ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY 35¢

NEW stories
presented by the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers,

The cover of this issue graphically presents what is in the mind of the baseball fan. In addition to hot dogs, cold drinks, and baseball, he wants entertainment. As you can see I have cooperated—even conceding to the ignominy of wearing a blindfold.

Still more complex aspects of the mind are explored in my most recent film, VERTIGO, starring Kim Novak and James Stewart. Though essentially a suspense story, such mental whims as acrophobia, necrophilia, and atavistic perception are used in the development of VERTIGO'S plot. I beg of you not to be alarmed by these dictionary-words; they merely mean that Jimmy Stewart, the boy, meets Kim Novak, the girl.

My severest critic, and I assure you it is not Alfred Hitchcock, made the following observation after a preview of VERTIGO. "I enjoyed the picture," he said, "from beginning to end. Why, even the screen credits made my skin crawl." I can, of course, only assume that the man was alluding to "Directed by Alfred Hitchcock."

Read on. And may you have a shuddering good time.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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Money is considered something of a problem. Most everyone says that it isn't everything, that you can't take it with you, and that it is the root of all evil. There are those, however, who consider it eminently worthwhile.

by Lawrence Treat

It was no problem leaving my insurance business for a few days, and she was easy to trace. She'd spoken of St. Augustine so often—in her mind it was a kind of paradise where she'd lived for awhile before making the mistake of marrying Wes. When she disappeared, I decided she had to be in St. Augustine, and she was.

She had a room in a small, white house with a blue tiled roof and a mass of bougainvilla. The man in the case was living nearby. His name was Sam Josephson, and I guess they saw each other every day. They were afraid not to.

She'd lost weight and her face was pale, but she was as beautiful as ever, and her black eyes

glowed with an intensity I'd never seen before.

I said, "Hello, Alice."

I could almost feel her tremble, and she answered in a low, strained voice. "Hello, Mac," she said. "What brings you here? Vacation?"

"No," I said.

I guess I should start further back. With the big storm upstate, in New York. Or with the bank robbery and that white, rounded drift in the gully that I'd noticed when I drove past.

Fifty thousand dollars, I told myself. Maybe it was down there, in that snow drift, waiting. Tied up in nice, taped stacks, the way the bank gets them. Brand new bills, those choice examples of the engraver's art, printed in special ink on fabulous paper of unique quality. Safe as can be, dry and crisp in their tomb of snow. And the cops not even realizing the money was there. How could they?

But I did. Call it a hunch or call it instinct. The point is there was money around, and I smelt it.

I had logical reasons, too. For over a year I'd lived on that isolated road, a half mile or so from Alice and Wes Ferrick. I used to drop in on them and have a drink. So I knew the situation in their house, and I therefore didn't believe the Ferricks had just up and gone on a trip together.

I had some wild theories, most of which turned out to be wrong. But I was convinced I had to talk to Alice and find out exactly what had happened. After all, to solve a mystery, a man can't dig out a twenty-foot snow bank. And certainly not without a lot of people wanting to know why.

You see, I'd visited the Ferricks the night before the robbery, and I sensed that something was up. When Wes asked me whether I'd give him a lift to town the next day, because something was the matter with his car, she gave him a queer, startled look.

I called for Wes in the morning. He had a bag with him, and he was unusually silent on the way in. Take that bulge in his pocket which could so easily be made by a gun, and the fact that he mentioned nothing about coming back, and who wouldn't be suspicious?

At the office I looked over my mail. There were a couple of premium checks, which I deposited. Then, with the blizzard starting, I went home. I was ahead of the worst of it and, thanks to chains, I managed nicely. I put my car in the garage and made myself snug.

I sat by the window, gloating and staring at the flakes spinning down. Snow stirs me up almost as much as money does, and I watched in a kind of hopped up excitement.

After awhile I made myself a drink, and turned on the radio. It was full of the storm. Highway 30, slippery but still passable. Highway

13, heavy drifts with several cars stalled. Thirty-five mile limit on the Thruway, sections of which were closed. All motorists advised not to go out except in case of emergency.

And then in the middle of the storm, two masked men had to go and hold up a bank. They were seen clearly, and the police had accurate descriptions of their clothing. They'd simply walked in and gotten away with about fifty thousand dollars. When the guard showed up, they shot at him and grabbed a bystander and used him for a shield. Once outside, they got into a stolen car and drove off, and they were out of sight before they'd reached the end of the block. In that whirling snow, tire marks were obliterated in a minute or two. Thereafter, no trace of the robbers or the car or the money.

Well, if you rob a bank in a blizzard, you do it because you need the blizzard. That was my premise, and everything else followed—and eventually took me to Alice and the small, white house in St. Augustine.

She didn't deny anything. Most of it she told me and the rest of it I filled in, partly from what I guessed and partly from what Sam told me later on.

Alice said that after Wes had gone to town with me on the morning of the blizzard, she sat down in the living room. Thinking. Upset and jittery. Reviewing her life with Wes and, in particular, the incidents of the last day or two. She was aware that a crisis was at hand, and that she had to make a major decision.

"I knew Wes had committed a crime once," she told me. "I never learnt the details, but one of those times when we were close, when there was nothing between us, he admitted he'd been in trouble."

I could have told her a little more about that. Assault and armed robbery. He had a smart lawyer, the checking I'd done also informed me, but Wes beat the rap chiefly because even the judge felt that here was a man who deserved a second chance. Wes's open manner, his charm and air of sincerity fooled you. The judge fell for it and gave him a suspended sentence. And later on, Alice fell for it and gave him everything.

