I followed him, a little surprised at Clyde's lack of a greeting. We walked through the barn, its musty odor and the layers of dust over everything proclaiming its long disuse. We stopped in front of the door to the silo and my eyes followed Clyde's pointing finger. I looked, blinked, and then staggered backward as a wave of nausea gripped me. I'd seen death before but not quite like this. I backed hastily away from the door and looked at Clyde. The frown on his forehead had deepened and his eyes were very tired and very dull.

"She's dead, isn't she?" I asked foolishly, for one glance at the body lying at the bottom of the silo was enough to tell me that she was dead.

"She's dead, all right," Clyde answered.

"I'll get my equipment," I said.

"I suppose you want it from all angles. The works."

"From every angle you can think of. Close-ups, especially. Lot's of them. This is murder."

Clyde's words, "This is murder," hit me as I walked back to my station wagon for my equipment. Murder was something I hadn't expected to encounter when I returned to my hometown after the Korean War bent on making my living as a photographer. Working as a small town photographer, I soon discovered, was not the way to acquire riches, especially if you were competing against two well-established old-timers. Hence my preoccupation with the photographic needs of the county offices, particularly the Sheriff's office.

I found another man and Cal Lewis, Clyde's favorite deputy, with Clyde when I returned to the silo. I had a nodding acquaintance with Clem Pitkin. While I set up my equipment I listened to Clem explain again to Clyde how he had found the body.

Clem, who owned the farm next to this one, had arranged with old Mrs. Banning to run part of his herd of cows into the barnyard for the coming winter. He'd also gotten permission to fill the silo. Mrs. Banning had been happy to let him do it since the farm had been vacant since her last tenant left over three years before. Clem and his son Jack had come over this morning to clean out the silo in preparation for

filling it sometime the next week. Right away they'd found the body of a woman, covered over with some old straw that apparently had been carried from the barn floor and dumped on top of her.

I went to work, taking shots from every angle. I tried not to look at the woman too closely as I worked. She'd apparently been strangled and wasn't a pretty sight to look at. But I couldn't help noticing a few things about her. Her dress looked as though it was a new one and fairly expensive. But it didn't go with the woman at all. It was gaudy, and much too young for her. Twenty years before she could have probably worn the dress and looked attractive in it, although in a cheap sort of way. Now she just looked hard and rundown. I put her somewhere in her forties, although it was hard to guess. Her hair was long and loose, and obviously dyed a reddish brown.

Once I looked up and found Cal Lewis looking intently at the dead woman. He had a funny look on his face. "Know her, Cal?" I asked.

"No," he answered shortly. "I never really knew her." He turned on one heel and strode off.

Cal was kind of strange at times, but most of the time he was easy to get along with and very easy to talk with. He was a bachelor and seemed quite contented with his singleness. Almost everyone in the county knew Cal and liked him. Maybe it was that slow Virginia

drawl of his that set you to liking him as soon as he opened his mouth. Cal had drifted into town soon after the end of the war. Six months later he'd become one of Tom Rinehart's deputies and had been on the force ever since. Cal came from Petersburg, Virginia, and could tell the story of the Civil War battles of that city better than any eye-witness could have done.

The coroner and his men came just as I was making my last exposure. I didn't want to watch them take her out of there so I took off for town. Anyway I had a ten o'clock appointment to get back to and it was half-past nine then.

Much to my surprise I found my sometime fiancée waiting outside my studio when I returned. Anita Taggart is a tall, cool blonde with a lot of big ideas which I don't quite measure up to. We were in high school together and like all kids that age I suppose we had more than our share of big ideas. Anita was bent on a career as a top-flight fashion model and I was sure I was headed for a career as a magazine photographer along with such as Robert Capa, Werner Bischoff, and others.

Then Korea came along before we left high school. When we graduated Anita and I became engaged and then like a lot of other young kids we parted. I headed for Korea via the U. S. Army and the Signal School at Fort Monmouth where I learned to handle a camera the

Army way. Anita headed for New York and her modeling career. I guess it must have been Korea that changed things for me; or maybe I never was cut out for the big dreams I'd wanted. But anyway somewhere along the way I lost my taste for my big ideas. When I came home and announced my intention to settle in the old hometown and concentrate on family portraits, Anita pleaded with me to change my mind. When I stood firm she promptly broke our engagement and took the next plane back to New York. She still dropped in to see me on the infrequent occasions when she made a visit home, hoping to change my mind, I'm sure, although she didn't press the issue.

I couldn't help feeling a little smug as I got out of my new station wagon. Anita was staring at the wagon as though she'd never seen one before.

"What did you do, Matt," she asked. "Inherit some money from one of your grateful clients?"

I grinned at her. "Business has grown a bit since your last visit."

"It must have."

She turned away from the wagon and looked me over. I saw her disapproval when she looked at my clothing. Tramping around in a barn and a silo isn't compatible with the wear of highly polished shoes and gray flannel suits. So, instead, I wore a pair of heavy work shoes and a suit of suntans with a

leather jacket to cut the chill of early fall. I was certain it had been a long time since Anita had been this close to a man dressed as I was.

While she was looking me over I gave her a quick appraisal. I supposed she wore the latest fashions, but, anyway, her clothes became her for she was beautiful, as always, in a cool sophisticated way.

"I'd love to talk to you, Hon," I said, "But right now I've got a rush job on my hands and a customer due in ten minutes for a sitting." I flashed a smile at her to take the sting out of what must have sounded to her like a polite brush-off. "And as you can see I'll have to make myself presentable."

"I wasn't aware that you went to so much trouble for your clients, Matt."

"Well, this one's kind of special. Charles Henry Lane. You remember. Prominent young businessman and son of one of our oldest families. I think I quoted our DAILY NEWS correctly."

Anita smiled softly. "Hum. Perhaps you aren't a total loss after all, Matt."

I knew what she was leading up to so I quickly changed the subject. "How long are you stopping in this humble wayside town?"

"Two weeks."

"Two weeks!" I exclaimed. "What is this? Anita rarely stayed longer than a couple of days."

"I'm on vacation. Two whole weeks."

"And you're spending it here?"

"Why, yes, Matt. I thought it would do me good to get away from the city for a while."

"I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself. We have plenty of clean fresh air. Wholesome milk to build strong bones and teeth, and quiet to soothe ruffled nerves. By the way, aren't you a little thin?"

She ignored me and walked toward the door. "You don't have much time to dress to receive Charles Henry Lane, Matt. Call me when you're free. See you later."

With a wave she was gone. I watched her disappear up the street and suddenly I felt an old, but not unfamiliar, sensation somewhere in the region of my heart. Quickly I willed it away and, glancing at my watch, dashed for the back room.

I had just slipped my tie around my collar when I heard the chime on the door ring. A few moments later I hurried out to the front room.

When I saw Charles Henry Lane I felt a little foolish for having made those remarks to Anita. For all the pompous words flung around about him by the DAILY NEWS Charles Henry Lane was small-town upper-class at its best. At forty-five he still had the neat athletic build of a man ten or fifteen years younger. His dark brown hair was beginning to recede and there were some rather deep lines around his eyes and his mouth, but they only served to give him a ma-

ture and rather distinguished look.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Lane. Just got back from the Banning farm. I suppose you've heard of the excitement out there."

"No. I haven't heard."

He spoke very slowly, almost as though he were carefully choosing his words. I was a little surprised at the expression on his face; it was almost wary. Or was it puzzlement?

"Someone found a body out there. A woman. Sheriff's pretty sure it's murder."

Lane looked shocked. Remembering my own reactions when I saw the body I felt comradeship toward him. He too had been through a war and seen violent death. But like me he had spent the years since in a town which hadn't had a murder since 1895.

"It's rather a shock, isn't it?" I offered sympathetically.

"Yes, it is," he answered. "Of course it happens every day in the cities but here —" He stopped and looked at me rather helplessly.

"I suppose the world had to catch up with us sometime, Mr. Lane. Although I wish it had waited a little longer."

"Yes. Yes, so do I. I just got back last night from Cincinnati." He grinned ruefully. "I kept thinking all the way home last night how nice it would be to get back home where everything's nice and quiet."

"Business trip?" I asked politely.

He nodded. "Yes. Left early Sun-

day. One of those conventions. Don't really know why I go. Never seem to accomplish anything."

The sitting didn't go very well. I kept seeing that woman's ghastly face every time I looked in the camera and Lane seemed preoccupied. I had to repeat every direction to him about three times. I took a couple of extra shots for insurance and then called it quits. I knew Clyde would be anxious to get my pictures so as soon as Lane left I went right to work. A couple of hours later I locked the studio door behind me and carrying a stack of slightly damp enlargements walked up the street to Clyde's office in the county jail.

Clyde was talking on the phone when I walked in. He waved me to a chair as he finished his telephone conversation. A minute later he swung around in the swivel chair to face me. His movements were as quick and sure as ever but I caught a bewildered look in his eyes that had never been there before. He glanced quickly through the stack of photos and then piled them neatly on the corner of his desk.

"Thanks, Matt. That looks like a good job. As usual," he added, giving me a grin that faded too quickly from his lined face. I took out a pack of cigarettes and after giving him one took my time about lighting up.

"Any idea who she was, Clyde," I began. "I like to keep my records pretty complete, you know."

Clyde shook his head. "And I like to keep my records complete, Matt. But so far, nothing. No identification on the body, no one's recognized her so far, and her clothes could have come from any large department store in the state or maybe the whole country. Just nothing. Except it's pretty certain she was strangled. Doc's working on that now. And she's probably been dead about forty-eight hours." He threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. "I've started through all the channels, missing persons, the FBI for fingerprints, but all that takes time. And in the meantime . . ." He paused and looked at me intently.

There was a catch in my throat. "In the meantime, there's a killer running around loose." I finished it for him.

He nodded. "It's probably an out-of-town killing and someone just happened on that abandoned farm and thought it a good place to dump the body."

"But the silo, Clyde? Sure, an abandoned farm's a fine place to get rid of a body. But why the silo? Why not a shallow grave somewhere on the farm? That silo just doesn't make sense."

Clyde nodded. "That's what puzzles me, Matt. If it weren't for that silo I'd be pretty sure this was an out-of-town killing. Or rather out of the county. It's almost as though someone knew that silo was going to be filled soon but didn't think that Clem would clean it out first.

It if weren't for that, why hard telling how long that body could have stayed in there."

I saw what Clyde was getting at. If that silo had been filled on top of the body it would be months before the silage was fed out down to the body. And if it wasn't all fed out and the silo wasn't used the next year or the next, it might even be years before it was used again.

"I'm calling on the auxiliary deputies, Matt. If I have to I'll run everybody in the county through that morgue. Someone here must know her."

"Yeah," I answered. "Someone knew her well enough to kill her. But suppose the killer's the only one who knew her, Clyde?"

Clyde sighed wearily. "I know, Matt. That's what's worrying me. If the killer's the only one who knew her he's not likely to let us find that out."

The afternoon was pretty well shot when I left Clyde. There was no hurry on Lane's pictures so I decided to call it a day. I called Anita at her parent's home. When I suggested we share an early dinner she accepted rather too eagerly to suit me and I was sure she'd heard about the murder and would be full of questions. For a moment I was sorry I'd asked her out. I'd had about all I could take of that murder for one day.

When I stopped off at the home I shared with my older brother Clint and his wife Maggie for a

quick shower and change of clothes I learned news of the murder had reached the back-fence clothes-line circuit hours before. Maggie seemed to sense that I didn't want to discuss it and quickly switched to something else. I felt better then and only hoped Anita would be as perceptive.

And she was. I even found myself chuckling inside when I caught the approval in her eyes as she looked at me. I knew I looked every inch the rising young photographer in my dark blue suit.

My hometown only has one hotel but it's a nice one with an excellent restaurant and dance floor on the ground floor. We took our time over dinner and then took a few spins over the dance floor. It was still early when we left. I've never quite gotten over a rather childish pride in my studio so when we left the hotel I drove down past it. I glanced at the sign above—Matthew Braddock, Photographer—letting my eyes glance lovingly at the entire spot where it nestled, between a clothing store and a hardware store. I didn't dare to hope that Anita was seeing it with any similar feelings. Suddenly I swung the car over to the curb. The display window was lighted and although the lights didn't illuminate much of the front room I'd seen something in there. As I dashed up to the front door I caught another glimpse of something or rather someone moving through the door—

way of the reception room. By the time I got inside he was gone, leaving the back door banging softly in the cool night air. A car started up down the alley but it was gone by the time I got out there.

Anita had come inside the studio when I came back. She looked frightened and lost. I suddenly realized that I'd never seen her frightened before. But I didn't have time to think about that now. I called Clyde and then started taking a quick inventory.

None of the equipment seemed to be missing and the cash register hadn't been touched. Then I saw my print files. I file both prints and negatives by number. The negative files didn't look like they'd been touched. But the last drawer of the filing cabinet that holds my prints was pulled open and someone had begun to paw through them. I couldn't figure it out but I got my appointment book out and started checking it against the prints to see if anything was missing. None of today's work was in the file, of course. For a minute I thought he'd made off with a whole week's work and then I remembered that I hadn't filed anything from the last four days. I'd planned to do that today but Clyde's early morning call to go out to the Banning farm had caught me before I'd opened up this morning. I went back to my finishing room and there they were just as I'd left them.

Clyde and Anita came into the

finishing room just then. Clyde seemed just as puzzled as I was when I told him what had happened.

"And you say he started to go through your print files, Matt?"

I nodded my head. "Yep. That's what it looks like. And just the recent ones, too."

"Matt, are you sure you never saw that woman before?"

"Clyde, you don't think it was the killer?"

"Can you think of a better explanation?"

"No. But." I didn't finish. They did come a little too close together to be pure coincidence. First the discovery of the body and then the raid on my studio.

"Matt, I want you to go through every picture you've taken for the past week. See if you can come up with anything."

"But Clyde."

"No buts, Matt. The killer obviously thinks you have something in those files. Whatever it is we have to find it before he comes back. I'll leave Cal and another man here to keep watch."

When Clyde had gone I looked helplessly at Anita. "Well, Honey. I guess it's going to be a long night. I think I'd better take you home. Cal can watch the place for a few minutes."

"Oh No you don't Matt Braddock. I'm staying right here. Someone has to keep you awake." She moved briskly over to the hot plate

where I keep my coffee pot. "I think we could both use some coffee."

"Thanks, Hon. I really appreciate this." I noticed that her earlier frightened look had disappeared. In its place there was a concern that I knew was directed to me. Suddenly I felt very warm inside. It had been a long time since I'd seen anything like that in Anita's eyes. A long, long time.

I went to work on the pictures. There were quite a lot of them but most of them were studio portraits and after a quick glance I could eliminate them. The rest were mostly shots I'd taken around town the past week. Some street scenes I'd shot for my own amusement, several I'd taken to test some film, and then I came to the batch I'd taken of the Happy Times 4-H Club. As I picked them up I remembered that these must have been taken the day of the murder if the coroner bore out Clyde's first assumption that the woman had been dead about forty-eight hours. Day before yesterday. Sometime during the morning.

I'd gotten up early that morning for the Happy Timers were leaving on the seven-thirty bus to the capital city. They were already at the bus station when I arrived. I'd taken quite a few pictures of them: group shots, their leader boarding the bus, even some after they were on the bus. I glanced quickly through the enlargements. If there was something in these the **killer**

was afraid of I couldn't imagine what it would be. I handed the stack to Anita.

"See if you see anything in these pictures, Anita. I sure can't but maybe I'm missing something."

Anita took the stack over to a table and began to examine them. I heard footsteps and looked up in time to see Cal Lewis come in. He wriggled his nose at the coffee pot.

"Say, Matt, you couldn't spare a fellow a cup of that could you?"

"Sure thing, Cal. What about your partner?"

"Naw. John don't drink coffee, Matt. Say, you found anything yet in those pictures?"

"Not yet, Cal, although I've pretty well got it narrowed down to one batch. There're the only ones that could possibly have anything in them. Anita's looking them over now."

"Well, guess I'd better get back outside. John's out in back keeping an eye on things." Cal ambled on out the door.

"Matt, do you still get Y's and Z's on your automobile licenses in this county?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Then come here and look at this car in the background of this picture."

I looked. Sure enough there was a car with a strange license tag in the background. Then I saw something else. How I'd missed it before I didn't know. But there she was, getting into the car with the strange

tags. She was looking right at the camera and that gaudy dress was unmistakable.

"It's her!" I cried.

"Who?" Anita asked, puzzled.

"The woman who was murdered. She's getting in that car with the strange tags. Well, I guess this wraps it up. All we have to do is trace the owner of this car and we should have the killer. Looks like Clyde's first hunch about this being an out-of-town killing was right."

"I'm not so sure, Matt," Anita answered slowly. "If it were someone from out of town they surely wouldn't be hanging around here now. And the killer must be still around."

"Guess you're right, Anita. Of course, the killer no matter who it is knows about this picture. But it'd be pretty hard for a stranger to hang around without being seen. And he must know the body's been found. I'm going to run this picture down to Clyde's office. You wait here. I'll either be right back or call you from up there."

"What about the negative, Matt. Don't you think you'd better lock it up?"

I grinned at her. "Say, maybe you should be around more often. Keep me from forgetting things."

I locked the negative in the safe and then left the studio.

"Find it, Matt?" Cal called to me as I went out the door.

"I think so, Cal. I think so."

The suddenness of the blow sent me sprawling. I struggled in a swirling fog to keep my feet and then the world came down on me and I felt myself slipping into a bottomless pit.

The sunlight burned into my eyes, making my head pound faster. "The blinds," I whispered, "Please close the blinds." Instead I felt a moist cloth fall over my eyes and the sunlight disappeared. I sighed deeply, relaxing. In another moment I was asleep.

When I awoke again the sun had disappeared and a cool soothing breeze drifted in from the open window. My head felt thick and full of mush and when I ran my hand over my head I felt a good-sized knot. Otherwise I seemed to be all right. Then I ventured to look about me. With a start I recognized a hospital room. "What the . . . ?" I exclaimed. Then a gentle hand fell over my mouth. "Hush," Anita whispered.

"What happened? What am I doing here?" I insisted.

"As Clyde said, someone cold-cocked you," she announced.

"Clyde!" Now I remembered. "The picture! What happened? Who hit me? What happened to the picture?"

"Not so fast, Matt. One question at a time. Someone hit you and knocked you out after you left the studio. I'm afraid he took the picture, Matt. But we still have the negative and you can make Clyde

another print when you get on your feet."

"But the license number, Anita! He'll have to trace that!"

"Hush, Matt. Don't get so excited. I remembered the license number. Clyde's already checked it out. You've been here almost twenty-four hours and a lot has happened since last night."

"But what's happened? Who hit me?"

I think Clyde will have to tell you that, Matt. He'll be here in a few minutes. Now lie back and relax."

I did as she asked and a few minutes later Clyde walked in the door. I started involuntarily when I saw him, causing my head to begin throbbing painfully. Clyde looked tired and beaten. His face had gone an ashen gray and the deep lines around his mouth and eyes looked deeper than they had when I'd last seen him.

"Hello, Matt. Good to see you're going to make it. You had us all worried there for a while."

His voice sounded as dispirited as he looked. I began to dread what I knew he must be going to tell me.

"Did you see who struck you down, Matt?" he asked suddenly.

"No. Not a thing. I was in a hurry to get to your office. The next thing I knew the world came down on my head."

Clyde nodded. "Yes. I thought you probably hadn't. I think he followed you from the studio and

when you got past the business district he let you have it. But I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Who was it, Clyde?"

"Cal Lewis, Matt. I know it's a shock. Kind of hits me where it hurts. But everything hangs together pretty well."

"But Cal? I don't get it?"

"Guess I'd better tell you the whole story. One of the first things I did yesterday was start getting hold of all the bus drivers who made a run into town the past few days and had them in to look at the body. This morning I finally reached the last one, Tim Anderson, who drove the seven-thirty bus in and out of here on Monday morning. The one that 4-H Club took out of here on that trip they won to the capitol. He recognized her right away. She came in with him out of Akron. Seems she struck up a conversation with him which is how he remembered her. He also remembered something of the conversation. According to him she said this was her first visit here. Said she was going to visit her brother, Cal Lewis, one of the deputy sheriffs."

"So that's why!" I broke in. "That's why he made that funny remark out there at the farm about not really knowing her."

"Anyway, Matt, that sort of broke it when the bus driver gave his statement. I confronted Cal with it and he admitted she was his sister."

"What about the killing?"

"Says he didn't kill her. Claims he didn't even know she was in town. Says he hasn't seen her for about two years. The last time soon after she went to Akron to live and he went up to see her."

"But if he didn't kill her why didn't he identify her?"

"He claims she was no good. Said she must have been up to something down here and he felt whoever killed her probably had a good reason. He thought if he kept quiet we'd connect her with whoever she came here to see but if he admitted knowing her we'd suspect him."

"Sounds kind of fishy to me, Clyde. Why didn't he just say he was ashamed to admit she was his sister. That'd make more sense."

I thought so, too. Anyway he had the opportunity to kill her. He took Monday off. Left town the night before. He claims he went to see a girl of his in the capitol. But won't give her name or anything else to back up his story. Says he's going to keep her out of this even if it makes it bad for him."

"I never knew Cal had a girl."

"Neither did anyone else around here. I figure he went to the capitol, hired that car, it came from a rental agency in the capitol, by the way, drove back here, picked up Thelma Gaskins at the bus station and then drove out to the Banning farm. The only thing that bothers me is his reason for killing her."

"I also got a report from the FBI

in Washington. Her prints were on file. She's been in and out of trouble since 1943. Started hanging around the soldiers from Camp Pickett during the war. Apparently that started her off. Since then she's been in trouble all over the country."

"Any proof that Cal rented the car?"

"I sent Phil Masters down there this afternoon with a picture of Cal. When he gets back I figure I'll have it all sewed up."

"Sure looks that way. But Cal! Just doesn't seem possible. I suppose he's the one who gave me this?" I gingerly touched the knot on my head.

"He denies that, too, Matt. But Anita heard you tell Cal as you left that you thought you'd found something. When you didn't come right back and didn't call she got worried and called me. So I went looking for you. But she'd tried to find Cal before she called me and he wasn't around. By the time I got down to the studio Cal had turned up. Claimed he was checking out a noise he heard in the alley that runs beside the hardware store."

They wouldn't let me out of the hospital until the next morning. I slept fitfully that night. My head throbbed most of the time and every time I thought about Cal it throbbed even more.

Anita came to the hospital early the next morning. She'd driven my station wagon in and I didn't object when she insisted on driving

me home. I didn't really feel up to leaving the hospital but I was anxious to get back to work. Anita started the car and then turned to me before pulling out of the parking lot.

"Clyde called early this morning. He'd like to talk with you again. Do you feel up to it?"

I didn't really but I didn't want to admit it. I had a feeling Anita was about ready to take me back inside that hospital as soon as I gave her the slightest hint that I felt like going back to bed.

Clyde looked even grimmer this morning, if that were possible.

"The man who rented out that car says it wasn't Cal, Matt. Says the man who rented it gave the name of Henry C. Marshall and showed some credit cards in that name. Said he looked to be in his early forties or late thirties, was tall, well-built, and his hair was receding slightly. And that certainly doesn't fit Cal. Cal's tall and skinny and he couldn't make that shock of red hair of his look receding if he tried. Also the man who took out that car had brown hair."

"Hum." I thought a minute. "That description sounds more like Charles Henry Lane than Cal."

"I hope you're kidding, Matt."

"I am. Just thought of him because his was the last portrait I took. No. Maybe I'm not kidding. Lane was out of town, too, that day. Or said he was. He was telling me Wednesday when I took his picture.

Telling me what a terrible thing this was to come home to. We were talking about the murder. Matter of fact I told him about it. He hadn't heard about it yet."

"What time was this, Matt?"

"Oh, about ten-thirty. Right after I got back from the Banning farm. He acted funny about that. When I mentioned the Banning farm. Maybe you'd better take his picture down to the capitol and show it to that clerk."

Clyde scoffed. "Look, Matt, I want to believe Cal didn't do this just as badly as you do. But Charles Henry Lane! I can't buy that. Think about it a while and you won't either."

"Now wait just a minute, Clyde. Why not Charles Henry Lane? If it's possible for a guy like Cal Lewis to go wrong why not Charles Henry Lane. Look. Give it a try anyway. Send somebody with a picture of Lane to the capitol."

"Not me, Matt. It'd get around and then I would have troubles. I'm not sticking my neck out for a damn fool hunch of yours like that."

"Then I'll do it, Clyde. I'll print up one of those pictures I took Wednesday and take it down there myself."

Clyde shrugged his shoulders. "I'll give you a letter to take with you in case they object to talking with you. But other than that you're on your own."

I regretted saying I'd go as soon

as I walked out of Clyde's office. I didn't feel at all like driving to the capitol. But then I thought of Cal and I knew I had to do it. Halfway out to the station wagon I thought of something else and I went back to Clyde's office.

"Do one thing for me, Clyde," I said to him. "Find out where Charles Henry Lane spent his Army days."

Clyde sighed. "All right. I'll do that much for you."

When I explained my idea to Anita she wasn't at all skeptical. Maybe it was because she'd been away so long and Charles Henry Lane was rather unreal to her. And when she insisted on going to the capitol with me I didn't object. I needed her now if only for moral support.

It's about 65 miles one way to the capitol. Anita offered to drive down. My head was hurting again from printing up some enlargements of Lane so I let her drive. By the time we reached the capitol I was feeling pretty good. It was about three o'clock when we reached the edge of the city and three-thirty when we got to the car rental agency.

Fortunately the man who rented the car on Sunday night was on duty again. It took only a few minutes to get what I wanted. Charles Henry Lane was the man in our mystery car and our clerk was quite willing to make an identification in person.

Anita and I were both elated as we started homeward. I felt we really had something now. I drove and as the miles clicked by Anita dozed, her head resting near my shoulder. About twenty miles from home and just inside our county line there's a bad curve and a drop-off on one side. It's a bad spot and a lot of cars have gone over the bank. I don't think anyone has lived who's gone over. We were nearing it now and I began to slow down. Anita had awakened and was sitting sideways in the seat looking out the rear window. Suddenly she sat up straight.

"Matt! That car behind you is coming up awfully fast isn't it?"

I'd been watching him in my rearview mirror. He was coming awfully fast. I swung off the road just as he cut around me, half on our side of the road. We hit the guard rail but stopped.

"Matt! He crowded you off the road!" Anita cried.

"He sure did! If I'd been going a little faster we'd have gone right through the guard rail!" I was boiling mad because I knew one side of my station wagon was a mess where I'd scraped the guard rail. I got out of the car. There'd been very little traffic on the road and not a car was in sight now. I was examining the damage when I heard someone running through the gravel along the road. I swung my flashlight on him. Charles Henry Lane!

When the beam of my light hit him he slowed to a walk. Then I saw the revolver in his hand.

"Drop the light on the ground, Braddock. Good. Now kick it toward me."

I wasn't going to argue with a killer. I did as he said.

"All right, now. Get back in the car." He opened the door behind me and got in too. "Now get this car back down the road. That's fine." He was holding the gun at Anita's head. I prayed desperately for another car to come along but nothing was in sight. "Now drive forward, point the wheels toward the guard rail, and stop when I tell you." He got out of the car now and pressed the muzzle of the gun against my temple as he opened my door. "Now put your right foot on the gas pedal and your left on the brake. Fine." He looked to make sure I had the car in drive. I knew what was coming next. I glanced over at Anita. She was staring straight ahead and I knew she, too, knew what he was about to do.

"Now gun the motor. Faster, Braddock. Fine. So long, boy."

With that he grabbed my leg and jerked my foot off the brake. But as he did so I drove my left arm into his face. At the same time Anita hit the selector lever throwing the car into neutral. Instead of hurtling forward we rolled a few inches and stopped. As I dived for Lane he fired. I heard the bullet strike the windshield and then I was on top

of him. Lane was in good shape and desperate. But I was seventeen years younger and just as desperate. It was touch and go for awhile but I'd knocked the gun out of his hand when I dove for him and all he had to fight with were his fists. I stood up. Lane lay on the ground unable to move.

"I've got the gun, Matt," Anita called to me. Then I heard a car coming down the road. I grabbed Lane and managed to drag him off the highway.

"Get that flashlight," I panted at Anita. "I think he threw it in the back seat. Flag that car."

But before Anita could get the flashlight the car was rounding the curve. I noticed that it was going awfully slow. They must have seen us at the same time for that big red flasher came on. I collapsed against the car as Clyde and Cal Lewis stepped out of the sedan. And then I had something else to think about as Anita flung herself into my arms.

"You know, Clyde," I said later, "I've always thought pictures were important but I never thought one of my pictures would help solve a murder." Anita squeezed my hand.

"I'm not surprised, Matt. I always knew you'd be a famous photographer. But I'll admit I didn't expect it to happen here, or in quite this way."

We were all sitting in Clyde's office, having a much needed coffee break. Charles Henry Lane, was safely locked up. There'd been no

more fight in him when Cal slapped him awake and put the handcuffs on him.

"Okay, Clyde," I said, putting down my coffee cup. "Let's finish this up. When did you decide my idea wasn't completely cockeyed?"

Clyde gave me a sheepish grin. "Not very long after you left. I knew it would take too long to get anything from the Army on Lane's whereabouts during the war. So I checked the newspaper files, figuring Lane's whereabouts would have been given there. Lane was at Camp Pickett, Virginia, from 1943 until he went overseas in '44. So then I went to Cal with what I had." He glanced at Cal. "Care to fill him in, Cal?"

"My sister," Cal began, "was always pretty wild. But when she began hanging around the soldiers from Camp Pickett she really cut loose. There was talk that she'd even married one of the soldiers during a weekend spree that ended up in Maryland. But nothing ever came out about it and I'd always supposed it was just talk. My sister never acknowledged the rumor. I asked her about it once but she just laughed at me. Then soon after that she ran off with a fellow from town. Hugh Gaskins. They sent word they'd gotten married, he went into the Marines, and was killed somewhere in the South Pacific. I was overseas myself at that time. My parents died while I was gone and when I came back I'd lost

all track of Thelma. About eight years ago I got a letter from her. She'd tracked me down through some friends at home. I heard from her once in awhile then and a little over two years ago she wrote from Akron. Soon after that I went up to see her. That was the last time I saw her alive. Not too long after I visited her I got a letter from her asking if I knew Charles Henry Lane. She said he'd been up there for a convention in the hotel where she was working and she'd noticed on the register that he was from here. I think when I answered her letter I gave her a brief sketch of Lane, pointing out that he was quite a big man here in town. I thought no more about it. I didn't even remember the incident when I saw her out there in the silo the other morning. But when Clyde came to me with the news that Lane had been at Camp Pickett I began to put two and two together."

"So I released Cal and we went looking for Lane," Clyde continued. "And of course we couldn't find him. I'd already called the car rental agency in the capitol and found out that the clerk there had identified your picture of Lane. On a hunch I decided to drive toward the city."

"Lane gave us the rest of the story on the way back here," Clyde began after another sip of his coffee.

"About two years ago Lane was in Akron for a convention. Thelma

was working at the hotel where he stayed. She recognized him and made herself known. Lane admitted he'd never divorced her. She'd disappeared soon after the wedding, Lane went overseas, and by the time he got back he'd almost forgotten about marrying her. And since no one knew of the marriage he ignored it. By then he'd met the future Mrs. Lane, of course, so he was even more eager to forget Thelma. Soon after he saw Thelma in Akron she began blackmailing him. This went on about two years and it began to get a little difficult for him to give her the sums she demanded. He kept stalling on her last demand. She threatened to come down here and he told her to come ahead. He'd be waiting for her in a car at the bus station. By then, of course, he'd decided the only thing to do was to kill her. He left early Sunday for the convention in Cincinnati, checked in there at the hotel, then caught the bus to the capitol where he rented the car, using fake credentials he'd fixed up. By seven-fifteen Monday morning he was waiting at the bus station for Thelma. He drove out to the Banning farm. She thought they were going to talk things over. The house was locked up so they went out to the barn. He strangled her, threw her body into the silo, and tossed some loose straw from the barn in on top of her. Then he drove back to the capitol, turned the car in, and caught the bus back

to Cincinnati. He figured the body'd be safe in the silo until he could come back and bury her somewhere on the farm. But he didn't know about Clem's lease."

"He knew Matt had got Thelma and the car in the background of one of the pictures Matt took that morning but since he figured her body'd never be discovered he didn't worry about it."

"And if he hadn't gotten panicky and tried to steal the picture we'd never have dreamed I had it," I added.

"Lane thought he was in the clear with Cal's arrest," Clyde continued. "He thought the picture would be ignored now. He knew we'd sent a man to Columbus but he was sure we'd never connect him with the car. But then he happened to see you and Anita heading out of town this afternoon. He decided to follow you to see where you were going. When you kept on towards the city he kept behind you all the way."

"Then I suppose he saw us enter the car rental agency?" I asked.

Clyde nodded. "And saw you come out. You were carrying a package and by your expressions he was sure the clerk had identified his picture."

"I'll bet this beats New York excitement," I said to Anita as we left Clyde's office. She nodded in agreement.

"I think I've had about all the excitement I'll need for awhile."

"Say, what is this," I countered.

"Aren't you eager to get back to gay, mad New York?"

She smiled sweetly at me. "Not right now, Matt. We'll give it another week and then we'll see."

Suddenly I felt about ten years younger. I had a hunch that other week would be a long one, and that Anita wouldn't be going back to New York for a long, long time.



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The act was vicious and violent. The vengeance was bitter-sweet.

BY
PETER BRANDT

THE BAR was empty. The customers were either at the tables or in the hard-backed chairs on either side of the bandstand. Most of them were young and very serious and they listened quietly to the musicians. There was no dancing.

Three men came in and sat down at the bar. All three wore pin-stripe suits that were a size too small. Two of the men were short and heavy set. The other was tall and well built. There was a constant twitch in his left eye. He ordered three old fashioned.

"What the hell, Carl," said one of the men. "What kind of spook joint is this?"

Carl's eye twitched rapidly. "Take it easy, Rocco. The smog's getting you."

The other man

WRATH

laughed. Rocco grunted.

"Besides," said Carl. "This is the only joint in town where you can get a decent drink." He nodded towards the bartender. "Joseph comes from Milan. He makes a real drink."

Joseph smiled and set the old fashioned on the bar.

"Here's to business," said Carl. They drank.

"Not bad," said the other man. He had short kinky hair and he wore horn-rimmed glasses.

"The liquor's okay," said Rocco. "But I wish to hell I was out of L.A. and back in K.C. listening to real jazz. This cool stuff turns my stomach."

"You mean you miss that dumb broad of yours."

"Shut up, Frank."

Carl stuck a cigar in

his mouth and Joseph fired it with a silver lighter and moved off to the other end of the bar.

"You'll both forget Kansas City when this blonde chick comes out to sing."

Rocco nodded eagerly. "Nice stuff, huh?"

Carl blew a smoke ring. "Long blonde hair and a sharp figure. Yeah, she's a nice package."

Rocco licked his lips. "You know, Carl, I'm real hot for a dame."

"That's why we're here."

Frank scowled. "Lay off the women. We got a business deal to talk over."

"Pipe down, Frank. What do you say, Carl? Do we meet her?"

Carl studied his reflection very seriously in the mirror behind the bar. "I'll see what I can do."

"That's swell. And lay off me, Frank. Pleasure first and then we talk deals."

Frank laughed contemptuously, but said nothing.

The three men ordered another round of drinks. And then another. They were feeling very good. They laughed at each other's jokes. A few of the jazz lovers gave them cold stares and then turned hastily away when they saw Rocco.

Carl turned on the bar stool as a tall, extremely thin man approached them. He had a large hawklike nose that gave him the look of a carnivorous bird.

"Hello, Carl."

"Evening, Harv. Meet a couple

friends of mine from back East. Rocco Cavoli and Frank Misano. Boys, this is Harvey Dunn. He runs The Black Cat."

Harvey smiled and stuck out a bony hand. It remained empty. Rocco and Frank looked at him without smiling.

"Nice place," said Rocco.

"Say, Harv . . ." Carl leaned forward with a confidential air. "You know this chick you got singing here. Well, the boys would like to meet her."

"You mean Cathy Rain? I don't know, Carl. There isn't suppose to be any fraternizing between patrons and employees."

Carl nodded. "Yeah. That's the way it is. We want a nice table ring-side. And after she finishes a set you introduce us to the chick."

"But, Carl . . ." Harvey Dunn pulled his nose with a nervous gesture.

"You're a nice guy, Harv. You're gonna stay that way ain't you?"

Harvey Dunn led them to a table by the bandstand, marked "Reserve." He put the reservation in his pocket.

Carl smiled. His left eye twitched. "You'll come back, won't you Harv?"

"Yes, Carl."

"But not alone?"

Harvey Dunn shook his head and smiled.

In a few minutes Cathy Rain was introduced. The hard spotlight was reflected in her blond hair. She wore

a black strapless that was tight in the right places.

Carl smiled and lit another cigar. Rocco licked his lips. Frank scowled and began cutting his nails with a penknife.

The blond girl began with a rhythmic, finger snapping version of "Old Black Magic" and then when the lights dimmed she softly sang the lyrics to "Willow Weep for Me." She ended the set with "The Man I love."

Rocco stared at her hungrily.

When Harvey Dunn introduced her, the three men rose in unison. She smiled graciously and sat down. The three men sat down. Carl looked hard at Harvey Dunn and the tall man disappeared.

Cathy would accept nothing stronger than a coke.

"You sing real nice," said Rocco.

Cathy smiled. "Thanks. This is my first job."

"Yeah, you're real good," said Frank. He was no longer cutting his nails.

The smile stayed on the girl's face but she was nervous.

Carl leaned forward confidentially. "The boys and I thought maybe after you're done tonight we could all have dinner together."

Rocco and Frank nodded.