I don't know whether the judge ever found out that there was a great emptiness of character behind Wes's appearance, but Alice did. And that morning she reached the end of the line. She was tempted to take the car, which had nothing wrong with it, and leave. In her mind, she composed the farewell note and placed it on the living room couch where he'd see it as soon as he opened the front door. But she couldn't run out on him like that. It would be cowardice; she had to face him directly. And besides, the storm was threatening.

So she didn't go. She sat there and thought, and she made up her mind. Her marriage was no good; she had to end it. For her, Wes was dead.

When she came out of her trance and that grappling with her soul, it was snowing. She got up and went about her household tasks. She washed the dishes, cleaned and vacuumed and did some laundry. When she finished, the snow was getting deep. She wondered when Wes would come back, and why he hadn't taken the car.

She tried to read, but she was unable to keep her mind on anything. She called a neighbor or two and discussed the storm. Outside, she saw the snow plow go by. She watched the flakes whirl in the wind and cover the road almost as soon as the plow had passed. By now she expected that, whatever Wes's business, he'd have to stay in town.

She was rather glad. She saw a day or two by herself, and no real worries. The furnace worked, the water ran, there was plenty of food in the freezer. She had a telephone at hand, and eventually somebody would come and dig her out. Probably Wes hadn't called because it was perfectly obvious that, for the present, no one could possibly get through.

Then she saw him. She thought it was Wes, braving a blizzard and risking his life to return to her. She admitted that her loyal, female heart gave a small leap. She could come to grips with him, they'd have an enforced period of appraisal and adjustment. Love dies hard, and she even thought they might work something out.

She opened the storm door with difficulty; the snow was stacked against it. She said the cold needles of snow stung her face, and she felt happy. And certainly she looked beautiful to the half-frozen, exhausted man staggering across the yard. At the sight of her, he raised his head and lurched forward with a kind of fierce pride in his victory over the elements.

That was when she saw he was a stranger.

Sam Josephson isn't much to look at. He's spare, bony, with rather deep-set, gray eyes, and an earnestness about him. Then, he was also red-nosed and rimy-eyed, and he came stumbling in. He was clutching a bag and he could barely talk. He muttered something about a breakdown, the blizzard, needed rest. Then he collapsed on the couch.

She slammed the front door and hovered over Sam and then rushed to the kitchen to heat up some coffee. She put a slug of whisky in the coffee and brought it back to him. He tried to take the cup, but his fingers were too stiff and he almost dropped it. She had to hold the cup to his lips.

After awhile he began to thaw

out, and he fell all over himself with gratitude. "You just about saved my life," he said. "I was all in. I don't know how far I walked. Must be below zero outside."

"I know. The radio's been warning people not to go out."

"And you think I was fool enough to try, and now I'm on your hands." He stood up and peeled off his overcoat. "I'd like to apologize for being such a nuisance. Will you forgive me?"

She didn't answer, because she was staring at the coat. It was Wes's; she recognized the lining she'd sewed in last month. Then she looked down at the bag and that, too, was Wes's.

"Something the matter?" Sam asked.

"No, no. I thought—when you first came in, I thought you were my husband."

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said. "But I guess nobody's going to get through in this storm."

"How did you manage?"

"Car. But it broke down, went off the road, and that was it."

"And the bag? Why did you bother taking a bag?"

"This?" he said, pointing.

"Yes. It looks like my husband's."

"Oh." It hit him then. Naturally Wes would have been heading for home. And Wes had almost made it, and a blind, crazy fate had brought Sam here, to Wes's wife. Sam said slowly, "Then I guess you know what's in it."

She didn't, and his remark made no sense to her. She said, "You're wearing his coat."

It was a matter of fact statement, and she made it without emotion. But the way she stood there, clean, pure, strong in the way a virtuous woman can be strong —something about her demanded a completely honest answer.

Sam said gently, "I'm afraid your husband is dead."

"Oh!" she said.

She told me that she was stunned, but in a curious manner. She felt much the same as when she read a particularly tragic item in the paper. She was sorry, but people die, and the Wes who had been her husband had died this morning, when she'd decided to leave him. I think her real shock came from seeing Sam as a murderer.

After a moment, she turned around and ran to the phone.

Stupid? Certainly the police couldn't get to her home, she wasn't the hysterical, grief-stricken widow, and she had every reason in the world to conceal her suspicions. What she was doing, on impulse, was to provoke a crisis and force Sam into a role of guilt.

Sam rushed past her, grabbing the phone and yanking it from its wires. And in his fury, he almost knocked her down. She stumbled back, grabbed a chair and sat down in it with a jolt.

"What were you trying to do?" he demanded. "Call the police?"

She stared wide-eyed, and she shook her head.

"I guess you know, now," he said. "And I had to land here, of all places."

She put her head in her hands and began sobbing.

After that, they set up a kind of temporary truce. He asked her where he could stay, and she showed him the guest room. He lay down and took a nap. Then he bathed and put on the dry clothes she'd set out for him. When he came downstairs, dinner was ready.

She had the radio on, and she'd found out. She said, "There was a bank robbery. Two men stole fifty thousand dollars, and took a hostage with them."

"In this blizzard?" he said. "Hard to believe."

She didn't answer, and they didn't talk to each other. The snow was still falling, and at one side of the house the drifts swept up to the window level. According to the radio, entire communities were isolated, roads were blocked and would probably remain closed for days.

Sam and Alice ate without looking at each other. She said her hate was like a fog, she couldn't see clearly, she hardly knew what Sam looked like.

Next day the storm was over, and the landscape stretched out in unbroken whiteness. Clear, dazzling sun, bitter coldness. No road was visible, and familiar landmarks were buried in the gleaming whiteness that covered the countryside.

The radio was giving instructions in case of distress. Many homes were without heat. Helicopters would cruise the isolated areas to take out the distressed and drop food, where necessary. You were advised to make a cross in the snow if you needed a doctor, a circle for food.

Sam and Alice listened to the radio. They didn't speak to each other all day long, and Alice said she almost went crazy. It was far worse than being alone. When you had words to say, you swallowed them. You reacted fiercely to small sounds, the squeak of a shoe, a cough, the whir of the refrigerator. You had an overpowering impulse to mention the way the snow had buried the fence, to point out the pattern of the shadows, the shape of a tree. You had thoughts, and you suppressed them. You longed to scream, to fight, to run away, to speak out your hate. You couldn't.

Hate, confined in a small place, is not nice.

She wasn't scared. Sam had killed her husband, and he might kill her, too. But not yet. He needed her to cook.

There was a moon that night, and they went to bed early. Alice made up her mind to sneak outside and make a signal in the snow. Around one in the morning, she got up

and put on some sweaters and a coat. She tiptoed downstairs and entered the kitchen. She squeezed into her boots, and then tried to pull the door open, which was frozen tight.

She didn't hear Sam come down, but he spoke to her from across the room. "What are you doing?"

She whirled, and she backed up against the door. "Nothing. I've been cooped up all day. I need air."

"You're lying."

"All right," she said defiantly. "I want help. I'm going to get it and you can't stop me."

She tugged at the door, and he ran across the room and hauled her back. She hit out and tried to scratch, and he grabbed her. Then he tripped, and they both fell.

She had no reason to fight, there on the floor. It wasn't going to get her out of the house, her whole attempt was useless and silly and pointless. Except that in the struggle she was close to him, while she strained and threshed in fury. She bit at his ear and tasted blood, and they lay there, locked in an embrace, hating.

When she was quiet with exhaustion, he released her and stood up. He didn't lock the door, which would have been easy. He merely swung around and went upstairs, and a few minutes later she returned to her room.

She gave me no details, but from the way she recounted this part of the story, from the words she used and the inflection of her voice, I knew what really happened.

She was in love with the man who had killed her husband, and she couldn't admit her feelings. She was caught up in emotions that violated all decency and self-respect. There was a bond between her and Sam, and events forced it into hate instead of love.

In the five days that followed, they talked to each other, but in suppressed, antagonistic terms.

"That's a nice chair," he'd say. "I like the color." And she'd answer, "I bought it at an auction, but I don't care for it any more."

Or else he'd pick up a book and remark, "Have you read this?" "Yes." "Do you like it?" "One of my favorites," she'd say. And he'd shove it back on the shelf.

She cooked, and he cooperated in the eating. But otherwise they opposed each other on every issue and in every circumstance that arose.

"I hated him," she said. "He was a murderer, he'd killed Wes. And I had to live there in the same house with him. For six days."

The day the snow plow came through, Sam announced that he was leaving.

"So am I," she said.

"Going to the police?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I'm going with you."

She was confused, her motives were complicated and they bewildered her. She couldn't bring

herself to accuse Sam, but on the other hand she couldn't let him go free.

"I think I went with him as a kind of punishment," she said. "I knew I'd be easy to follow, and I've been waiting for the police to catch up with me. Do you want to see Sam now?"

"Yes," I said. "But tell me something first. Did he take that bag with him?"

"The bag?" she said, as if the thought of it had never occurred to her. "No, I don't think so. I would have noticed."

I asked Alice a few more questions about Sam, where he was living, where he ate, what he did all day. From her answers, it was obvious that Sam wasn't spending much money.

I could have walked in on him and threatened to turn him over to the police on a murder charge, unless he gave me the fifty thousand. But then, if he was ever caught, I'd be wide open. So Sam had to be handled. He had to disappear, and voluntarily.

I saw him in the shabby little bedroom that he'd rented by the week. He sat on the bed, and I took the only chair. I could see the corner of his bag underneath the bed.

He looked something like Wes. Thinner, bonier, and without Wes's easy charm, but the general resemblance was clear.

I introduced myself, and came straight to the point. "I just saw Alice," I said. "She told me the whole story."

"She doesn't know it," he said. "She knows enough."

He shook his head. "I doubt that. It's too fantastic, too incredible. I'm not sure that anybody's ever going to believe it."

"Try me," I said. He shrugged, and I said, "When the thaw sets in and exposes the car in the gully, when the police find what's inside, they'll be looking for you."

Sam pursed his lips and let his breath out in a long, low whistle. "How do you know?"

"A northwest wind usually blows straight through that gully and cleans it like a dinner plate. So when the snow piles up, there has to be something to pile up against. And besides, three men and a car can't disappear into nothing. Not to speak of fifty thousand dollars."

"I suppose not," he said. "Maybe I'm not so bright. But the stupidest thing of all was taking that gun with me."

"You still have it?" I said, in amazement.

He nodded, and that's when the idea hit me. Maybe, I thought. Just maybe. And I gave him a long, searching look.

He smiled, and I said, "Tell me the story. The truth, without any dressing up."

"That's the only way I can tell it," he said.

He began nervously, with em-

barrassment, uncertain whether he could trust me. But as he got talking and relived that harrowing day, he warmed up and his words poured out and I don't think he held anything back.

Sam Josephson was an engineer. He had no family and no trouble finding work, and he wandered restlessly, from job to job. Looking, he said. For adventure, for roots of some kind, he didn't know exactly what. Until he met Alice.