"I'm flattered. Really I am," she said. "But I'm afraid it's impossible."

"It's okay," said Rocco. "We talked to your boss. It's all right with him."

"No. I'm sorry."

"Listen baby," said Carl. "These are my friends. They asked for you. Nobody, not even a cute chick says no to Carl Rieger."

Cathy stood up. "You're a big man, Mr. Rieger. But the answer is still no. It would ruin my career to be seen with you or you're hoodlum friends."

Rocco pounded the table with his fist. "Hoodlums! God-damn you. You ain't so hot you cheap floozy!"

But Cathy Rain turned on her heel and walked away. Everyone in the club was watching them.

"Who the hell is she? Calling us hoods."

"Forget it," said Frank.

"Not me," said Rocco. He laughed harshly. "I'm going to defrost that iceberg."

Cathy Rain said goodnight to the man at the door and stepped out into the hot August night. The air was full of the smell of exhaust fumes but now the streets were silent. She had changed her gown for a white summer dress that she wore without any jacket.

She walked around the corner and up the block toward the taxi stand. Her high heels echoed down the street. She passed a parked sedan with its motor idling. Then there were footsteps behind her and she was not alone.

Cathy walked faster, afraid to turn around. The footsteps were still there. She started to run and

then suddenly an arm hooked her throat and a rough hand pushed a sweet smelling rag over her nose and mouth. The fumes from the cloth burned her nostrils bringing tears to her eyes as she kicked and flung her arms wildly but the fumes were stifling. Her eyelids fluttered as a numbness swept over her. She felt herself lifted into the air.

"Git the dam door open," someone said.

The voice seemed to come from a long way off but it sounded faintly familiar. Then a dark cloud pushed all the breath out of her. She was conscious of being flung on the cushions, and inhaling deeply, she passed out.

Carl drove the car. Frank sat beside him and Rocco sat in the back seat with the unconscious girl.

Frank said angrily, "What a dumb stunt. They give cyanide for jobs like this in California."

"Shut up. Drive where it's quiet, Carl. Up in the hills."

Carl nodded and soon they were on the winding roads in the Santa Monica Mountains.

The girl moaned. Rocco watched the dark outline of her face and fingered the yellow hair.

"Hey! I'll bet she ain't no real blond."

The men in the front seat said nothing. Rocco chuckled to himself and played with her hair.

It was a long drive into the mountains and by the time they reached their destination Cathy had

come to. She was sick and Rocco held her arms behind her while she vomited in the bushes.

"Let me go," she begged.

Rocco laughed and released her. Cathy tried to run and he tripped her. He yanked her to her feet by her hair and when she whimpered he hit her in the stomach.

"You ain't so high and mighty now," Rocco said. Someone else hit her again in the stomach and then they dragged her back to the car.

"We'll use the back seat," said Carl. Rocco and Frank nodded. The full realization of what they were going to do finally struck her and she began to scream. But the smell of chloroform filled the back of the car and when the rag was taken away Cathy was still.

Rocco grinned and began to undress her.

The motel was plastered with pink stucco. It was very long and low and the cleaning girl did not reach number twenty-six until after her lunch break. She stuffed a half-eaten candy bar in her pocket, knocked on the door twice, and when there was no answer she let herself in with a passkey.

The rooms were still dark. She opened the venetian blinds in the living room and began dusting the furniture with an oiled rag, transferring the dust from one spot to another. After a minute she stopped and wiped her nose. There was a nasty odor in the air. She stuck her

nose up in the air like a bird dog and sniffed her way to the bathroom.

For the first time she noticed that the light above the mirror was on, burning weakly. There was a shaving brush, stiff with congealed soap and a razor on the rim of the wash basin. The frosted glass door to the shower was closed.

She coughed. The smell turned her stomach. She started to leave and then curiosity got the best of her.

She opened the shower door.

A patrolman heard the girl's screams. When he reached number twenty-six he found the girl sitting in the doorway giggling hysterically. When the girl saw him she started to cry.

"There's a dead man in there," she sobbed.

The patrolman was young and new to being a cop. It made him gag.

The man was squatting in the shower stall. He was fat and hairy chested and his flabby throat had been punctured like a sieve. The blood had flowed over the body and mingled with the water on the tile. The young patrolman had never seen so much blood. The corpse looked like an over-ripe tomato that had burst its skin.

The patrolman used the phone in the motel office to call his station. Two plain clothes detectives were followed by the homicide department. Flash bulbs popped and fin-

ger prints were dusted as the assistant coroner officially announced that the man was dead from wounds inflicted by a sharp instrument such as an ice pick. Off the record he commented that someone had done a hell of a thorough job.

An assistant D.A. appeared when the police learned the identity of the murdered man. He had registered as Richard Carter.

The police in several states knew him as Rocco Cavoli.

Mrs. Maule was a widow. It left her with a great deal of free time and nothing to do but gossip, stroke the fur of her cat, or go to the movies. Tonight she had seen a musical and she nervously hummed the tunes from it as she hurried home along the deserted street. The night was sultry and she carried her coat over her arm.

She felt much better when she had unlocked her door and switched on the lights. She turned on the fan and went into the kitchen to make coffee. While she waited for the coffee to percolate she put away the dishes she had left on the sink to drain.

It was then that she looked out of the kitchen window and saw a blaze of light from the vacant lot adjacent to her own property.

It was a fire.

Mrs. Maule quickly laid down the saucer in her hand and ran out into the backyard. She fumbled in the dark for the pail and filled it

from the water faucet. As she ran towards the vacant lot water from the pail sloshed on her dress but she was not conscious of it.

The fire came from a mound in the center of the lot and although it burned fiercely it did not spread. Hurriedly she emptied her pail. The water made an arc through the flames and suddenly Mrs. Maule jumped back.

"Oh my God!" she wailed.

Outlined in the fire was a human head the color of charcoal and as the water sizzled all the hair fell out. A blackened tongue protruded from the mouth and then the flames closed over it.

Two fire extinguishers were used up before the fire could be put out. The odor of burnt flesh and clothes was very strong.

Mrs. Maule had to be given a sedative.

It was not until a week later that the police were able to identify the thing in the vacant lot.

His name was Frank Misano.

The Black Cat was just beginning to fill up when Carl Rieger came in and sat down at the bar.

Behind the bar, Joseph smiled and laid down the glass he had been wiping. "Good evening, Mr. Rieger."

Carl nodded. "Give me a double scotch and soda. Is Dunn around?"

"Not yet, Mr. Rieger. He should be in very soon." Joseph only laced the scotch with carbonated water.

"You know how I like it," said Carl.

Joseph smiled. "That's my business."

"I'll be in a booth. Tell Dunn I want to see him when he comes in."

Carl took his drink and sat in the booth so he could see anyone coming in. He wiped his damp face with a handkerchief and his hand came in contact with the gun strapped under his arm. His left eye twitched nervously.

There was a brunette sitting on the bench with the pianist. She was going over the music.

Carl finished the scotch and signaled to Joseph who served him another from a silver tray. Fifteen minutes passed before Harvey Dunn folded his large frame and slid into the seat opposite Carl.

"Lo, Harv."

Harvey Dunn did not smile. "What can I do for you, Carl?"

"Nothing. Just making my rounds. This is my last night in L.A. for awhile."

"Oh? Where are you going?"

Carl shrugged. "Mexico. South America. My first stop is Acapulco."

"Nice climate down there."

"Yeah. I guess you heard about Frank and Rocco."

"Everybody has, Carl."

Carl licked his lips. "They were too hot I guess."

Harvey Dunn shook his head. "You know it wasn't the syndicate."

Carl looked at him suspiciously. "I do?"

"Funny coincidence you three guys here the night I lose my singer, and now there's just you."

"You talk too much."

"She was a nice kid, Carl."

Carl lit a cigar and blew a smoke ring. "They're all nice," he said. "Well, I guess I'll see you around."

"I don't think so."

"What do you mean?"

Harvey Dunn smiled and rubbed his hawk-nose. "Just that you're the last."

"Go to hell," said Carl. But he shivered as he said it.

When he left, Harvey Dunn was still sitting there with a smile on his face.

Outside, the smog and fog had mingled in a dark haze that formed a heavy layer over the street. Carl spat on the sidewalk and threw his cigar in the gutter. He walked to the parking lot and slid behind the wheel of his sedan.

Too late, he realized that someone else was in the car and there was a long moment as he froze, afraid to turn his head. He could hear who ever it was breathing. His eyes twitched nervously. There was the gun under his coat but he could not move. He heard a loud, rasping sound and finally realized that it was his own breathing. He smiled faintly. It had been his imagination. There was no one in the back seat. He turned to make sure and saw the hand with the ice pick.

Carl threw his hand up in defense and the long point of steel pierced the webbing of skin between the thumb and index finger. The shriek that tore past his lips was cut off as the ice pick descended again and plunged into his throat. He gagged and his tongue slithered out of his mouth like a huge red worm.

"Thank you, Mr. Rieger. Now I'm finished."

Carl Rieger's body was not found by the parking lot attendant until the next day. The police were not surprised. They even found the ice pick. It was a very ordinary ice pick and of course any prints had been wiped away.

They found it sticking in Carl Rieger's left eye.

It was the middle of the afternoon and the visiting hour at Green Valley Sanitarium. Every seat in the waiting room was occupied so the man leaned his back against the wall and waited.

Finally a gray haired nurse in a white starched uniform called his name and he followed her down a long corridor. Through the open doors he could see the visitors and patients talking in subdued voices. It was so quiet in the hall he could hear the rustle of the nurse's starched uniform.

"It was a terrible thing," the nurse said.

"I would rather not talk about it," he said.

"Of course. But you mustn't give up hope. The withdrawal isn't always permanent. Many patients recover completely from the shock they received."

"I would rather not talk about it."

"Of course."

The nurse led him out on a wide flagstone veranda. From the veranda he could see green grass that descended to a grove of eucalyptus trees. It was very beautiful and still.

He felt better. It was a fine sanitarium. The nurse was right. There was always the chance of recovery.

The nurse left him and he walked to the end of the veranda where a girl with yellow hair sat in a chaise lounge. She was looking off towards the grove of trees with the sunlight reflected in her hair and singing in the sweet, childish tone of a little girl.

He pressed her hand very gently and knelt beside her.

"The last one is dead," he said.

Cathy smiled, without understanding the words of the strange man and continued her song.

Joseph was smiling at his daughter but there were tears in his eyes.

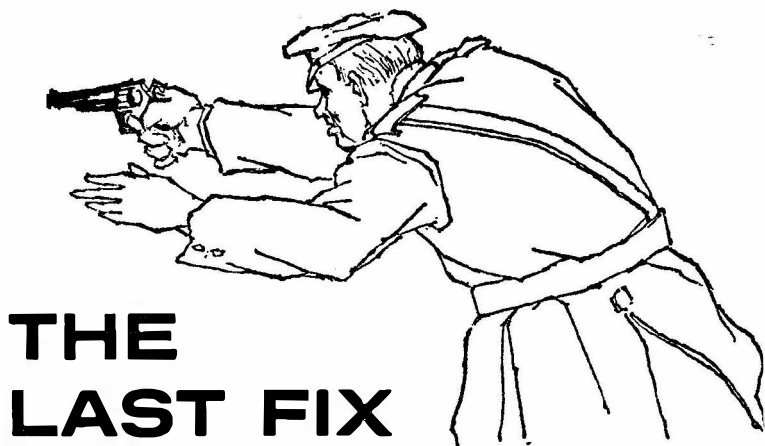


Convict?

No. This man is a patient in a mental hospital. Held prisoner by a tortured mind. Psychiatric drugs and other treatments help some of the mentally ill, but for many forms of mental illness no effective treatment has yet been found. The answer is research. Your financial help is needed.

Give to the National Association for Mental Health through your local chapter.





THE LAST FIX

After forty years on the side of The Law . . . he'd finally found the courage to turn down a fix.

BY JACK BELCK

See you around, Ward," the fat, red-faced man said slipping off his stool. He gave the Sheriff's broad shoulder a hearty thump and puffed over to the cash register to pay his check.

Sheriff Ward Cogan barely grunted in reply, his thoughts wandering through the haze of forty years' memories, memories of all the other fat men, and the thin ones, the young, the old, the shy, the brash, who had slapped him on the back and called him by his first name because he was the law. And they were all sons, daughters, wives, in-laws and what-

have-you of the politicians, the powers in the state. They all wanted the same thing: special consideration.

Cogan stared morosely into his steaming coffee mug, glad the diner's crowd had thinned out and he could spread his elbows. The fat man was a poker pal of the State Police Captain up at the barracks, so he'd have to remember the name and pass it on to his deputies. They would write it down in their books with "S.C." after it, and then they'd wave the fat one on instead of stopping him for speeding. "S.C." rated a smile that turned a cop into a no-

body who bowed and scraped to the people with influence.

"About the only citizens you can still pick up if they do something wrong are the migratory farm workers," Cogan reflected, wondering how long it would be before they had somebody behind them so they could also put in the Fix.

Beyond the noise of clattering dishes, the pulsating racket coming from the chrome-finned jukebox, and the chatter of waitresses above the dinging of pinball machines, the phone rang. Its feeble, tenor bell clawed through the jumble of sounds and caught the ear of the stringy short-order cook, who slipped around the end of the counter and yanked the receiver off the hook.

"It's for you, Sheriff."

Feeling the weight of his sixty years, Cogan backed off the stool and took the phone from the cook.

"Cogan. . . . Good God! All right, Fred. Be right there."

Two and a half minutes would get him to Walker Street if the snow wasn't too slippery. He nudged the cruiser out of the diner parking lot, flicked on the lights and laid a gentle foot on the gas pedal. Years ago he would have thrown gravel as he took off, blinker light flashing, the siren rising to its nasty screech under the prodding of the floorboard button. Now he made an efficient, quiet departure, lacking drama and reflecting how little excitement there was to a cop's life.

Walker Street was in the nicer part of town and there would be complaints if the cops were inconsiderate enough to use a siren and disturb folks watching TV. Besides, the damn siren attracted crowds of blood-thirsty vultures, eager gossips, and helpful well-wishers, half of whom would yell, "Hi, Sheriff," as he tried to do his job.

His lights swung into Walker, catching the red-eyed rear of Deputy Millis' cruiser. The driver's door was open, and the beacon spun lazily, throwing a blue pattern on overhanging trees bare of leaves and tinged with a powder of light snow.

Cogan pulled in close, his eyes already sweeping the area until he saw Millis' white face in the headlight glare. The deputy motioned to him from a clump of high bushes lining the sidewalk.

The girl looked about sixteen, perhaps a little older. She lay under the spindly branches of a bush, her legs drawn up under her as if she were trying to ward off the cold cutting through the policemen's tan uniforms.

A light coat of snow was her only clothing, except for a shredded pink thing caught around her neck and tangled in her long black hair. She might have been sleeping but for the deep, dark gashes covering her thin frame, their redness softened into a rose color by the sifting snow.

Cogan nodded to his deputy, knelt beside the body, and slipped a practiced hand between the girl's

body and the limp arm that lay over it. A slight warmth.

"Been dead no more than fifteen, twenty minutes, I'd say," Millis offered, flitting the beam of his flashlight around the spot where the body lay.

"Yeah." Cogan listened to the deputy's story about finding her and noted that Millis sounded frightened, although a casual observer would have put it down to the bitter dampness clawing at the young lawman. Cogan knew it was the fright of a cop who made a career of guarding a town like this, where an occasional wife-beating, perhaps a gas station hold-up once every few years, was about the limit of violence.

Millis handed him a purse. "Found this along with her clothes, most of 'em anyway."

The Sheriff rose awkwardly to his feet and fetched a gray blanket from the trunk of his car. He whipped it open and draped it over the dead girl, then fished into the pocketbook while the ever-observant deputy poked his light to guide the way.

"Martha Eberly."

"That's her house over there," Millis pointed to a gangling, turreted Victorian pile that sat two houses down on the other side of the deserted street.

"Fred, call the office and have Morgan call the barracks. Tell 'em . . . Hell! You know what to tell them." He closed the pocketbook

slowly. "They won't show up for twenty minutes, so I guess I'd better go and tell her folks."

"I'll go if you want, Sheriff." Millis was only twenty-four and single, but he could imagine what it was like to be sixty years old, and he felt what it must be like to have a sixteen-year-old daughter, dead.

"No. It's OK." He patted the deputy on the shoulder lightly, then wheeled to cross the street.

It was two in the morning before the State Police got through and packed their equipment away, their notebooks jammed with data and measurements, their patience frayed by the press of wide-eyed, questioning onlookers who stood around cold and silent, even after the local ambulance had whisked away the blanket-covered lump that once had been a girl.

Sheriff Cogan was physically tired, but his brain kept functioning. He knew he had to remain alert and in command. If he just stood back and let the state experts work it would become their case, and it had to remain his. The states could only come in on request of local authority, and he'd be damned if he'd let them take this one out of his hands.

He didn't even know the girl or her parents, but it had only been necessary to talk to the chalk-faced father and weeping mother for a few moments to know he couldn't let go of the case. The killer had to be found by the man paid \$6846 a

year to prevent this sort of thing. And he had promised Mr. and Mrs. Eberly he would find the killer.

Deputy Millis still held his flashlight as he waved a listless arm at the dozen or so onlookers who wouldn't let go of the tragedy. "All right, folks, all right! It's all over. Whyn't you all go home now?"

Without waiting for them to move, he slushed through the four inches of snow and joined his boss in the car, stamping snow off his black boots.

"I gotta hand it to you, Sheriff," Millis said thoughtfully.

"What?"

"You said this was the first thing like this ever happened in this town since you've been sheriff, but you knew just what the State boys were doing, even corrected them once in awhile and showed them a thing or two they might of missed."

Cogan let a half-smile light his tired face. "Got most of it from reading, the rest from listening." He lit a small cigar and stared thoughtfully into the night. "You might as well grab a quick bite. I got a feeling things are going to be hectic."

Millis clambered out of the car, bracing himself against the white-specked cold. He peered back at the Sheriff. "No sleep tonight for anybody, huh?"

"No. I'm going to stop at Chucks' house and rouse him out of bed. It's his day off, but we're going to need the whole crew for the next few days. The state boys are setting

up road blocks, but he's had enough time to clear the county by now."

At the end of Walker, Cogan turned right onto Terrace Drive. The two-way radio crackled, and Morgan's voice at the office broke into his thoughts.

"Sheriff? Our friend from the courthouse wonders if we can keep his accident off the blotter."

Cogan fingered the cold mike at the end of its coiled leash for a few seconds before answering. The goddam city clerk. Cracked up roaring drunk again. And if it wasn't him, it was his brother-in-law or his grocer wanting something. Everybody wanting the law to be enforced for the other guy, not for him. Put the screws to the other guy, the one without a relative, pal, or debtor with pull.

"OK, leave it off. I'll fix it up tomorrow." He dropped the mike onto its hook, then jerked the wheel hard and slithered across the street onto the narrow road leading to his sleeping deputy's tiny ranch house.

The snow fell a little more thickly now, teasing the windshield wipers as they frantically rushed to and fro, trying to fight the feathery fluff plastering the glass.

Cogan squinted at the clipboard hanging from the instrument panel, trying to read the plate number of the dead girl's car. Her green and white Ford had disappeared, presumably with the murderer behind the wheel, since she had left the house with it after supper.

Four headlights bore at him through the snow, a blinding whiteness that hid the metal shape behind it. The oncoming car forced Cogan's to the shoulder as it slipped silently past on the snow-covered road, slewed for a moment, caught hold again and dragged its tail-lights into the night.

It was a green and white Ford.

Cogan slammed to a stop, cutting the wheel sharply with automatic reflexes. The cruiser's rear wheels let go, and the front ones stood almost still waiting for them to catch up. In a moment, the car was pointed the other way, and the Sheriff tromped on the gas, his hand on the blinker switch, his foot grinding down on the siren button.

He knew the Ford's driver would have trouble at the end of the road when he had to make the right-angle turn onto Terrace Drive. He was travelling too fast for conditions. Cogan could already picture the fugitive trying to take the corner at speed and spinning out into a utility pole or burying himself in a snowbank. No need to speed after him, really.

Cogan slowed down long before the intersection, peering intently for signs of his man. Just as he spotted the Ford, its nose snuffling deeply into a drainage ditch, he caught a glimpse of the figure racing awkwardly down the wide road that led out of town. The cruiser's lights caught the short-jacketed, thin back, and a white face turned for a sec-

ond. Then the lightly-clad runner made a hunched spurt to outrun the car behind him.

Cogan accelerated lightly, passed his prey, then cut the wheel sharply to the right, forcing the runner into the V of car and snow bank. He unlimbered his .38 Special and was out of the car before it had come to a complete stop.

It was just a kid, perhaps seventeen years old. He stared open-mouthed at the Sheriff, then twitched his shoulders as if ready to flee the way he had come.

Cogan closed the gap between them with quick strides. He caught the boy by the arm, whirled him around and drove the gun's barrel hard into his belly. "Hold it!"

The boy stood still, his mouth still open. Wheezing from the exertion, the big man let go of the tensed arm and fumbled for the flashlight in his belt holster. He caught it in the palm of his hand, flicked it on and poked the beam into the boy's face.

"You son of a bitch! You goddam rotten kid!"

The kid closed his mouth and let a small, crooked smile show. He said nothing, but caught his thumbs in his wide belt. The probing light caught the bloodstains on his sleeves and pantlegs. He said nothing when the lawman ground the handcuffs hard on his wrists and shoved him into the cruiser.

Familiar with what was in the minds of would-be escapers, Cogan

took a large paper bag out of the glove compartment, flapped it open, and dropped it over the boy's smirking face.

No one got any sleep after that except the boy, shoved into a cell in the basement of the jail. While he stretched his length on the clean-sheeted cot, a look of indifference on his smooth face, the sheriff had to deal with newspapermen from all over the western part of the state. He had to answer the questions of a thousand friends, neighbors, and the many others who always had to know the inside story so they could pass it around—along with their boastful tales of never getting a ticket.

By eleven p.m. the next day, only twenty-four hours after the girl had been found, the initial curiosity had worn off, and Cogan had managed to catch a few hours of sleep at home, while his three deputies basked in the publicity before becoming irritated by the annoyances that went with it.

Long past midnight Cogan returned to his overheated office and dropped wearily into his swivel chair behind the ancient oak desk. Grateful for the quiet finally brought by night, he grunted when Millis shoved a cup of coffee toward him and mumbled something about the life of a small-town cop.

"Thanks. How's the kid?"

Millis shrugged. "His mother came to see him. She's getting him a lawyer. The District Attorney

talked with him awhile, and we've been giving him his three squares a day. That's about it."

"What do you think of the little bastard?"

"You know what I think, sir; I just can't figure out what gets into a kid like that, from a good home and all. I just can't figure it."

"Neither can I, Millis." The sheriff yawned. "Why don't you knock off for the night? I'll cover 'til Morgan comes on at six." He wanted to be alone.

The deputy hung his keys on the board, signed the book and trudged out of the office, grateful for an understanding boss.

The kid was reading a girlie magazine, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He didn't look up when the sheriff came downstairs and stood before the bars.

"Kid?"

The boy dropped the magazine on the floor and scratched his chin negligently. "What's up?"

"Why'd you do it?"

"I dunno, Mr. Dillon. Just sort of happened, I reckon." The boy laughed at his TV-inspired drawl.

"You want to talk about it?"

"No, but sure as hell you do."

Cogan gripped the bars until his knuckles turned white. "You're going to hang for this, you know. It isn't like the car you stole last year or all the other things you've done."

The boy laughed softly, more to himself than to the somber-faced old man staring at him. He said

nothing for awhile, just playing with his cigarette.

"It's not funny!" The words were hard, icy.

"Mr. Dillon, sir; they ain't agoin' to hang me; they ain't." Another laugh followed, a hollow, self-satisfied one. "A fellow what kills a girl, he gets hung, but a fellow what cuts her up like Martha was . . . Well." He swung to his feet and came closer to his captor. He looked him squarely in the face. "I'd say a fellow was sort of nuts to do a thing like that, wouldn't you?" He tucked his chin into his long hand and tilted his head to one side. "And they don't hang people who are nuts, now do they?"

Cogan felt a chill across the back of his neck and turned wordlessly away.

He was poring over the lab reports when the phone at his elbow jumped.

"Hello? Cogan here." He listened intently for several minutes while the voice at the other end spoke in staccato tones that fled past his ear and seemed to fill the small, cluttered office.

"You're kidding!" he finally said, half believing, half doubting. "He's sane as can be. You know it. I know it. Everybody knows it!" Cogan ran a heavy hand over his thinning, gray hair. He was sweating.

"OK. Thanks." He slammed the receiver down and buried his head in his hands. No, they wouldn't hang the little bastard. His mother's

lawyer had already seen Judge Wiznoski and talked him into a quick diagnostic committal to the State Hospital in Farrington. By noon they'd pick him up and by three he'd be under the care of helpful, solicitous doctors and psychiatrists.

Killing someone was one thing, but cutting them up after they were dead . . . "I'd say a fellow was sort of nuts to do a thing like that, wouldn't you?" The boy's words echoed in his head.

Cogan cursed softly and leaned back in his swivel chair to turn on the radio. Perhaps he could drown out his thoughts, drown out the growing knowledge that the killer in the cell below him would probably never see the inside of a prison.

His fingers were at the knob when the chair plunged backwards on its casters. The sheriff clawed for the desk, missed, and crashed hard to the concrete floor.

The blow of his head on the floor made his vision swim, blanking out the present for what seemed like a year. When he finally sat up, he ran an exploratory hand over the back of his head. It came away with an ugly smear of blood that oozed out of a painful, throbbing lump.

He struggled to his feet, righted the chair, and dropped into it cautiously. Suddenly his mind functioned clearly again, and whatever thought pushed its way through brought a broad smile to his ruddy, lined face.

He tugged his revolver from its

holster, flipped open the cylinder, and dumped the cartridges into his pocket. Replacing the gun, he lifted the keys off the desk and plodded downstairs.

"Why the hell should I want to escape?" the kid asked warily. "They won't do anything to me. They'll be damn nice to me, and all the little old ladies in town will feel sorry for me."

"You think you can fool a psychiatrist? Don't you think they'll see right through you and remand you for trial?"

The boy fingered his magazine, his usual crooked smile darkening into a sullen frown.

The sheriff stood patiently beyond the cell, his heart pounding against the star on his chest. He was careful to say nothing, careful not even to make a sound while the boy thought.

"You may have something there," the adolescent voice said evenly, the bright blue eyes digging at the light of freedom lying past the heavy steel bars.

"It's your only chance. Yes or no?"

A question rose in the boy's throat and was swallowed. He nodded silently, then rose to his feet as the sheriff unlocked the grating.

"Here." He handed the boy his gun. "It'll look better."

Moments later, the cellroom was quiet and empty except for the body of the corpulent lawman which lay sprawled on the damp floor.

In the office, the two-way radio began to sputter as a pinched-nose voice called in. No answer. The voice grew louder, more insistent. Still no answer.

"You'd better go home and take it easy for awhile, Sheriff," the doctor said as he stuffed his equipment back into his bag. "That was a heluva blow."

"I know."

"You might have ended up in the hospital with a concussion. As a matter of fact, I'm not so sure you don't have at least a mild one."

The sheriff waved the doctor away, unwilling to argue. He watched as the sleepy-eyed physician worked into his coat, then said, "Thanks anyway."

Millis, anxiously ready to be needed, waited for the door to close before pleading with his boss to go home like the doctor said. "I'll drive you."

"No, no, I'll drive myself. I'm OK. The Doc is making a big thing out of nothing."

Millis knew better than to argue after five years with the strange, hard-soft man. "Yessir." He helped Cogan into his heavy fur-collared jacket and politely escorted him to the cruiser.

Now, where would that little bastard hide out? That was the only question in Cogan's painful consciousness as he pointed his car up and down the city's silent, white-rutted streets. Where?

The kid would need a car. He'd

want to skip town fast, but where would he find one at three in the morning? Had he found one already and fled out of the sheriff's reach?

The gas station on Aberdeen Road was a favorite hang-out for the hordes of teenagers who pampered cars that shone on the outside but were sick and tired under their hoods. The dour old Scotsman who ran the place was full of patience, automotive knowledge, and a willingness to let the young pile up bills while they talked of promised jobs or a raise in allowance.

Now the pumps, office and workshop were dark as Cogan ground to a halt a few hundred feet from the white cement building. The snow had let up, and he could just see the red glow of the soft drink machine in the tiny office.

A shadow blotted out the light for a brief moment, then disappeared.

Cogan felt the blood pounding in his head as he cut the engine and slipped a .45 automatic out of his jacket.

The kid had just raised his thin arms to yank down the overhead door when he heard the voice behind him.

"Kid."

The boy started to turn slowly, then crouched as he reached for the gun tucked in his belt. He had it clear and pointed when the .45 roared and shattered the slope-shouldered youth. He coughed as if

something were stuck in his throat, tried to raise the gun, then staggered drunkenly for three steps before collapsing to the ground.

Cogan ran up to the body, stooped over and retrieved his revolver. Despite his gloved hands, he managed to reload the gun before dropping it a few feet from the lifeless hand.

At five a.m., with the sun just beginning its daily task of crawling up the far side of the distant hill, Sheriff Cogan parked in front of a small brick-veneered house in the less comfortable part of town.

He thumbed the doorbell and waited, his breath filtering into the predawn gray.

A gaunt, pinched-looking woman opened the door a crack, peering furtively at the hulking shape before her.

"It's me, Ward."

The door opened and the hall light went on. The woman pulled her gaudy wrapper tightly around her and backed up as the sheriff filled the tiny space. "What is it? What do you want?"

"I've come about your son."

"There's nothing to say. You did what you had to do catching him like that and . . ." She stared down at the floor. "And I have to do what I can to save him."

Cogan felt awkward and strange in this stuffy place, wishing he could be somewhere, anywhere, far away.

"You mean, get a bunch of paid-

for head shrinkers to declare him insane, so they'll put him away for awhile and then turn him loose again, all cured?"

The woman leaned against the doorway leading to the dining room, as if trying to block the way. "Nothing is to be accomplished by hanging him. Hanging is killing, no matter who does it, even if some judge and jury says it's all right." She sniffed self-righteously.

"Killing is killing too, and the boy murdered that girl in cold blood."

And then she cried, first dryly and silently, then louder, until she had to dig her hands into her face to stifle her sobs. "My baby! My baby!"

Cogan flicked his glance to the door, longing to flee through it into the inviting quiet cold beyond. He hadn't been in the house for many years and was glad of it.

"No, he won't be hanged, Ethel," he said more loudly than he intended.

She looked up.

"He escaped from the jail two hours ago and tried to get away." He looked right into the woman's shining eyes. "I caught him again. He's dead."

"You killed him?" The words were no more than a hoarse whisper.

"I had to." It was true, he thought.

She crossed the few feet between them in her bare feet. She was trembling.

"You killed your own son!"

Sheriff Cogan didn't answer. He caught the door knob, wrenched it, and left her behind, not hearing her half cries, her accusations mixed with memories.

He'd already written out his resignation and would file pension papers when the court house opened. His weariness fell from his shoulders as he strode to the car. He felt younger somehow. After forty years on the side of the Law, he'd finally had the courage to turn down a fix.

He would never have to face the choice again.



the (deadly) AD-MAN

BY
HAYES RABON

*Well, it was an idea. He'd run it up
the flag-pole and see how it waved.*

THE letter opener hit the desk top with a dull thud. Ralph Thomas nervously pushed it aside and for the third time picked up the pink slip notifying him to call Arthur Smith. He studied the note. Mary, in her neat secretarial hand, had written, 'call Arthur Smith as soon as possible.'

He pushed back from his desk and began pacing the large office containing the long table lined with

chairs, and the tall cabinet where the advertising accounts were kept, and the red-leather sofa on which he catnapped when he could. When he stopped at the end window to stare out at the hazy New York skyline, he tossed the damp, crumpled reminder into an ashtray.

Nothing had been right all day, it seemed to Thomas. He had overslept—the party the night before had lasted until 3 a.m.—and he had

not reached the office until 11:30. He had a headache and had smoked too many cigarettes. He had missed a meeting at 10; a meeting he should have attended. And then the note.

'Call Arthur Smith as soon as possible.' Arthur Smith. Thomas could see his pale, frightened face floating before him. But why is he frightened, Thomas wondered. I'm the one that should be frightened. He has nothing to lose, really. I've got the ad agency, and if that goes, I go . . . house, car, club . . . maybe even Phyllis. Ah, I should never have let Art talk me into leaving Atkins, Moore and Dunn and taking the Greater Airlines account with me. But Art should have . . . well, hell, he couldn't foresee a crash. What a mess.

Thomas looked at his watch . . . 12:10 . . . and walked to his desk. Slowly he dialed Smith's number.

"Why in the hell," Smith belated when they were connected, "didn't you call earlier?"

"I was tied up, Art, until just a few minutes ago. I've been out of the office," Thomas said, rubbing his head. "It can't be that bad, can it?"

"Bad, hell," Smith said. "That's not the word for it. It's disaster, that's what it is. One month . . . that's all we have. One . . . O-N-E . . . month."

"You've got to be kidding," Thomas said. "They can't, they don't dare do this to us. I expected one year, but just one month?"

"Well, maybe they can't," Smith said, "but they have." There was a long pause. "I tried to get more time, but I couldn't. I told them just six months would be long enough. I explained that the passenger loss after the crash wouldn't last over six months, and that the crash shouldn't be a factor in their advertising. But they wouldn't listen. We only have one month to get those passengers back, or we lose the Greater account."

"It's impossible to show any results in one month," Thomas said. "We've already tried everything. We're overspent by almost . . ."

Breaking in, Smith said, "You think I don't know? Good god almighty. I told them. I begged them. But they just don't realize. Who am I to give them advice, let me ask you. Since when do they listen to their vice president in charge of advertising? They think we should be able to convince people to ride Greater Airlines. That's why they spend good, green cash for all that ad space, isn't it?"

If Thomas had not known Smith better, he would have sworn he was about to cry.

"Well," Thomas said softly, "there's nothing we can do, except wait. By some miracle, we might get those passengers back before the month is up. But it'll take a miracle."

There was a long pause, then Smith said, "God, I feel awful."

"Look, Art, let's get together in

the morning. I'll think about what we can do tonight and then first thing in the morning we'll go over it and see what we can come up with. There might be an out, an answer, somewhere. At least it'll help to talk about it."

"Says who?" Smith sounded tired, beaten. "But I won't argue. I'll see you about 10."

Thomas placed the phone gently back on the cradle. He stared at his desk, cluttered with a variety of objects which bore no relation whatever to the advertising business: dirty assortment of pipes and three cans of tobacco, Ian Fleming's "Goldfinger," the letter opener. . .

Well, he thought, I never expected anything like this to happen, not to me. If only we had had a year, we would have had enough accounts so it wouldn't matter. But six months? Who would have thought that it would all end in just six months?

He reached down and pulled up his sock, then pushed the intercom button. "Mary, hold all calls. I'll be back around three."

He came back much earlier, shortly before two, and had Mary call Bill Phillips.

"He was at the party last night," Thomas explained. "I think he lives in the Riverside Apartments."

He walked into his office and sat down at this desk. What a mess, he thought, and rubbed his eyes. When the phone buzzed he stared at it for several seconds before picking it up.

"Hello Bill," Thomas said. "How are you feeling today?" After a pause, he said, "Yeah, I'm a little hungover too. What I wanted to find out is when you're going to Miami? . . . Tonight? . . . A Southern Lines flight? I didn't realize it was so soon. I wanted to ask you if you would do me a favor? . . . That's right. It's for my sister. She's been living there for five months now. . . . That's right. Look, how about having dinner with us before you leave? I can pick you up after work and then I can drive you to the airport. . . . Fine, I'll pick you up about six. . . . Bye."

Thomas sat for a long time, staring at the telephone as if it could give him the answer he needed. Finally he sighed and walked out of the office.

"Mary," he said, "I won't be back today. If anything comes up and you need to contact me, call Phyllis. I'll be home after seven."

No one else had arrived when Thomas came to work the next morning, looking as if he hadn't slept in days: his suit was wrinkled, he needed a shave and his eyes were red. He walked quickly into his office and without taking off his coat and hat spread several morning newspapers out on his desk and looked at the bold, black headlines: 124 KILLED IN PLANE CRASH
NEAR WILMINGTON
AUTHORITIES SAY
BOMB SUSPECTED

His hands shook as he read the story. He ran his fingers through his hair, then laughed softly. Well, he thought, they said a crash was a factor in advertising. Let's see how big a factor it really is.

Thomas sat down at his typewriter

and typed out a note for Mary: "Get Walter Adams for me. He works at Potter, Potter and Potter. He's an old friend of mine and I understand he's going to California sometime next week on a Continental Airlines flight."



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MARY ELLEN used to say it was the law of averages that changed our luck. But I think it was her ankles! She was standing on a stepladder wiping the grease off the wall over the grill that day the stranger walked in. He ordered coffee without looking at me then perched himself on the middle stool at the counter and studied Mary's legs. The way you look at a picture, long and keen. I noticed his eyes right away . . . pale, wintry eyes, too light to be grey. Too dark to be white. Snake's eyes.

I gave Mary the discipline look as I squeezed past the ladder, and she flounced down with annoyed little wrinkles in her forehead. Like Scarlett O'Hara at a plantation picnic pouting just to tease. Mary's quite

BY
LARRY DANE

I cradled the rifle and rubbed the smooth stock. It wasn't a weapon . . . it was the key to Fort Knox.

deadly star-dust



an actress when she wants to be, and she wants to be most of the time. I suppose all her ham notions started five years ago when she was twelve and full of temper and day dreams. Her mother used to think Mary was better than Judy Garland and entered her in the talent hunt at the Albion Theatre in Detroit. Come to think of it, Mary did look a little like Judy Garland, tight and breathless, holding down that inside excitement but not very well. Mary sang "Over the Rainbow" that night at the Albion and won fifty dollars . . . second prize. She said she put a "lot of heart" into the song, but I thought she was a little off key. That night touched it off, I think. All those crazy ideas about New York and Hollywood and being a big star.