He'd been interviewed for a job on the day that it happened. He'd turned it down, and he was debating whether to leave town or stay for another day. In either case he needed money, and he stepped into the nearest bank to try to cash a check. He was standing near the door when the pair of masked men came in.

He didn't move. He remained where he was and saw the robbery take place. He felt detached, as if he was watching the rehearsal of a play. He thought the hold-up was badly planned, and that the robbers were lucky. He pointed out a half dozen things that were wrong. They didn't cover the entrance, anyone could have walked in and gotten them from behind. Or somebody on the street could have seen what was happening and cut them off from their car, which was unguarded. Sam thought the operation was sloppy, amateurish. He said that if the guard had been on duty when the thing started, he could probably have prevented the hold-up. But by sheer chance he'd gone to the washroom and was in there almost the whole time. When he came out, it was too late. Wes saw him and fired a shot, and then grabbed Sam and ducked behind him and used him as a shield. The two robbers backed out slowly, still behind Sam.

Why Wes pushed Sam into the rear of the car and sat alongside, Sam didn't know. Probably Wes was scared and wasn't thinking straight. Sam represented protection, and Wes kept the protection with him. Maybe that was it.

Gingo, the man driving the car, looked and acted like a professional gunman, and he kept asking Wes why he'd brought Sam along. Once, Gingo stopped the car and told Wes to throw Sam out, but Wes merely laughed and said he liked company. Wes was slightly drunk, and he seemed to enjoy threatening Sam with a gun.

"I couldn't understand him," Sam said, perplexed. "He seemed honest, intelligent, steady. A likable guy having a lot of fun."

"Sure," I said. "That's Wes."

The car had chains on and Gingo handled it expertly. From the conversation, Sam gathered that Wes knew Gingo from earlier days and had sent for him to help on this job. Gingo counted on collecting his share and hotfooting it back to New York as soon as he could.

Wes kept chattering away, he

was in high spirits and proud of what they'd pulled off. When he made Sam change coats with him, Wes proposed it as a joke. He said it would make Sam the robber, and himself an innocent bystander.

He tried to laugh it off, but the act itself was a giveaway. And besides, he kept poking Sam with the gun and saying that, with masks on, nobody could tell them apart.

It was pretty obvious what Wes was planning—kill Sam and Gingo, and walk off with the money. The police would find the two bodies and assume that they were the bandits. The clothing would tally with descriptions, and the police would probably decide that the hostage had been released, and had run off—scared of contact with the police. Then, so long as Wes wasn't found in possession of the money, nobody would even dream he'd participated in the crime.

Gingo drove through the storm for almost an hour. When the car finally skidded and slewed down into a ditch, Sam had no idea where he was, whether Gingo had reached his destination or had had an accident. Probably Gingo didn't know, either.

Gingo, however, was the action type, and he figured that whatever was good enough for Wes was good enough for him. As soon as the car had stopped, Gingo pulled a gun, turned around and shot Wes. Just like that.

Sam dived for Gingo's gun before he could use it again. Sam said it jammed, otherwise he wouldn't have had a chance. But he managed to grab the barrel and twist it. He had leverage, and Gingo's fingers must have been cold. In any case the automatic went off while it was pointed at Gingo's head.

Then Sam panicked. He was in a car with two dead men and a large sum of stolen money. He'd just shot somebody, he was wearing a dead man's coat, a blizzard was raging and in an hour or so the car would be entombed. The fact that he'd fired in self-defense might be hard to prove. He knew nobody in town, logically he might be one of the bandits, and whether he could ever prove his innocence was debatable.

He hardly remembered what he did, but he found himself floundering through snow that came up to his waist. He had the suitcase and the murder weapon, which he'd taken with some hazy notion that it would constitute evidence to clear him. He kept firing the gun insanely, purposelessly, in a kind of blind rage at the storm and at fate. The gun gave him confidence and a feeling of strength, and he shot at the falling snow until the clip was empty. Then he pocketed the gun.

At first he tried to carry the bag in his hand, but it was an encumbrance that he had to drag

through the snow. After awhile he put it in front of him and pushed it as if it were a plow. He said that without it, he could never have fought his way through the drifts.

He battled his way foot by foot. Actually the distance was only about three hundred yards, but it seemed like miles. He fell many times, and eventually he glimpsed the outlines of a house, gauzelike, unreal in the white haze of snow. He was almost exhausted by then, and when he saw a vision of an extremely beautiful woman standing there in the doorway, he thought he was going crazy. Nevertheless the vision gave him a final spurt of strength, and he tottered forward to the door. He was incoherent, and he didn't really come to until he was sitting on a couch, still clutching the bag, and Alice was holding a cup of coffee to his lips.

The rest of his story was the same as Alice's, except that he didn't mention the fight in the kitchen. He lived through the days that followed it in a kind of sardonic, senseless despair. He was in love with her, but she thought he'd killed her husband, and he had no way of proving otherwise.

Sam let it go at that. He said he could have told her what had happened, but she wouldn't have believed it. Nobody would. So he said nothing, in the hope that some day, somehow, she'd find herself convinced that Sam couldn't have killed Wes. She had to have faith before he told her.

"In the same way that I knew she was innocent," he said. "At first, when I found out she was Wes's wife, I assumed she knew all about the robbery. She never defended herself or told me she was innocent, but I knew it. A girl like Alice—how could she be anything else?"

I said, "Where's the gun now?"

He tapped the edge of his bag with one foot. "In there."

"And the money?"

He shrugged.

"Sam," I said, "the police have no idea of what's in the gully, they're not investigating, they don't know where to look. You realize that, don't you?"

"Sure. Until it thaws."

"If you get rid of the gun and the money, who can ever connect you with the crime? Alice won't give you away. If she were going to, she'd have done it long ago."

"I know that."

"Then give me the gun. Trust me, Sam. I'm an old friend of Alice's. I'll go down to that gully and bury the gun deep in the snowbank. Then in the spring the police will find the whole package—the car, the two corpses, the guns. You'll be free."

"How about Alice? They'll look for her, won't they?"

"Not until the snow melts. And if you marry her, there's no Alice

Ferrick any more. You're an engineer, you can get a job thousands of miles away. You have no family, the two of you can drop out of the world and disappear. It ought to be easy for you."

"Why are you willing to do this for me?" he asked.

"For fifty thousand dollars."

"Oh," he said. "I see. Except that I haven't got it."

"Then where is it?"

Sam went into a brown study. I suppose he was fighting with his conscience, so I gave one side of the battle a prod or two.

"I think you got your story twisted," I said. "If you didn't shoot Wes, how come you have his gun?"

"But I haven't got it," Sam said. "I've got Gingo's."

"Alice isn't interested in guns," I said. "She doesn't know one from another. But once I tell her you have Wes's and give her a hint of what that means, she's intelligent enough to get the point. Then you lose her."

"You don't have to convince her," Sam said. "She probably still thinks I killed Wes." Then Sam heaved a deep sigh, bent down and opened his suitcase. He handed me the gun. "The money's still in Wes's bag," he said. "In the attic, under a loose board next to a brown, leather trunk. I'd have turned it in long ago except that, as I told you, nobody would ever believe me."

"I do," I said.

I guess Alice did, too, and I think my visit helped bring them together, because they left St. Augustine the next day. I imagined Sam changed his name and took a job out of the country, along the lines of my advice. In any case, they both vanished without a trace. But *I* know they're with each other, and happy.

I went back north and drove straight to Wes's house. The money was in the attic, exactly where Sam had said it would be. I brought it home and went down to my cellar and began counting it, and that's where the police found me.

It seems that, while I was away, the wind whipped up the snow and uncovered the top of the car. Then the police dug and found the two bodies, beautifully preserved in their cold tomb. They'd been watching Wes's house ever since.

Sam was right, of course. Nobody believes a word of his story. The police think I was the hostage, and that I killed Wes and Gingo and hijacked the loot. How else, they say, could I have both the money and the murder weapon?

I am extremely fond of children, goblins, and hobgoblins—which are, of course, goblins with hobs. And though I also find hen-pecked husbands amusing, I'm aware that the credit for making them so must go to their awful wives. All this is apropos of our small epic.

TILL DEATH DO US PART

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

EVERYONE knew Mrs. Hudding would kill her husband. It was just one of those things that had to happen. She'd been half-killing him once, twice, three times a week as long as I could remember, and the neighborhood kind of stood around waiting for her to slip up and go all the way.

Mrs. Hudding was a big woman. She was tall, and there was a lot of her no matter what way you meas-

ured. She didn't wiggle when she walked, either, like Mrs. Rodney, over on the next street, or Doctor Long's wife. She had hefty arms and broad shoulders, and dad used to say she was all muscle.

Mr. Hudding was just a little squirt—not much bigger than me. He was an all-right Joe. He bought us kids candy when he could hold out any money on Mrs. Hudding, and sometimes he'd play baseball or football with us, or maybe umpire. That didn't happen often, because Mrs. Hudding didn't let him out of the house often. We kids all liked him, even if we were a little ashamed of the way he let Mrs. Hudding kick him around.

It always happened along about dark. We could hear them banging around, and Mrs. Hudding would throw things at him and chase him through the house. She always screamed all the time she was doing it, and if you didn't know what was going on, you'd of thought he was punishing her terrible.

Mr. Hudding never said a word. I suppose he was too busy keeping out of her way. She'd keep chasing him and screaming, and if any of us kids were out in the yard, the folks would send us in the house. All the neighbors — the grown-up people — lined up on their front porches and waited.

After awhile she'd catch him, and then she'd come tearing out the front door and across the porch and down the steps, screaming all the way, and usually she headed for our house. She'd run up on our porch, crying to mother how Mr. Hudding was after her again, and dad and I would hurry out the back door and over to the Huddings' house. The house would always be a mess, with broken dishes everywhere and furniture tossed around, and sometimes even a broken window. Once we found the piano tipped over.

Usually Mr. Hudding would be in the bathroom trying to patch himself up, but sometimes we'd find him on the floor, unconscious. That was why dad took me along; he never knew when he might have to send for a doctor, and the Huddings didn't have any telephone. The telephone company wouldn't let them, because Mrs. Hudding was always smashing it.

We kids called her the Witch, and when we heard her chasing him around we'd say, "The Witch is riding tonight." I think maybe that's how the thing got started. Everyone knew she'd kill Mr. Hudding sooner or later, but we kids knew just when it was going to happen. She was going to kill him on Halloween.

That got going as a joke along about the end of the summer, and before long we were really believing it. It got so I didn't even worry when I heard Mrs. Hudding starting in on him. I knew he was safe enough — that time. It was a good

joke among us kids until the first part of October, when that smart alec Willie Dobson gave it away.

Mr. Hudding had sneaked out to play baseball with us. Willie was pitching, and Mr. Hudding lifted a long one that bounced into the creek. That made Willie mad, and after Mr. Hudding crossed home plate he yelled at him, "Is it true the Witch is going to kill you on Halloween?"