That same year her folks got smashed up and killed in an auto wreck. I always told Joe to lay off the hard stuff when he was driving, but he had a mind of his own. Joe was Mary Ellen's dad, my kid brother. I took care of the kid, put her through high school. And that was no cinch for a dumb bachelor like me.

You wouldn't call Mary the easiest child in the world to raise, either. She always was a crazy, mixed-up kid full of get-rich-quick ideas and let's pretend. She's a little heart-breaker too . . . likes to get the boys "croony and swoony" (that's her damfool lingo, not mine!) . . . then she gives 'em the air. Last summer

I played Cupid . . . tried to get her interested in Stan Clark, the Greyhound bus driver. Stan has the Detroit-New York run and makes pretty fair money. They had a few dates. Most likely held hands in the movies. But Stan was poor second to her ambition. Mary Ellen called him a "square bear" and an old "stale and steady."

"Say, Pop, how's about that cup of joe?"

Silly darned thing. I'd held the cup under the urn spout and forgot to turn the handle! Daydreaming! Like Mary Ellen. Or maybe I'm just getting old. No one called me Pop ten years ago . . .

I snapped the handle so hard I whacked my knuckles against the hot urn and burned them. I cussed, under my breath, then hustled the cup over to "Snake Eyes." I gave him the royal treatment to spite myself . . . napkin and water with only a cup of coffee. But that didn't impress him, and he didn't order anything else. He tossed a dime on the counter and I rang it up. Then I picked up the emery block and started scraping the grill. Dirty looking grill, chipped, rusty legs. But after twelve years there's nothing you can do. Grills wear out like people. Like me.

"Cute little trick, old timer. She related to you or just a professional hash jockey?"

Funny voice. Not low and straight out like Stan Clark's, but side-of-the-mouth with a tenor rasp.

A New York accent. He tossed the question at me the way you throw a nickel to a bum. Casual and disinterested. Those funny eyes were glued on Mary Ellen who was standing at the end of the counter pushing the set-ups crooked and straightening them again. Pulling the busy act and being so godawful good about it.

"Relative," I said. That's all. I wasn't going to tell him anything. None of his business anyway.

"Cute as a butterfly's ear!" he said with a dirty purr. I went on scraping the grill, saying nothing. A fresh guy. That's what he was. A fresh guy!

"What's her name, Pop?"

I put more muscle on the emery and ignored him, but Mary answered for me. "Miss Mary Ellen McCrae."

I knew what she looked like then without even looking at her. Sticky sweet with a dab of mischief in that halfway smile of hers. Looking wide-eyed and ready for anything. I'd have to speak to Mary Ellen again. This was no rock-and-roll school kid or the village Casanova.

His age I reckoned between thirty-five and forty. His face was bone-thin, with sharp cheek-bones, Chinese-slanty eyes, and black hair combed straight back and greased flat to his head. "The interesting and mysterious type," Mary Ellen said later. He was wearing an expensive looking single breasted suit, banker's grey, soft and rich look-

ing, a silk black-and-white candy-striped tie, soft, button-down collar, and a pair of those fancy Italian shoes.

He'd thrown his light tweed top-coat over the next stool with a dark fedora on top. His heavy purplish ring . . . probably amethyst . . . caught the late sun and flung colored lights across the counter when he stirred his coffee.

I glanced out at the driveway, but there was no car there. That surprised me. This was no local guy. I wondered where he came from . . . and how he got here. I'd pegged him as the foreign car type. The kind of guy who plays the bigtown sophisticate with wide-eyed college kids.

"Little Miss Mary Ellen," he repeated. "Nice. Rolls off the tongue like a poem." Then he noticed the cheap vinyl peeling off the seats, the busted floor tiles, and the scarred, old wooden counter. "What's a doll like you doing in a dump like this?" he said.

"I own a piece of the place," Mary flipped back. "What's your reason for being here, mister?" The guy giggled.

I gripped the emery block so hard my knuckles faded white. "What's your excuse?" Excuse! People had to have an excuse for being in my place. The diner I'd put together with the sweat and the ache of ten lousy years. . . .

But my trolley car diner wasn't always like this. Before that big De-

troit operator, Jim Parrish, built that big carny-looking restaurant of his across the road, my "Trolley Lunch" did O. K. I used to get most of the truck trade, and if you know the Dixie Highway between Detroit and Toledo, you know what the truck traffic is. My little place did all right. My brother Joe handled the short orders, and Kitty . . . Mary Ellen's ma . . . took care of the counter. When I wasn't managing the place and handling the ordering, I was drumming up business in Detroit and Toledo. I used to hit the big trucking outfits with advertising and promotion stuff, matches and blotters, and calendars. Sometimes free coffee and homemade cookies. Once inside, I'd talk my head off, whipping up word pictures about homemade soup, big bull sandwiches, and good coffee in big mugs with free warm-ups. Business was booming.

After Joe and Kitty died in that wreck, I tried to go it alone. But a jinx was on the place. Business fell off. Customers started griping about the food and the service. I hired a cook, but he was a drunk and I had to get rid of him. I hired a counter man. He was fast and glib, but he couldn't keep his fingers out of the till.

All hell broke loose. I fell and broke my hip and was laid up for six weeks. Mary Ellen had a bad siege of pneumonia. A customer swallowed a glass chip in the mashed potatoes and sued me for

five thousand dollars. I didn't want to do it . . . but I had to close the place for a while. Then, Jim Parrish built that big, flashy restaurant across from mine and grabbed off my regular trade. He landed the Greyhound stop franchise, too.

The location is terrific for a food stop, so I don't blame Parrish a bit. The next restaurant north is up in Flat Rock. But the traffic detours the town. Then there's a chicken shack south of here near Monroe. I'm midway. Me and Parrish.

His place is really a driver's dream. And he called it just that: "Driver's Dream" . . . a big place with U-shaped formica counters and cute waitresses in bright yellow uniforms. Plus the flaming jukeboxes, the fluorescent lights, and the slot machines. I can't compete with anything like that. But I tried to for a while. That was my mistake. I put up a half dozen shacks in the rear and a flashing neon sign in front to pull the motel trade. But no dice! It was like throwing money in the furnace.

Last year I decided to give it up . . . unload the "Trolley Lunch" on the first sucker I met with a bank account and a yen to go into business for himself. But then I decided to wait until Mary Ellen got married and had a couple little ones. That would knock those screwball stage ideas out of her head! Stan Clark looked like good husband-material to me. But Mary Ellen dangled him like a puppet. Mary

Ellen had dollar signs and glory dust in her eyes . . . and definite ideas about "latching on to a gravy boat." And this slicker with the snaky eyes looked like Mr. Gravy himself. He sat there grinning at Mary Ellen with a big mouth full of tiny teeth.

"So you own the place?" he was saying in that tenor coo of his. "High finance, eh, gorgeous?"

Mary leaned across the counter confidentially with that sick siren look on her pan. "Not too high, mister," she whispered in that artificial stage voice. "Just in range, honey. Just in range!"

She dazzled him with a come-hither look and walked with her little rolling strut into her back room. The door to the ladies' room was open, and Mary was smearing on lipstick and checking the cracked cabinet mirror for the results. She pivoted fast and almost collided with me in the doorway.

"Listen to me, Mary Ellen. I want you to cut it out . . ."

"What are you talking about, Unk?" she said. Injured innocence!

"You know what I mean. Cut it out. I don't like his looks!"

"You don't like anybody's looks, Unk. Except Stan Clark's!" She reached up and pinched my cheek. "Let me handle the women's work, will you?" she whispered. Then she slipped into gear and went rolling out front.

The guy's routine was like grease on his squeaky-axle voice, and he

shifted expressions like you flip switches. He was wearing that admiration look now. Teeth and eye-wrinkles. "Why the lip varnish?" he said. "You don't paint orchids or shellac lilies!"

Mary Ellen parted her smeared lips the way Marilyn Monroe did. "I bet you tell that to all the counter girls!"

"You're no counter girl," he answered. "You're some hotshot princess traveling incognito. You're a sugar bowl Cinderella!"

Mary smiled uncertainly and offered him more coffee and he answered yes. He said something nice about the coffee and Mary gave him her stock line, "Tell all your friends and relatives!"

"I don't have any friends and relatives," the guy said.

"Now stop it! Everybody's got relatives!" Mary teased.

"Nope. No relatives for me, kiddo. Just creditors . . ."

"That's bad?" Mary flipped. "You got to have money to have credit!"

He played with his spoon idly. "You get the idea, sugar." Then he swung up the cup and drained it and reached for the napkin.

"What are your rates for a cab-in?" he said suddenly, all business.

Mary looked carefully at the expensive clothes and said timidly, "Seven dollars." That's two dollars more than we usually charge. The stranger didn't argue, though.

"I may stay a few days," he said.

"Maybe three or four. Depends."

Mary Ellen fished the register out from under the counter, opened it in front of him, and handed him a pen.

"What's that for?" he said suspiciously.

"Why it's the motel register!"

Mary Ellen laughed. "Sign, please."

"You sign it for me," he snapped. He slid off his seat quickly.

Mary Ellen seemed confused. "Well . . . what's your name?"

The man looked at the coffee cup and smiled. "Just call me 'Coffee'," he flipped. "Joe Coffee . . ."

Mary scribbled in the book. "And what is the nature of your business?" Mr. Coffee looked impatient.

"I'm a salesman. That's close enough."

"And your license number?" Mary went on.

"No license number this trip, baby." Coffee wriggled into his topcoat and put his hat on carefully.

"How . . . how'd you get here then," Mary asked innocently enough. . . "without a car?"

He looked annoyed. "I saddled up a sunbeam. That good enough?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Coffee. I have to ask you these questions. You see, when you operate a motel. . ."

"Spare me the higher education!" he cut in. "Just give me the key to the cabin."

That was enough from this character. I came out from the back. "I have to insist on proper identification, son. That's the law."

The stranger stepped back as though I'd slapped him with a wet rag. "Look, Dad. I don't have to stay in your shack, you know. There are plenty of cabins on the road!"

"That's right!" I managed to keep my voice even. "But all of 'em will ask you for identification. It's the law."

He stood there trying to glare me down, but I stood my ground. His face was pulled down into a hard thin exclamation point and the fingers of the tan gloves he wore twitched nervously. I dug into my back pocket and grabbed the roll of pennies that I keep for situations just like this one. But this time I didn't need my knuckle-dusters. Snake-eyes showed me his teeth and said, "O. K., Old Timer. I guess you play your game with your rules." He pulled a fat wallet from his breast pocket, thumbed a bill, and threw it on the counter. It was a fifty.

"That take care of your rules, Dad?"

I looked at the bill for all of twenty seconds. Then I said, "Thank you, Mr. Coffee," and handed him the key to number four.

Mary Ellen had been standing like a scared chick watching. When I picked up the fifty and shoved it into my pocket, she scooted around the counter and reached for Coffee's valise, like a bright little bellhop. Coffee moved fast. He knocked her arm away from the

handle. Mary Ellen stepped back bewildered. The stranger paused and shrugged. "It's heavy. Much too heavy for a doll to carry!" Mary Ellen's hurt look vanished and she was in control once again. The teen-age Theda Bara!

"Go on ahead and open the door," the man ordered, handing her the key. Mary Ellen shot him that sidelong look and minced out. Coffee followed, limping a little with the weight of the bag.

I watched from the back room window: Mary bending against the March wind, her dark hair streaming like a pennant, and Coffee at her heels, holding his hat with his left hand and the bag with the right. Mary unlocked number four and swung it open. They seemed to be talking. Then Mary Ellen entered the shack and the man followed, slamming the door. I looked at my watch. Five o'clock. Mary Ellen shouldn't have gone into the cabin with that character. I felt uneasy. But the fifty dollar bill in my pocket was like a tonic. I touched it and felt good right away!

A couple fellows from the piston-riding factory came in and ordered pie and coffee. They were second-shift workers, sounding off about production cutbacks in Detroit. Jack Gilley . . . he's a retired fireman . . . dropped in for coffee and started talking about a traffic slowdown on the highway. "Like a funeral," he said. "Cars all spaced even . . . goin' about thirty, thirty-five."

"Probably a wreck up the line. Or a semi broke down," I said.

Stan Clark, the bus driver, breezed in as he usually does after work, full of the day's doings and stale jokes that he managed to make funny again. Stan's a husky fellow with wavy blond hair, baby-blue eyes and a straight, honest look I always liked. He glanced automatically at the back room and I knew what he was going to say before he said it. "Mary Ellen's out back with a customer," I said.

"A customer!" Jack Gilley piped up. "Well, whaddya know! Sam-boy finally hooked a flea-bag sucker!" The boys from the factory kept on eating, and I just ignored the old fathead.

Stan ordered the beef stew, and I heaped on an extra ladle of stock as I always do for Stan. And he always makes the same crack . . . "Best damn stew in Ohio!" This is Michigan, see?

"State cop told me there was a cadillac abandoned up this side of Flat Rock today," Stan said between spoonfuls. "Parked right on the asphalt near the white line. Right in the driving lane! Young kid from Wyandotte almost ran into it."

"Who'd abandon a Cadillac?" I asked. "An idiot?"

"Gas tank was empty, Sam, and the keys were in the ignition."

Jack Gilley chimed in again. "Sounds like somethin' a woman would do. Run out of gas. Then leave the car and hike to a phone."

"No," Stan said. "The road cop told me the Caddy was stolen up in Detroit this morning."

The factory hands stopped eating and sat listening, their elbows on the counter. Gilley was quiet for a change, also listening, his bald head cocked like a terrier's. I fished some water glasses out of the hot rinse and clattered them on the drain board.

"Afternoon paper had a big write up on it," Stan said.

"Didn't get the paper yet, Stan. Boy's late again."

"Say, is that the car they used in the holdup today?" one of the mill hands cut in:

"What's it all about, Stan?" I said. "I haven't heard a thing about it. Was there a holdup in the city today?"

Stan tilted his chauffer's cap back on his head and wiped his lips on a paper napkin. "Well, Sam, it seems like this here fellow walks into the office of a big wheel. . . . Great Lakes Supermarket Building. He sticks up the bigshot and his secretary and walks off with the payroll. Something like twelve thousand dollars."

"Not a bad day's work!" Gilley horned in.

"That's not all," Stan went on. "The big wheel makes for the burglar alarm. And the crook plugs him right through the head. Killed him too." Someone whistled and Stan paused for a minute.

"Then the crook walks right

through that crowded building with all that loot, stops a guy right on Woodward Avenue who was driving this here '58 Caddy . . . boots him out and makes off with his car! All this in broad daylight, just before lunch hour! There's only a little gas in the car, but the crook drives until it gives out. Then he ditches the car up near Flat Rock. Cops all over the place. Floodlights and all. They got roadblocks all along 25 . . . clear down to Toledo!"

I thought of the well-dressed slicker with the cold eyes and my stomach did a flip-flop. "What'd he look like, Stan, this gunman?"

"Hard to say, Sam. The secretary was scared stiff. The elevator guy told the police the heister was a big, hulking brute in a rainhat and a plastic raincoat. The starter claims the crook was a little guy, wearing glasses. You know how kooked up these I.D. things are."

"More'n likely it's a Chinaman wearing Bermuda shorts!" Gilley roared, but no one laughed.

"One thing the cops are sure of, Sam. The leather bag . . ."

My heart skipped a couple beats. "Leather bag, Stan?" My voice must have sounded thin and far away. Like somebody else's.

"Yeah. He was carrying this tan leather bag. The secretary said he put the payroll money in it before he lammed out of the office."

I thought of the phoney named "Coffee." The way he acted when

Mary Ellen reached for his bag. It was a leather bag, too. A *tan* leather bag!

My brain was racing like a bad clock. I reached in my pocket for a kerchief and touched the fifty dollar bill. My lips seemed parched, but my forehead was suddenly wet with sweat. "Stan . . ." I started to say. He looked at me with that funny, puzzled look of his. I balled the fifty into my fist. Held it hard. How many fifties in twelve thousand? How many hamburgers add up to fifty bucks? How many hunks of pie? Gross minus outlay equals net. And what the hell is my net! Thank God I don't have a salary to pay! I'd have gone under a long time ago. And how long could I go on paying Mary Ellen with board, room, and pin money? Scatter-brained Mary Ellen with show business pulling at her like a magnet! Twelve thousand bucks in a tan bag not a hundred yards away! What couldn't I do with twelve thousand dollars!

Right there at that battered ruin of a counter I'd varnished a dozen times . . . halfway between the broken grill and the rusty sink . . . I got the Big Idea. But Stan's face came swimming into the Big Idea like bright yellow noodles in a thick goulash.

"Hey, get with it, Sam," Stan was saying. Then as my mind stopped spinning with dollar signs, he said, "Anything wrong, Sam?"

I recovered fast. "No, nothing's

wrong, Stan boy. Just thinking, that's all. Wondering what the hell this world is coming to, that's all. All this robbing and killing. It's not safe to get out of bed anymore, is it?"

But still that puzzled, screwed-up look on Stan's face and those china-blue eyes of his boring into me. "How's about some pie, Stan? Cherry's fresh this morning." He said O. K., and I cut him a fat wedge. But my mind went sailing again after I shoved the platter in front of him.

"How many cherry pies could I buy with twelve thousand dollars. . . . ?

I had to work the supper rush all alone, but I'm only kidding when I say "rush." There wasn't a dozen customers all told from five to six o'clock, and that's counting those factory hands and Gilley. Stan was just killing time waiting for Mary Ellen. But I didn't tell him anything until he fired pointblank, "What the blazes is taking her so long?" I told him she was cleaning up for weekend business. I was worried stiff but would not let it show. We listened to the Detroit news out of WJR at 6 o'clock . . . it was full of the holdup and murder. The killer had been identified by the owner of the Cadillac from photographs in the police files. A Chicago hoodlum named Marty Klegman.

Stan left about 6:20 promising to

double back about 7. He lived over in the village about a mile off the highway at a rooming house run by an old widow named Mark-witch.

Ten minutes after Stan left Mary Ellen breezed in, her green eyes shining like traffic lights. She pulled a ham-pose at the door with her chin up and her hands high like a ballet dancer. She waltzed over to me, leaned over the counter, and planted a kiss on my head. "Oh, what news, Unk! What news!" Then she noticed the look on my face and laughed. "Look at the pily Pilgrim!"

"What the devil do you think this is!" I started, but she stopped me with that patient, long-suffering look her mom used to wear.

"Now wait a minute, Unk . . . before you have a stroke. I just auditioned for Mr. Henderson. Joe Coffee was only a name he made up to conceal his real identity. You guessed that, didn't you? Look, Unk. Here's his card!"

She shoved a name card into my hand . . . a rich looking hunk of paper finely engraved in gold and blue: BERNARD K. HENDERSON . . . REGALITY PICTURES. There was a Sunset Boulevard address and a phone number. An ornamented coronet backed the name. I handed the card back to Mary Ellen and she dropped it down the front of her dress.

"He's a real movie producer, Unk. *A real Hollywood producer!*"

I felt as though I'd just taken the big dip on a roller coaster. I didn't want him to be Joe Coffee, Bernard K. Henderson, or Walt Disney! I didn't want Snake Eyes to be anybody but Marty Klegman. The hood with twelve hot G's in a tan bag.

"An hour and a half!" I griped. "Some audition!"

She gave that high whinny of hers that she likes to think idly is a tinkle, like in bell. She perched happily on the end stool, looking like a green and ivory pixie, all life and color and kid excitement. Jeez. I felt old looking at her. . . .

"Mr. Henderson knew I was an actress, Unk! Think of it! I didn't have to tell him anything about the Albion Amateurs, or the Community Players, or the Footlight Club at church. Nothing! He said he recognized talent 'on sight'. He said I shot sparks and color. Like a Roman Candle on the Fourth of July!"

There was no interrupting her or stopping her. This was American Youth in high gear loaded with bright future and daydreams. She gushed adjectives like my old soda tap gushes fizz. I was glad the place was empty. There was enough talk in the village about Mary being fast and flighty with a cobweb head.

"He had me sing for him, Unk! I did "Temptation" for him . . . in my sexy voice, you know . . . and he said he'd never heard it rendered like that before! Imagine, *rendered!*

Then I got that 'Complete Works' you gave me and read Lady MacBeth to him. Oh, Unk! You should have been there! He wants to take me to Hollywood with him for a screen test! What do you think of that?"

I caught her wrist and held it hard. "I think you're acting like a silly, damned little fool!" She winced at that, as though I'd punched her in the belly. "How corny can a guy get with that old Hollywood routine! That was old when they turned movies with a crank. I thought you had more brains than that!"

"Oh I didn't believe him at first! I'm not that thick! But when he showed me those credentials and started talking about the people he knows out there—Cary Grant, and . . . and . . . Rock Hudson, and Doris Day . . . and all the rest of them . . . I just knew he wasn't kidding me along."

"Then, Mary Ellen, what was all that bushwash about 'Joe Coffee' and 'riding in on a moonbeam' he gave out with in here?"

"Oh, that! He told me all about that, Unk."

"Well, how about telling me. Just for laughs." Mary reached up and pinched my cheek. Her hands were cool and trembling.

"You Old Doubting Thomas, you!" she giggled. "Mr. Henderson has been on a talent hunt in Detroit. Strictly q.t. Except the news leaked out, and there was a story in the pa-

per about him, and then he was mobbed. You should have heard him tell it!"

"I wish I could have . . ."

"People wouldn't let the poor man alone, Unk! Every crooner, and horn blower in town was after him. And pushy mothers with talent brats! They chased him into restaurants and bars. They jangled his phone all night long. One guy, a tap dancer, bribed the garage man to hide him in Mr. Henderson's car so he could meet him. Can you imagine!"

"What did your Mr. Henderson say about his car, anyway? Did some talent brat take it home to play with? Or did Hardcash Henderson donate it to sweet charity?"

"Now you're being stinky," she pouted. "Mr. Henderson was on his way to Toledo this afternoon, and his engine conked out. He left his car at a garage in Flat Rock, but the mechanic didn't have a . . . a pump . . . or a fuel . . . handle . . . or something like that. He had to send to Detroit for it. The car won't be ready till tomorrow and the mechanic dropped him off here for the night." She talked the way a teacher does, explaining to a kid that the moon was not made of green cheese.

"Who was the mechanic, do you know? Whose garage, did he say?"

"Honestogosh, Unk! You're so darned suspicious! How do I know? I wouldn't ask him that and he didn't tell me!"

"Maybe he told you something about that phony monicker. That 'Joe Coffee' routine he was giving us in here?"

"Aw, come on! You're smarter than that! He just doesn't want it to get noised around that a Hollywood producer is here. I told you what happened in Detroit. Poor guy's exhausted!"

"But don't you wonder, Mary Ellen, why a big operator like that would choose a busted down flea-bag like this? Why didn't he grab a cab back to Detroit to wherever he was staying? Further more, first he tells me he's going to stay a few days. Then he tells you just overnight till his car's fixed. He don't add, honey!"

"You don't want him to add up! He makes darn good sense to me! A big famous man wants to stay overnight in a place where he won't be picked and pulled to death. If you can't understand that, then you can't understand anything. That's all!"

She was white hot now, poking her finger in my face. I caught her hand and forced it down. "Listen, kid. Listen hard. A guy held up a payroll office in Detroit today and shot the manager. He stole a car to make a getaway and ditched it up near Flat Rock when he ran out of gas. He carried his loot in a leather bag. . . a tan leather bag!"

All the grown up temper drained out of her face, and she was a scared kid again.

"I think your Mr. Coffee or Henderson or whatever his name is . . . I think he's the killer, Mary Ellen. A guy called Klegman."

"Where'd you hear about all this?" she said hoarsely. "Stan Clark got it from Mack Garrity. Radio's full of it. And I suppose the afternoon papers, too. They even got the guy identified. Marty Klegman, that's the name."

Mary Ellen's face was tightening into knots and I knew she was going to cry. I pulled her to me, put my arms around her, and let her jam her face into my shoulder. She didn't speak for whole minutes. Then she said, "Unk . . . there's a lot of tan bags around." I waited. "And plenty of people break down in Flat Rock." I waited some more. "Maybe . . . coincidence?" Pathetic!

I weighed it out in my head. Could be. Could be.

"You know, sweetheart, it could be a crazy coincidence at that!" She perked up right away. "Let's find out, what do you say?"

There wasn't but a handful of auto repair shops in Flat Rock, and I called them all. One was already shut for the night. The other two were all-night garages. But no tow-ins today, they said. Score: two no's and one question mark. I told Mary Ellen.

"Think we'd better call the police, Unk?"

That brought it out into the open. "I don't know, honey. I just don't

know." The bag of dough was playing touch-tag with my imagination. And I wanted to be "it".

"Unk . . . what if he really is the producer. Henderson. His car just might be in the garage that's closed, you know. If we reported this to the police . . . and he was Henderson, like he says, then couldn't he sue us? For false arrest? Or scandal?"

Good question. Damned good. I just had to make sure before I did anything. I picked up a long, sharp knife and tested it on my thumb. Then I put it back on the sandwich board.

"Maybe you're right kiddo. Maybe this is the chance of a lifetime for one of us or the other. If we handle things right."

"I don't get you, Unk . . ."

"If we handle things right, we stand to make a lot of money. If the guy back there really is a Hollywood bigshot and likes you . . . enough to help you in the business, I mean . . . then you're really in the chips. But that's a big, fat 'maybe'."

"He really sold me, Unk. Showed me all kinds of identification cards and credit cards, studio passes. Everything!"

"Could have been tricked up, you know. That stuff is easy to duplicate. And a con man worth his salt can be anybody he wants to be. You know that!"

She was firm. "I believed him, Unk. I believed him." Then, not so firm, with that Judy Garland trem-

or in her voice—"All I want is a chance. That's all. A chance to be somebody."

"That's what I want for you, too, honey. It's what your Mom and Dad always wanted too, God rest 'em. If that guy back there is Henderson, sure as shootin' I won't louse up your chance! But what if he isn't Henderson? What if he's the gunman Klegman?"

"Then, we call the police," she answered promptly.

"That's right. We call the police. *But not right away!*" I saw the hurt in her eyes, and I was sorry I said anything.

"You're thinking about that bag of money, aren't you? The money from the holdup?" Her forefinger jabbed my conscience.

"All right. So I am. So what? If that's Klegman, why turn his loot over to the cops? What's to stop us from grabbing that bag and hiding it away safe. Then turn the bum over to the cops!" The idea sang in my head. "What's to stop us?"

"Oh, you're so damned brainy, Uncle. 'Who's to stop us?'. Klegman for one. If he is Klegman, I mean. You think he's going to hand you that money like a bag of peanuts? Put your hands on his bag and he'll blow your head off. Like he did to the payroll guy he plugged. He's got nothing to lose now. . . ."

"But if that's Henderson in that shack, you'll get a bag full of dirty shirts and some monogrammed shorts. If he caught you with his

bag, he could get you pinched for larceny. And the place would be tagged a clip joint and closed. You're so smart, Unk!"

"But, listen, kid. I don't think

"That's right!" she screamed. "You don't think! And if that guy is Klegman, and by some million to one shot you get your hands on his bag and turn him in . . . she was breathing hard now with the bigness of the idea . . . "don't you think the cops can't break you down and get the truth out of you? And the money too? Use your head! Nothing's new. Everything's been tried before!"

Sure, she was right. And I wanted to smack her for being right. But the front door opened just then and Mickey, the paper boy, goofed in, his red hair all spikes. He mumbled something about a busted tire on his bike, but I wasn't listening. I grabbed the paper and slammed it down on the counter, reading frantically. The kid looked at me as if I was losing my marbles and slammed out.

The story was on the front page in big headlines. And there at the bottom spreading over two columns was a picture of the killer with a prison serial number across his chest. Mary Ellen and I hunched over the picture, studying it. The face was pudgy and boyish and smirked into the camera with a go-to-hell expression. "That's not the man!" We both said it together. The

twelve G's started taking off like an astrojet. Disappointment hit me like heartburn. Mary Ellen stood there, happiness bouncing on her face like a sunbeam, all hope and happiness again.

"Now, wait a minute. That's a pretty old picture. You can tell that." I scanned the news photo again hunting for anything that would tie to the guy in the cabin. I think I prayed. And my prayer was answered in the pale eyes you could hardly see and the Oriental almond shape of them. My heart started skipping like a dollar watch, but I didn't say anything, just "Maybe you're right, Mary Ellen. That moon-face isn't the one." She smiled at me and tightened the belt of her uniform and I knew that Henderson and stardom were playing leapfrog with her imagination.

Tires rasped on the sparse gravel outside, and we both walked in back of the counter. In a minute, Stan Clark bulled into the room wearing his best smile and his Sunday blue serge. The smile drooped when he saw Mary Ellen behind the counter. "Aw, heck," he hecked, "you're not even ready yet."

"Ready?" she said casually, showing more interest in the sandwich board than in Stan, "Ready for what, Mr. Greyhound?"

"Well, for crying out loud! Don't tell me you forgot about our date!" He did look like a stunned ox, at that!

"What date do you mean, Stan?"

"You mean you forgot about the conference championship down at Toledo U.?" Stan was holding his temper in his mouth like a hot potato, and I was so embarrassed for the guy that I pretended to be busy at the sink. "The basketball game!" he groaned. "The biggest game of the season!"

"Gee, Stanny. I forgot all about it. I'm sorry."

He looked like a funeral director at that. "Gee. I bought two tickets and everything. And they were tough to get, too!"

The big fellow was so miserable standing there holding those tiny stubs in his meaty hands that I knew she would pity him and go. Even if he was a dumb square. "Let me change, then . . ." She looked at me uncertainly, hoping I'd say something, but I didn't, then she went in the back room to change her dress. Stan looked like a convict with a pardon, grinning as he tucked the tickets back into his wallet. It was hard to believe I was like that once . . . me, Sam MacCrae, twenty years ago, before the girl switched her valentines and married that insurance man from Cincinnati. That smashed me up a little bit. Then I put my faith in something more reliable than romance. Dollar signs. And the trolley lunch cart. But the old flame did better than I, I guess. She had four kids. And I got a busted grill and a rusty sink. Nuts.

I drew a cup of joe for Stan and folded up the paper. I didn't want

him to talk about the gunman. But the paper reminded him of the headline, I suppose, and he said, "Did you hear about the reward, Sam?" I said no. "That market chain is offering five thousand dollars for any information at all that'll lead to an arrest. Not bad, eh?"

The fire in my head leaped up again. "Five thousand, eh?"

"That's right. It's right there in the Times. Page three."

I unfolded the paper and found the story along with a picture of the man who got shot. "LARGE REWARD FOR KILLER POST-ED," it said.

Mary Ellen called me just then and I went out back. She was standing near the utility closet we stash almost everything into. The bare electric light bulb threw a sick glare on her face and yellowed the edges of her new coat and her white fuzzy beret.

"Why didn't you say something?" she whispered. "You know I don't want to go out with him. I don't want to go out with anybody tonight. Not tonight!"

"Sure you do," I said. "Get out of this grease box and have fun. You're only young once. Go on, now, don't keep him waiting."

"And what about Henderson?" she said.

"So what about Henderson?" I shot back. "You can see him in the morning." Stan hollered out just then and Mary Ellen jumped like a jack-rabbit.

"Maybe he'd like something to eat," she said.

"Yeah, sure. Go on, now." She started away. "Wait a minute." She stopped. "I wouldn't say anything to Stan about Henderson. He might not like the idea. I'm sure he won't!"

Pure disgust at that. She pecked me on the cheek and left.

I was glad business was slow. It gave me a change to think. I took my time steel-wooling the sink and mopping the floor. It was starting to smell under the floor boards in back of the counter, so I leaned them against the cabinets and scrubbed the concrete with lye soap, flushing it clear afterwards, and mopping it dry. Once I had a colored fellow to do things like that. When I had money.

The tan leather bag bombed into my mind again. The twelve G's jabbed me like a needle. Money could square everything. All the bum years. Once I thought I could hit it real big like those big boys. Howard Johnson. What the hell had gone wrong? I had the guts and the drive. I poured time and muscle into this dump. What had gone wrong?

Easy answer. No breaks. No dough. That's it. Dough. Take any flop and there's the reason. The lousy dollar sign.

I looked out across the road at Jim Parrish's place. There's a success story for you! But money built it. Not brains or guts or muscle. Just

money. If my Trolley Lunch was big enough . . . bright enough, I'd give that blowhard a run for his money. There's nothing like dough to knock out competition. And Parrish had it! If I had a few bucks twenty years ago, I never would have lost Grace to that insurance man. But that's another story and what the hell am I thinking of that for now? I scowled at the "Drivers' Dream". All those flashing signs! Looked like Coney Island! But there was only one big rig parked outside his place. That made me feel good just thinking about his overhead.

Fred Chanlek from the filling station dropped in and tried to pull me into an argument about socialism. Finally, he gave up, paid his tab and left.

I helped myself to a cup of coffee and sat at the counter like a customer. It was only nine o'clock. One of the fluorescents started to flicker in the overhead socket. A few days and that would bloop out. More money out. Always money out. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer, like the song says. The idea is to get rich. Then you get richer. A law of nature. A little money is the magnet for a lot of money. Now, if I had some money I'd shut this dump and move to Florida. That's what any guy with brains does, go to Florida. Everything makes money there. Motels. Pools. That's a good racket. Swimming pools. Or maybe a frozen custard stand on a

busy highway with cute car hops. I'd call the place "MacCrae's Main Line." That's a good name. Now the "Trolley Lunch": that's corny and old hat. Trolleys are dead. But that was my brother Joe's idea. He thought a folksy name would pull in the truckers. Well, it did for a while.

A siren screamed up the road. Cops tightening the net on Klegman. It wouldn't be long. Cops had issued an all-points bulletin and the roads were jammed with bluecoats. I wondered about Klegman. Maybe he was a money-nut like me, without talent or schooling or connections. A nothing. And maybe he saw his chance and grabbed and a goof got in his way and he cut him down. That's the breaks. And Klegman had the moxie to grab his chance. God! Think of that jackpot. Twelve thousand dollars. If I worked forever I'd never make that much coin. You got to take a chance. Mary Ellen did this afternoon, rolling her eyes and wiggling her keester like a Water Street tramp. Henderson. Never heard of him. Not in the same league with Zanuck, or DeMille, or Preminger. But maybe he wasn't in the same league with anybody.

Bells went off in my head. Those eyes. Those snake-eyes! Those were killer's eyes. The guy didn't talk like a movie bigwig. And he didn't look like one, except for his expensive clothes. But anybody can put on a big front.

Excitement whipped me over to the phone . . . a wall phone, the kind you put money in. My fingers were shaking so bad I couldn't get a dime in the slot. Just as well. Take a minute. Think. Five G's reward against twelve G's in the bag out back. Smart guys take a chance. At least one big chance in their life. Klegman took a chance today in broad daylight with the whole chicken town against him. Easy, MacCrae. Twelve less five is seven. Seven thousand beautiful bucks. That's the difference between being smart and being a boob.

I shoved the dime back into my pocket. I remembered the bottle of whiskey in the back cabinet and finished it off. Half a pint, I guess. Maybe less. My hands stopped shaking, and I felt calm and strong.

I fished the .22 caliber out of its imitation leather case in the wardrobe closet. Sometimes I hunt rabbit and field rats back in the woods. I locked the door and yanked down the venetian blinds. Then I cleaned the gun. While I reamed the barrel I put the pieces of my plan together. One shot through the window of his cabin. That would do it. Then grab the bag and bury it fast. Then call the cops. Sure they'd ask questions. A million of them. But I'd bluff it through. I know all these fellows. They'd believe me. An idea hit me then and I yipped with joy. I'd get the reward, too! Twelve plus five is seventeen! Seventeen thousand dollars! Hit me again, Lady Luck!

I took off my apron and tossed it on the rack. The .22 cartridges were in their box on the shelf and I shoved three in the clip. I wouldn't need three. One would do it at close range. I cradled the rifle and rubbed the smooth stock. It wasn't a gun, it was the key to Fort Knox!

I have a cuckoo feeling that time has stopped for me. The grubby, greasy past puffs away like smoke in the wind. The future—but I won't think of that right now. The present, that's all I have. Everything that happened before has led to this moment. And everything later depends on what I do now.

I step out the back door and the cold air smacks me in the face. But it's sweet with pine and carbon monoxide and I breathe it deep. In five minutes, I'll be a rich man! I walk lightly as I can avoiding the dead twigs that snap like a whip. The cabins are black against the gray woods. Number four . . . no light. Klegman must be asleep. It'll be easy. Like killing a jackrabbit. I know exactly where the bed is. Halfway across the room with the head against the widest wall. Thirty degrees down from the horizontal. I could do it blindfolded. Maybe I'd pump two bullets in there. Or all three. Just in case. I'd have to be sure.

I skirt number three cabin and creep up on four's rear window. It's one of those high half-sized ones, a long oblong near the roof.

I've cleaned that window a million times, and I leave an empty milk crate in back to stand on. There it is. I set it back a couple yards from the shack so I can sight and aim. After all, it is a rifle and not a cap pistol. No it isn't either. It's the key to Fort Knox!

The moonlight falls across the room inside and hits a bulky form in the bed. Better than a flashlight! I raise the stock to my shoulder, pressing it firm and quiet there. But then my hands start trembling again and I lower the rifle, hold it with my knees, and rub my hands briskly. They're numb with cold.

"Get off that box and stick your hands straight up!"

The voice hits me like a club and I stumble off the crate. It's that high, shrill voice with a rasp. Klegman's. He's standing on the far side of the cabin and his arm is sticking out at me. I can't see the gun. But I know he's holding one.