Mr. Hudding knew right away what he meant. He kind of grinned, and he said, "That's three weeks away, Willie. Do you think I'll last that long?"

We tried to laugh it off, but we were pretty embarrassed about it. As soon as Mr. Hudding left we ran Willie half way across town, and we wouldn't have stopped then if he hadn't been bawling.

Believe me, I was scared that Halloween. I was scared sick. I didn't even want to go out when night came, but all the other kids were going, and mom had made a mask for me, so I filled my pockets with laundry soap, and started out. It was just turning dark, and the Huddings' house was quiet, so I thought maybe we were wrong after all. I headed on down the street, and all of a sudden somebody stepped out from behind a tree and walked along beside me. It was Mr. Hudding.

"Anything doing tonight, Johnnie? Any excitement?" he said.

I told him I didn't know; I was just getting started.

"Got any extra soap?" he said.

I gave him a piece, and we sneaked up together and soaped the Yardleys' big front window. Some kids were trying to put a cart up on Forbe's barn, but old man Forbes saw them before we got over there, and they scattered.

"Things are pretty quiet," Mr. Hudding said. "It used to be different, when I was young."

We circled back down the alley and kicked over a few trash cans. When we got behind our garage, he pulled out a couple of cigarettes, and asked me if I wanted a smoke. I told him no, I guessed I was too little, and he nodded, and sat down to smoke one himself.

All of a sudden I heard Mrs. Hudding calling him. "Roger!" she screamed. "Roger! You get home here!" I'd never heard her so mad. I knew she always had him doing the dishes and cleaning up the house in the evening, and he'd probably sneaked out without her knowing about it.

He sat there smoking his cigarette, and I watched him and listened to Mrs. Hudding. She'd stop for a couple of minutes, and then she'd shout again from the front of the house.

I was pretty jittery. "Is she going to kill you?" I asked.

He lit another cigarette, and said he wouldn't be a bit surprised.

"You know, Johnnie," he said, "some people are better off dead. Maybe I'm that kind of person. I've been thinking about it."

I was thinking if he wanted to be dead in a hurry, making Mrs. Hudding mad like that was a good way to get it done.

He smoked for awhile without saying anything. Mrs. Hudding was out in the back yard screaming. I was afraid she'd come as far as the alley and see us, but she didn't. We were lucky.

"Johnnie," Mr. Hudding whispered, "do you know what happens to a person who kills somebody?"

"They get hung, don't they?" I whispered back.

"Not always. Sometimes they just go to jail. And sometimes they get off without having anything done to them. If Mrs. Hudding killed me, what do you think? Would she be hung?"

I didn't know, so I didn't say anything. But I kind of thought I knew what he was getting at—he wouldn't mind being killed so much, if he could be sure Mrs. Hudding got what was coming to her. I didn't really understand it, and I knew mom would say I was too young to be worrying about things like that, but with him sitting there smoking and Mrs. Hudding not thirty feet away screaming, I couldn't help worrying about everything.

She gave up after awhile, and went back in the house. He threw away his cigarette, and patted me on the back, and said, "Johnnie, Halloween comes only once a year, and we might as well have a little fun. Let's go."

We raised some ruckus together, I'm telling you. I never had so much fun on Halloween in my life. We did the town over from one end to the other before we finally ended up back on our street. Someone had knocked out the street lights, and we sneaked up and down the block getting in some good last licks. It was nearly eleven when we got back in the alley behind our houses, and that was late even for me.

"I guess that does it, Johnnie," Mr. Hudding said. "It was fun while it lasted, wasn't it?"

"It sure was," I said.

"Let's keep it a secret. Just between you and me."

"Cross my heart," I said.

"All right, Johnnie. We might as well face the music."

He started up the path to his house. I stood there watching him go, and I was shaking right down to the bottoms of my feet. Mrs. Hudding heard him coming, and she lit the back-porch light. He looked so little, going up the back steps, and Mrs. Hudding looked so big standing there in the doorway waiting for him. Neither of them said anything. They stood there looking at each other, and then she

opened the door, and he made a run for it and got past her into the house.

In all the years they lived beside us, she never took after him like she did that night. She was mad enough to break him in two, if she got her hands on him, and I knew sooner or later she'd tire him out and catch him. Around in front I couldn't see anything because the street was dark, but I could hear people out on their porches listening to her scream at him. I listened as long as I could stand it, and then I went up to my bedroom. Even up there I could still hear them, and I could tell when she caught him. She always screamed different, when she had ahold of him.

I knew she'd be over at our house in another minute, and I started downstairs to find dad, so we could go over and see what had happened to Mr. Hudding. Sure enough, she went galloping through the house, and screamed her way out the front door and across the porch, and then there was a louder scream that stopped kind of funny like.

There were already a lot of people crowding around when I got out front. Mom chased me back in the house, and a little later dad came in. He said Mrs. Hudding had fallen and gotten herself killed, and Mr. Hudding wasn't in such good shape. They took him to the hospital, and dad went along. He waited there until morning, and when he came home he said it was all right, that Mr. Hudding would get well.

He did, too, and he sold the house and rented our attic room, and since then he's been just about the best friend I have. He's always buying things for me, and taking me places, and sometimes mom catches him winking at me and wants to know what we two are cooking up.

We cook up some pretty good ones, I'm telling you, but nothing as good as that Halloween, the night when we carried away the Huddings' front steps.

But as Mr. Hudding says, that's nobody's business but ours.

It is bruited about that competition is the life of trade. In this somewhat dramatic tale, what competition does to certain individuals shouldn't happen to a business man. But there is one bright spot: victims are always welcome in the pages of this fine publication.

by Jay Folb

WITH a shaking hand, Gerard Gordon squeezed a cigarette into the ivory holder. The Huntsman salt stand was the finest of its kind he had ever seen. Blood thumped in his ears. He *had* to own it. This time he would outbid de Bartro, even if he had to double the figure he had scribbled in the mimeographed catalogue.

He was dimly aware of the auctioneer's description of the piece.

If only the man's assistant would keep his grimy hands from soiling the magnificent head and exquisitely tooled base! Of *his* Huntsman. "Yes, de Bartro, you smug devil," his eyes said to the slumped body two rows in front, "this one is mine."

The auctioneer called for a bid. An amateur hopefully cast out a figure in the hundreds. Moments later, Gordon's finger flicked the price up by fifty—de Bartro was not even bidding—and it seemed as if the Huntsman would surely be his. And then de Bartro joined in combat. The bidding soared . . . higher . . . higher. . . . higher. Gordon's eyes clouded with strain. The bid was at six thousand. Impossible! Where, to whom, could he sell it? And how much could he get? Tomorrow's auction would dispose of the best furniture in the famed Stanley collection. That would take cash, all Gordon had. His head shook "No" to the auctioneer's questioning eyes.

Sweat dried cold on Gordon's face. Again de Bartro had outbid him on every item he had wanted. He could no longer avoid approaching the man.

Cane tucked firmly under his arm, Gordon edged between the rows of folding chairs to the regency chest where Daniel de Bartro stood reviewing his auction list.

"De Bartro," he said at the younger man's elbow. Gordon's graying hair was swept back neatly without a part. Wax kept his ample gray moustache in place down to the last hair.

Although de Bartro had heard, he ignored Gordon. In his sweat-stained shirt, he was a slothful contrast to the carefully dressed older man.

Gordon cleared his throat and plunged into speech.

"Those bids were fantastic," he said. "You're willing to outdo me at any cost. *Any* cost."

De Bartro turned around. His full, flushed face grew more oval with his deprecating grin.

"Just waking up?" he said. "I mean to outbid you anytime, anywhere, *Lord* Gordon."

A spasm of anger gripped Gordon's neck. Venom prompted his tongue, but at the same moment he realized venom would be disastrous. Instead, he allowed self-pity to sting his eyes.

"I'm shocked," he said. "After all, I don't want to make your life miserable. Why choose *me* as a target for ruin?"

"Ho! I like your pious attitude," de Bartro said. He put his weight on the brown marble of the chest. "When I moved from Boston to New York you didn't give *me* a break, did you? Not one. And you were right. It's dog eat dog, and now my teeth are sharper than yours."

Gordon blinked under attack. In a face pained by insomnia, his small eyes were bloodshot.

"Such hate!" he said. "I've never walked into an auction room hating anyone the way you hate me."

"Strictly impersonal," de Bartro said. "I want to be best. I've always wanted to be best. And I am. 'The House of de Bartro' is number one. And it's going to stay that way."

Gordon supported himself on his gold-handled cane. De Bartro was right and it hurt. Ever since Harry Horn's illness had forced him into semi-retirement, Gerard Gordon had been number one. Now de Bartro was kingpin on the avenue where the remnants of history were evaluated in dollars and cents.

"Don't write me off, young man," he said. "I still know a thing or two you don't."

De Bartro smiled, then said, "You weren't so smart about that aquamanile when you let me take it at a hundred and a quarter. Guess what? I sold it yesterday for three thousand dollars."

"You can't taunt me with lies. I'm not a child!" He was losing control, debasing himself by even talking to de Bartro.

"A lie? Oh no, Lord Gordon," de Bartro said, returning to his list as Gordon edged out of the aisle. "Ask Harry Horn. He bought it."

Gordon remembered the aquamanile vividly. It was a knight on horseback, mounted on marble. It had struck him as beautiful, but a copy. If de Bartro wasn't lying, then it hadn't been a copy and he had missed out on something of great value.

Harry Horn's shop was a block from Gordon's in the upper sixties on Third Avenue. The aging Horn had been the titan of English antiques until a heart condition and asthma drastically curbed his activity. Now his shop was mainly an outlet for mediocre pieces which he kept mounded without too much care against the walls of the musty-smelling store.

Horn's belt was hidden underneath his rumpled shirt as he leaned back against the worn fabric of the upholstered swivel chair.

"Sure I bought that aquamanile. Magnificent. Best I've ever seen." With each phrase air rasped into his lungs then wheezed out. "Nothing like it even in England. Age? Twelfth century. I'll double the money I spent."

Gordon was staggered. He pulled a chair under him and gripped its arms.

"It was almost mine," he said. "De Bartro won't let me live. What am I going to do, Harry? Not one item did I get today because of him. And tomorrow . . . tomorrow they'll auction off the museum pieces. How can I stop him?"

"Only one way. Beat him at his own game."

"It's hopeless," Gordon said. "Where does the pig get his

money? Where does he find his clients? For me, there's a limit. I can bid on any antique. Not for him. He'll bid twice what an item is worth and make it pay."

"Then you've answered yourself," Harry said. "You can't win. Why try? Lower your ideals. Don't carry such fancy stuff. Don't charge such fancy prices."

"You don't understand," Gordon said. "I love every antique that comes through my door. I love its beauty, its history. Not de Bartro. To him an antique is just a piece of furniture. Great antiques are my life. I won't become a junk dealer."