The strength runs out of my legs. I feel numb and sick. "Don't shoot! For God's sake, don't shoot!" The words bounce off the trees and the echo comes back weak and thin.

"Get into the cabin," he snaps. I jump and fall headlong over the milk crate. Something tells me "RUN!" but I can't run. I scramble to my feet. My rifle is there on the ground a few feet away. But it may as well be on Mars. I raise my hands high as I can and walk into the cabin. Klegman follows me, shuts the door and locks it. He

snaps on a light. "Turn around." I turn fast. He's standing near the door with a gun in his hand. Wicked looking thing, like a cop's thirty-two. The whiskey starts rolling sour and sticky in my belly.

"What are you up to, anyway?" he says. He doesn't sound angry. That's the trouble. He's too calm. I want him to be sore. "Speak up, damn you!"

I wet my lips twice before words can come, like priming a pump. "I'm . . . I'm hunting, Mr. Henderson. That's all. Hunting. . . ."

He gives a little sneering laugh. "It's the truth!" I say real fast. This has to be good. "I hunt rabbits at night. It's the only chance I get. . . ."

He just stands there, dark and pencil thin. "You just called me Henderson. . . ."

"She didn't mean to tell me your name, Mr. Henderson. It slipped out, that's all. I try to laugh and it sounds like a squeaky doll. "You know how young girls are. . . ."

"Yes. And I know what old rats are too. Don't you think I was on to you all the time? Don't you think I'm wise to greedy little pigs like you?"

"Please, Mr. Henderson. Please! It's not like you think!"

"Cut out that 'Henderson'. You know who I am. . . ."

He brings his arm up and I can see the gun barrel flash. I try to dive, but he catches me high on the head, and I go down. The room starts

spinning and the bulb seems to go out. I'm not sure of the next few minutes. He seems to be talking but I can't hear him. Only a sound like a leaky faucet dripping water in a metal sink. Slimy, dull, irritating sound. Then the leak takes shape and becomes words splitting through the see-saw room. "You think I'm going to let a dirty little hash-man get the drop on me?" He takes a giant step, and I see his foot pull back and I try to roll under the bed. But his shoe catches me hard under the ribs.

An all-gone feeling of flying and landing all at once. I open my eyes and focus on something that looks like a long, black snake with one fang showing. The snake is crawling out of a clear crystal cave. Then the snake becomes a pen and the cave becomes an inkwell. I think I'm sitting on the hard chair now with my head on the desk, slopping in wet ooze. I can see the color now. It's blood all over the desk pad. I try to lift my head with my hands, but I can't. My hands are tied. Then I see him standing over me like a monster balloon in a kid parade. I try to say something, but my lips seem huge and puffy. Then I know. He must have pistol-whipped me while I was out.

"So you found out!" he's screaming. He grabs me by the hair and snaps my head back. "You know who I am, don't you?"

There's nothing to lose now. I know I'm going to die. "Yes. I

know you're Klegman." I think he's going to hit me again and I close my eyes hard. But sirens cutting through the walls of the cabin stop him. The racket jolts him into action. He jumps over to the bed and flips open the lid of the bag. Bleary and sick as I am, I almost laugh. That was the bulky thing under the blankets I was aiming at before. Not him!

He throws on his jacket and tweed topcoat, then starts stuffing wads of bills into his pockets. When they are full, he tucks more under his belt, even in his hat. He looks like a kid playing with funny money. He sees me watching him and laughs. "Here's a present for you, hash man." He heaves the bag across the room at me. "They can bury you in it."

The one light in the room becomes many lights rolling into each other slowly then out again in crazy patterns. Klegman's only an outline now, bearing down on me like a hawk.

"You're taking me out of here, do you hear me!" he yells. The panic has shifted now to him. Me? I don't care any more. I mumble something about all the roadblocks.

"We'll cut off somewhere," Klegman says. "You must know all the roads around here. The back roads!"

I remember something. Like a dim candle in a mammoth cave. "A car. You don't have a car."

"But you do!" he said. "That old

Ford out front. That's yours, isn't it?" I didn't say anything. He rips into my pockets and finds the keys. "You drive!" he snaps.

"We won't get out of the driveway," I tell him. Time. That's what I need. Just a little time. Say anything. Do anything.

"Let me worry about that!" he says. "I know cops. They won't shoot with you at the wheel. Little crumbs like you are precious to them. They won't shoot you!"

"What about the roadblocks?"

"Go right through 'em. And if you try anything funny, I'll blast your brains all over the windshield!"

"I can't see so good. You hit me on the head. I don't think I can drive." Say anything. Do anything.

"You'll drive, 'Pop!" Klegman grabs me by the arm and hoists me to my feet. I'm surprised how strong he is. I must outweigh him by fifty pounds. He fumbles at my wrists and my hands are suddenly free. "Let's go." He swings open the door and I toe out like a baby trying his first step.

Strange how you remember small things. How the moonlight falls on winter ground; shadows on dead branches, the wind in the tall trees. For a minute I feel like a guy in a theatre looking at a movie. Soon, this bloody, violent picture will be over and I'll get up and go home. I'll say what everybody says, "This could never happen in real life."

There's a sharp, whisking noise.

Like the noise scrubbing brushes make on a rough floor. Traffic sounds, I guess. And the snapping of wet towels on a clothesline. Twigs breaking underfoot.

Klegman prods me along with his gun and I stumble along thinking one thing now. And it's life, death, hell, and heaven for me. Run! Get away! But I can't. He'd cut me down in a second. His life or mine. I must have fallen. He's heaving me up onto my feet again . . . like a bag of wet laundry.

I'm at the car now fumbling with the handle. Then I'm inside trying to remember where the starter is. Button on the dash, that's it. Now, hit it! Hit it fast! There's a gun at my head and the driveway spins like grey ribbon in the moonlight and I'm going to die.

Off the drive, onto the asphalt. Suddenly a ring of dark metal shapes, wedged tight together and moving in from the right and left . . . cops! God in Heaven! Cops! "It's a trap!" Klegman screams. "Head for that driveway!"

I slam down the accelerator and the car hops across the highway, jumping the curb of Jim Parrish's place, and landing in the parking lot. "Keep going!" Klegman says. "Over to that door." I wheel around fast in a big, skidding circle and hit the brakes. Klegman leaps out before the car stops, runs in jerky little steps, and falls to his knees. But he is up again. A big floodlight washes over him, and the last I see

of him are those white eyes of his and those little sharp teeth.

There's a riot of noise and dirt kicks up little puffs all over the bright circle he's standing in. Suddenly, he lifts his arm straight out toward me. I see the gun, and I sprawl down on the seat cushion, half on the floor of the car. The windshield splits like ice in a bowl. I wait a second or two and look out. Klegman is down on his hands and knees, dragging himself out of the floodlight's glare. Wild noises now, screams. I twist my head around and see the carhops, streaming out the front door of the restaurant, clutching at each other, yelling, their legs churning. They run over to the floodlight where the police are standing.

"All right, Klegman, you're through!" A voice trumpets through a P. A. system. Silence. "O. K. boys. Lay it on." All hell breaks loose and my heart is banging like a soup spoon on a kettle. Then, there's a bigger sound. Not gunfire. But another sound, a great muffled "BOOM!" Like dynamite in a canyon. I rub my eyes with my sleeve. Everything is spinning again, and I roll over on my back trying to force the screwy jigsaw night into the right places between the looming shapes that must be tree-tops. Other shapes are running and yelling and scrambling for cover . . . police. I wonder at the vivid orange that splatters out of the windows then turns to wild jets of

red and yellow. The whole thing is a nightmare of noise and color. . . . I try slapping reason into my head with my hands. I seem to be sliding down into a pool of flickering lights. Then suddenly, everything is clear, as if someone had just wiped a pair of dirty spectacles clean. The "Drivers' Dream" is belching smoke and flames, sirens are blaring on all sides, and a stampede of people is surging past my Ford toward the blazing building. I watch spellbound, like a kid at his first circus. Then I start slipping back again into that deep pool of flashing colors. Stop!

Well, there it is. I just wanted to get it down in writing. Purging the conscience, that's all. Confession is supposed to be good for the soul, and damned if I don't feel better already.

Jim Parrish's place went up like a dry leaf that night, and with it went the competition that had loused me up so long. The cops said that a stray bullet may have hit the gas line, but there are people like me who believe Klegman set that place blazing himself. Going out the big way, I guess.

I'd be nuts to go to Florida now. With the "Drivers' Dream" a heap of ashes, the whole strip from here to Monroe is mine. I put the reward money into the "Trolley Lunch" . . . all five G's . . . renovated the whole shebang: formica

counter and tables, knotty pine paneling, stainless steel fixtures, the works. I added a wing and put in a slot machines and a big flashing juke box. Jim Parrish'll think twice before he builds again. It's like I always say, all it takes to knock out competition is money!

The newspapers made me a public hero, going in after that gunman myself. You know the pitch: the ordinary little citizen taking the law into his own hands, dishing out instant justice. Corny, but it brings in business, and how I love to hear that cash register jingle! You know, some people come in just to stare at the scars on my face and the little stump of an ear I have left. They're like trophies! One of the Detroit papers wrote a big story about me and called it "Counterman Courage". I got one of those display houses to blow up the story, mural-size, and set it into the front wall.

I guess a woman's intuition saved my life. Mary Ellen knew I was up to something that night, shooing her out on a date with Stan. I never forced her to go out with anyone before. Halfway through that basketball game, she told Stan the whole story, before she blew up with suspense or excitement or worry or whatever it was she felt for me. They called the state cops and you know the rest of the story.

Speaking of Mary Ellen, I think something happened to her that night that blew away the daydreams and Hollywood notions . . . and

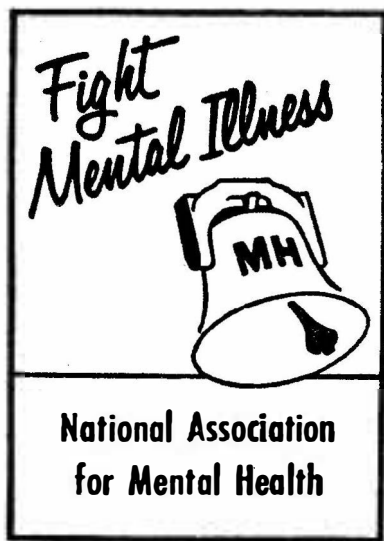
set her thinking straight for the first time in her life. I think she grew up in those few hours. She's seeing much more of Stan Clark than she used to. Nothing like being scared to bring people together.

Just one thing I hate remembering: all that dough Klegman hauled away that night went up in smoke. Twelve thousand dollars! All that

money! But what the hell. You can't win them all.

Mary Ellen kids me sometimes. She says we had so much bad luck all our lives that something terrific just had to happen when it did. She says the law of average rigged our break.

But I think her ankles had something to do with it.



MANHUNT'S

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PREDATOR!



Coz Tanner was a predator, a man who'd sooner spend half a day stealing a dollar than work honest for twenty. The big swamp was his habitat.

BY

ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

COMING back through the saw palmettos from the swamp pine island where he and Harris had laid the trapline, Ramsay paused to watch one of nature's vicious little dramas being enacted in a squawk heron creek. An otter had caught a watersnake and it was trying to get the writhing thing up on a fallen cabbage palm to eat it.

The entire scene lasted about five minutes. And that five minutes might have been what cost his friend his life. But he could never

be sure about that because he wasn't a coroner—only a Park Service boatman. Still . . .

When he first stepped into the little camp he thought that Harris must be asleep in the pup tent, because the small clearing seemed so deserted, so void of life and sound. It didn't even enter his mind at that moment to wonder why the big puma's hide wasn't on the drying rack that Harris had rigged between two gum trees.

And then he saw the body.

His instant thought was that Harris was lying there as some kind of joke. The second thought, that he had stumbled and fallen on his face. But the third thought—the one that really didn't want to come forward, that was almost impossible to accept—was the accurate one.

There was no mistaking the glazed eyes that were staring into nothing—or the punky gnat that was wading over the sticky, fixed right eyeball. A living man would *have* to blink.

He looked at Harris' khaki-clad back and saw a one-inch wet red slit in his shirt. The kind of puncture that a hunting knife would make—just under the left shoulder-blade. Then he touched the dead man's bare arm and it was still warm. That's when he realized that the man who had used the knife was probably still close by.

And I'm slated to go next, he thought.

Harris, one of the fish and wild-life patrolmen, had come to Ramsay the morning before with a request. "How about you hauling me into Black Water Swamp, Ram? Seems a randy old painter and his bitch has been raiding them backwater farmers by Lostmans River. Got one of Ben Toll's heifers last night."

He was one of those big, quiet, slow-smiling men. Born and raised in the Glades, he had taken to his job like a gator takes to a slough.

Which was more than Ramsay could say for himself. He had left the Georgia woods simply because he'd wanted to see something of the country he lived in, and two years ago had found himself stuck in Florida, a penniless victim of the drifter's curse.

To him this land of palm and bogs was a crazy place. Not only were there no mountains, but here even the water was black, not crystal clear like his home streams. He was sick of it, of his job too. He didn't give a damn about Ben Toll's heifer, but trying to trap a pair of pumas would at least help break the deadly monotony of taxiing tourists and entomologists around the swamp.

So he said "Sure" to Harris, and if the Park Service didn't like it, they knew what they could do with it.

They loaded up Ramsay's propeller-driven airboat with the trapping gear: four steel wolf traps with chains and dragging hooks, dried bait, a jug of barkstone, and a nine-shot .22 target pistol. Ramsay gave the long-barrelled gimcrack a wry look.

"You aim to shoot anything bigger than a poor-joe bird with that toy?" he asked. Harris pulled his slow grin.

"That's for the painters," he said, "and we're lucky enough to catch 'em. You'll see."

The airboat droned by a picturesque little commercial fishing

hamlet situated on an ancient Indian shell mound island, and started up the wiggly river. A good-god flight of red-billed white ibis thundered overhead as the interlocking mangroves gave way to the open vastness of the inner Glades.

Ramsay sat on his perch in front of the engine and nodded when Harris called above the whirr of the airplane prop—

"You know that big old pine island north of Duck Creek? I got that painter located there. But likely we can't get that far in."

"This buggy will go into water three inches deep," Ramsay said.

"Not through no log litter it can't."

Harris was right. The waving sea of sedges and sawgrass was soon broken up by hammocks, the tree islands of the Glades, and the cypress jungles and pindown thickets began to crowd in. A maze of fallen cabbage palm logs and gnarled cypress knees stubbornly barricaded the waterway. They got out in the shallow black water and started unloading the boat.

A hundred yards beyond the thicket high land waited, with palmettos, liveoaks and swamp pines, and honest, solid earth for a man's feet. They struggled toward the island, loaded with the traps and drag hooks, wading through knee-deep marl that sucked at their boots and hurrah bushes that clawed at their pants.

Nearing the cocoplum bushes

that circled the big island, Harris paused and cautiously tried an open patch of marl with his foot.

"Watch out for this spot, Ram. It's a sinkhole. Suck you right down to perdition."

They staggered into a steaming jungle of gumbo limbo trees, wild tamarinds with frilly leaflets, and coffee bushes laced with grapevines—dumped their load and waded in to the thicket to get another.

"You know Coz Tanner is out and back?" Ramsay said.

"That's what I've heard."

"I saw him yesterday on Squawk Creek in his outboard skiff."

"That so?" Harris didn't seem to show any interest in the subject, which mildly surprised Ramsay. Tanner was a Glades man; born and raised on a shantyboat, he was one of those illiterate men who would instinctively rather spend half a day stealing a dollar than work a full day for twenty dollars. He was a swamp poacher of the first water; always ready and willing to kill and skin anything from a gator to an egret. He had a deep-rooted, almost atavistic, hatred of the Park Service and its patrolmen.

"Queer cuss," Harris commented. "I've known him to even steal *Ligu* snails to peddle to collectors."

Harris had caught Tanner three times at poaching. The fourth time he had lost his patience and turned him in, and the law had put him away for a year. Now he was out again and bearing a grudge.

"And a mean cuss," Ramsay added. "Remember what he did to that fisherman at the Chokoloskee dance two years back?"

"Yeah. Coz is a randy man with a knife. Goan get him in real trouble some day . . .

They set up camp among the palmettos. Harris wanted to keep the traps near the water where some big cat prints showed in the mud, so they laid the trapline between two palm bogs. He hung the bait over the concealed traps and sprinkled it with barkstone, which had an appalling odor that wild creatures seemed to go for.

"Well, Ram," Harris said, "I sholly appreciate the hand. You might drop back in two days and see do I need a ride home."

"I reckon I'll stick out here with you if you ain't got any objection," Ramsay said. "I want to see you use that .22 on a puma."

"What about your job?"

Ramsay shrugged. "I've been thinking I'd chuck it anyhow. Figure I might go up to Tennessee for a look around. They got hills and mountains there—and no gators."

"Well, it ain't my nevermind," Harris said quietly. "But I reckon for some perverse reason you've sort of made up your mind to throw away something precious. Namely, your life. You got plenty of savvy and a good disposition, but you won't stick to any one thing. Just keep hopping around like a June bug on a string."

Ramsay frowned. He didn't like to talk about his restlessness, or to think about his instability.

"I've been on this job two damn years," he said defensively.

"Sure. And before that a month on a job here, five months on another there, a year somewhere else . . . Boy, you're nearly thirty. Next thing you know, you goan look around one day and find you're just another broken old bindle-stiff hobbling down an empty highway." Harris thought for a moment, then added:

"There ain't never nothing waiting beyond the next hill, Ram, if you're just going there to sightsee."

"Well," Ramsay muttered, "it's my life, ain't it?"

"Yep. That's just what I mean."

Twilight fetched an expectant hush over the wet wilderness. It seemed to totter on the brink of darkness like a great glassy ball waiting to drop and crash. Then a limpkin wailed its sad sad cry and a flight of night ducks got up from the lake with a batter of spraying wings and took off. After that there was the chuckle and squawk of the herons in the creek.

And suddenly Ramsay was aware of a third human presence. He looked up with a start and saw Coz Tanner standing by a liveoak.

A lanky-limbed, big shouldered man, he could move as daintily or swiftly as a bobcat. He was standing there like a tall petrified man,

grinning a plastic grin. That smirk and the deep set of his penetrating eyes gave him a demonic look in the firelight.

Harris looked around at him and stared back for a moment. Then he said, "Well, Coz. How you keepin'?"

Tanner made no move, held his fixed grin for a slow count of ten, before he said, "Lo, bastard."

Ramsay looked at Harris to see if he'd get mad. But he didn't. He smiled evenly, and said, "Have some coffee." And when Tanner went on waiting where he was, still with that damn grin, he said:

"Ain't no sense in bearing a grudge, Coz. I'd warned you often enough about killing gators for their hides, but you had to have it your way. Way I figure it, you sent yourself up."

"I said bastard," Tanner said.

"I heard you," Harris said calmly.

"Mebbe you'd hear me better ifn I said son of a—"

"Get out a here, Tanner!" Ramsay said, and he started to get up. There was a hollow feeling above his solar plexus and the blood was tingling away from his face. He didn't like fighting—always avoided one if he could—but he couldn't go on listening to Tanner insult Harris while Harris just sat there and took it.

Tanner crouched, catlike, and his right hand flashed a hunting knife. Ramsay looked at the knife. The

blade gleamed, the thin red light from the fire dancing along the edge like blood.

"Sit down, Ram!" Harris' voice was sharp. "He's trying to herd me into going at him. Then he'll make with that fool knife of his and call it self-defense, and you'll be his witness." He looked at Tanner again and shook his head.

"Better get along, Coz. Go poach some wild orchids or some more tree snails. Ramsay ain't goan fight you neither."

Tanner wagged the blade at Ramsay, insinuatingly.

"I reckon he ain't at that," he sneered. He started backing, moving absolutely without sound, as if he were not actually touching the ground. Then the night shut him off, and all they heard was his voice—"I'll be around, boy."

Ramsay sat down, feeling the blood rush back to his cheeks. He looked at Harris who was complacently sipping his coffee. There was such a thing as being too passive, he thought. And for the first time he wondered if the patrolman was gutless.

In the heron chuckling dark a godawful outcry ripped across the swamp night. It sounded as if wildcats were being skinned alive. Harris scrambled up, saying, "C'mon! We got us one."

Holding the .22 in one hand, a flashlight in the other, he led the way through the moony palmettos, heading upstream. It was a puma,

a big tan male with a bloody mouth. He was snapping at the steel jaws of the trap in his pain and outrage as he writhed in the weeds like something gone crazy.

The trap had him by the left hind leg and the iron drag hook was pronged in the pindowns, holding him in place. When the beam of light hit him his wild eyes sparked liquid fire and he leaped at Harris like something from a catapult.

Ramsay sprang aside in a frantic jump—but the hook's chain stopped the cat short in midair and piled him on his back. And then Harris stepped in, pointing the flashlight in the cat's face, and as the big sleek snarling head started to come up he pulled the trigger and the .22 went *pak*.

And that was that. Straight through the left eye to the brain.

"My gawd," Ramsay breathed, and then he started to laugh, from nerves mostly. "And I was wondering if you were gutless!"

Harris smiled, nudging the dead cat with his foot.

"If you can get in a shot like that, it gives you a nice whole hide. Bet Tanner would give his grampa for a skin like this."

They cut a sapling carrying pole and toted the heavy carcass back to camp, where Harris went to work skinning the big cat.

"Mebbe tomorrow will wind it up," he said. "Mebbe we'll get lucky and catch that she-painter right off."

Tomorrow . . .

Now was the tomorrow that Harris had talked about the night before. And now Ramsay was bending over his knifed body.

Tanner has to be close by, he thought, or he would've already hauled Harris' body into a slough and left it for the gators. He must've heard me coming back and hid in the brush.

He broke out in a cold sweat as an almost hysterical terror stole over him. He could *feel* Tanner watching him. Crawling into the pup tent, he pawed wildly through Harris' gear until he uncovered the .22 pistol. His head jerked up—listening.

Something crackled in the underbush. Animal—or Tanner?

He tried to think rationally. Tanner probably had a gun, but likely he wouldn't use it unless he had to. Nobody could detect a knife thrust after the gators were through with a body, but a bullet too often left obvious bone damage. And there was a good chance that Tanner didn't know about the target pistol.

The .22 will keep him away from me, he thought. At least until he decides he has to shoot me.

His best course would be to slip back to the airboat and go for the law. And quick. Tanner might already be creeping up on the tent. Again the hollow feeling came to his solar plexus, and he knew that he was scared. Honestly and completely scared.

He scooted out of the tent like a

cat from a bag—expecting the shocking smash of a rifle bullet in the back at every step. Then he was breasting the whipping palmettos and he sprawled into the sand and scrambled under the cover of the avid fronds.

No rifle shot. Nothing. The silence was complete, but ominous too—like a mute monster watching solemnly from the jungle.

He crawled, staying under the palmettos until they petered out. By then he had reached the little footpaths he and Harris had made between the camp and the outer thicket. He started along it, trying to trot quietly as the flowery jungle closed in like the green walls of a narrow hallway.

Cypress roots clutched the edge of the path and fronds touched down every which way, and he didn't give it a thought when his left foot slashed through one of the crisscrossing creeper vines.

Something instantly started to give and he caught a flicker of motion in the corner of his eye, and he threw himself sideways as a heavy ten foot dead log came crashing across the path.

He looked at the log, at the vine his foot had triggered. It stretched across the path, through a cypress root, and up the side of the log where it had been tied by hand. A deadfall.

He rigged a widowmaker for me, Ramsay thought blankly.

He left the path, plunging into

the jungle and scrabbling down to the mucky bank and the looming thicket. He started wading into the ghastly marl, stepping over hoop bushes and clawing his way around the pindowns. The thicket thinned as he approached the log litter where they had left the airboat.

But the boat wasn't there.

So Tanner hadn't hung around after he killed Harris. He had gone directly into the jungle and set up the deadfall, knowing that Ramsay would come along the path sooner or later. Then he had hauled off the boat and hidden it. Where? God, it could be in any little setback in the thicket. It would take him hours to find it!

And Tanner was probably somewhere in the thickets too. Where? How near? He looked at the .22's cylinder. *No*, he thought, and he quickly broke open the pistol.

One .22 long rifle cartridge. *One*. Because that was all Harris had needed, knowing that if he missed with the first one a second slug of that caliber wouldn't do him any good.

"Ramsay!"

The gut-grabbing bellow reacted on him like a bomb. He jumped and shrank into the lofty tules, trying to see everywhere at once.

"Goan kill yuh, taxi boy! Goan feed you to the gators!"

Then Tanner laughed—a high, maniacal laugh that got a short-winged cooter bird all asquawk.

Ramsay crawled into the reeds,

the echo of the savage laugh ringing in his ears. He realized that for the first time in years he was at the edge of a complete and violent loss of temper. Tanner had killed a good man, one of the few really good men Ramsay had known. And now Tanner was playing games with Ramsay's life.

In an odd way he was almost glad that the boat was gone. Now he couldn't run for help. For the first time in his life, out of all the false beginnings and phony endings, he was going to have to stick to one thing and see it through.

He snaked through the tules, under the pindowns and around the gargyle cypress knees—then stopped in consternation when he suddenly found himself face to face with a big bull gator drowsing on a fallen tupelo. The huge saurian started to unhinge its ponderous jaws with a wet hiss, and Ramsay beat a hasty detour.

The marsh dust was balling in the air, covering him with a fine powder, turning to mud where his clothes were wet. The sun was straight up and hell hot, but the jungle was looming now, and he plunged through the last of the reed and gained the mucky bank.

Here at its outer edge, the jungle was thickly grown with cocoplum, bay and willow shoots interlaced with bamboo. The thorny vines tore his shirt, entangled his feet, snatched at his pants.

Sweating a pint a minute, he

smashed through to a place where the ground was still marshy but the island more open. Dense laurel bushes crowded him, and the gums and bay trees and swamp pines rose higher, their branches spreading overhead.

Stopping to listen, he thought he heard Tanner following the run of the creek. But it might have been anything from a gator to an otter.

He crept along the path that led to the downstream bog at the foot of the trapline, looking right and left. He actually didn't have any plan in mind. He was simply keeping on the move.

He came to an abrupt stop, staring at a length of grapevine across the path. It was partially concealed with dead leaves, as if a breeze had banked them there. Crouching down he pawed aside the laurels on one side of the run.

A six-foot sapling was cocked back to the ground and held in place by a forked branch. The end of the grapevine was tied to one tine of the fork. A hunting knife, blade up, was lashed to the tip of the taut sapling. A spring trap.

He triggered the vine with an outstretched foot. The fork flew out and the sapling sprang at the path with a swish, the steel blade describing a flashing arc. Ramsay yanked the knife free, looked around, and let out a sharp, painful cry—"Aagh!"

Dodging into the sheltering lau-

rels, he dropped to his knees. His damp hand gripped on the butt of the .22 as he waited. He felt like a guitar after a quadrille solo, beat and trembly.

Some unseen limpkins moaned about his cry for a little while. Then they shut up and the silence picked up again, and there was nothing but the usual sing of the attacking mosquitoes.

Five minutes . . . ten minutes

A redheaded pilcated woodpecker banked among the trees in its peculiar up-and-down flight pattern. Ramsay watched it go. Had it been flushed out? His thumb stretched for the .22's hammer.

"Haw!" Tanner's laugh exploded in the jungle.

"Smart bastard, ain't you? Figgered to bushwhack old Coz, did you? Figgered I'd thunk I got you and would come booming along to see the body. But you ort a left my knife on that tit!" Tanner let out a crazy laugh, and a chill zagged up Ramsay's spine.

"Now I'm goan show you *real* bushwhacking, boy! I'm coming at you, hear? *But you won't see me!*"

He was now certain that Tanner had a gun—else he wouldn't have risked wasting his knife on the spring trap. And Ramsay didn't dare try to match the .22 against a real firearm. Conscious of his danger, he scrambled hastily to his feet and took off into the jungle.

He didn't flee in absolute terror

this time. He ran with an idea forming in his mind. Two could play at traps. . . .

The jungle opened and he ran panting into the sawgrass. Four wild turkeys, flushed out of hiding, raced like streaks through the grass and palmetto and took flight, thrashing the air with powerful wings. Ramsay dodged in among a tall, lacy stand of Caribbean pines and cut back toward the creek and the pindown thicket again.

He was laying a track that a blind man couldn't miss.

Nearing the pindowns, he turned south and started forcing a path through the devilclub and catclaws until he reached a little soggy leaf-covered patch of earth. The number two downstream trap was under those leaves.

With Tanner's knife he cut down the telltale bait dangling from a gum tree, and pitched it into a witch hobble. Then he stepped over the concealed trap and pushed deeper into the devilclub.

Not three minutes later a piercing shriek all but split his eardrums, and all manner of little creatures went scurrying in the sky with a great beating of crimson wings. Ramsay stopped short with a tight grin. A moment later he slipped quietly back along the path.

He spotted Tanner from some distance away. The killer was thrashing around in the damp leaves like a wounded cougar, wear-

ing the steel trap on his right foot. Suddenly he wheeled over, belly to the ground, and his eyes glared intensely at Ramsay.

He snatched for something by his side, and Ramsay piled sideways into the thicket as Tanner whacked out a shot.

That was that. He had a .30 carbine, and Ramsay didn't stand a chance of getting close enough to put the .22 to use. He pulled back in the bush, wondering what to do next.

Tanner, evidently, knew just what to do. He knew he didn't have a prayer of forcing down those powerful springs on the trap by hand, so he disentangled the drag hook and picked it up along with the connecting chain, and started hobbling painfully after Ramsay.

Ramsay understood Tanner's desperate play. The killer was going to go back to the camp and find Harris' jackscrew which would loosen the steel jaws on the trap. Which meant that Ramsay would have to get to the camp first and pocket the jackscrew.

The trouble was, he didn't know where Harris kept it. It would probably cost him precious minutes trying to find the damn thing among all the patrolman's gear. And all Tanner needed with that carbine was one clear shot.

Then he remembered there was one other kind of trap that he had completely overlooked . . .

He started laying a fresh trail

back to camp, making it comparatively easy for Tanner to follow him. Reaching the marshy thicket at a point where the godawful pin-downs pushed far over the spongy bank of the island, he hacked a sizeable path through the tules and hoop bushes with the knife. The oozy marl was only ankle deep.

He paused, listening to Tanner's labored breathing and gasps of pain, still coming on strong. And he knew then that Tanner was one of those hardheaded, iron-ribbed men who would never throw in the towel. Even if he never got the jackscrew, he would keep right on limping after Ramsay with that damned thing on his foot, until he ran him down and killed him.

Cutting reeds right to left, he forged on through the clinging muck until he reached the place where Harris had warned him to watch out. Carefully separating the tules with his hands, he veered around the danger spot and came back again on the opposite side of the sinkhole.

He hacked open a path in the tules—one that would look as if he had waded straight across the marled space. Then he slogged on toward the rising jungle, slashing and shoving at the damn Moses reed which was as thick as the business end of a broom. But not for far. He stopped, panting for breath, listening—

A startled cry splintered the silence, and he turned back.

Tanner had blundered smack in to the sinkhole. Within two steps he felt the jellylike ground give under his feet, and he stumbled and fell and all at once he was knee-deep in gooey marl which seemed to suck at his legs like thousands of voracious little mouths.

He dropped the drag hook and snatched at a spindly reed, and it bent and snapped off in his hand. He kicked with his free foot and it swung free, but—as he took another panicky lunge—both his feet sank into the viscous marl which was suddenly as soft as warm mush.

He dropped the carbine and floundered wildly, beating the slimy muck with his hands. He sank—sank—screaming and thrashing as the ghastly, glutinous marl crept up to his crotch, to his waist . . .

"Ramsay! For gawdsake, Ramsay, *help me!*"

Ramsay, standing in the tules, looked at the helpless man and nodded. It was already far too late. He couldn't reach Tanner without blundering into the sinkhole him-

self. And even if he could, he wouldn't be able to pit his strength against the combined weight of Tanner and the steel trap and the chain and drag hook.

But a sense of compassion struck him, and that was why he nodded. At least he could make it painless.

He raised the .22 and took careful aim and squeezed the trigger on his one shot. The target pistol went *pak* with a jolt.

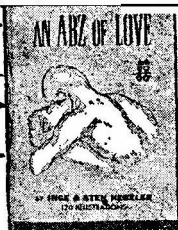
Tanner's body lunged backward, bowing at the spine, and a thin bright red ribbon ran out of his right eye. Then he settled forward, his face in the brown muck and his arms spread-eagled. The marl oozed up on him, swallowing—swallowing—until only his cloth cap sat complacently on the placid surface.

Ramsay lowered the .22 and turned away. He had to find the airboat and haul the body of his friend back to civilization. He waded on into the marl and tules, searching. All around him now, the swamp was silent.



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TWO PASSIONS remained to Cora Ransome, once the darling of the silent screen—Mon Repos, her boarding house for retired actors and actresses; and the semi-weekly showing of silent films in which she and her aging friends had starred. She lived—they all did—in a sweet, vague no-man's land, a land which actually had been theirs, when they were young and beautiful and talented and rich, with castle-like homes and yachts and custom-built limousines.

When Conrad Dillingham, like a ghost from the past, arrived at Mon Repos, Cora had her first sense of being jolted into the present, and she did not like the feeling.

She had gone out that night to buy popcorn—her old ladies and gentlemen liked a big bowl of freshly-buttered popcorn to munch as they watched themselves on the screen.

When she arrived home, she perched her shabby little Renault precariously on the steep hill, got out, and stood looking with fondness and admiration at the silvered old mansion, with its gabled roof, its many cupolas and bits of gingerbread. The house seemed to be

floating, drifting on air, and the lights of Hollywood, far below, were like stars shining in an upside-down sky.

A tall man was mounting the steps of the house, and Cora recognized that erect carriage, that immensely tall figure, with the outmoded, yet dashing black cloak

Frailty, thy name ain't necessarily "woman".

BY
MAEVA PARK

thrown across his shoulders.

He turned. "Cora Ransome!" he cried. "After all these years—but I'd have known you anywhere."

She knew that it was true. Her pretty, round face, with the small mouth so typical of the beauties of her day, was unlined, and still had the expectant look of the eternal ingenue. Her fair hair was streaked with grey, but it was soft and plentiful, and her blue eyes were only slightly faded.

"Conrad Dillingham," she said, somewhat less enthusiastically. "No one has seen you for years."

"Ah, well," he said absently, "I've been in Europe for a long time."

He was looking at the neat wooden sign which swung gently in the breeze. "My Repose," he translated. "That's a lovely name, Cora, a lovely promise for an old actor like me."

He was not young, of course; he had been her co-star. Yet there was something of perpetual youth in the flamboyant handsomeness of that face, with its strong, straight nose, its jutting chin. His hair was silver, but otherwise he seemed scarcely changed from the dashing young man who had been one of the famous lovers of the silent days.

He roused her from her thoughts by asking politely, "May I come in?"

She unlocked the front door and led the way down the hall. "We're viewing movies tonight," she said. "Walter Williamson—you remem-

ber him, of course—is operating the projector. Just go in and have a chair; I'll be with you as soon as I've popped the corn."

She opened the door of the projection room which she had had installed in the big house years ago, when she had been the biggest star of them all. Darkness filled the little room, except for the flickering shadows on the screen, and the only sound was the little tinkle-tinkle of old-time piano music on the tape recorder.

Watching Conrad as he sat down, his back straight as a ramrod, his grey-gloved hands resting on the gold top of his cane, she wondered why he had bothered to come back, after all these years. It was not like Conrad to feel the pull of old friendships, nor to yearn for rest and tranquillity, after the hectic years.

When she went back with the big bowl of popcorn, the movie was nearly over. It chanced to be one in which she and Conrad had starred, with Minnie Gordon as comedienne and Grant Lester as villain. The train careened down the track, with Grant at the throttle, and Conrad struggling masterfully to wrest the controls from the villainous Lester. There was Cora tied to the tracks, her small face pleading, pleading to be set free. Once again, Cora Ransome felt the old fear, the old excitement, the old sense of immediacy.

The reel went to its expected cli-

max, and Cora switched on the lights. The viewers blinked at one another, emerging reluctantly from the dream, back into reality.

"I have a surprise for you," Cora said, in the little, birdlike voice which had been her chief reason for retiring, when talkies came in. "You all remember Conrad Dillingham! He's just back from Europe."

All the old actresses, with their softly-painted faces, all the old actors with their carefully-lifted chins, their military bearing, turned in their chairs. Conrad Dillingham stepped forward.

"My dear friends!" he said. "How wonderful to see you all again."

Lillian Boone, who was tall and white-haired and regal, asked in a tone which was ice itself, "Well, Conrad, to what do we owe this honor, after so many years?"

His great, sonorous tones filled the room. "To friendship, of course, my dear Lillian. I've come back—for old times' sake."

Mrs. Carstairs, who had been Sally Jones in the old days, went up and put her tiny hand in Conrad's. "Where are you staying?" she asked.

Conrad turned his searching, black-eyed look on each of them in turn—on sweet Sally Carstairs and Grant Lester and Lillian Boone, and fat old Casper Cuthbert, once the funniest man in the movies, on little Betsy Moore and Anthony Meriweather, who walked with a cane now, but once had been as heroic as

Conrad himself, handsome, noble-browed, a little larger than life; on Geroge Masters and Minnie Gordon and Helen Johnson. Ten of them, in all, besides Cora herself, and Conrad, of course.

Cora loved having them about her, these aging actors and actresses, with their remembrances of past glory. She felt fiercely protective toward them; they were her bulwark against a changing, unfamiliar world, as she was theirs. All their little airs and pretenses were so harmless; even their tiny jealousies were childlike and unimportant.

Only Conrad—Conrad was different. He had always been different, taking money and women and good times where he found them. Cora shuddered when he finally answered Sally.

"Where else should I stay, but among my dear friends?" he asked, winningly, spreading his blue-veined hands in a helpless gesture.

He's broke, Cora thought grimly. That's why he's here, among his dear friends.

"I'm sure Cora can find room for me," he said, looking at her, repeating the phrase he had used before. "For old times' sake."

Cora set her little mouth determinedly. For once, she intended to turn someone away. But at that precise moment, Conrad suddenly clutched at his breast pocket. "In here!" he gasped.

Grant and Walter gave him a tablet from the flat tin in his pocket,

gave him water to drink, helped him to a chair. In a few minutes, he brightened and the color came back to his face.

He leaned back against the chair. "The old ticker," he said, almost cheerfully, "isn't what it used to be."

He tapped his breast pocket. "I carry my medicine here, always. It saved my life last year, in Italy."

Casper Cuthbert cackled. "Can't go chasing those pretty young things around so much any more, can we, Conrad?"

Conrad gave him a repressive look. "I never had to chase them, Casper; they chased me."

Casper flushed an unbecoming red, but said nothing.

"Do you think I could get to bed now, Cora?" Conrad asked weakly.

Cora opened her lips, but the "no" would not come out. For too many years, she had said "yes" to her friends from the old days, taking them in when they had nowhere else to go, using her modest annuity to keep the big house running, whether the room rent came in or not. She could not—not quite—turn away this man with the thin, blue-white line still around his lips.

And so Conrad Dillingham moved into Mon Repos, and gradually—or so it seemed to Cora—the light, the gentleness, the other-day quality seemed to move out of it.

In their place, Conrad brought discord and unhappiness. Into her home, in which she had perpetu-

ated the old, silent-film world, there had crept the atmosphere of some off-beat foreign-language movie, macabre and bitter.

Much, of course, lay in the slyly malicious remarks Conrad made to everyone.

"Minnie," he said one day at the luncheon table, "remember that time you and your husband and Jim Gallagher took the trip on your yacht?" He paused to pat his lips gently with a stiff white napkin. "Strange, how only the two of you returned—you and Jim. They never found your husband, did they?"

Minnie's face was a dull, sickly white, and everyone industriously avoided looking at her.

Cora cast a furious look at Conrad, but he went on blandly spooning up his fruit cocktail. Minnie Gordon was a grandmother now, respectable and contented; her life in the old, wild days had nothing to do with her present placid existence. Cora felt a wave of murderous hatred for Conrad sweep over her.

Sometimes it was Cora herself who was the target of his remarks. "What a pity you never married, Cora," he said slyly one day. "A pretty, famous woman like you! I'm sure any number of men would have been delighted to catch Cora Ransome."

Cora's cheeks went hot with anger, but she turned away without answering him, and heard his sneering little laugh behind her.

As the days went by, her mind seized upon the fanciful idea that he was a parasite upon her house. As he waxed younger and gayer and healthier-looking, the others became quieter, older, drained of energy. Conrad had, for each of the inhabitants of Mon Repos, his little subtle dig, his small, deadly shaft of wit tipped with venom. And from them, she soon realized, he was getting something more concrete than words.

On the day that George Masters asked her, apologetically, if she would mind if he delayed paying his rent until the end of the month, Cora knew that something must be done.

"George," she said quietly. "Has Conrad been asking you for money?"

George answered evasively, "He borrowed fifty, for old times' sake."

Cora said nothing more, and went grimly about her work. The following afternoon, she saw Conrad Dillingham leaving Helen Johnson's room. He was slipping something into his pocket, and there was that little smug, self-satisfied smile upon his face. Cora felt suddenly that she'd always hated that smile.

She went back to the big, quiet kitchen and started dinner preparations, but inside she felt such a burning anger as she had not experienced since her youth. Conrad was milking her people dry. Peeling potatoes viciously, she suddenly

threw down her knife and marched off in search of him.

She found him in his room, and when he saw her expression, a look of genuine amusement crossed his face.

"Cora, Cora," he admonished, "It doesn't become you to lose your temper. You're the gentle type."

"Even the gentle type has a breaking point," she said grimly. "Now I want the truth, Conrad. Have you been blackmailing my tenants?"

"Now however could I do that?" he asked. "Surely these dear people have nothing to hide."

Cora clasped her hands together, so that their trembling wouldn't show. "Everyone in the world has something to hide, and with these people, perhaps there's a bit more. Those were wild old days we all shared. But they're respectable, aging people now, with families who could be hurt by your snide tales. But I tell you, none of these people is well enough off to support you, Conrad Dillingham."

He smiled. "That's all very interesting. Now tell me, do *you* have anything to hide, Cora?"

"Never mind me. 'I'm not afraid of you, Conrad. Just leave my friends alone, if you want to remain in my house.'"

She turned to leave, but not quickly enough to miss his parting shot. "Oh, I think you'll keep me, Cora dear. I don't think you really could turn me out, if it came to a showdown, do *you*?"

That evening, after the inept little maid had cleared away the dishes and stacked them in the dishwasher, Cora tidied the big, dark dining room and set the bowl of flowers back on the polished mahogany dining table. Then she went to stand in the living-room archway, her delicate little hands clasped in front of her.

"Anyone for films tonight?"

The old faces turned toward her like flowers to the sun, their false teeth flashed brilliant smiles, and the little murmur went round the room: "Yes, indeed, Cora. That would be wonderful!"

They all trooped into the projection room, and Walter set to work. Cora sat with her little feet—she had been famous for those tiny feet—close together.

Looking down, she said casually, "Do you remember 'Murder Has Many Faces'? You were in it, Walter, and Minnie, and so was I. It was about an unusual form of murder, if you'll remember. I wonder if you could find that one in the files, Walter?"

Everyone was strangely quiet tonight. They watched the movie, and Cora thought, with satisfaction, each of them seemed to tuck away its message into some remote corner of the brain.

The final reel was barely over when Conrad came striding in, his impressive face ruddy-cheeked and glowing from the fresh air, his eyes twinkling with malice.

"Well, well," he said, looking around the room, "hiding away from life as usual, I see. Why don't you people get out and do a little living, like me?"

"Because living costs money," Lillian Boone said tartly.

Conrad smiled. "You were all rich, once. If you had guarded your investments, as I did, you'd all be living on Easy Street."

He is insufferable, Cora thought. He hasn't paid a penny of board, either. I'll throw him out.

Yet she knew she wouldn't. She felt strongly that, if she were to make such a move, he would manage to disrupt her little way of life. His tiny veiled threats had become much more frequent since she'd faced him with his blackmailing.

On Friday, Conrad kept to his room, and when he came down to breakfast on Saturday, his face was an odd grey color.

"No, no," he said angrily to the maid, when she served his eggs. "Just bring me some tea and toast."

No one asked after his health, and he stayed in his room the rest of the day. In the evening, to Cora's surprise, he went into the projection room with the others, to watch the Saturday night movies. He rejected popcorn scornfully, but sat erectly in his seat, watching his dashing, much younger self, as he swept across the small screen. She had an odd little feeling that he was afraid to be alone tonight, that he wanted to be near human beings.

The music on the tape recorder tinkled on, and the former actors and actresses sat enthralled, each of them lost, quite obviously, in dreams of past glory.

Cora, sitting two seats away from Conrad, heard a small gasp. She looked over and saw his well-manicured hand clutching at his breast pocket, his eyes pleading with her.

Lillian Boone, in the row ahead, turned around to look at Conrad. She half rose from her seat, then her eyes met Cora's, and she turned away again, back to the film.

Cora leaned over to Casper Cuthbert, who sat near the tape recorder. "Turn up the music," she ordered. "This is the exciting part."

Which of them turned to look at Conrad, gasping for breath, clutching at air? Cora would never know, she didn't want to know. Sitting erectly, tidily, as she always sat, she watched the screen.

When the film had ended, and the music was switched off, Cora heard a little scream from Sally Jones Carstairs.

"Conrad is ill! Look at him!"

There was general alarm then, and confusion, and Cora trotted off to the telephone to call an ambulance. It was, however, much too late. Conrad Dillingham had died from a heart attack.

The police lieutenant who came, as a matter of routine, to check on sudden death, was very kind, very considerate of the elderly inmates of Mon Repos.

"Did any of you know that Mr. Dillingham had a heart condition?" he asked.

"He did have a mild attack the day he moved in here," said Cora. "But I didn't think it was as serious as it must have been. He went out a great deal and seemed in good health, although I suppose he must have been ill. Conrad was always a bit foolhardy."

The old people sat and rocked gently.

Lt. Denton wrote busily. "Well," he said philosophically, "he had a full life, anyway, and a pretty long one."

He snapped his notebook shut. "Funny, he was married and divorced a couple of times, years ago, yet he didn't leave any survivors. Too bad. They say one of the big studios is about to pay a fortune for the rights to his life story. It'll go to the state or some distant cousin, I suppose."

After he had left, Cora went upstairs and unlocked the big cedar chest in which she kept the most cherished mementoes of her days of glory. She took out the document at which she had not looked in many years—her marriage license.

At first she had kept it a secret because it had been an unpopular thing for a feminine star to marry; later because she had hated her husband, and had been ashamed of the brief marriage. She had wanted only to forget it.

It's really too bad, she thought re-

gretfully, that I can't admit I was still Conrad's legal wife, and claim the money from his life story. Mon Repos wouldn't need board money to keep going then. If my dear friends couldn't pay, it wouldn't matter. But then, I suppose I should be thankful Conrad didn't admit that I was his third wife, and try to get half of Mon Repos from me. He threatened it, but he didn't have a chance to do it.

She ripped the marriage license

into tiny pieces and burned them in the empty fireplace. Then she went into the bathroom and washed her hands carefully with soap and water.

It really wouldn't do, she knew, to give the police a reason to suspect that Conrad's demise had been a matter of—well, certainly not commission. Call it omission, she thought placidly, remembering that old silent film, "Murder Has Many Faces".





STIFF

COMPE

*A
Novelette*

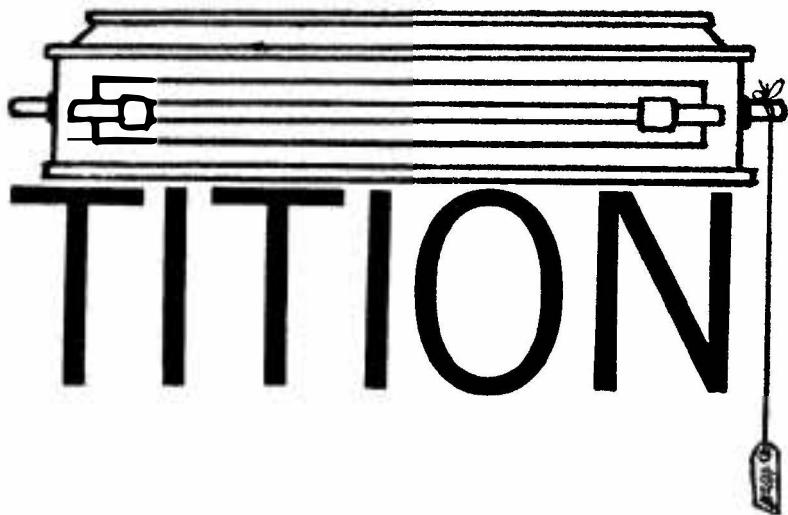
BY FRANK SISK

It's common knowledge among entrepreneurs that one hand washes the other. Some enterprising business men even join hands, merge, to better serve their customers.

A MAN wearing an old tweed cap and a sleeveless cardigan slowly ascended the six stone steps that led from the basement apartment of the brownstone house. Under the streetlight he stopped a moment to examine what he held in his hands. He shook his head and blinked his eyes as if trying to dispel the effects

of alcohol. His right hand held a crumpled five-dollar bill; his left, a car key. He stuffed the bill into the pocket of his denim pants and, mumbling to himself, walked none too steadily toward a green Volkswagen parked at the curb.

Harral Street was muffled in that twilight quietness which often fol-



lows a hot day in the city. Through open windows floated the faint jangle of radio music intermixing with dramatic inflections of television dialogue. From the nearest corner, where Harral joined Columbus Avenue, came the hum of traffic and occasionally the strident sound of a horn.

The man in the cardigan opened the door on the curb side of the Volkswagen without using the key and then slid clumsily over to the driver's seat. It took him nearly a minute to find the ignition lock and insert the key. It took him another minute to find the light switch. All the while he muttered to himself.

When he finally got the headlights on and the motor going he noticed randomly, with his foot lifting to the clutch, that the car door toward the curb was still open. A weary hiss of disgust escaped his lips and he started to lean across the seat. His outreaching hand was still two feet from the handle when a report like the crack of a bullwhip snapped at the quiet night.

At the same instant a spasm seemed to seize the reaching man's body, twisting it backward and sidewise. A gasp popped softly from between his lips and his right hand at last encountered the handle of the open door, clutching it convulsively. For several seconds he remained in this half-reclining position, his bloodshot eyes wide open in dumb contemplation.

A buxom woman appeared hesitantly part way up the basement steps of the brownstone.

The man in the Volkswagen didn't see her but now he was trying to speak or shout. All he managed was a dry whisper.

"... a backfire or somepin," the buxom woman was saying to somebody invisible behind and below her. "Hey, but that's kind of funny. The wagon's still here and ..."

The man in the car, using the door as a crutch, was getting out. It required a great effort to pull himself erect. The tweed cap sat askew on his bony head and beads of sweat were forming on his pale

brow. The left side of the gray cardigan, near the waist, was stained a mottled brown.

The woman on the basement steps saw him. She grasped the front of the wraparound dress she was wearing and started up, saying to somebody still invisible, "Why, the bum hasn't even left yet. In his condition he couldn't drive a baby carriage."

The man, appearing to concentrate on nothing but himself, released the car door and staggered three steps forward before going down on both knees. Then, his breathing a low whistle, he began to creep laboriously along the sidewalk, eyes closed.

"Jeez!" said the woman, a bit surprised.

Captain Thomas McFate had dined alone and poorly that night in a restaurant which had recently changed management for the worse. The breaded veal cutlet was lodged so solidly at midriff that he decided to shake it down with a brisk walk. When he arrived at a pharmacy at the corner of Columbus Avenue and Harral Street, however, he considered the advisability of seeking direct aid in the form of these explosive stomachics regularly advertised on television.

Just as he was about to enter the pharmacy, a familiar siren arrested his attention. A police cruiser took the corner leaning to one side and burning up rubber.

McFate stepped to the corner of the building as another different-sounding siren wailed down Columbus Avenue. He spotted the revolving domelight first amidst the slow divergence of traffic, then the white ambulance nosed free and took the turn at Harral Street with cushioned grace.

McFate's eyes followed it down the block. The locus of trouble was obviously under a streetlight where a small foreign car was parked. A dozen people moved there in silhouette. McFate, forgetting the veal cutlet, started in that direction.

Lieutenant Bergeron was first to notice him. "You sure got the message fast, Skipper."

McFate said, "I didn't get any message. Just out for a walk. What happened?"

"Some wino's been shot."

"Dead?"

"No, not yet."

"Who shot him?"

"Well, sir, we just got here. We haven't begun to question anybody."

"Let's start," said McFate. "With the ambulance doctor."

When McFate addressed him the young police surgeon looked up from where he was squatting beside a man prone on the pavement and said, "Hello, Captain. The bullet seems to have just missed the descending colon."

"Meaning what?"

"He'll live."

"Who is he, Doc?"

"I haven't **had** time to check out his wallet, Captain," the young surgeon said derisively. "If he has one."

"His name's Tippy Welinski," said a buxom woman wearing a gingham dress of the wraparound style. "I thought he was drunk, so help me."

"He's not sober," said the surgeon. "Let's **get** him on a stretcher, boys."

McFate turned his attention to the woman. "And just who are you, ma'am?"

"Alma Barth. The landlady here. I own this house." She swept an arm in the direction of the brownstone behind her.

"You've had a few drinks yourself, haven't you, Alma?"

"Mrs. Barth to you, flatfoot," the woman replied, indignant.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Barth. Let's begin again. I'm Captain McFate of the Homicide Division."

"My taxes **pay** your wages," said Mrs. Barth.

"I'm trying to **earn** my wages, ma'am. By asking a couple of questions. You and Tippy Welinski had been drinking together, is that it?"

Mrs. Barth **fluffed** her red-tinted hair with red-nailed fingers. "I was drinking with **Martin** Mulcahy if that's what you **wanna** know. The newspaper man. **Martin** Mulcahy, you've no doubt heard of him. Works for the *Evening Express*."

"I've heard of him," said McFate patiently.

"Well, **Martin's** one of my ten-

ants," said Mrs. Barth. "Lives in the basement apartment. Known him for years and years and always a gentleman. But on a Saturday night like tonight we often take a little drink together. Tippy Welinski was there tonight, for some reason or other, but it's the first time I ever laid eyes on him. A bum is all. A towel boy at a Turkish bath, Martin called him. Hell, Captain, I was drinking with Martin Mulcahy of the *Evening Express*, not with Welinski. That's his little car there." She pointed to the Volkswagen. "Ain't it the cutest?"

"Whose car?"

"Martin's."

"And where's Martin at the moment, ma'am?"

"Yeah, how about that? Where's Martin at the moment? Now that y'ask, I don't know. When he came out and saw Tippy flat on his face on the sidewalk, he took off like a bat outa hell."

"You mean he ran away?"

"Well, walked would be more like it. Martin ain't a kid no more. And he was a little loaded himself."

"Which way did he go?"

"Toward Blandish Avenue. No liquor stores up there either."

"No liquor stores?"

"Well, that's what our next move was supposed to be," said Mrs. Barth as if the logic were self-evident. "To get another bottle of rye. That's what Tippy was supposed to be doing when he got shot. Martin gave him the dough and the car keys."

McFate's hard face remained expressionless as ever but a note of interest crept into his voice. "Was Welinski in that car when he was shot?"

"I guess so. I saw him getting out of it just before he fell down. So help me, I thought he was drunk."

"You say you were in Mulcahy's apartment?"

"No harm in that, is there?"

"Stow your moral dignity for a minute, Mrs. Barth, and tell me why you left the apartment and came out to the street."

"I heard what I thought was a backfire. The windows were open and the door. And I wanted a breath of fresh air anyway. The men were smoking a lot."

"And you came out for the air and saw Welinski getting out of the car?"

"That's right."

"You're sure he wasn't trying to get in?"

"Of course I'm sure. When I first come up the steps I thought the car was empty. The door was open but I couldn't see anyone inside. Then Welinski must've sat up or somepin because all of a sudden he's coming out and falling down."

McFate called to Bergeron who was standing near the Volkswagen.

"Aye, Skipper?"

"Check that buggy for evidence of where a bullet might have entered. Windshield, windows. Was the right door open when you arrived?"

"It was. But he was shot in the left side, Skipper." Bergeron began to circle the car with a flashlight in hand. "All glass intact. Both windows are rolled down about three quarters. No holes in the body that I can see." He opened the left door and shone the light inside. A few seconds later he gave a whistle of surprise.

McFate came over.

"Take a look at that, Skipper. Ingenious rig if I ever hope to see one."

McFate, sighting along the flashlight beam, saw a .32-caliber revolver taped neatly to the underside of the steering column. Its muzzle was so pointed that it would cover the driver's lower rib cage exactly where it counted. Fastened to the trigger was a black cord, probably nylon, which ran like a rein through three guides made of paper clips and fastened by tape at equal intervals along the steering column. The end of the cord, neatly tied to the black clutch pedal, was practically invisible, even in the beam of the flashlight.

"Be damned," said McFate to himself.

"A quick way to kill yourself," said Bergeron. "Just step on the clutch and bang."

"Yeah," said McFate. "Welinski was lucky to be somewhat off range when the gun went off. Otherwise he'd have got it good. Must have been reaching for something to the right."

"The open door," said Bergeron. "Trying to close it."

"That's it," said McFate. "We better get the fingerprint men down here immediately." He left Bergeron and sauntered back to Mrs. Barth with a question. "Got any idea how long ago Mulcahy parked his car there, ma'am?"

"You ain't gonna give him a ticket, are you?"

"I don't think so," said McFate grimly.

"Well, okay then. Since about two o'clock this morning."

"You mean it's been parked at this spot for approximately nineteen hours?"

"I'd swear to it."

McFate almost smiled. "He must know the cop on the beat."

"He does and don't doubt it," said Mrs. Barth proudly.

Sunday morning arrived hot and humid. McFate, after a few hours of dyspeptic sleep, was making breakfast at his desk of bromo seltzer chased by black coffee.

Tippy Welinski was still alive, according to the hospital report, although he had lost a lot of blood and booze. Martin Mulcahy was still missing from his usual haunts. The fingerprint boys found nothing in the car except a few smears on the steering wheel, the dash board and the exterior and interior right door handles, all of which probably could be attributed to Welinski. But—

And it was a fine big "but" at that: the revolver had been loaded with two bullets—the one which was fired and a second in the chamber next to it as insurance against a dud. And a partial thumb and forefinger print had been found on this second one.

McFate looked questioningly at Lieutenant Bergeron, who was detailing all this information.

"We're doublechecking with the F. B. I., Skipper, but our boys are sure the prints belong to a guy named Arthur Iacobucci."

McFate's eyebrows arched just perceptibly.

"He's before my time," Bergeron continued, "but maybe you remember him?"

"I remember him," said McFate. "He's been missing and presumed dead for the last eight years."

"That's what our I. D. boys said. A stoolie, wasn't he?"

"In a way."

"Testified in a murder trial against his own brother, they tell me."

"That's about it," said McFate. "Did they tell you who the brother killed?"

"No."

"Well, Fred Iacobucci killed Arthur's wife. What the papers call a love triangle, with Fred getting the short side and not liking it. Anyway, he happened to strangle the girl in front of her husband and it kind of took the brotherly love out of the picture."

"Lousy."

"It got lousier. Fred was pretty high up in the Combination and word went out to rub Arthur. One day about eight years ago he walked into the Oriental Bathing Parlors and hasn't been seen since. Until now I figured he was dead and down under."

"What happened to his brother Fred?"

"The hot seat."

"Oh, and another thing before I forget it. Martin Mulcahy phoned in yesterday afternoon."

"Who forgot it up to now?"

"Well, the duty sergeant didn't take the call seriously until he read his Sunday paper an hour ago. Then he remembered that Mulcahy called the desk about three yesterday and wanted to talk with you about a personal matter. You were at a meeting with the Super at the time and besides Mulcahy sounded drunk. So the desk sergeant—Jack Gillis if you want to know his name—said he'd have you call back. But Mulcahy wouldn't leave a number. Said he'd be in touch with you later."

"A towel boy at a Turkish bath," said McFate musingly.

"What's that again, Skipper?"

"That's the way Mulcahy described Tippy Welinski. According to Alma Barth. A towel boy at a Turkish bath. Just to satisfy my curiosity, Bergeron, find out whether Welinski is employed by the Oriental Bathing Parlors."

"You think he might be this missing—?"

"Hell no. I've known Welinski from a distance for a dozen years. He's a third-rate boxer you could flatten with a feather. But it would be interesting if he happened to work at the Oriental. No more than interesting maybe."

"I see what you mean."

"Also get me a mug shot with full description of the not so late Arthur Iacobucci."

"Will do, Skipper," said Bergeron, leaving the cluttered office.

Wondering whether he really disapproved of the terminological hangover from Bergeron's days in the Marine Corps, McFate lifted a flap-eared telephone directory from the file drawer in his desk and looked up Alma Barth's number. When he found it he used his private phone.

The landlady, sounding much sobered, answered immediately.

"The Barth residence, Mrs. Alma Sturges Barth speaking."

"You must have been waiting for my call," said McFate.

The gracious voice grew grim. "And just who might you be, weissenheimer?"

"Right back in character, quick as a wink. Well, Mrs. Barth, this is Captain McFate again. You may recall having a chat with me last night."

The landlady made an effort to return to graciousness. "I sure do, Captain. I guess I was kind of rude.

If so, don't blame me. Blame the situation."

"I'll do that. Have you heard from Mulcahy yet?"

"Not a peep, sir. I been sitting here expecting a call any minute."

"What makes you expect a call?"

"Well, it ain't—isn't—like Martin to run off without a word. As soon as the booze wears off he always comes back or at least gives me a buzz."

"Where does he generally go to wear the booze off?"

"He likes a good snooze in a Turkish bath."

"Did he ever favor the Oriental Bathing Parlors?"

"Not that I know of. He was always promising to take me along on Ladies Day, but we ain't made it yet."

Making a note to have every Turkish (and Finnish) bath in the city checked out, McFate said, "Well, as soon as you hear from him, ma'am, call here. His life is in danger, and I'm not just talking."

On the way to the Municipal Emergency Hospital, McFate had an idea. The Sunday emptiness of the streets gave it to him. He pulled the unmarked cruiser to an outdoor phone booth near a closed gas station and dialed the number of A. B. C. Damroth, executive director of the Tillary Foundation, honorary doctor of science and septuagenarian widower, who answered the ring himself.

"Has your cook anything special planned for lunch, Doc?" asked McFate.

"Why, good morning, Captain," said Damroth with delight. "So nice to hear from you. I regret to say that Mrs. Simco is off on a holiday."

"You plan to eat out then?"

"Well, what I actually planned to do was to ring your apartment and suggest that we join forces at my Club. They feature an excellent crabmeat mornay on Sunday. But after reading the newspaper, I must assume you are busy on the self-actuated shooting which took place last night in the West End."

"You get up early, don't you?"

"Habit, Captain."

"Since you're up then maybe you'll do me a favor."

Damroth said with his innate courtesy, "You need but ask, my dear friend."

"Well, Doc, a little later I want to have free access to the desk of Martin Mulcahy in the city room of the *Evening Express*. He's the paper's obituary editor."

"Who nearly made his own page last night, I gather. Yes, that can be arranged. I'll call the editor immediately."

"Would you like to come along, Doc?" The question was a teaser.

"I insist upon it, Captain."

"Then I'll pick you up."

They had Tippy Welinski in Ward D with the terminal cases.

Sitting in an undertaker's chair in the corridor, McFate studied the police photograph of Arthur Iacobucci and the terse descriptive paragraph under it. The hair was black and bushy; eyebrows the same; eyes large and limpid brown; nose large and Roman; mouth small and rather pouty; chin somewhat receding with a faint cleft; ears—

It was the thing about the left ear which fascinated McFate now as it had fascinated him eight years ago. Behind the lobe, tattooed in tiny blue letters, was the word *Due*—meaning Two in Italian.

Fred Iacobucci's left ear lobe had borne the word *Uno*. Papa Iacobucci, long dead in another country, had numbered his sons as well as named them.

The floor nurse materialized in front of McFate. "Doctor Wallace says you may see Welinski for ten minutes."

Getting to his feet and rolling the police flyer into a tube, McFate asked, "Is Tippy considered terminal?"

"He'll live," the nurse said. "Bed five."

McFate found the bed fast enough but hardly recognized the occupant. The sunken face wan against the bony structure of the head was not made easier to identify by the white plastic hose running from the nose. It also occurred to McFate that the last time he had seen Welinski lying down was in a prize ring.

"I know you can't talk with that tube down your throat, Tippy," McFate said, remaining at the foot of the bed. "But the doctors say you can see and think. Now I want to ask you a few questions and all you have to do is to move your head to the side if the answer is no and forward if the answer is yes. To start with, you know who I am, don't you, Tippy?"

The time-worn head on the pillow moved slightly in acknowledgment.

"You work at the Oriental Bathing Parlors, don't you?"

Again the acquiescing movement.

"You've worked there, off and on, for five years. Right?"

Affirmative.

McFate unrolled the police flyer and walked to the side of the bed. With his thumb over Iacobucci's name, which he was sure Welinski would never associate with the pronunciation, he asked, "Ever see this guy around?"

The diluted blue eyes said nothing. After several seconds the head turned negatively.

"This shot was taken more than eight years ago, Tippy. The guy may be gray now or bald."

Welinski continued to look dull.

"Never saw him around the Oriental?"

Negative.

"Ever hear the name Yakaboochee?" He bore down on the phonetics.

The blue eyes in the tired sockets glimmered faintly.

"Arthur Yakaboochee. Five foot six, a little on the stocky side. Ever hear of him or see him, Tippy?"

The eyes seemed on the verge of saying something.

McFate leaned in. "You have heard the name?"

Yes.

"Recently?"

Yes.

"Yesterday?"

Yes.

"From Martin Mulcahy?"

Yes.

McFate tapped the flyer with his forefinger. "This is a picture of Arthur Yakaboochee. You sure you don't recognize him?"

Welinski took another look and then shook out a slow No.

As McFate drove along the deserted streets the police radio talked to him. The survey of Turkish and Finnish baths was completed. It had not uncovered Martin Mulcahy, although it had confirmed the fact that he was a frequent patron of such establishments.

"Particularly the Oriental," added Bergeron. "Oh, and the investigating officer reported a kind of funny occurrence there."

"Funny like how?"

"Well, let's see if I can make out this handwriting, Skipper. Oh yeah. The manager there was telling the officer that Mulcahy had been in the night before last when

another guy came up and contradicted him. Said the manager had Mulcahy mixed up with somebody else. That Mulcahy hadn't been around in weeks. And right away the manager changed his story."

"That *is* funny," said McFate. "Does the investigating officer give any names?"

"Sure. The manager's name is Whipple and the other guy's name is Jackson, described as assistant manager."

"Some assistant."

"Aye, sir. Well, where do we go next?"

"Cover all the public parks and gardens. It's nice weather. Men like Mulcahy often sleep it off outdoors."

Damroth's protracted figure, draped in a white linen suit and made to appear even longer by a high-crowned Panama hat, lolled against a bamboo cane on the wide sidewalk outside the Camelot Arms.

"Impatient?" asked McFate.

"Not at all," said Damroth, folding his frame into the front seat. "Enjoying the air. A pleasure one appreciates as one grows older."

"How would some hot humid air suit you?"

"Not a bit. But where do we go for it, Captain?"

"To a Turkish bath."

"Intriguing though unseasonable. I thought you were determined to ransack the *Evening Express*."

"It's on the agenda," said McFate. "But first let me fill you in."

Damroth lit a cigarillo and listened. When the summary was finished he said, "You seem to think that Mulcahy has discovered something that jeopardizes his life. Is that it?"

"To put it mildly."

"But the only thing he appears to have discovered, as far as you know, is that a man named Arthur Iacobucci is alive?"

"Right."

"And yet it isn't a crime for Iacobucci to be alive? I mean he's not wanted by the police for anything, is he?"

"No. Not until today."

"So presumably Mulcahy would have nothing to gain or Iacobucci nothing to lose if the police were to learn about what may be called a resurrection?"

"Go on, Doc, you're doing fine."

"Hence, on that basis at least, Iacobucci would have no reason to kill Mulcahy."

McFate nodded.

Damroth tapped ash out the window. "But it was not only the police who presumed Arthur Iacobucci to be dead, was it? It was a view also held by what you choose to call the Combination. In fact, the Combination arranged his death as a matter of business. Now if it were brought to *their* attention that the business transaction had somehow miscarried, Iacobucci would again be marked for death. Am I right?"

"Probably?"

"Is Mulcahy the sort of man who would hold this over Iacobucci's head for money?"

"Blackmail? No, I don't think so. Martin Mulcahy's a rumpot now, but I'd guess he still has the moral concepts of a good reporter. Ten years ago he was the best all-around legman the *Evening Express* had. Then his wife was killed in an automobile accident and he took to the bottle. Downhill ever since. But the paper never fired him. Just tucked him away in the obituary section. I don't figure him for blackmail, Doc."

Damroth pondered over the cigarillo. "If your assessment of Mulcahy is reliable, Captain, it leaves us with a portentous conclusion. Don't you agree?"

"I won't know until I hear it, Doc?"

Damroth smiled. "Simply this: more than the fact that Iacobucci is alive. He must have discovered who kept him alive."

"That's it," said McFate, slapping the steering wheel.

"If what I read about criminal organizations is true, the only man who could have kept Iacobucci alive was the man assigned to kill him. Or am I being melodramatic, Captain?"

"Nope."

"This leads us then to another conclusion. Whoever kept Iacobucci alive must have had a very big reason. Whatever the reason, it

gave him the power of life and death over his supposed victim from then on. You see that, don't you?"

"Clear as glass."

"Therefore, when Mulcahy hypothetically dug up the corpse he was exposing not only Iacobucci to the Combination but also the man who had hoodwinked it for eight years. And that man obviously ordered Iacobucci to kill Mulcahy."

"Poor old Tippy Welinski," said McFate.

"He served a blind purpose, didn't he?"

"And he'll never know," said McFate.

The Oriental Bathing Parlors occupied the entire second floor of a four-story building of red brick. The first floor, split by a tiled lobby, contained a pool hall to the right and a hock shop to the left; and the third and fourth floors, according to the directory beside the self-service elevator, were inhabited by bill collectors, blueprinters, mimeographers, second mortgagors, and a chiropodist. The address was 177 Market Street.

"Quiet as a tomb," said Damroth, entering the elevator.

"I bet it bustles on weekdays," said McFate.

The open-cage elevator transported them with an agonizing moan to the second floor. They stepped out into a foyer with red linoleum on the floor and dusty pictures of prize fighters and race

horses on the plywood walls. A glass-topped counter stood near the only door, offering an assortment of cigars, cigarettes, chewing gum and playing cards. A long-jawed man, chewing rhythmically, sat behind the counter with the Sunday paper in his lap, but he didn't seem to be reading it.

He said, still chewing, "How's tricks?"

"You tell us," said McFate.

"Bath?"

"No. We're nice and clean. Are you the manager here?"

"That's mc. Massage maybe?"

"Whipple?"

"Right. Homer Whipple. Or sun lamp? Nice tan in no time."

"We're looking for a man named Jackson," said McFate.

"He's somewhere around. Can I give him a name?"

"The police."

"This is our day." Without breaking his chewing stride, Whipple flicked a switch on a battered intercom on a shelf behind him. "Calling Mistah Jackson on one-two." Nothing. "Mistah Jackson on one-two, please." Nothing. "One-two for Mistah Jackson."

"Maybe he stepped out," said McFate.

"I didn't see him."

"Is this the only exit?"

"Pretty much. Except the fire escape."

With a nod of invitation to Damroth, McFate went to the only door and opened it. It let on a locker

room. Two fat men, attired in florid shorts and gartered socks, were palavering over a pint of whisky. McFate passed them with a cursory look and headed for a pair of swinging doors which proved to be the entrance to a small gym, now unoccupied. To the left was a glazed glass door lettered in black: Massage & Sun Tables. Straight ahead was an open archway with a red arrow pointing downward from the keystone and flanked on either side with the words Steam & Shower.

Damroth remained in the center of the gym while McFate tried the Sun Room first. Then together they went through the archway.

It didn't take them long to find Jackson. He was squatting fully dressed in one of the shower stalls. The brown eyes gazed stonily from the flaccid gace. The plump hands were hugging something to the chest as if in a childish effort of concealment; they fell away at McFate's touch to disclose the brown haft of an ice pick.

"No wonder Welinski didn't recognize him from the mug shot," said McFate. "White hair, white eyebrows, double chin, fifty pounds heavier."

"This then is Iacobucci?" asked Damroth.

"I'd say so, but let's make sure." McFate turned the squatting corpse's head a trifle to get a look at the left ear lobe. "Pancake makeup," he said, holding his right hand out to

catch a slow drip from the shower. Then, with thumb and forefinger moist, he rubbed the lobe fastidiously. "Here it comes, Doc. A blue tattoo. D, U, E."

Fingers tapping the glass-topped counter, McFate fixed the gum-chewing Whipple with a bleak eye. "How long has Iacobucci worked here?"

"That his real name, Cap.?"

"Yeah. Now answer the question."

"He was here when I came, Cap."

"How long have you been here?"

"A year thereabouts."

"Who hired you?"

"Mistah Jackson or whoever."

"He called himself *assistant* manager, didn't he?"

"Yessir."

"And you're supposed to be the manager, aren't you?"

"That's so."

"Are you trying to tell me, Whipple, that the assistant manager hires the managers around this plague spot?"

"That's a fact, Cap."

"Are you silly enough to think that makes sense?"

"Titles don't mean nothing here, Cap. A slob wants a massage and he'll get it from me or Jackson if Tippy ain't around."

"And he ain't around today, is he, Whipple?"

"That's for sure, Cap."

"Who really owns this place anyway?"

"A corporation."

"I bet you don't even know the name of it."

"You'd win, Cap."

"What's the signature on your paycheck?"

"They pay by cash."

"Who hands you the cash then?"

"Mistah Jackson does. Or did."

Damroth, who had been wandering through the far reaches of the establishment, now appeared in the doorway from the gym. McFate greeted the smiling old man with a shoulder shrug.

"No progress, my friend?"

"Circular only. Whipple swears nobody but us has gone in or out that door since that last time he saw Iacobucci walk through it alive. And that was about twenty minutes before we arrived."

"If true, it narrows the suspects rather severely."

"Nobody on the premises except the two stout boys in their underpants and the Negro errand boy. And I'm convinced they're as clean as you can get in a place like this."

With a glint in his eyes Damroth said, "That leaves us nobody but Mister Whipple."

The gum got a sudden rest. "Now that ain't a bit likely, gents. Not one little bit."

"Why not?" said Damroth. "Maybe you wanted to be *assistant* manager."

"Nosirree, Cap. I'm content with my lot. A plain man."

"Just Plain Homer Whipple,"

said McFate wearily. "Well, if nobody has gone through this door since Iacobucci walked through it alive, who do you think shivved him in the shower? The stylish stouts remedying a Sunday hang-over?"

"No, they're regulars."

"The colored kid then? Asleep like the end of the world on a rub-down table."

"No, Cap. He's too lazy to tie up his own shoes."

"That leaves you, Whipple. Unless there's another way to get into this trap."

Whipple scratched his long jaw. "The fire escape maybe."

"Maybe. We'll take a look."

"I've already examined the fire escape, Captain," said Damroth cheerfully.

"I might have known."

"It's the spring-ladder type from this floor to the ground, requiring the human body as a counterweight to lower it. A most minute examination of the rust increment at the articulating joints convinces me it hasn't been raised or lowered in many months."

"You heard what the Doctor said," McFate said solemnly.

An hour later, after placing the Oriental Bathing Parlors investigation temporarily in the hands of Lieutenant Bergeron, McFate and Damroth went to the Sunday stillness of the usually booming *Evening Express*. They were welcomed

to the deserted city room by a young man with a crew cut and a tattersall vest incongruously divided at brow level by an eyeshade. His name, he said, was Tony Waterford, federal beat, now doing lobster trick; Mr. Simmons, the editor, had called to say the visitors should be granted all courtesies. This way, gentlemen, to the square cool desk of Martin Mulcahy, which is in the same state of munificent misarrangement as he left it.

McFate coughed slight thanks and extracted the telephone from an open desk drawer overflowing with crumpled copy paper, half-squeezed and topless tubes of glue, pencil stubs and the like.

"Dial nine for outside," said Tony Waterford, then left.

McFate called his office while Damroth, setting aside his cane and hat, sat down in Mulcahy's perilous swivel chair and began to stare speculatively at the reams of confusion that literally blotted out the desk blotter.

". . . no sign of him in any of the parks yet?" McFate was saying to the phone. "Well, keep looking everywhere. Alleys. Back lots. And another thing, I want you to send a cruiser to the home of Dinny Shannon. Yes, the old guy who does all the clerking for the City Clerk. He'll be taking a ride to City Hall. He doesn't know it yet, but I'll call him now."

In ten seconds McFate was talking to Shannon. "Dinny, I know

you're dying to get away from the old lady before she puts you to mowing the lawn. Now here's what I'd like you to do. . ."

When McFate finally hung up, Damroth said, "I see you believe in the seven-day week, Captain."

"That's the number of days it has, Doc. Now what have you found here?"

Damroth applied his pince-nez. "Nothing very tidy."

"Well, whatever makes Mulcahy a danger to somebody must be here. My men found nothing in his apartment except dirty socks."

Damroth opened a desk drawer. "I suppose we might start with this." He set three fat folders on the desk.

Just five minutes later he smacked his dry lips with satisfaction. "Did you know that Mulcahy was a collector of cremation certificates, Captain? Or, rather, photostats of such certificates?"

"News to me. News to him, too, I suppose. After all, he was an obituary editor. And what in hell is a cremation certificate, Doc?"

"Counterpart of a burial certificate. It authorizes a licensed undertaker to cremate a body."

"I'm listening."

"Mulcahy has fourteen such photostats in this folder. The first is dated eight years ago and the last just two weeks ago. Each photostat, as you can see, is attached to several newspaper clippings. The clippings in each case are dated

within a day or two *after* the issuance date of the corresponding certificate. Shall I take them in order, Captain?"

McFate sat on the edge of the desk. "Why, yes."

"The certificate dated eight years ago, October sixth, authorizes the Memorial Mortuary of one eleven Essex Avenue to cremate the remains of David Dunkle. The attached clippings, dated two days later, report that Arthur Iacobucci, key witness in the murder trial of his brother, has been reported missing from his usual haunts. The police are quoted as fearing the man has been kidnapped and probably killed, gangland style. Your predecessor, Captain, told the press that Iacobucci was last seen by a business associate entering the Oriental Bathing Parlors from which he failed to emerge an hour later to keep an important business engagement. The description of Iacobucci is detailed, even to the lobe tattoo on the left ear. Mulcahy has circled this with a red pencil."

"Be damned," murmured McFate.

"The remaining thirteen clippings and photostats convey information along the same lines. A certificate is issued, a man vanishes. Shall I read you the most recent?"

McFate nodded grimly. "I suppose it concerns Jackie Whistler, the so-called numbers king."

"Precisely how he is described in the headline of this clipping twelve

days ago. Number Up For Numbers King, Wife Tells Cops. The gist of the story is that Whistler left his home after dinner one night to go bowling with some friends. He never came back. A few days earlier a cremation certificate was issued for the disposal of the remains of Paul B. Taunton."

"Are you implying Whistler and Taunton are the same man?"

"Not at all, my friend. In each of these cases I am sure the certificate was issued on a bona fide corpse. Paul B. Taunton died. A doctor so certified. His wife or a relative perhaps requested that the body be cremated. Using the death certificate, Memorial Mortuary applied for—"

"Just a second, Doc. Is Memorial Mortuary the applicant in each of these cases?"

"Exactly. They have their own crematorium on the premises. Quite convenient."

"Let me see if I follow you, Doc. A body is scheduled for legal cremation by Memorial Mortuary. Shortly thereafter an unwanted man—from the point of view of persons unknown—disappears. We assume he has been murdered but we never find the body because—I don't believe it, Doc."

Damroth suddenly smiled. "A wonderful thought has just occurred to me, Captain."

"You have some beaux."

"If you were the Numbers King and went bowling with some

friends at night, where would you go afterward?"

"Home."

"No. You are sweaty and a little lame in the legs and shoulders. So are your friends. They suggest an hour in a Turkish bath. Would you go along with the suggestion?"

McFate's eyes brightened. "To the Oriental?"

"One seventy-seven Market Street," added Damroth.

McFate smote the desk with the palm of his hand. "Of course, of course, Doc. Market runs parallel to Essex Avenue, back to back. What was that address again?"

"One eleven. And that map on the wall over there seems to show the city in great detail."

They went to the map and rapidly traced Market Street to the point occupied by the Oriental Bathing Parlors and so indicated by the microscopic numeral "177". Directly opposite and a half inch away was the numeral "111" on Essex Avenue. The Oriental Bathing Parlors and the Memorial Mortuary practically rubbed spines.

"A pretty setup," said McFate softly.

"Ideal for the purpose," said Damroth. "You shed your clothes and all identification in the Oriental, enter a steam room where you are dispatched without interference, and then transported to the Mortuary probably via a catwalk that slides from one of its second-story windows to that fire escape."

"I guess we can stop looking for Jackie Whistler."

"If you do find him, Captain, you may have to sort him out."

"Meaning what?"

"It's my opinion that the Numbers King is now mingling in an urn with the ashes of Paul B. Taunton."

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"I do."

"Convince me, Doc."

"I'll try. Have you ever attended a cremation, my friend?"

"Not yet."

"Well, generally speaking, this is the procedure. Just before the casket is sealed, the family and the official witness leave the chapel or whatever the mourning room may be called and go to the crematorium. A few minutes later the closed casket follows and is popped into the oven. In certain specific instances I believe that casket contained two hodies instead of the one authorized by the cremation certificate."

"And this is what Mulcahy found out?"

"He seems to have been putting it together. Which proves your good opinion of him. When he was young and sober he must have been an excellent reporter."

McFate became aware that his name was being called by Tony Waterford. "There's a call for you, Captain. You can take it on Mulcahy's desk."

Dinny Shannon was on the line. "You got the dope?" McFate asked.

"To be sure," said Dinny. "The Oriental Bathing Parlors and the building it occupies are owned by a corporation named Marble Monuments. Here's the list of officers and stockholders."

McFate scribbled the names on a sheet of yellow paper, then he said, "Don't go away yet, Dinny. One more thing. I want the same stuff on Memorial Mortuary."

"Just a minute." Just a minute elapsed. "You're a fine boy for coincidences, Tom. Marble Monuments also owns Memorial Mortuary. And one of the stockholders is asterisked here in the records—let's see—yes, as the managing director of Memorial."

"What's his name, Dinny?"

"Ronald Padgett. I've seen his name in the funeral news."

"So have I," said McFate. "Thanks, Dinny. I'll go your bail someday." A moment later he hung up and turned to Damroth. "It's a Combination deal all right, Doc. This list of officers and stockholders contains the names of some of the shadiest characters in the state. Two of them have been arrested a dozen times but never convicted."

"I heard you mention the name Ronald Padgett and now I connect it somehow with death notices in the newspapers."

"It's the only name on the list not connected in my mind with crime."

Until now. He's the front man for the Big Scum in their undertaking business."

Tony Waterford called across to them, "Another call, Captain."

This time it was a desk sergeant at headquarters. "We've just found Martin Mulcahy for you, sir."

"Where the devil was he?"

"Here in the drunk tank under the name of Hiram Johnson. He just woke up and identified himself."

"How does he look?"

"Like the butt end of a hairy night, Captain."

"Sober though?"

"Painfully."

"Give him some of that tired coffee you keep around, with a slug of brandy. You'll find a bottle in my desk drawer. Then hold on to him. We'll be right along."

With Martin Mulcahy valiantly trying to control the shakes in the backseat, McFate drove the unmarked cruiser in the direction of Essex Avenue. Damroth, enjoying his second cigarillo of the day, was verbally exploring the obituary editor's somewhat muddled recollections.

"You say you got an inkling as to Jackson's true identity the night you passed out in a steam room?"

"That is correct, Doctor. Do you have another of those little things you're smoking?"

"Certainly. Here you are."

"Thanks. Yeah, I was crocked

when I went into the place. As usual. The steam got to me and I blanked out. Tippy Welinski found me or I might have died. That's two I owe the poor bastard. Anyway, he got Jackson or Iacobucci to help lug me out. When I came to, Iacobucci was holding ammonia under my nose and listening for a heart beat."

"And that's when you noticed the tattoo on his ear?"

"That is correct, Doctor. The makeup must have come off it in the steam room. D, U, E—it's the first thing I noticed when I opened my eyes."

"It rang a bell?"

"Dimly. Very dimly. I was in a daze."

"How long ago was this, Martin?"

"About two months. But that tattoo kept wriggling around in my thoughts, like a drunken memory, without giving me any clue. Sometimes I thought it was something I'd imagined. Until the night Jackie Whistler disappeared."

Damroth cast a triumphant look at McFate. "Don't tell me Whistler was in the Oriental that night?"

"I'm telling you just the same. I saw him and then I didn't see him. He came in with a couple of other guys just as I was about to leave. I was dressed and dry and thirsty. They went by me in the locker room wearing nothing but towels. I smoked a cigarette and took a drink from a bottle in my locker.

The last drink in the bottle. I was still thirsty. Then I remembered seeing Whistler going to the steam rooms. I'm a bum, Doctor."

"You mean, Martin, that you decided to borrow a few dollars from Whistler?"

"Mooch is the word. Well, I went through the gym to the steam rooms. There are four of them. I looked through the window in each one. They were all empty. Then I looked in the massage room, and nobody was there either, except Tippy and the colored kid. Well, hell, I thought I might have had an hallucination until I read the papers the next afternoon. Whistler was missing."

"That's where the chain reaction started?" asked Damroth delightedly.

"More like a slow-motion movie," said Mulcahy. "It took me a day at least before I remembered somebody else, long ago, was last seen at the Oriental. And it was another day before I remembered that the other missing man was Arthur Iacobucci. I pulled the morgue file and found out about the tattoo on the ear. Holy God, was I scared! I went out and got loaded."

"How," asked Damroth, "did you connect the Memorial Mortuary with the Oriental?"

"Half-soused logic, I guess. Next time I was up for a steaming, I concluded that Whistler and his friends couldn't have gone out the front door voluntarily in the nude.

Hence they must have gone out the back door involuntarily. I looked out that door. Nothing but a fire escape and another building within jumping distance. I took a look at the front of that building next morning. Again I got loaded."

"Understandable," said Damroth. "After that, though, you did some exceptional research. How far had you progressed before Iacobucci tried to kill you?"

"You said you'd seen my file. That's about it. Cremation seemed to be a pretty good way of disposing of evidence. I dug into the vital statistics records. There are only about twenty cremations a year in this city. I began to match the dates up with the dates of missing persons. I couldn't believe what I seemed to be discovering. The clincher could be Jackson. If Jackson were really Iacobucci—wow! I had a worldwide wire story to make a real reporter of me again."

"How did Iacobucci get on to you?"

"My own stupidity. Friday night I licked up too much sauce and went to the Oriental to sleep it off. In that state I believe I asked Jackson if he ever had heard of Arthur Iacobucci."

"What did he say?"

"I guess he said no. I don't remember. Next thing I know, I am being driven home in my Volkswagen at two in the morning by Tippy Welinski. Since then conditions have been vague."

"Here we are," said McFate, hugging the curb. "Memorial Mortuary. You're going to have your big story yet, Marty."

"I could use it, Tom. Want me to come along with you?"

"No, Marty. Sit in the car and take it easy."

"I'll bring my cane," chuckled Damroth, "in case of trouble."

The elaborately scrolled door was opened by a palefaced young man in a black suit and a gray tie. He tipped slightly in a bow. "Come in, please." He lisped.

McFate and Damroth entered a heavily carpeted hallway.

"May I be of thervice, thirs?"

"We'd like to see Mr. Padgett," said McFate.

"Whom shall I thay ith calling?"

"Captain Thomas McFate."

"Are you a military officer, thir?"

"I'm a cop, sonny. Now get cracking."

The young man pirouetted and pranced to a room at the far end of the hallway.

"This Padgett must be very brave or very stupid," said Damroth.

"Why, Doc?"

"Well, obviously he disobeyed the Combination's orders when he failed to kill Iacobucci eight years ago."

"Hell," said McFate, "he's just a greedy gambler like the rest of them. You'll see. He had a key spot to fill at the Oriental. He had to fill it with a man he could trust. What better man than a guy whose

life he'd spared. And look at the profit. Anyone else in such a critical job would have had to be paid plenty. With a bonus for each kill. Iacobucci would work for peanuts and like it. You'll see, Doc."

"I must disagree with you this once, my friend."

"Tell me why, Doc."

"The risks were too great to be justified by Padgett for a comparatively merger monetary advantage. From now on his life isn't worth a plugged nickel."

"He gambled and he lost, that's all."

Just then a sound like a muffled pistol shot came from the rear of the mortuary. A second later the palefaced lisper sprang into the hallway with a squeal and ran toward McFate and Damroth. But they were already moving forward. "He shot himself. Right in the head. Dreadful."

It was true. Padgett, lying on a purple carpet beside a highly polished black desk, heaved a final rattling breath as the two men entered the room. For nearly a minute they stood silently staring down at the ghastly hole at the left temple and even as they watched, some of the skin in that area appeared to crack and drift away with a streak of blood.

Adjusting his pince-nez, Damroth stooped over. "He's wearing pancake makeup, Captain."

"He's what?"

"Lend me a piece of facial tissue

from that box on his desk."

McFate complied.

Damroth quite daintily turned the dead head to one side and tweaked the ear lobe several times with the tissue. Then on one knee

he took a close look.

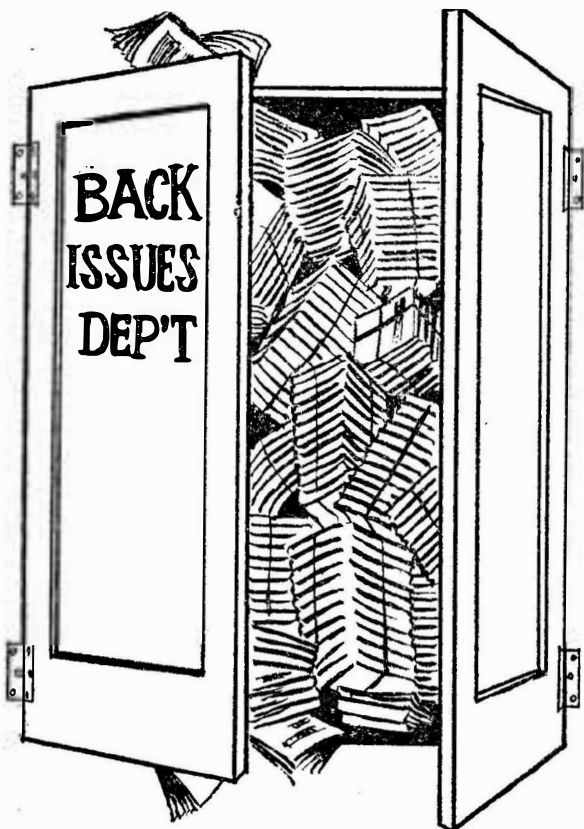
"Anything?" asked McFate, somewhat tense for him.

Damroth nodded and stood up. "Signor Iacobucci had at least three sons, Captain."



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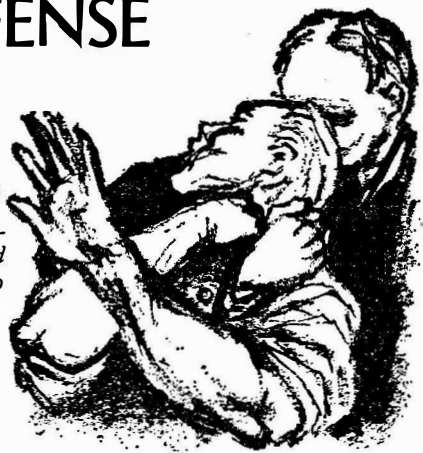
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IN SELF DEFENSE

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

It seemed a routine case of a man defending himself from attack. And there was the catch . . . it was too routine.

BY RICHARD DEMING



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I was surprised to see Sergeant Nels Parker in the Coroner's Court audience, for homicide detectives spend too much of their time there on official business to develop any morbid curiosity about cases not assigned to them. I was in the audience myself, of course, but as a police reporter this was my regular beat on Friday mornings, and after five years of similar Friday mornings, nothing but the continued necessity of making a living could have gotten me within miles of the place.

When I spotted him two rows ahead of me, I moved up and slid into the vacant seat next to him.

"Busman's holiday, Sergeant?" I asked.

His long face turned and he

cocked one dull eye at me. For so many years Nels had practiced looking dull in order to throw homicide witnesses off guard, the expression had become habitual.

"How are you, Sam?" he said.

"You haven't got a case today, have you?" I persisted.

His head gave a small shake and he turned his eyes front again. Since he seemed to have no desire to explain his presence, I let the matter drop. But as the only inquest scheduled was on the body of a Joseph Garcia, age twenty-one and of no known address, I at least knew what case interested him.

The first witness was a patrolman named Donald Lutz, a thick bodied and round faced young fellow who looked as though he, like

the dead man, was no more than twenty-one.

In response to the deputy coroner's request to describe the circumstances of Joseph Garcia's death as he knew them, the youthful patrolman said, "Well, it was Wednesday . . . night before last . . . about eleven thirty, and I was walking my beat along Broadway just south of Market. As I passed this alley mouth, I heard a scuffling sound in the alley and flashed my light down it. I saw these two guys struggling, one with a hammerlock on the other guy's head, and just as my light touched them, the guy with the hammerlock gave a hard twist, the other guy went sort of limp, and the first guy let him drop to the alley floor. I moved in with my night stick ready, but the guy stood still and made no move either to run or come at me. He just stood there with his hands at his sides and said, 'Officer, this man tried to rob me.'

"I told him to stand back, and knelt to look at the man lying down. Near as I could tell, he was dead, but in the dark with just a flashlight I couldn't be sure, and I didn't want to take a chance on him waking up and running away while I went to the nearest call box. So I stayed right there and used my stick on the concrete to bring the cop from the next beat. That was Patrolman George Mason.

"Mason went to call for a patrol car and a doctor while I stayed with

the two guys. That's about all I know about things except when the doctor got there, he said the guy lying down was dead."

The deputy coroner said, "And the dead man was later identified as Joseph Garcia?"

Patrolman Lutz nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And the man Garcia was struggling with. Will you identify him, please?"

The policeman pointed his finger at a short, plump man of about fifty seated in a chair apart from the audience and within a few feet of where the jury was lined up along the left wall. He was a quietly dressed man with a bland, faintly vacuous smile and an appearance of softness about him until you examined him closely. Then you suspected that a good deal of his plumpness was muscle rather than fat, and you noticed his shoulders were unnaturally wide.

"That's him there," the young patrolman said. "Robert Hummel."

Just in front of the platform containing the deputy coroner's bench was a long table, one end pointing toward the platform and the other end toward the audience. On the right side of this table, seated sideways to it with his back to the audience, sat the assistant circuit attorney in charge of the case. On its left side sat Marcus Prout, one of St. Louis's most prominent criminal lawyers.

Now the assistant C.A. said, "Pa-

trolman Lutz, I understand Robert Hummel had in his possession a .38 caliber pistol at the time of the incident you just described. Is that right?"

"Well, not exactly in his possession, sir. It was lying in the alley nearby, where he'd dropped it. It turned out he had a permit to carry it."

Marcus Prout put in. "Officer, was there any other weapon in sight?"

"Yes, sir. An open clasp knife lay in the alley. This was the later established as belonging to the deceased. Robert Hummel claimed Garcia drew it on him, he in turn drew his gun to defend himself, and ordered the deceased to drop the knife. However, the deceased continued to come at him. Hummel said he didn't want to shoot the man, so he used the gun to knock the knife from Garcia's hand, then dropped the gun and grappled with him."

The lawyer asked, "Was there any mark on the deceased's wrist to support that statement?"

"The post mortem report notes a bruise," the deputy coroner interrupted, and glanced at the jury.

Marcus Prout rose from his chair and strolled toward the patrolman. "Officer, did the deceased . . . this Joseph Garcia . . . have a police record?"

"Yes, sir. One arrest and a suspended sentence for mugging."

"Mugging is a slang term for robbery with force, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Generally without a weapon. You get a guy around the neck from behind and go through his pockets with your free hand. There's other methods classified as mugging, but that's the way Garcia did it the time he was convicted."

The lawyer said, "Did you draw any inference from the fact that Robert Hummel, with a gun against a knife, used the gun merely to disarm his opponent and then grappled with him with his bare hands?"

The policeman said, "I don't exactly know what you mean."

"I mean, did it not occur to you as obvious Robert Hummel's statement that he did not wish to shoot his opponent was true, and that he went out of his way to avoid seriously injuring Garcia, when under the circumstances he would have been fully justified in shooting the man through the heart? And that Garcia's subsequent death in spite of Mr. Hummel's precaution must have been an accident resulting from Robert Hummel exerting more strength than he intended in the excitement of the moment?"

This leading question would have been stricken from the records in a regular court, of course, for not only was it deliberately slanted at the jury rather than to the witness, it asked for an opinion on a matter of which the witness could not possibly have had actual knowledge. But in Coroner's Court the legal formalities of a court of law are al-

most entirely lacking inasmuch as no one is on trial for anything, the jury's sole duty being to determine how the deceased met death. I was therefore not surprised when neither the assistant circuit attorney nor the deputy coroner made any objection to the question.

Patrolman Lutz said he had not thought about the matter, which seemed to satisfy Marcus Prout, as he had asked the question only to implant it in the jury's mind anyway. The lawyer went back to his seat.

When the deputy coroner asked if there were any more questions, both Prout and the assistant C.A. shook their heads. The patrolman was dismissed and Norman Paisley was called as a witness.

Norman Paisley was a thin, dried up man of middle age who looked like a school janitor. To the deputy coroner's first question he gave his address as a rooming house on South Broadway two blocks south of Market.

"Were you a customer at Stoye's Tavern on Sixth near Olive this past Wednesday night?" the deputy coroner asked.

"Yes, sir. All evening from seven till they closed at one thirty."

"Did you know the deceased Joseph Garcia?"

"To talk to, yes, sir. I used to run into him at Stoye's Tavern off and on. I didn't know where he lived or what he did, or nothing like that, though."

"I see. Was the deceased a customer at Stoye's that night?"

"Yes, sir. He come in several times during the evening. I guess he was bar cruising all up and down Sixth Street."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, sir."

The deputy coroner said, "Do you recognize any other person now present as a customer at Stoye's the night beforelast?"

Norman Paisley pointed at Robert Hummel. "Him. He come in about a quarter of eleven and left at eleven fifteen. I noticed him particular because he bought the house a couple of drinks."

The assistant C.A. cut in. "Was Joseph Garcia present during this period?"

"Yes, sir. He even remarked about it. When Mr. Hummel bought a drink, Joe said to me. That damn fool must be made of money. He just bought the house a drink at a place I was in up the street."

Marcus Prout asked, "Did you get the impression Garcia was following Hummel?"

"No, sir. Joe come in first, as a matter of fact, and Mr. Hummel come in right after him."

The lawyer looked surprised. He started to ask another question, changed his mind and waved his hand dismissingly. The assistant C.A. stepped into the breach.

"Mr. Paisley, did you get the impression the deceased was interested in Robert Hummel?"

"Not right at first. But when Hummel bought the second drink, he happened to be standing close to Joe at the bar, and when he opened his wallet to pay, Joe looked kind of startled. I was standing the other side of Joe, but even from there I could see there was a lot of bills in it. After that Joe couldn't seem to keep his eyes of Hummel."

Marcus Prout spoke again. "When Hummel finally left the bar, did Garcia follow him?"

"Yes, sir. He went right out after him."

Marcus Prout smiled at this answer and the assistant C.A. grunted. When both indicated they had no further questions, the witness was dismissed.

Shuffling the papers in front of him, the deputy coroner located the post mortem report, cleared his throat and said, "The autopsy shows death by suffocation due to a crushed larynx."

Following this announcement, he rose from his bench, advanced to the edge of the platform, and asked in a loud voice, "Are any relatives of the deceased present?"

When there was no reply to this routine question, he turned to the jury and signified they were to go out.

While the six man jury was out, I tried to figure what Nels Parker's interest in the case could be. On the surface it was simply a case of a mugger being killed in self-defense by his intended victim, and the in-

quest was obviously a routine affair designed to clear the intended victim of any blame. The slant of the questions, not only of Robert Hummel's lawyer, but those of the assistant circuit attorney and the deputy coroner as well, indicated no one expected or wanted any verdict other than justifiable homicide.

I had no time to question Nels about it though, for the jury was out only thirty seconds. When it filed back in, the foreman read the verdict I expected: justifiable homicide.

Ordinarily, beyond noting down his name, age and address for my news item, I would have paid no further attention to the man who had just been cleared of homicide, for he was not a particularly impressive person. Nels Parker's unexplained interest in the case intrigued me though, and noting the sergeant continued to linger in the courtroom until Robert Hummel finished shaking hands with his lawyer and finally moved toward the door, I lingered beside him.

When Robert Hummel was erect, you were less conscious of his unusually broad shoulders and the muscle underlying his fat than you were when he was seated. He looked like a well fed businessman who had reached the age when he ought to start watching his blood pressure. He also looked like the last person in the world you would expect to resist a professional mugger so successfully and so violently.

As the man passed from the courtroom, Nels continued to watch his back through the open door until he reached the stairs at the end of the hall and started down. Then the sergeant gave his head a slight shake and moved toward the stairs himself.

Falling in beside him, I said, "Buy you a drink, Sergeant?"

His dull eyes flicked at me. "One beer maybe. I got to get back to Homicide."

The nearest tavern to the Corner's Court Building was a half block west. I waited until we were standing at the bar with a pair of draft beers in front of us before I asked any questions.

Then I said, "A story hidden here somewhere, Sergeant?"

He shook his head, tapped his glass once on the bar to indicate luck and sipped at his beer. "No story, Sam."

"Not even off the record?"

"Just a pipe dream I had, Sam. You couldn't print it without risking a libel suit."

"Then I won't print it. But I got curiosity. Whose case was this Garcia's? On Homicide, I mean."

"Corporal Brady," Nels said. "He wasn't there because the thing was so routine, all they needed was the beat cop's testimony. Probably I ought to have my head examined for wasting my time on a case I wasn't even assigned to."

When he lapsed into silence I asked, "What's the story?"

He drank half his beer before he answered. Then he said, "I was just interested because this guy Hummel killed a guy once before."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Almost the same circumstances too," the sergeant said. "A mugger down along Commercial Alley. Only that time the guy's larynx wasn't crushed. Hummel just choked him to death."

"Judus Priest!" I said. "Was there an inquest?"

Nels nodded. "Routine. Happened about twelve years ago. There's no doubt it was on the up and up. The mugger had a record as long as your arm and it was pretty well established Hummel never saw the guy before he was suddenly waylaid by him. Apparently the mugger had been loitering in a doorway for some time waiting for a likely victim to pass, for they turned up a witness placing him there a full hour before he tangled with Hummel. Picking Hummel was pure accident, and the mugger was just unlucky to jump a guy who looked soft, but turned out to have the strength of a gorilla." The sergeant paused, then added reflectively. "There wasn't any of this flashing a roll in dives then."

His tone as he made the last statement struck me as odd. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

But the sergeant ignored my question. "Hummel didn't carry a gun then either. Matter of fact, it was a result of the incident that he

applied for a permit. He didn't have trouble getting one, because he's an antique and rare coin buyer and carries large amounts of cash."

"You've been doing some detailed checking on the man," I remarked.

"Yeah. But it doesn't add up."

I eyed him narrowly for a moment, then signaled the bartender for two more beers. I said, "Now give me the pipe dream."

"Pipe dream?" he asked.

"You mentioned your interest in the case was a kind of pipe dream. You think there's some connection between the two cases?"

Nels took a sip of his fresh beer and shook his head. "I'm sure there isn't. Not between the two muggers anyway. Maybe a kind of psychological connection."

"What does that mean?"

"Well," the sergeant said slowly, "I figure the case twelve years ago was just what it seemed to be. A guy unexpectedly jumped Hummel, and Hummel killed him defending himself. So was the case today, I guess. With a slight difference. Maybe this time Hummel killed deliberately when he was jumped."

"You mean he deliberately lured Garcia into attacking him?"

"Think back over the testimony," Nels said. "Remember how surprised the great lawyer looked when the witness said Hummel had followed Joe in?"

"There was even something about Garcia remarking he had run into Hummel in another tav-

ern. But why? What would be Hummel's motive?"

Nels was silent for a moment. Finally he said, "I checked back over unsolved homicides for the past twelve years, and seven of them were guys with records as muggers. They were found dead in alleys, some strangled, some broken necks."

"My God!" I said.

"That makes nine he could have killed."

For a moment I couldn't speak. "But why, for God's sake?"

Without inflection Nels said, "Twelve years ago I imagine Robert Hummel was just a normal guy. Or at least I imagine any abnormal urges he had were merely latent. Then he killed in self-defense. My pipe dream is that maybe he discovered he enjoyed it. You've heard of psychopathic killers."

"But . . . but . . ." I stuttered.

"But what? A guy flashes a roll in dives. There any law to stop him? A mugger tails him for an easy roll. The guy kills the mugger, and if nobody sees it, he just walks away. If he gets caught in the act, he merely tells the truth and the law gives him a pat on the back for defending himself against attack by a criminal. It's a psychopath's dream. He's figured a way to kill legally."

"But . . ." I whispered. "But . . . he couldn't possibly again . . ."

"The law says you can use whatever force is necessary to resist at-

tack on your person or property. If you use more than necessary, theoretically you're guilty of manslaughter. In the case of a farmer shooting a kid stealing watermelons, we can prove unnecessary force, but how do you prove it in a case like today's? And even if we established beyond reasonable doubt that Hummel deliberately enticed a robbery attempt . . . which we couldn't do without a confession, no matter what we suspect . . . he still has a legal right to defend himself."

"You mean you intend to do

nothing about a homicidal maniac?"

"Sure," Nels said calmly. "Next time we'll put a white light in his face and hammer questions at him until Marcus Prout walks in with a writ of habeas corpus. But unless we get a confession that he used more force than necessary to protect himself, he's safe even if he kills a man every week."

He laughed without any humor whatever, "Beyond picking him up and questioning him every time he kills, there isn't one damned thing in the world to stop him."



the



man

THE narcotics squad? N Men? The law? What the hell do I care about that heat! I've got half the junkers in this town on my tail and you're worried about your phone being tapped. And the stuff I put out to them came from you—every powdered sugar cap of it, Gortoff. You know what it's like to have a wolf pack of junkers tailing you? A mob of half-sick, half-crazy hopheads screaming for one of three things: good stuff, their money back, or my blood? I'm calling from a coin box on Rincon Hill near the Bay Bridge, and," Tony Bello looked over his shoulder, through the booth's glass, "I've got to get the hell out of here—a car just pulled up. I'll call back."

It was too late. Karl Gortoff had already slammed his desk phone down on its cradle. "I'll feed him to the sharks out in the Bay," the kilo man with a corner on the San Francisco narcotics traffic screamed. "If that simple-minded pusher thinks he can put the heat on me, I'll have him pushing coal in hell."

"What's the pitch, Karl?" a

blonde asked from the other end of a room corner sectional chesterfield. She toyed with a silk-covered pillow with a naked toe. With the other nylon-clad foot she stretched out to caress Gortoff's naked back as he dialed another number on the phone at the chesterfield's end table.

"The pitch," he snarled over his shoulder at the half-dressed sexpot, "is that we're getting the hell out of here—fast. Bello put out a day's supply of caps yesterday that were overloaded with powdered sugar. For all I know they didn't have any H in them at all—probably quinine to make like a bitter taste. Anyway, according to Bello, every junker in town's after him. And the crazy bastard calls me. He blows his top on a tapped line. The N Men have more electronic snoopers in this pad than they have in the visiting room over on the Rock."

"Get me a cab," he spoke into the phone, "and have it wait in the basement."

"You leaving the convertible downstairs?" the blonde asked.

BY

DON LOWRY

Karl Gortoff was a sly and careful man in a brutal, dangerous business. But Padgett took the challenge . . . and the game was on.

"I'm leaving everything in this building right where it is, except you, baby. Get dressed and don't bother to pack. That crazy Bello is liable to show up here in a minute. And I don't want any tape recording of what he'll cry about. I can't dump him here or I'd do just that. All I got is trouble now. I don't want the DA writing me up on a murder indictment." Gortoff buttoned a white silk shirt and pulled up a tie. "Come on," he turned to the blonde who hopped on one foot as she cupped a spike-heeled shoe on to the other.

"My mink!" she cried and dashed back to a wardrobe closet.

"We're not leaving the gaw-damned continent. Come on!"

"OK, OK, OK, darling!" Marie Hein shrilled back in a high C, "I'm coming." She dragged a mink stole across the apartment's carpeted floor, trying to close a bulky purse while she ran. "When I kicked my way out of that kick line into your life I didn't bargain for this fire house routine."

"Sausalito," he ordered the cab driver. Gortoff pressed back in the taxi's seat as the car pulled up the ramp from his apartment's basement garage. He relaxed when he saw the fog.

"Helluva night for driving, boss. You in a hurry?"

"Take your time," Gortoff shrugged. "Who wants to hurry?" He pulled the blonde to him. "My baby doesn't like to hurry."

But Tony Bello hurried through another patch of the impenetrable San Francisco fog. He ran to his car from the phone booth and tore at the handle of its right hand door. He lurched inside and was swiftly and violently torn right through the front seat and out the left hand side. His forehead bounced off the steering wheel as claw-like hands grabbed at his lapels and propelled him to the pavement. One lone, yellow sodium-vapor light spotlighted the beating.

"Don't kill him—yet. We want some answers," a guttural voice reached Bello's one good ear. The other hung in shreds from a pistol-whipping slash of a .38 revolver.

"You pushed a lot of sugar this afternoon, Bello. We want H. A little cut, sure. We expect that. But when you fill a lot of caps with sugar and add a little quinine to make it taste like the real stuff, you're getting ready to fill a grave—a watery one. Who the hell you think you are, trying to get away with that kind of fraud? You're lucky we found you instead of those sick bastards down on Geary Street. They'd pull you to pieces and ask questions later. Before *we* pull you to pieces, come up with our dough or some good stuff. Now!"

"Wait!" Bello gasped.

"Wait, hell, you dirty, phoney pusher bastard. We can't wait. Come up with some money so we can send some one down to Tia Juana. Or come up with the stuff."

"Wait," Bello insisted. "Listen to me. You know me. I've been pushing stuff around this town too long to try and beat you people. If I'd wanted to beat you, I wouldn't hang around to let you catch up with me. Would I?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I didn't know those caps were phonies. My connection crossed *me*. I just phoned him now. Your money? Here, I'll give you what you want . . ."

"Let's take his roll and dump him down in the bay," a tall youth moved from behind the addict who was holding Bello's twisted arm.

"No. Wait," another interrupted. "Let's give the bastard a chance. We'll all be sick by the time anyone can get to Tia Juana and back with more stuff. We'll all need a fix before midnight—or be too damn sick to do anything about it." The junker turned to Bello. "Alright, pusher, like you say, your connection crossed you. Let's go see this smart sonuvabitch. Let's find out who's crossing who."

"You know gawdamn well I can't take you hopheads there. I'd be killed!"

"Take your pick, Bello. Your connection kills you. We kill you. You can get it right now if you want to stall." The words were emphasized with the mouth of the .38 in another pistol-whipping blow, across his mouth this time. "Throw him in the back seat. We've been around here too long now anyway. I'll be there in a minute."

While the three other addicts muscled Bello to their car, the revolver wielding heroin addict prowled Bellow's car. With a switch blade knife, he slashed the upholstery and ceiling as he searched for any possible hiding place. He tore up the seats and looked in coil springs. He ripped wires from under the dash; examined the engine; and crawled under the car seeking any hiding place where drugs might be hidden. He slashed wildly at the spare tire in the trunk and swore when he discovered no sign of narcotics of any description. "Not even a grain of powdered sugar," he shrugged when he returned to the other car. Let's get down the hill and see if we can't induce Mister Bello to talk about his connection. We can use one tonight, real bad."

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"You tell him, Bello," the revolver wielder ordered with a heel grinding into the captive's ribs. "Sit up here!" He jerked the half-conscious Bello from the car's rear seat floor. "In this fog you won't be seen by the junkers who want to knock you off or the law who want to lock you up. And start talking. Like Eddie says, where to? Where do **we** find this connection who puts out powdered sugar and quinine for the real stuff?"

"I can't tell you."

"You can't live and not tell us!"

A dozen slamming fists in his guts and a knee in his groin made Bello

more talkative. "In an apartment," he growled, "on Grant Avenue. But let me go up alone and see him. If I show up there with you junkers, we'll all get shot. This guy's a kilo man and the last thing he wants is any part of a deal with you."

"He'll get his deal with us, Bello, and it'll be his last deal. And, if he can't come up with some H, it'll be your last chance."

Bello peered through the fog. "That's it. Turn down into the basement ramp. We can get up to his apartment from there without being seen. But I'm telling you, this guy'll blow his top when he sees you."

The addict laughed. "Always did want to do some business with one of these behind-the-scenes vultures who bloodsuck a living from us. All he'll blow'll be some good stuff for us. Or else!" Bello stumbled from the car when it's lights faded off the basement wall, staggering from the addict's kick. "We'll follow, Bello. No tricks!"

"There's no one here," Bello quivered when the door failed to open to the fifth floor apartment.

"We'll just see." The driver of the car pulled a strip of reinforced celluloid from his pocket and eased the spring lock back more quickly than a key could have been inserted in it. "We'll just see."

The five addicts piled into Gortoff's apartment like a squad of vice cops crashing into a call girl headquarters. The one waving the .38

spun Bello in front of him and the groggy heroin pusher stumbled to a deep leather chair.

"There's no one around here," one of the intruders screamed from a bedroom. "I told you that Bello's as phoney as the caps he pushed on us. Let's give it to him right here. This trip was just another stall."

"Wait a minute," another shouted from the bath. "Here's a works. This place is a shooting pad. There could be some stuff around. Let's take it apart."

The "taking apart" process was thorough. Only Bello and the revolver-waving addict failed to join in the ripping, tearing, furniture smashing, plumbing-ripping, fixture-breaking search for heroin.

"This is your one and last chance, Bello," the armed addict whispered into the pusher's one good ear. "I'll give you a chance that these hop-heads won't. Make like you're trying to get away. I'll let you go and chase you. Lead me to your connection and let me do business with him. Just me. No one else. We can get out of here and away from them without being noticed. Now!"

"I can't . . ."

"You've no time to talk. Get going!"

Bello lurched for the apartment door and ran. The .38 cracked twice and two harmless slugs hit the ceiling. By the time the destruction-happy addicts noticed the pseudo flight, Bello and his pursuer were in the elevator.

"Say where, Bello," the addict shouted above the roar of the sedan's motor as it roared up the ramp into the Grant Avenue fog, "and don't be fool enough to play games with me. You heard this piece work back upstairs. Every slug left in it belongs to you. Which way?"

"All I can do it make a couple phone calls and try to find where he is. Pull down Bush Street and stop at that Chink pharmacy. I'll call from there."

"I'll be right with you."

Bello entered a coin booth, feeling in his pocket for change.

"I've got a dime, Bello, Don't close the door. I'll tune in."

He listened as Tony Bello dialed. And he scribbled down the number on the inside of a pack of book matches. There was no answer. Bello tried another number. The waiting addict scribbled it down. Again, Bello got his dime back from the pay phone.

"No luck," Bello shrugged.

"You mean your luck's running out, Tony."

"Let's go over to Kearny Street. I know one spot where he might be about this time."

"We'll go, Bello. I've got lots of time but you sure haven't much left. Your time's running out."

Bello and his persistent and patient armed escort made three stops—at a Kearny Street cigar store, at a Geary Street bar and finally at a small bar on Turk.

In the Turk Street bistro, Bello

talked to a bartender. His silent shadow, on the next bar stool, listened.

"See Karl around tonight?"

"Not yet."

"Know where you can get in touch with him?"

"Probably in his pad with Marie. You call there? And what the hell happened to your face, Tony? Run into a truck?"

"Accident. This damn fog; hit a street light standard over on Stockton. I called Karl at his pad. He wasn't there."

The bartender knew Bello was Karl Gortoff's man. And Bello knew the bartender and the bar belonged to Gortoff. He leaned over the bar, close to Bello's good ear. "He lays up over in Sausalito, Tony, when he's not around town. His schooner's anchored there. But don't tell him I tipped you off and your business better be damned important to bother him over there."

"It is. Thanks." Bello turned to his shadower. "Come on." Tony Bello led the way out of the bar into his last brawl—on Turk Street near Eddy, at the fringe of San Francisco's tenderloin.

"Get the bastard!"

"You phoney sonuvabich!"

It was a different, younger crowd of addicts than the earlier assailants with whom the revolver wielding shadower had first caught up with the pusher. Half sick, crazed without heroin and shooting Bello's powder sugar, the younger ad-

dicts moved in on Bello, neither noticing nor caring for the presence of his shadow—who stepped away from the attack and moved on away from the brawl. Bello was a street fighter and continued to kick, gouge, bite and swing even after he'd been cut by a dozen switchblade knives, sapped with lengths of chain and lead pipe. He stopped swinging only when he dropped to the sidewalk—dead. His attackers ran around the corner on Eddy and disappeared.

His shadower with the .38 revolver was picked up by the first siren screaming cruiser that skidded to a stop as he tried to run across a parking lot. Before the cruiser officers had him leaning on their cruiser, hands on the roof and legs stretched apart for a frisk, other police cars were screaming into the district in answer to the riot call. The *addict* remained motionless as he was frisked.

"A hot one," an SFPD sergeant exclaimed, "packing a .38, seven caps of what's probably H, and, well, well," he whistled, "look at this!" He handed a wallet to his cruiser partner and flipped up an I.D. card from a hidden compartment. "An N Man. Looks like the Bureau of Narcotics is really on the job. Guess you can stand up now, Padgett," he called the prisoner by the name he read from the I.D. card. "Let's have a look at you." He compared the picture on the card with the face of his prisoner.

"So throw me in the car like it's for real," Chris Padgett quipped in a low voice. "You'll want to check me out at headquarters anyway. Play it like I'm just another junker—all the way. And, if you can, sergeant, make it fast. I think I've got something tonight."

The N Man was run through the SFPD narcotics squad offices and turned out with greater speed than he had been booked in as a suspect. He turned to the lieutenant. "Thanks, Tom. Your boys will have one less to work on now that Bello's out of the way."

"There'll be another one on his corners tomorrow, Chris. They come and go like the fog. Glad to help you. Say hello to your boss when you see him again. Need any transportation?"

"No. Rest is what I need but it's not for me tonight. Maybe the Bureau'll plant me on a desk job when this one's over. If I keep on at this pace, I'll soon be old—and desk-bound—like you. Night!"

The lieutenant laughed and walked to the door of his office with Chris Padgett. "You boys move too fast to grow old. Be careful, Chris. And good luck."

Padgett didn't explain his operation and the lieutenant didn't ask. His division of the San Francisco Police Department cooperated with the Bureau of Narcotics and that cooperation included all available help but no interference whatever with operations of the Bureau's un-

dercover men like Chris Padgett. Padgett wanted the late Bello's source of supply and now he had a handful of leads—the telephone numbers Bello had called from the Chinese pharmacy on Bush Street, the Turk Street bar, and an unknown schooner and its Sausalito anchorage. He had played his undercover role to perfection in San Francisco and was known among local addicts as a user and a rough customer who went armed. He took a cab from headquarters to a modest house on Portola Drive near Twin Peaks, paid it off a block away from the house and walked slowly to the house. It's living room resembled the signal room of an army command headquarters. Electronic equipment, a teletype and miscellaneous communications equipment took the place of usual household furnishings that passers-by would expect to find inside the Portola Drive house. A rear bedroom was furnished as an office rather than sleeping quarters. Chris Padgett sat across a gray steel desk and talked with a shirt-sleeved Bureau of Narcotics officer.

"If it's Bello's connection," he observed, "it's probably a kilo man. That means he doesn't handle the stuff himself. And I don't think he's around where the heroin is capped. Someone, between him and Bello, got greedy today. Whoever held out on the heroin and filled those caps with powdered sugar and quinine, made his own killing. The kilo man

knows that if Bello didn't. And whoever did that is on the lam right now—not from the junkies who got Bello but from the kilo man who has that Grant Avenue apartment and the schooner at Sausalito. There'll be another killing tonight in the tenderloin if that kilo man tracks down whoever swung with the heroin and substituted the sugar and quinine. I'd like to get him before he gets to his caper."

"Let's review your position first, Chris. I've already got the Coast Guard tracing the schooners over at Sausalito. And the Grant Avenue apartment is staked out. What will the hopheads say when they find out—which they have probably done by now—that Bello got it outside that Turk Street bar and that you disappeared down the street?"

"Nothing. Those two shots I let go in the apartment left the impression that I took off for Bello when he made like he was trying to get away from me."

"What will this Eddie say when he learns either you or Bello took his car?"

"I'll tell him Bello got away in it."

"And what if word gets around that you and Bello were seen buddy-buddy-like, making that phone call on Bush Street, stopping at that Kearny Street cigar store, in the Geary Street bar, and finally at the bar on Turk Street. It's more than a good bet that you were seen by

some junker and that the grapevine has word out that you and Bello have been together all evening. Right, Chris?"

"Not all the way. By now some of those hopheads I was running with are on their way to Tia Juana for more heroin. They took over a thousand dollars from Bello up on Rincon Hill. What if word is around town that I was with Bello before he was killed by these junior league hopheads on Turk Street? I can put it out that I was still pressuring him for some heroin."

"Alright. You know the crowd, Chris. I dislike seeing you lose the effectiveness of the role you've worked on for six months. What do you suggest now?"

"That I try to contact the kilo man over at Sausalito. I'll try to get Bello's job. I know the junkers and I can drop enough names to convince this connection that I'm his best candidate to take over and replace Bello. If he's not the top man out here, I'll try to get on up the heroin ladder to the man who is on top. If he is the actual importer and transporter, we'll move in on him with his first delivery to me. Make sense?"

"I'll get in touch with Washington and see what the director has to say, Chris. Get something to eat and I'll let you know in a few minutes."

Chris Padgett listened to the sounds of the teletype as he drank

black coffee. He shaved and changed his clothes. He re-loaded the .38 and left the narcotics caps with the Bureau lab man for analysis, carefully tagging each one with its source and date, hour and location. He was on his second cup of coffee when his senior officer of the N Man team joined him in the kitchen.

You're cleared for Sausalito, Chris, but we'll have a snooper on you all the way. Take the green Chev from the garage. It's already bugged. We'll be on top of you all the time. And, Chris, check in your I.D. and revolver for this trip. You're not playing footsie with San Francisco addicts. You can run into a frisk at this level that could mean a dead agent if that card were turned up. The name of that schooner is the *Stardust*. Its owner is the lessee of that apartment on Grant. He's also the owner of the bar on Turk. The name's Karl Gortoff—no record here; white male, 44; supposed to have moved here about a year ago from LA. The LAPD has no record on him. But the schooner has a Panamanian registry. The boys picked up his prints from the Grant Avenue pad and neither the FBI nor Interpol people have anything on him. He's a mystery man and the *Stardust* is a mystery ship. It hasn't moved from its anchorage for six months. We'll have the Coast Guard keep it under surveillance from now on. But once you're aboard, you'll have to

play it by ear. If it weighs anchor and sails out of U.S. territorial waters, you'll be on your own. Better get fixed up with a passport—just in case."

Chris Padgett drove carefully over the bridge. He didn't worry about a tail. He knew he was tailed by his own N Man co-workers and that, if he were picked up by a chance recognition from San Francisco addicts, his protective tail would have them promptly stopped by local police. He parked the Bureau car under the cliff and walked across the cliffside Sausalito road to a swank resort restaurant bar. From its room-wide window, he saw the *Stardust*, lying at anchor on the shimmering, moonlit water. Its cabin lights glowed through the fog. Padgett sat at the bar and listened to a low-playing combo play, "stardust".

"Ballentine's and water, please," he replied to the barman.

The barman made conversation and the window view made Padgett's question a natural.

"Whose schooner?"

"Karl Gortoff. He also owns this place."

Padgett disguised his reaction at this new source of information and smiled, "Nice boat. Nice spot here."

"We do have a good trade."

Padgett sipped his drink and listened as the bar enlarged on the "nice kind of trade" which patronized the *Stardust* Inn. "Not too much of a crowd during the week.

But reservations are necessary on weekends."

"I'd like to meet Mr. Gortoff. He around?"

"He might be aboard the schooner. But the manager's here if you want to see him. You a friend of Mr. Gortoff?"

"Yes," Padgett lied with a smile. "I'll be back." He left a bill on the bar and walked leisurely outside the inn. He leaned against a porch pillar, idly smoking a cigarette and looking down the cliffside road. He flipped the butt into the air and sauntered across the road to his car. For a few minutes he sat in the car, looking out into the night fog. When his eyes were adjusted to the dark and fog, he watched the inn for five minutes. Then he switched on the car's fog lights. From the cliffside of the road a man moved towards the car. Padgett opened the door and switched off the fog lights.

"Gortoff also owns the inn," he said. Tell Art to send someone else over here to check in as a guest. Might be a good idea to keep an eye on what goes on. I'm going to make a try at meeting him tonight. Looks quiet inside—the usual crowd from here and the mainland in this sort of place. And you might tell the Coast Guard people that I'll probably be aboard the *Stardust* tonight. I've a hunch Gortoff does his business aboard rather than inside the Inn."

Padgett watched as the N Man left the car and waited a few min-

utes after he left, watching the inn for any sign of observation or unusual movement. A man and a woman left the inn by its parking lot exit and entered a Triumph with its top down. Padgett watched as it passed his Chev, waited a few minutes and walked back into the inn. The barman had apparently sent word along that a friend of the owner was at the bar.

"Same?" the barman asked.

"Please," Padgett smiled.

"I'm Coleman, Jim Coleman," a suave, smiling resort manager greeted him before the Ballentine's was placed on the bar.

Padgett acknowledged the introduction and introduced himself. "Good to meet you. I was looking for Karl. If he's around, you might tell him I'd like to see him."

"I'll see if he's in," Coleman smiled as he left. He turned to the barman. "Mr. Padgett's tab is on the house, John."

"Nice of you, Coleman," Padgett smiled as he mentally laughed, "this one won't be hard on the taxpayers!"

Aboard the *Stardust*, Gortoff, slouched in a berth inside the master's cabin. He talked on a ship-shore phone. "Like I said, I want that capper up on 19th Avenue and I want him tonight. Dead. He had over three ounces of pure stuff and the sonuvabitch swung with it—or peddled it himself. He sold Bello a thousand caps of sugar and quinine. Bello got it tonight on Turk Street

from the junkers and now all hell's broke loose in town. Feed him to the sharks in the Bay. Nobody crosses me and lives. Where is he?" Gortoff snarled into the phone. "If he's not at his place, he'll be lying up with that dame on Fulton Street. Get her too. She knows too much. And then lay low for a while. You say there'll be a panic with no stuff on the corners? Get word around that there'll be a new supply on Friday. And there'll be a panic for you if you don't take care of that double-crossing capper and his broad."

"You've nothing but trouble, Karl, darling," Marie Hein purred. The blonde slipped down beside him in the berth and pushed towards him.

He ran a heavy but carressing hand lightly over her pointed nipples pushing prominently through green silk pajama tops. He smelled the musty odor of marijuana. You've been blowing pot again, baby. How many times have I told you not to bring that tea aboard without telling me. Have your fun, baby, but keep me clued up on when you're having it. You'll reek of that stuff some time when I have the wrong kind of guests aboard. She smiled and twisted suggestively towards him in the berth. He responded and slowly, even delicately removed her pajama top. While he kissed her he ran his fingertips lightly, in a circling motion, up and down her smooth, naked back. He moved his lips, carressingly down

to her throat and his fingertips to her upper arms. One middle fingertip stopped as it ran back and forth on her inner, right forearm. He sat up with a jerk and snapped on the berth light. He looked at the arm. He saw the tattoo-like scar and dark blotch on the smooth, white flesh.

"You damn little fool. You're mainlining stuff!"

"Just a joy pop, darling," the blonde smiled up at him. "Not enough to get hooked."

Gortoff was on his feet. He raved. "Not enough to get hooked? Just a joy pop? Anybody who mainlines that stuff *is* hooked. And where's the gawdamn works? Don't tell me you got it with you. Don't tell me you're carrying any stuff around with you when you're with me!"

"Karl, darling, calm down. You know I've better sense than that."

"Well, where in hell is it?"

"I left it at our place on Grant, dear. Don't worry."

"Don't worry," he raged. "You know what happened at that pad earlier tonight? It was taken apart by a mob of junkers. And the law was in it a few minutes after. Oh, you dizzy bitch. You had to get hooked. The one thing I can't have is a junker broad hanging around me. I told you and told you. But you had to play games. You know something. I make a million clear a year from this racket and I never touch the stuff. And no one gets around me who touches the stuff."

Gortoff lunged at the thoroughly frightened blonde. Her fear died quickly—as she did. His heavy, clutching hands no longer carressed. They held her throat in a vise-like grip while her face turned a greenish-purple and her eyes bulged as she strained to breathe. When he released her, marks on her once-white throat were the only trace of his attack. She no longer breathed. He raised the lid of the opposite berth in the cabin and propped it open. He lifted the blonde, crudely grabbing the dead body with one hand clutching long blonde hair and the other closing in on the soft flesh of a thigh. He hurled the body into the storage space below the starboard berth and slammed its lid. He cursed and gathered her clothes and purse. He flung them into the storage space. He spun around as if discovered in his act of murder when he heard the sound of a small boat bump the schooner's hull. He went on deck.

"Ahoy the *Stardust*," Jim Coleman's voice came through the fog. "OK to come aboard?"

Gortoff sighed. He leaned over the schooner's edge. "What's on your mind, Jim?"

"A guest at the Inn says he's a friend. Wants to see you. Name's Padgett."

Gortoff thought quickly. The name didn't ring a bell. And he didn't want Coleman aboard the *Stardust*. He didn't want anyone

aboard the schooner that night. "I'll be with you in a minute, Jim." He returned to the cabin, threw on a blazer, and locked the cabin door. "Who is this Padgett?" he asked as Coleman moved the dinghy back to shore.

"I don't know. Never saw him before. He just came into the bar and asked the barman on duty if you were around. Said he was a friend."

Gortoff made no comment. "I'll probably sail on the tide, Jim. Anything for me to sign, I'll stop in the office before I leave."

"Expect to be gone long, sir?"

"No. I should be back Friday." Gortoff looked back at the *Stardust*. "Just a shake-down cruise. I may leave for the winter in another couple weeks. I'll see this Mr. Padgett in the bar. See you later." He walked up to the inn while Coleman made fast the dinghy to the dock.

Padgett was alone at the bar. Gortoff looked at him from an alcove, unseen from the bar and lounge. He saw a tall, blonde, tanned—a little on the sallow side—solitary drinker. He was neither well dressed nor shabby. He appeared neither out-of-place nor as a typical guest of the Stardust Inn. He saw Gortoff for the first time in the bar mirror.

"I'm Gortoff," the swarthy, older man announced himself at a discrete nod from the barman. "Did you want to see me?"

"Why, yes," Padgett smiled. "Join me?" He rose from the bar stool and shook hands with the Stardust Inn owner.

"In the lounge?" Gortoff suggested. He turned to the barman. "The usual, John, and whatever Mr. Padgett's drinking—in the lounge." The kilo man and the N Man walked together into the carpeted lounge. They made small talk on the *Stardust*, the inn and the fog while they were served their drinks.

When the barman left, Gortoff looked at Padgett. "What was it you wanted, Mr. Padgett? I don't think we've met before."

Padgett decided a direct approach would be more effective. He had the advantage of knowing *who* Gortoff was. "I'd like to take over Bello's deal with you, Karl."

"You'd like to take over what? Whose deal?"

"Bello's." Padgett smiled. "His end of the San Francisco H traffic."

"I don't have any idea of what you're talking," Gortoff shot back at him.

"Let me explain, Karl," Padgett spoke in a low voice. "I was with Bello when those hopheads outside your place on Turk Street caught up with him tonight. I was pressuring him myself for some of the powdered sugar he pushed earlier in the day. I tailed him from the time he called you earlier this evening. I got him away from that mob of junkers who tore your Grant Street apartment to pieces. I

had a lot of trouble convincing him he should lead me to you. In fact I had to work him over with the wrong end of a .38 once or twice during the earlier part of the evening. I'll say one thing for Tony. He was loyal to you 'til the going got really rough."

Gortoff didn't blink an eye as Padgett continued with his effort to win the kilo man's confidence. "Your conversation is amusing, Mr. Padgett, even if it isn't of interest." He toyed with his drink, a liqueur, and looked straight into Padgett's blue eyes. "Go on."

Padgett talked. He named names and places, that could be known only to an initiated addict or pusher in the San Francisco narcotics world. He sold Gortoff when he told him of the works found in his own bath at the Grant Avenue apartment.

"Did you find the hypo?"

"No. I was keeping an eye on Bello. I wanted to get him away from that mob of junkers. They were ready to kill him."

"You know, Mr. Padgett, you could be a smart policeman, or an NMan."

"I could be, Karl. But I'm not. I came here from the East a year ago. Things were a little hot around East 21st Street in Manhattan. You probably have the connections. Check me out. I've got an FBI record as long as your arm. And it's not the kind of a record that a stoolie might have."

"I'm not worried about you being a stool pigeon, Mr. Padgett. I can predict the actions of a stool pigeon and handle them. As a matter of fact, I can smell a stool pigeon. And I know how to handle them. But the Bureau of Narcotics has some smooth workers today. I know for a fact that at least one junker in every city is an N Man in disguise. And I know all about their ability to take a phoney fix and shoot the stuff right through the skin into a shirt sleeve or on to the floor. Let's go out to my boat. We can talk more there. I might just have a proposition for you."

"Good," Padgett smiled. "So far I've had to do all the talking. I'm a good listener, Karl."

"Excuse me," Gortoff rose from the lounge table. "I have some things to look after in the office." He beckoned to the hovering waiter. "Tell John at the bar, we'll have another round here, please."

Padgett watched the heavy-set inn owner, bar owner, schooner-owner and kilo man move away. In his white flannels and blue blazer, he fitted the former three roles more appropriately, in appearance, than the latter. "He's smooth," the N Man thought, "and not sold on me yet. And he's probably damned dangerous."

In the office, Gortoff quickly signed checks presented by the manager and initialed some invoices. He made a long distance call to Rosarito Beach, down in Lower

California, giving only a time, a latitude and longitude and a date. From a spring compartment in the office desk, he removed a flat Beretta, dropped it into his blazer pocket, and returned to Padgett.

"Have time for a short cruise?"

"My time is your time, Karl."

"Good. We'll be gone a couple days—down to Rosarito Beach—should be back up here by Friday."

"Do we go ashore?"

"Why?" Gortoff asked.

"I've a passport but it's only a passable forgery." He tossed it on the table.

Gortoff examined it with an experienced eye. "It's more than passable. It's a good one for a forgery."

Padgett pointed out the deliberately created flaw in the federal seal. "If you still have doubts, Karl. This little piece of engraving may reassure you. No law or N Man would be running around with a forged passport. And no ex con would have a genuine one."

Gortoff laughed. "If I had any doubts at this moment, *Chris*, you'd be on your way *into* the Bay rather than on to a schooner on the Bay. Let's go."

Gortoff started the small electric outboard which silently pushed the dinghy away from the dock. "Ever do any sailing?"

"A little when I was a kid. I know the difference between a main sail and a gib."

"Good. You can help me get underway. I've got a good diesel aux-

iliary. We won't use any canvas 'til daylight."

Sea-going traffic was so heavy in the San Francisco area that Padgett never knew if the Coast Guard kept the *Stardust* under surveillance. And Gortoff was too busy navigating and manoeuvring the schooner to pay particular attention to navigation lights of other ships on port and starboard, on the bow or on the stern. By daylight, San Francisco was no more than a spec on the north-eastern horizon. Gortoff sailed southwest, far off the edge of the U.S. mainland. Then he tacked to a southerly course. At dusk he dropped the *Stardust's* sails. He turned to Padgett who was sitting in the cockpit with the schooner's owner.

"You agreed, Chris, that, if we could get together on a deal, you wouldn't back away from anything. I like to test a man before I commit myself. And I've a test waiting for you. Under the starboard berth of the cabin, you'll find the test. It's the result of carelessness. Somebody grew careless. They couldn't stand prosperity. Or, I should say, *she* couldn't stand prosperity. It's a body, Chris. We can bind our little contract. You bring it up on deck. You dump it overboard for the sharks. I like this sort of binding agreement. You see, Chris, in dumping the body of this careless person, you make yourself an accomplice, or at best, an accessory after the fact, to murder. If you meet this

test, I'll know you're my man. After all, it will be our little secret—a little matter of murder and disposing of the corpse—one that will ensure mutual loyalty. See what I mean?"

Padgett made no reply. He looked at Gortoff. In the few seconds available, he debated the moral issue. He weighed his purpose and his Bureau operation against the test proposed by Gortoff. As if sensing his hesitation, Gortoff brought the .25 caliber Beretta from his blazer pocket.

"In the event you fail to meet the test, Chris, you'll be a permanent failure." The kilo man smiled.

"I see what you mean, Karl. I'm not about to fail—either way. I was wondering who I was aiding and abetting. Actually I wouldn't have failed if the person were alive in the berth storage space. When I go in with a man, I go in all the way."

Padgett moved to the cabin and lifted the hinged berth. An odor, nauseating and sickly, that of early decomposure, struck him. He forced himself to carry the dead girl's body up to the deck. He looked quickly away from the bubbles as the body settled slowly after the splash. And he looked Gortoff straight in his black eyes. "Any other little messy tasks to be looked after, Karl." As he spoke, he made a promise, "I'll square things up for that blonde girl with you, Gortoff, or I'll die trying."

"Not right now, Chris. Perhaps

some other time." Gortoff cut in the auxiliary and sailed south. By the compass light, Padgett noticed, he began to make a careful check on his course. When the *Stardust* passed the San Diego light, Gortoff tacked to a south-southwest course. Soon after dark, Padgett noticed the green flash of a signal light. Gortoff increased the schooner's speed and made for the signal's direction. He cut his engine when a cruiser approached the *Stardust*. Go below, Chris. Like your own crime this evening, the fewer witnesses, the better.

Padgett listened from the cabin. Sound and voices travelled clearly over the South Pacific water and through the semi-tropical night.

"Three tins, Senor Gortoff. Enough?"

"For this time, Garcia. How are things at the casino?"

"Very good, senor. Will you be down soon again?"

"I'll call you. Give my regards to Hernandez. And you better give that cruiser a coat of paint. I'll want to do some fishing this winter."

Padgett made a fast assessment of the conversation he had overheard. "Garcia—Hernandez—a casino—and lying off Rosarito Beach—and Gortoff ordering a coat of paint for the cruiser—no money exchanged for what he supposed was three tins of heroin. Gortoff could be more than a kilo man; more than an importer. He could be the big man behind the heroin traffic from Mex-

ico. He could control the source as well as the big West Coast outlet in San Francisco. Three tins made for a lot of heroin. It was more than what was needed for the San Francisco traffic." He stopped his mental debate when Gortoff called from the deck.

"OK, Chris, come up on deck."

Padgett heard the roar of the cruiser as it sped east in the night. He saw only its starboard light as it disappeared. "Smooth operation, Karl," he smiled.

"In this racket, Chris, only the smooth last. And let me pass on a tip to you. Play it like I do in your traffic in town. Never make the same move twice in a row. When you arrange for a pick-up at a plant, vary your routine and your pedlers' routines. That's the only way you'll last. Get into a rut. Make the same moves every day and the Narcotics Squad or the N Men will have you in a week. But you know the racket. Play it your own way." On the northward voyage, Gortoff spelled out his deal for the new pusher. "I had a middle man between me and Bello. He was the character who sugared the caps the other day. Now he's out of the way. With you it's going to be different. I'm going to give you the stuff eighty per cent pure. That's as pure as any heroin coming on to this continent. You have two ways of handling it. You can cap it yourself and put the cut stuff out to your pedlers. Or you can have a capper

working for you and making the plants for you. Do it your way, Chris. You get one of these tin's. It will handle your traffic for a month. You pay me through the mail every day. In cash. The first morning mail at the inn that misses an envelope from you, with its cash, will be the day you die. That's the way it has to be Chris. When I put you ashore, you'll be walking away with \$100,000 worth of pure H. Don't get me wrong. I'm not about to trust you. Instead some of my people watch you—all the time!"

"Where do those other two tins go?" Padgett asked.

"And that's another thing, Chris. No questions. And no answers about anything other than the Frisco traffic. That town is only *one* of my towns."

"What time we due back at Sausalito?"

"We're not due back there. I'll put you ashore at San Pedro. Take a cab from there to the LA airport and fly up to Frisco. And the cab you take, Chris, will be *my* cab, and *my* driver. And you'll have a shadow on the flight. Like I said, I don't *trust*. I *watch*. All the time. When I drop anchor at Sausalito, the *Star-dust* will be as clean, or cleaner, than any pleasure craft sailing into a harbor on the coast. Like I mean it to look, I was on a short vacation voyage. I play it careful as well as smooth." Gortoff swung on an easterly course towards the mainland.

Padgett heard Gortoff contacting his cab driver in San Pedro before the *Stardust* reached the harbor. "And two one-way flights up to Frisco," he heard the kilo man conclude his orders.

"Use this brief case," Gortoff ordered. "If you need me in town, call Coleman at the inn or the bar on Turk Street. I'll tell you through either one of them where the meet will be. That tin is another test for you, Chris. You've got it made if you play it smart. Get careless and you're dead—or in Leavenworth for so long that you'll wish you were dead."

In San Francisco, N Man Padgett skillfully dropped his obvious tail and arrived at the Portola Drive house, temporary headquarters of the N Man team, in a round-about route, using seven different taxis. He made the last part of the trip in a Bureau car which he called from a public telephone in the Sunset residential district. Its driver made doubly sure that he was not tailed by having another, unmarked Bureau car tail him. It, in turn, was tailed by an unmarked FBI car. If Gortoff's men had followed Padgett after his efforts to lose them, they would have been quickly spotted by the protecting federal shadowers.

"You acquired a tan on your sea voyage," the Bureau chief of the N Man team laughed.

"And I also acquired a kilo of pure heroin," Padgett replied as he

dumped the brief case on the desk. He ran down, while his chief taped the verbal report, every move he had made, from the time he last left the Portola Drive house—including the disposal of the body from the *Stardust*. No one smiled or commented. It was a deadly game in which death had been encountered before. Once more, the situation was teletyped to Washington. And once more orders came back from the Bureau.

"You're a pusher, Chris, for a week. The lab boys will adulterate this heroin down to an acceptable weak mixture with powdered sugar. Put it out in the city to the pedlers you know for a week. We'll supply you with funds here to convince Gortoff that you've moved the normal month's supply in a week. Tell him the large scale movement was a result of the panic created by Bello's fiasco. All he's interested in is his money. See that he gets his first payment in tomorrow's mail. Pick up the currency before you leave here. We'll make the other daily mailings for you during the week. At the end of the week, make a meet with him. He'll know that you're running short because of the daily payments. We'll stay on top of you. And we'll stay on top of him. This time, when he makes his connection with his Mexican source, we'll take him. And Chris, this time, take along your .38 and your I.D. Just in case Gortoff has any more tests for you."

The San Francisco Narcotics Squad was alerted to the Bureau's action and Chris Padgett moved again in the half-world of the city's addicts. He shrugged off his take-over from Bello when former addict acquaintances asked what had happened to him on the night when he and Bello fled from the ransacked Grant Avenue apartment. "I took after him and tailed him to his connection."

He squared up with Eddie, the addict who drove the car when he and the other addicts had trapped Bello at the Rincon Hill phone booth. "Here's payment for your car rental, Eddie." He handed him twelve caps of heroin in its adulterated form. "And there *is* H in those caps."

He played the role of a typical pusher. "It's cash on the line," he told his pedlers. No cash; no junk. When former *friends* with whom he had pretended to share fixes came crying to him, in horrible, sick, anxiety, "... I'm sick, Chris. Just trust me with one cap to get going. I'll have the cash for you in an hour . . ." he snarled back at them. "No cash; no cap."

He played his role to such perfection that word got back to Gortoff, "This boy knows what he's doing."

And the narcotics squad of the San Francisco Police Department cooperated all the way, right down to making the usual number of arrests among pedlers. It was one of the best undercover operations in

the Bureau and SFPD history as a list was compiled of every user and pedler in the city. And, thought Karl Gortoff, it was the best week in the history of his narcotics racket. Each morning at the Stardust Inn he received a manila envelope containing four times the cash he had formerly received from Bello.

On the fifth day Padgett was sitting in the Turk Street bar at a corner table. Two pedlers had already eased over to his table, slipped wads of bills to him, and been told where to pick up their plants. The bartender whispered to him while serving a fresh glass of Canada Dry.

"Call Karl."

Padgett called him at the inn. "What's on your mind, boss?" he asked nonchalantly.

"You, Chris. You're going like a house on fire according to the take. Meet me. I'll be parked on Fulton Street. Park near the Ignatius church and walk to my car. Around one. OK?"

"I'll be there." Padgett hung up and walked to another bar from which he called the Potrola Drive house. He spoke to his Bureau chief. "Get that conversation from the bar?"

"Yes. We'll cover the meet. Be careful. We've got the Inn phone tapped and just before Gortoff called the bartender on Turk, he called Rosarito Beach and told his man down there—the Garcia you told us about—that he and you would be making a trip soon. Looks

like you're going out of town again, Chris. And when our boys put their snooper on that phone in the bar, they found another electronic bug on it. And it wasn't one installed by any of our agencies or the SFPD. Looks like Gortoff has his own telephone taps working. Don't make any calls from the bar that you don't want Gortoff tuned in on. We'll keep our eyes on you, Chris."

It was after midnight when Padgett drove towards Fulton Street. He looked up and saw the spires of Ignatius wreathed in gray fog. He parked and walked to the rendezvous with Gortoff. He saw the black Buick and crossed the street.

"Get in." Gortoff reached over and opened the door.

"I'm glad you had me call you, Karl. By Monday I'll need another kilo." Padgett wasted no time on preliminaries.

"I know, Chris. You've pushed a big bundle this week so far—more than the local traffic could use. Who's doing the big buying?"

"Hymie and Severson came into town from Chicago," the N Man explained glibly, using names of two Chicago peddlers who, he knew, were currently held in custody, having been taken off the City of Los Angeles when it stopped at Salt Lake City on its westward run. There's a panic in Chicago. I drove a hard bargain with that pair. What they got, they paid street prices for."

"I wondered why I hadn't heard from them," Gortoff smiled. I called them yesterday and they were supposed to be on their way here. Maybe those slick bastards think they're by-passing me; that you're handling your own stuff. That's good. Let them think they're getting it without dealing with me—and keep on sticking them with street prices. For a long time they've wanted me to make deliveries in Chicago. They've threatened to buy elsewhere. Now they think they're doing that and that I'll come around to transporting the stuff all the way to the Windy City. They knew Bello was my man. They don't know you. Like a lot of local people, the word's out that you're an independent—a new source here on the West Coast, Chris. Let's keep it that way."

"Unless you tell me different, Karl, I sell to who lays cash on the line. You any other inland connections that you want me to look after?"

Gortoff didn't reveal to the N Man any other branches or limbs of his narcotics traffic tree. "Not right now. But I want to take you down to Mexico tomorrow and get you set up with my man there. We'll fly down this time. I'll pick you up in the morning at your hotel. Around ten. We can spend a couple hours with Garcia and from now on you'll make your own pick-ups with him. But you'll still pay me, Chris. Garcia works for me."

The N Man exhibited no sign of his excitement over learning that Gortoff was the man for whom the Bureau had looked so long—the man at the top of the heroin traffic—the one person who controlled the narcotics racket from its source to the addict on the street. “I’ll be in the lobby, Karl, at ten. See you.” He left the car and walked through the fog towards Ignatius. Instead of driving to the Turk and Eddy district, he drove towards the Richmond district. When he spotted the tail at an intersection on 19th Avenue, he recognized its driver as a fellow N Man. He drove slowly through thick patches of fog, turned south around the west edge of the lake and turned into the lonely, unpopulated area to the east and south. On a new, unopened boulevard, he stopped. The tailing car approached and stopped when Padgett flipped a toggle switch under his car’s dash. Its driver and another N Man entered Padgett’s green Chev.

“Busy night, Chris?” one asked.

“And a busy day tomorrow. Tape a report for me?”

The driver left for the other Bureau car and returned with a tape recorder. Padgett recorded events of the day and evening, including Gortoff’s plans for the Mexican flight.

“He can’t be planning a flight on a commercial airliner, Chris. The nearest field down there is Tia Juana and there’s no flight leaving

here for the border town before noon. Private plane?”

“I don’t know. But if he plans to spend only a couple hours at Rosarito Beach, it sounds like a private plane. Why not be ready in the event he uses his own or a chartered plane? And bring in the Mexican authorities on this one—and Interpol. He’ll have to pick up more heroin tomorrow. I think we should be prepared to nail him on either side of the border, in the event that he has some switch planned. He’s tricky and he might just have me in mind as a border jumper. We want *him* with the heroin. And while the Bureau isn’t interested in a homicide charge, I haven’t forgotten that blonde girl. I’d particularly like to see him apprehended on our side of the border. If there’s any change in the way I suggest to clean up this operation, let me know before morning. Otherwise, I’ll play it by ear and act according to what Gortoff does. Once we’re in the air I’ll have to use my own judgement anyway.”

The older N Man, a senior to the driver and Padgett, interrupted. “I don’t know what instructions will come through from Washington when we send your report in, Chris. But I can see a flaw in your suggested plan to get Gortoff tomorrow. From the care and trickery he has used so far, he’ll never try to land back here, on any type of plane, with a shipment of heroin. He’ll more likely drop the stuff in water-

proof containers to be picked up at sea; or even drop it on land somewhere. And we're not interested in picking up some lieutenant of his on a transportation charge. Furthermore, neither Washington nor the San Francisco Police are too keen on your continuing as a pusher. It's the sort of thing some queasy politician or newspaper would raise holy hell about. I feel you ought to be prepared to take him into custody at the first opportunity when you know he is in actual possession of the shipment of heroin. If it's below the border, we'll work with the Mexican authorities and have you under surveillance all the time. We'll be down to Rosarito Beach before you get there. And we'll cover the Tia Juana airport just in case he has any plans in mind for a switch there. We'll also have an air cover for any plane you and he take off in from here. If the *Star-dust* moves out to sea, the Coast Guard will keep it in sight."

"If I apprehend him, I'll have to testify in court. That will end my undercover career for the Bureau."

"Frankly, Chris, I feel that would be a good idea anyway. You've worked your way in deeper than we ever dreamed was possible. You're close to the top man—and that proximity to evil brings you real close to the sort of risk not even the Bureau asks you to take."

"I hope I'll be real close to Gortoff when he tries to resist arrest, if I'm the man to arrest him,"

Padgett stated in a flat, serious tone.

"We'll leave that personal feeling out of our reports, Chris." The older N Man and the driver left the car. "Good luck, Chris. We'll be in touch if there's any change in plans for tomorrow."

As Padgett drove back down to the city, he saw the tailing car relieved by another Bureau vehicle. He yawned from fatigue when he parked on his Geary Street hotel's parking lot. The lobby clock clicked off three o'clock when he walked into the elevator. Gortoff was sitting in an armchair of his room when he switched on the lights.

"No wonder you're making such a clean-up, Chris. You play this sort of an eleven-inning ball game every day?" The narcotics king grinned.

"Every day, Karl. Seems you do too. And you're out of your territory. What brings you down here?"

"We're leaving now for Rosarito Beach, Chris. Remember what I said? I never *trust*. You didn't think I'd tell you what time we were going to take off for a pick-up did you. I don't even let my pilot know the exact time I'm going to take off. And I never let Garcia know the exact time I plan to arrive at the Beach. In this game, Chris, you last only when no one knows your next move. Garcia and my pilot have worked for me for five years. I trust them only as far as I can see them. Not because I think they would sell out. Like you, I have little holds on them. But they could be tailed. And

so could you. I can't take a chance on any one of you slipping up. So I play it my way—real careful. Ready to go?"

"I'm ready. Where?"

"The airport. We'll drive out in your car, Chris."

It was the one break the N Man needed. Wherever his car went, an electronic tracer enabled tailing fellow N Men to follow it. As he drove the green Chev out to the San Francisco airport, Padgett made no effort to spot a tail. He knew he was tailed by another Bureau vehicle, even if it remained out of sight in the almost impenetrable fog.

"Pull down to the private hangars," Gortoff ordered. "It's that one." He pointed to a hangar from which a red and white, twin-engined Beechcraft was being towed.

Padgett read the white lettering on the red plane, "Stardust". He laughed, "You have an obsession for naming your properties, 'Stardust,' Karl."

"I'll let you in on a secret, Chris. It's my favorite name for heroin too. I'm even a sucker for a dame who sings the song."

"Like the blonde we buried at sea, Karl?"

"Like the blonde *you* buried at sea, Chris," Gortoff smiled without looking at him.

Padgett listened as Gortoff gave orders to the pilot. "Tia Juana, George." He turned to Padgett, "I need some sleep, Chris. We can get an hour or so shut-eye before we

land." He tripped his reclining seat in the Beechcraft and was asleep before the plane was cleared by the control tower to take off.

Padgett fought sleep until the plane taxied from the hangar. He peered through the plane window into the fog, seeking some sign of the tail which he was confident had followed him from Geary Street. He thought he saw an unmarked panel truck, a familiar one, at a neighboring hangar, but he wasn't sure. He felt for his shoulder holster and dropped off to sleep.

The Mexican immigration officers were not interested in documents. "*Touristas*," Gortoff began to explain in good Spanish, and laughed when the border official did no more than greet him and welcome two more sought-after American visitors to the border sin spot.

In the short drive south from Tia Juana to Rosaito Beach, Gortoff ran down his Mexican operation to Padgett—who wished dearly for a tape recorder and a witness. "I bought into a casino down here when gambling was legalized a couple years ago. It's a perfect front for disposition of U.S. currency, hot, cold or queer. Most of our trade is from the LA gambling crowd who prefer the run down 101 to the desert drive over to Vegas. As a result, I can deposit any sort of income in my Mexican bank accounts. I beat the IRS and I also beat snooping federal agencies who might be

interested in the source of my income."

"How'd you get located down here?" Padgett asked casually.

"You'll laugh when I tell you," Gortoff expanded. "I was a pusher like yourself. I hustled around the West Side in Downtown Manhattan for a couple years and picked up a proposition to run stuff up from Guatemala. I got in with a Guatemalan pharmacist who operated a refinery on the side and had my own source for heroin. But I couldn't compete with the syndicate in the East and live. So I came out here. I haven't gone wrong since."

"You've got it made," Padgett laughed. "Your own refinery, your own outlets and your perfect fronts and set-up to account for the income."

"I've got it made, as you say, as long as I'm hyper-careful, Chris. And I am that careful. Like on this trip. I'll introduce you to Garcia. He looks after my casino interests down here, and my *other* interests. He'll see that the stuff is delivered to you. *You* pick it up. *You* will carry it to the plane up at Tia Juana. *You* will fly it back up to Frisco. With me, Chris, it's always a *you*, a *he*, or a *she*. Never *me*. That trip on the *Stardust* down and up the coast was an exception. Even then I wasn't taking a chance. Those metal cannisters would have sunk to the bottom of the Pacific if there had been any sign of heat. And

even then, *you* moved it ashore. And the other two kilos were picked up offshore by somebody else. Like I said, Chris, I never take a chance. And I'm careful—real careful."

The casino at Rosarito Beach resembled a Spanish baronial hall. At daylight, gambling action continued as it had at midnight. Padgett was left to wander around the swank tourist trap while Gortoff conducted private business with the manager. Garcia, tall, dark-haired, suave and Castillian, had acknowledged the introduction with impeccable front desk smoothness. "It's a real pleasure, Senor Padgett. I'll look forward to working with you." The casino manager walked away with Gortoff, "The house is your own. Just sign for anything you desire."

"Even chips," Gortoff laughed as he placed a friendly arm on the N Man's shoulder.

Padgett wandered from the gambling rooms to the bar, searching for a familiar face or some indication that the Bureau's communications system had moved at its usual speed and placed Interpol or Mexican official support at the casino. He saw nothing. He strolled casually out to the casino parking lot and saw nothing more than forty or fifty cars, most with California plates. He smiled at a soliciting senorita and rejected her suggestion of love for a price. He moved back to the bar. He saw no one who might be from a cooperat-

ing law enforcement agency. In the dining room he ordered black coffee. Gortoff and Garcia joined him.

"You confine your pleasures to our dining room, *senor*?" Garcia smiled.

"For this trip," Padgett laughed. "I may have more time and a greater inclination to play the next time I get down. Right now, I've business in mind."

"We can expedite that, Chris. Garcia has already made arrangements for you to complete your business transaction. The shipment is aboard the plane up at Tia Juana. You'll accompany it back. I'll be back up by a commercial flight this afternoon. One package is for your use, Chris. The other two are for me. Bring them to the inn over at Sausalito tonight. I'll be there at midnight. Walk from your car, through the parking lot and down to the dock. You can use the dinghy to bring the stuff out to the *Stardust*. I'll be aboard. Right?"

"Right, Karl. I'll be there. And I see what you mean by exercising care." Garcia and Gortoff joined in Padgett's laughter. "But," Padgett thought, "if you are aboard the *Stardust* when I make this delivery, you'll be *careless*; not careful."

The Mexican taxi driver who picked Padgett up at the Rosarito Beach casino seemed like every other driver at the stand, shabby, in need of a shave, and looking as if he hadn't slept. When Padgett said, "Tia Juana—the airport—plesae,"

the driver grinned and roared off. But he slowed down when he left the outskirts of Rosarito Beach and handed an I.D. card back to Padgett who read it and looked closely at the driver's face.

"Nice to see you boys are on hand, lieutenant." He handed the card back to the driver.

"Can we help, *Senor Padgett*?"

"I don't think so," the N Man answered the Mexican FBI officer who camouflaged himself as a cab driver. "But you might keep Garcia and Gortoff under surveillance. The American plans to leave on a commercial flight for the States this afternoon. See that he does. Garcia's your problem."

"We can get *Senor Garcia* any time we want," the Mexican official explained. "We have his supply route from Guatemala checked all the way and we also have his stock of heroin at the casino under observation. We've permitted him to continue at the request of your own people, while you try to tie in *Senor Gortoff* with the traffic."

"We hope to do that tonight, lieutenant. If we do, you can get your local trafficker. Again, it's good to learn you're on the job. I had felt I was alone down here."

"Your people in San Francisco got a signal to us after you and Gortoff took off from San Francisco. It didn't leave us much time but we already had the casino staked out. And we had our man at the airport immigration office. So you were

never out of sight for long, senior." At the Tia Juana airport entrance, the disguised Mexican FBI officer accepted Padgett's payment and tip with thanks, "Come back again soon, senior." If there were any of Gortoff's agents hovering near the entrance, the report to the casino would be reassuring.

Apparently the Beechcraft's pilot had been advised of Padgett's return trip alone. He was uncommunicative but polite. "All set, if you are, Padgett."

"Let's go," the N Man replied. The Beechcraft had already been warmed up and the Tia Juana tower cleared the ship without delay. Again Padgett slept as the plane flew north. He woke as it lost altitude in its approach from the ocean to the San Francisco airport. And he loosened his .38 in its shoulder holster when the plane taxied to a stop in front of its hangar.

"These are your three parcels, Padgett," the pilot stated when he opened the plane's door.

Padgett pulled the revolver. "It isn't going to be that way, George. You flew them in. You carry them out. And just keep walking with them. Don't go into the hangar. Come on, get moving!" The N Man reinforced his order with a jab of the gun barrel in the pilot's back. He made no effort to conceal the revolver and the pilot had not walked more than thirty feet from the plane when a sedan pulled out from a neighboring hangar and

stopped beside Padgett and the pilot. It was a Bureau car and Padgett recognized his fellow members of the N Man team.

"We'll put this one on ice," Padgett said. He re-holstered his gun while other officers snapped handcuffs on the pilot. "I'll take those three parcels."

The pilot was locked in a federal cell on a holding charge from the Bureau officers, with instructions that he be held incommunicado. Padgett left with the other N Men to the Portola Drive house. "That, I think," Padgett sighed, "will wrap it up. Have the lab boys analyze that stuff. Re-wrap two of the parcels and I'll take them to Gortoff tonight aboard the *Stardust*. If it is heroin and if he is on board, we'll have him. And the Mexican authorities will be anxious to know when they can move in on Garcia at Rosarito Beach. Let them know after we have Gortoff. And," he reminded his fellow N Man team officers, "don't let anyone get to a telephone from that private hangar over at the airport. They may be no more than maintenance employes but they could be Gortoff employes too. Keep a tail on him from when he lands here 'til he gets to Sausalito."

"We'll do some skin diving tonight, Chris," one of the N Men laughed. "You won't be alone on the *Stardust*."

Padgett again returned to the Turk Street bar, resuming his pusher role for the afternoon and eve-

ning as if nothing had interrupted normal operations of the Gortoff narcotics traffic. He left downtown San Francisco at eleven and drove normally across the bridge. The yellow, sodium-vapor lights broke through the fog as he drove off the exit and curved around the turn to Sausalito. He took the two parcels of heroin from his car trunk and walked across the cliffside road. As he crossed the inn parking lot he recognized a Bureau car. He made no sign of recognizing the occupants of its front seat. He moved through the fog and shadows down to the dock. The electric motor of the dinghy purred into operation with a press of its starter button. He cast off from the dock and the dinghy disappeared into the fog. The *Stardust* loomed up in front of him and he switched off the tiny outboard. Padgett caught at the port side of the dinghy and gasped audibly as a black rubber sleeve of a skin diver's suit helped propel the dinghy against the *Stardust's* stern. He called into the night.

"Ahoy the *Stardust*."

"Come aboard, Chris."

The N Man looked up and saw Gortoff standing at the stern, looking down on him. He hoped he hadn't seen the skin diver's arm. Gortoff helped make the dinghy fast to the stern. Padgett held the two parcels in his left arm and pulled himself aboard with his right.

"Wouldn't want to drop this 'stardust' in the water," he quipped without a smile. Padgett held out the parcels to Gortoff. And the heroin king accepted them.

"Come below, Chris. Might as well have a drink before you go ashore."

Padgett looked along the starboard side of the cabin as Gortoff reached for its door. He saw the first of his skin-diving N Men fellow workers climb aboard. He waited until they had slipped quietly towards the cabin and followed Gortoff inside. When Karl Gortoff turned he saw the .38 revolver aimed directly on a level with his heart.

"You're under arrest, Gortoff."
...

Gortoff laughed and jeered, "You forget, Chris, I'm the careful one. You're covered like you think you have me covered."

Until Padgett felt the pressure of a gun barrel in his own back, he momentarily felt Gortoff's statement was another form of the old ruse. Then he recognized Garcia's voice. "Drop the gun, senior." The pressure increased on Padgett's back with a sharp jab. He dropped the .38 and was suddenly jammed against Gortoff, propelled to the cabin berth as Garcia's body slammed against his own. For a few, wild struggling moments, the tiny cabin of the schooner was filled with grunts and curses of Garcia and Gortoff. Garcia screamed as his

arm was broken by a blow from a rubber-clad figure, one of the three N Men skin divers who had hurtled into the cabin. Padgett was briefly overlooked in the melee. His fingers clutched at Gortoff's throat and the narcotics king was beginning to choke when another N Man knelt to snap handcuffs on him.

"You wouldn't choke a handcuffed prisoner, would you?" the skin diver N Man laughingly asked.

"This one? Yes. I think I would—if it were not against Bureau regulations."

The four N Men and two prisoners moved from the cabin into a

gleaming bath of light. A Coast Guard boat had slipped through the fog and spotlighted the *Stardust*. Gortoff blinked as he faced the blinding light ten feet away. He cursed when Chris Padgett taunted him, "Light too bright for you, Karl? You've made your last move under the stars or on the *Stardust*. Your stardust days are all over now!"

He turned to the Coast Guard lieutenant, "Can you put us ashore at the Presidio? We'll stay right with these boys. They're tricky. But *we* are careful."

"Glad to help out, sir," the lieutenant replied.



Fight them all

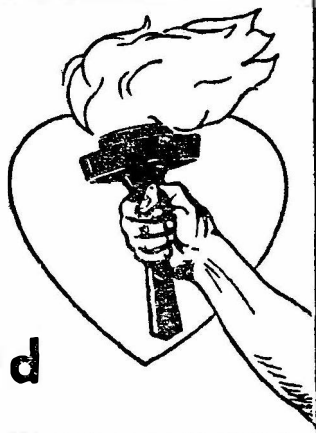
Heart Attack

Stroke

High Blood Pressure

Rheumatic Fever

Give Heart Fund



Past Imperfect

She was an ex-stripper . . . with a capital "X". Then Widget came on the scene.

BY FRANK GAY

WIDGET decided he would go for the flesh this time, and not the money. He made three circles of the block, then parked in front of the house. He was squat and flabby, almost beetle-like in the big car.

He thrust his head toward the windshield to get a better look at the blonde digging in the garden. His face was a melon of freckles decorated with puffy eyes and a bulbous, hairy nose.

He emerged from the car with his sample case and strode aggressively toward the blonde.

"You Mrs. Gideon?" he asked bluntly.

The woman rose from her knees and puzzled a look at him.

This was the way he remembered her, lean and petite with full hips

and breasts. She had a beauty that took his breath. She also had a dignity about her that made his lip curl—he could recall her in less dignified postures.

"You're the encyclopedia salesman?" she asked.

"That's me. Name is Widget. I'd like to show you samples."

They moved toward the house, a large brick and cedar shingle colonial on a lot planted with maples and oaks.

"So you got yourself a doctor," he said when they were in the living room. "Some furniture! Did all right, didn't you? Got yourself a real deal."

She was looking at him again with the same puzzled expression.

"Are you selling encyclopedias?" she asked sharply.

His mouth was amused this time. "Come on, Pepper," he told her, "don't get sassy with me."

Only her eyes changed.

"Pepper Patsy," he said, "The Hottest Tomale This Side Of The Border! Remember that tag?"

He let it sink in, then twisted the knife again. "You were my favorite stripper. I saw your dance in strip joints in Baltimore and Chicago. I even bought you a drink in Chicago."

She still showed no reaction, but she watched him and listened to him carefully.

"About three years ago you disappeared from the circuit and were never again heard from."

Now she lit a cigarette and said, "And then one day you happened to walk down the street in Akron, just by luck, on your way to the grocery store to buy anchovies and walnuts and you happened to see your favorite stripper disguised as the wife of a respectable doctor with her hair dyed blonde."

"Not quite," he said. "I make a business of finding people who used to live it up and are now trying to live it down. Profitable business too."

"You're wasting your time. My husband knows."

"How about your neighbors? your husband's patients?"

She turned away from him, drawing heavily on the cigarette, and walked twice back and forth along the length of the handsome living room. The body had mellowed and the lines softened, but she was still the same exquisite piece. The blonde hair made her, if anything, more striking.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Not a cent. Like I said, you were my favorite stripper."

"What then?"

"You," he told her. "Just you." He watched her bite her lip. Sweat beads ran down his own round face between and over the freckles.

"All that is behind me," she said finally. "I have a good marriage. I might give you some money, but that's all."

"You'll give me what I want!" A drop of his sweat splattered on the hardwood floor. "I'm no amateur. If I go to work on you, you're done in this town. Finished. Both of you."

She walked the length of the living room again and drew deeply on the cigarette, the body still lean and firm.

"Money," she said. "Money I'll give you, but nothing else."

"What's one more man to you?"

"It's different now. I'm in love."

He laughed, but there was no joy in his face. "I'm going to have you or I'm going to get you. Which is it?"

She turned to him with a plea. "Won't you leave me alone?"

He shook his round head slowly and coldly.

She took another trip down the living room and back before she nodded to signal her defeat. "When?" she asked.

"Now. Here and now. Upstairs."

"Impossible. My maid's due."

"Maid? he laughed, his face sarcastic. "In my motel then."

Widget showered, lighted a cigar, tossed down a banger of scotch and sat impatiently in the comfortable motel room. He wore a long, handsome, blue silk robe, but he was still squat and flabby.

He did not have to wait long. He smiled at her knock, and walked briskly to the door, the cigar between his teeth. He turned the knob and pulled the door open ceremoniously.

A big, muscular man pushed into the room. He closed the door and took special pains to twist the smaller knob of the night lock.

When he faced around Widget saw that he was wearing gloves.

Not hurrying, the big man moved steadily toward Widget.

Widget backed off, moving automatically, keeping precisely the speed of his pursuer. He was too manly to scream, too frightened to utter any more normal sound.

He wanted to ask questions, but

his instinct knew every answer, and pure terror strangled each word as it rose in his throat.

Abruptly a wall touched his back and held him.

The big man took him by the throat, driving powerful thumbs into the Adam's apple with a strength and sureness that made Widget's struggles so many flappings of a butterfly.

When the big man had squeezed out both the breath and the life, when the fat face was no longer just repulsive, but pathetic too, he laid Widget gently on the bed.

The big man walked six blocks to another motel, went in by a side entrance near the swimming pool unlocked the door to Room 26.

The woman who waited there for him in a negligee was petite and blonde. Her tense, beautiful face held a single question.

"He won't bother you again," he announced.

He pulled her to him, reached under her garment and ran one big hand up and down her naked back, saying, "I've gotten used to you and your husband being together, but the thought of you with any other man drives me crazy, even a toad like that one."

She shivered in his arms and nestled closer.



THE ANNIVERSARY MURDER

*George and Kathy Weston invited Malone to their
crystal anniversary celebration . . . It was a tragic affair.*

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

**BY
CRAIG RICE**

IT WAS, John J. Malone decided, a most satisfactory party. For one thing, George and Kathy Weston had invited only a few people to help them celebrate their crystal wedding anniversary; and, for another, none of the guests had yet expressed amazement over his personal taste in beverages. Straight gin with a beer chaser had never seemed an unusual combination to him, and it was a relief not to hear it referred to in incredulous tones by

people who didn't know what they were missing.

Malone bit the end off a cigar, lit it, and inhaled it deeply. Fifteen years married, he thought. A long time. And it couldn't happen to two nicer people than George and Kathy.

He had stationed himself by the table on which the liquor had been set out, and now, as he glanced around the Westons' luxurious living room, he discovered with some

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surprise that he was alone. Then he heard laughter from the direction of the kitchen: and now the question was, should he stay here and guard the liquor, or should he go out to the kitchen and join the others?

He had no choice, of course. He leaned his hip against the liquor table, sighed, and broke the seal on a fresh bottle of gin. To stand guard duty properly, a man needed strength.

The clear liquid has just reached the brim of his glass when Malone glanced up and saw George Weston coming toward him from the direction of the stairs. There was something about George's handsome, flat-planed face that, somehow, made Malone forget his drink. He put the glass and cigar down slowly, while a strange tenseness stiffened his short body and tightened the muscles across his stomach. George was walking toward him as if every step was an effort, as if he were half drunk. But he was not drunk, Malone knew. George Weston was a teetotaler. And yet he was walking across his own living room almost as if he were lost in it.

When he was within a few feet of Malone, George stopped. His eyes came up to meet Malone's.

"Malone," he whispered. "Malone . . . for God's sake . . ."

Malone pushed away from the table and stepped close to his friend. He'd seen men in shock, and in hysteria; he'd seen men in most of the ways a man can be—but he'd never

seen anyone with the expression that George Weston wore now. The nearest thing to it had been the look on the face of a punch-drunk prize-fighter he had watched, an instant before the fighter went down from a knockout punch.

"Damn it, George," he said sharply. "What's wrong with you?" He put both wide hands on George's shoulders and shook him. "What's wrong?"

George wet his lips. "It's Kathy," he said. "She's —" He looked at Malone, and his lips moved, but there was no sound.

Malone shook him again. "She's *what*? Speak up, George!"

"She's . . . dead."

The floor beneath Malone's feet seemed to tilt, and for an instant George Weston's face blurred out of focus. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, and the word *dead* sickened through him. . . .

George's eyes moved slowly toward the stairs and back again.

"She's upstairs," he said. "Malone, she's . . ."

Malone's fingers came up to tighten around George's arm. "Come on," he said. He tugged George around and headed him toward the stairs.

"Where is she?" Malone asked.

"In her bedroom. She isn't just dead, Malone. She's—she's been murdered."

"George, you're out of your mind!"

George shook his head. They

started up the stairs. "No," George said. "Somebody's killed her. Somebody's killed my wife."

Malone caught his beefy lower lip in his teeth, and said nothing. Of all the people he knew, George and Kathy were two of the ones he'd liked the best. If Kathy was dead, then a little part of him had died too. Kathy. Lovely, gracious Kathy.

At the top of the stairs, George turned to the right and stopped before the second door. "In there, Malone," he said hoarsely.

Malone twisted the knob and stepped inside. It was a large room, bright and infinitely feminine. It was in perfect order, and even the bottles on Kathy's vanity seemed to have been arranged in some whimsical order of her own.

Malone took in the entire room at a glance. He turned quickly to George. "Where is she?"

"On—on the other side of the bed," George said. "On the floor."

Malone went around the bed fast. Kathy lay on her back, the blue-black waves of her long hair in contrast vividly with the smooth white arm thrown out behind her head. One slim ankle was crossed over the other, and above them her stockinged legs tapered up to swelling thighs. A sheet had been spread over the body from shoulders to hips, but it took Malone no second glance to know that, except for the sheet, and her shoes and stockings, she was completely naked.

She was beautiful in death. It was, Malone thought, almost as if she were sleeping. He put his hand over her heart and held it there until he was convinced.

He looked up at George Weston. Very softly, he said, "How?"

George had remained near the door, but now he closed it behind him and took two tentative steps toward Malone. "Her neck's broken," he said thickly.

Malone put his fingertips to the back of Kathy's head and moved them slowly downward. He felt the break, the small bump where there should be no bump.

He got to his feet and stood very still, looking at George.

"You touch her?"

"I put the sheet over her."

"And what else?"

"I straightened her head. It was all . . ." His shoulders slumped and he put a hand out to the foot of the bed as if for support. "I couldn't stand to see her look that way."

Malone nodded. "Sure, George," he said.

George turned and pulled the bench out from the vanity and sat down. Malone walked to the window and stood staring out into the night. He would have gone through a thousand hells to be able to help George Weston now. But there was nothing he could do for him, and nothing he could say to make it any easier for him.

George was speaking now, almost as if to himself. "I loved her. No-

body will ever know how much I loved her."

Malone cleared his throat. "George, isn't it about time we called the police?"

George nodded. "Yes, I guess so, Malone." His eyes were sick. "This was our anniversary. It was fifteen years today."

Malone felt an utter helplessness that was alien to him. In most situations, he knew what to do, and how to do it. But not this time. His grief was not as great as George's, of course, but it was profound.

"I hate to ask this, George," he said gently. "But have you got any ideas? It had to be one of your guests. You know that."

George was silent a long moment. Then, "No, Malone. It couldn't have been. Everybody loved her. There's never been anybody like her, Malone. Everybody . . ."

Malone tried to get a stern tone into his voice, but he failed. His words came out as gently as before. "You found her without any clothes on? Where are they?"

"Under the bed," George said. "They were in a heap beside her, but I pushed them under the bed. I don't know why. I guess I just didn't want anybody to know what had happened to her."

Quickly then, Malone went around the bed once more and bent down. The dress Kathy had worn earlier was in tatters, and her underclothing had obviously been ripped from her body. Malone

dropped them to the floor and went back to lean against the wall near George Weston.

"Killing her wasn't enough," George said. "They had to do *that*, too."

For the first time in several minutes, Malone felt as if he was capable of coherent thought.

"George," he said, "I'll promise you something. Except for you, no one thought more of Kathy than I did. I'm going to find out who killed her, George—if it takes me the rest of my life."

"You can't bring her back," George said dully. "Nobody can do that."

"No. But we can find out who did it. It had to be somebody downstairs, George. Now, can you think of anyone who might have any reason at all to want to . . ." He paused. "Think hard, George."

George shook his head. "No. Nobody." His face was very white. "I can't stay in here any longer, Malone. I—I've got to have some air. I feel sick."

"Sure," Malone said. "We'll go down the back stairs."

As they walked between the trees in the huge back lawn, John J. Malone, for once, kept his silence. He was thinking back a good many years, back to the first time he had seen George and Kathy Weston.

There had been a carnival on the outskirts of Chicago that year, and one of the feature attractions was the Cage of Death. Malone had

watched two young daredevils wheel a pair of motorcycles into a giant globe fashioned of steel mesh. He had been across the midway at the time, and it was not until he got much closer that he discovered one of the riders was a girl. Her companion had ridden his motorcycle in small circles around the bottom of the cage, until he had gained sufficient momentum to suspend him and his vehicle horizontally. And then, defying gravity, he had increased the speed and looped-the-loop a dozen times.

Then the girl had done the same thing. And, at the climax, both riders were at the top of the mesh sphere one moment, and at the bottom the next, both of them looping-the-loop at the same time, and in opposite directions.

Malone had never seen anything like it. He waited around, and when the young riders came out, he told them so. That was the beginning, and Malone haunted the carny lot and the Cage of Death every night thereafter, until the carnival moved to the next town. He and the two young riders—George and Kathy—had become friends instantly. The next year, Malone had renewed the friendship. He had been watching them the night they collided head-on at the very top of the cage.

Kathy had suffered a broken arm and severe bruises, and that was all. But George had been badly mangled. During the four days when

his chance of life was fifty-fifty, after the long sessions of surgery, Malone had haunted the hospital just as he had the carny lot.

He remembered the way George had tried to smile when he told him he was all right now, but that he could never ride again, and the way Kathy had cried when George said that.

But they had saved a good deal of money, and George had started dabbling in Chicago real estate. Now, on their fifteenth wedding anniversary, they were in the upper income bracket.

They'd been one of the happiest, most devoted couples Malone had ever known. They'd kept close touch with him, and he with them, and his one sure cure for the blues was an evening with George and Kathy.

Malone glanced sideways at George. "You feel like going back now?"

"In a minute," George said.

"We've got to call the police."

"Yes, I know. In just a minute."

"About these guests of yours," Malone said. "I got their first names when you introduced me, and that's about all. Give me a quick run-down on them."

George stopped walking. He sat down on a stone bench and shook a cigarette out of a crumpled pack. He rolled it around in his fingers absently, then suddenly broke it in two and flicked it away.

"There are four guys and three

women in there," Malone said. "Who are they, and *what* are they?"

"None of them did it," George said.

"Never mind. What about them?"

"There's Eddie Marcheck. He's the short one with the crew cut. He was a talker with the carny at the same time we were with it. His wife is the tall blonde. The guy with the freckles is Del Esterly. He's in insurance. He and his wife—that's the girl with the glasses—have an agency." He shook his head. "But there's no point in this, Malone. None of them—"

"Go on," Malone told him.

"I don't feel much like talking."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But this is important. What about the others?"

"Well, the other couple are Mark and Jen Stevens. They're neighbors, and Mark is sales manager for a sporting goods firm down near the Loop."

George's voice was thin and tired, and Malone was beginning to dislike himself a little for putting him through the paces at a timelike this. But—it had to be.

"And the solo guy?" he asked. "Who's he?"

George hesitated a moment. When he spoke, his voice was scarcely audible. "His name's McJanet," he said. "Les McJanet. He's a guy I used to know—from school."

Malone took a fresh cigar from his pocket and began, very slowly,

to unwrap it, his eyes on George Weston. There had been a subtle change in George's voice when he spoke of McJanet, something quite apart from its sudden softness. Malone put the cigar in his mouth, unlit. Around it, he said, "Is there something special about this guy McJanet?"

"No, Why?"

"I think there is," Malone said.

"I think there's something special about him. What is it?"

George looked up at Malone, and then moved away again hesitantly.

"He's an ex-con. He's out on parole now. I hadn't seen him in years, and then, this afternoon, I ran into him on State Street. I invited him to our anniversary party. He said he'd come, but that there was something he wanted me to know first."

Malone bit the tip from his cigar and spat it out and glanced toward the house. "And that's when he told you about the parole?"

George nodded. "I told him it didn't make any difference. And it didn't."

Malone stared up at the window of the bedroom where Kathy Weston lay with her neck broken and a sheet across her naked body.

"What was McJanet in for?"

George stood up and started walking back toward the house. Malone fell into step beside him.

"I didn't hear what you said," Malone prompted.

"Assault and rape," George said. "He swore it was a frame-up."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes, I believed him. I've known him most of my life. He couldn't do anything like that." His tone was flat. "And now let me alone, Malone."

Malone drew in deeply on his cigar and said nothing.

They went in through the side door, and George started walking through the hallway to the living room. "Everybody seems to be in the kitchen," he said. "I'm going to try to call the police right now."

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "I want to take one more look in that room."

"Why?"

"Just a hunch. Maybe we can save the police a little work."

George turned to look at him. His eyes were level, his voice steady. "It isn't McJanet, and it isn't anyone else here. I know you think so, but you're wrong. Kathy went upstairs for a minute, and somebody had either sneaked in and was in the bedroom, or they got in through the side entrance while she was up there. I know that—"

"You don't know anything," Malone said sharply. "You're in something pretty close to shock, and you can't even think. It was somebody at this party, and I know it, even if you don't."

He caught himself. This was a hell of a way to talk to a good friend, a man whose wife had just been murdered. He knew how much George had always wor-

shipped Kathy, how he had worked like a dog to build up his real estate business. And he knew, beyond any question, that George had never so much as looked at another woman—no more than Kathy had looked at another man. George had loved his wife with an intensity that was rare in Malone's experience, and *worshipped* was the only word to describe the way he'd felt about her.

He had loved her so much that her death had temporarily deranged him. All this talk about innocent guests came from the part of George's mind that was trying desperately to catch on to something, anything, that it could deny. His mind couldn't deny Kathy's death, but the need for denial was so great that George had somehow channeled it toward something else.

Malone tried to manage a grin for his friend, but it wouldn't stay on his lips. If I'd told George that this wasn't Chicago, instead of that one of his guests had murdered his wife, Malone thought he'd have denied *that* too. Right now, his mind can't accept things. The poor lug. . . .

George studied Malone's face a moment, his eyes cloudy and remote. He shrugged. "All right, Malone." He turned and started up the back stairs. "But I can't go in. I—"

"I know," Malone said. "It'll only take me a minute—and then we'll call the cops."

At the door to Kathy's bedroom, George suddenly put his hands up

to his face, his head bent, his shoulders shaking.

It hurt Malone to see George this way, but there was nothing he could do.

"I—I think I'm going to be sick," George said. He turned in the direction of the bathroom and half ran toward it.

Malone wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and went into the bedroom. From the direction of the bathroom, he could hear George Weston being very sick. He closed the bedroom door and walked slowly around the bed and stood looking down at Kathy.

Any one of those men down there could have done it, he thought. Not the women, because only a man could break someone's neck quickly enough to avoid getting clawed and bitten. It took a lot of strength to break a neck; a hell of a lot of strength.

And motive? That would come out later. It always did. Right now he wanted the personal satisfaction of having a hand in finding the man who had killed a woman he loved dearly. His own deep reaction—the thing George was going through now—would come later, he knew.

He circled the room several times, and each time his eyes missed nothing. His brain was in high gear now, and his thoughts came quickly and clearly, the way they had before in similar situations. He looked

for the obvious thing, the thing that seemed slightly wrong somehow. There was nothing. He came back to the sheet-covered body, and then, with the strongest reluctance he had ever felt toward anything, he bent and pulled away the sheet.

He looked down at Kathy Weston a full minute, his eyes covering every line and curve of her body. He stood wholly without movement, his face as devoid of expression as if it had been a wooden mask.

But, inside him, deep in the pit of his stomach, something tightened and drew into a hard, pulsing knot. And then, carefully, and with infinite gentleness, he drew the sheet back across Kathy's body and left the bedroom.

He walked to the bathroom. The door was open, and George Weston was not inside. Malone went to the stairway and down the stairs to the living room.

The party was gay no longer. Everyone was in the living room, and all were watching George Weston at the telephone. A quick glance at their faces told Malone that they knew what had happened, that George had told them. George put the phone down and looked at Malone. "I've just called the police," he said.

Malone nodded. He took a folder of matches from his pocket and lit his cigar. "Maybe it's just as well, George. A few minutes more, either way, wouldn't make any difference."

"I got to thinking," George said. "Up there in the bathroom. I guess you were right when you said I couldn't think, before." He glanced quickly toward a broad-shouldered man, in his middle thirties, with thinning blond hair and a pinched, sallow face. "And I guess you were right in saying there was something special about Les McJanet. It must have been him, Malone. He just got out of prison for doing almost the same thing he did to Kathy."

The blond man lunged forward, but two of the other men caught his arms and held him. "What the hell is this?" Les McJanet shouted. "What are you trying to pull, Weston?"

Malone put his cigar down in a tray. If there was going to be action, he wanted no tobacco coals in the air.

"It wasn't too difficult to kill Kathy," Malone said. "With people going upstairs to the bathroom, and one thing and another, it wasn't hard to get to Kathy and break her neck and get down again without being missed."

"Goddam it!" Les McJanet yelled. "Let go of me!"

"In just a moment," Malone said. "When you're calmer." He looked around at the others. No one moved or spoke. All eyes were upon him. He turned back toward George Weston. "You can't go through with it, George, and you know it. You're not made that way. I don't know exactly when you decided to

kill Kathy, but it must have been just a few seconds after you discovered she was going to have a baby."

George's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "A—a baby."

Malone nodded. This was hurting him; this was tearing his heart out. "Yes, George," he said. "A baby. You couldn't stand it. You really loved Kathy, George. You practically lived for her. You felt you had to kill her, and the child too."

For the space of ten heartbeats, George Weston's eyes stayed locked with Malone's—and then George looked away. His whole body seemed to slump. His head drooped.

"You know you can't go through with it, George," Malone said. "You thought you could, but you can't."

George wet his lips, and how his face had gone slack and his eyes were sick again.

Malone stood very still, waiting.

"Yes," George whispered. "Yes. That's the way it was. I killed her . . . and I thought I could make it look like Les . . . but I can't. The minute I knew Kathy was dead, I didn't care about anything else. She's dead." His voice was slowly gaining strength. "And now I want to die, too. Do you hear? I *want* to."

Malone nodded to the two men holding Les McJanet. "Let him go," he said. McJanet took a step backward, gazing in stunned horror at his lifelong friend.

Out in the street, a car braked to a fast stop in front of the house.

"That would be the police," Malone said.

"I want to die," George Weston shouted. "*I want to.*"

"No, George," Malone told him. "You do now, but time will change that. You wanted to die a long time ago, too, as I remember." He looked away from George's tortured face. "Don't worry too much about dying. I've saved worse than you from the death house—and I can do it again. Things will be bad, George—but not that bad."

There was a heavy knock on the door, a heavy, official knock.

Les McJanet suddenly found his voice. "But how—how'd you know Kathy was going to have a baby?"

"I saw her, McJanet. Her breasts,

the slight swell of her stomach—not enough to show when she was dressed—but the signs were unmistakable. She was going to have a baby, all right."

"But why should George . . . ? I mean . . . what's wrong with a baby? Why should he kill . . . ?"

"George used to ride a motorcycle in a big cage with a carnival," Malone said softly. "One day he had an accident. It was a bad accident, the way it can be when a motorcycle almost rips you down the middle."

Malone whirled and jerked open the door for the police.

"You see," Malone went on, "a father was one thing George Weston could never be."



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