"You don't have to," Harry said, drawing close. He clasped his thick fingers together into a ball of flesh. "Why don't you retire? I tell you this as a friend. De Bartro can't be beaten. Sell out before you worry yourself to death."

"To you?"

"If you put your store up for auction, de Bartro will own everything like usual. Sell out to me. I'll pay."

"No, Harry," Gordon said, getting to his feet. "I'm not finished. Today was de Bartro's day. Tomorrow is mine."

"I doubt it," Harry said. "Good luck anyway."

Gordon had ended his visit on a note of bravado, but by the time he reached his place of business his stomach was knotted with anxiety again. The following day would be crucial. Before his mind's eye paraded the Stanley antiques with their golden wood buffeted by time . . . the carved and grooved oak food cupboard that dated back to the thirteenth century, the George I armchair, the single-handed wall clock. They belonged here, where they would be understood and loved.

Sitting at the sixteenth century desk he used for himself, Gordon knew tomorrow would be like all other days. Beyond question de Bartro possessed an amazing fund of information, otherwise he could not have called his shots so accurately. It had happened over and over again. It would happen tomorrow.

Across the street he saw the lights dim under de Bartro's red neon sign. He saw him turn the inside lock at the door and quickly withdraw into the blackness of the heavily stocked store.

Why not talk to him once more? Surely de Bartro couldn't deny that their conflict cost him huge sums of money. A little agreement and both would profit. He'd even concede first choice to the man. That would be better than leaving the auction empty-handed.

Gordon pulled the string of the fluorescent lights and walked in darkness to his door.

At de Bartro's, he knocked with his cane and minutes later saw de Bartro's form emerge from the staircase that led to the basement.

The crimson-faced man was annoyed.

"What is it, Gordon? I'm busy."

"I'd like to talk things over."

"What for?" de Bartro asked. Then he relented. "Well, if you don't make a night of it."

Gordon followed him past some of the most expensive and beautiful English antiques in America. He knew nearly all of them on sight and knew what de Bartro had paid for each one.

He followed him downstairs to a clearing where de Bartro had laid out a complete set of George II silver for polishing. The younger man sat under the weak yellow bulb and rubbed pink polish onto a fruit bowl.

"Recognize this stuff?" he asked. "You thought I wouldn't break even. I've tripled my investment." He laughed and stared provokingly into Gordon's eyes. "What's bothering you, Gordon?"

"I saw Harry Horn," Gordon responded. "It's true about the aquamanile. I take my hat off to you. Very clever."

In silence, de Bartro removed the polish from the bowl.

"I'll get to the point," Gordon said, staring at the back of de Bartro's mottled neck. "The Stanley auction is the biggest thing in decades. Yet there's enough for everyone. Why not make a deal? I'll step aside, take a back seat. Let me have just a few—"

"Nothing doing," de Bartro said.

"Why bid against each other?" Gordon asked.

"Because on just two or three pieces, I'll make more than with a deal," de Bartro said.

"I'm not asking for much."

"It's too much. Too much, Lord Gordon."

That was it. A decree of ruin uttered by a pig-faced man wallowing in the filth of his foul-smelling silver polish. What point was there in playing the gentleman? This was a jungle and like a jungle animal he would have to act. De Bartro's death alone could resolidify his lost leadership. De Bartro's death alone could make tomorrow the biggest day of his life. An opportunity like the Stanley auction would probably never come again in his lifetime. This time he would not lose.

Gordon reached into his pocket for the soft doeskin gloves. Fitting them finger by finger, he said, "Very well. You've had the last word. I had hoped you would find an agreement worth your while. But, since you don't . . ."

It had to look like robbery—murder done for money, not out of malice. A murderer would use one of the silver candlesticks stacked on the table at his side. Slowly, he curled his fingers around the nearest candlestick.

De Bartro was rubbing the surface of the fruit bowl to a brilliant gloss. The big, unwashed head was an excellent target. The blow

was fast. But not fast enough. De Bartro saw it coming and moved so that he took a glancing, stunning blow. He fell on his side.

"Pig! Pig!" Gordon screamed. And dropping to his knees, he twice delivered the heavy candlestick hard and accurately against the fallen man's temple.

Gordon held de Bartro's wrist and felt the pulse come to a stop. Now, fighting the shudder that went through his body, he tried to concentrate on "robbery." He sped up the wooden stairs two at a time. At de Bartro's desk, he flung papers around wildly as he went through every drawer. It didn't matter whether he found money or not. What mattered was to make the motive of de Bartro's murder appear to be robbery. In the big, deep drawer of the desk, he discovered a green steel box. It was locked. De Bartro's jacket hung over the chair beside the desk; he found a set of keys in the second pocket into which he looked. The smallest key clicked the box open.

Inside, was a roll of bills. Gordon estimated two thousand dollars or more. Good. That would help repay some of the heartache, some of the loss. He stuffed the roll into his pocket.

Gordon was about to throw the emptied box aside when, in the thin light coming from the basement, his eyes fell on a piece of paper that bore the words, "Stanley Auction." He unfolded it and read. Listed in longhand were the numbers and descriptions of more than two dozen antiques that would be on auction the next day. It was fantastic! De Bartro had accurately described each piece down to the maker and date, displaying a profound knowledge of his field, a knowledge that far surpassed his own. Next to each number was a ceiling bid. The sheet was priceless!

He left, first wiping the door of fingerprints, the only place touched by his ungloved hands.

The auction floor was filled when Gordon arrived, and he took the seat that had always been reserved for him.

De Bartro's death had caused a stir. The dealers were shocked, but at the same time were well aware that his demise would prove a windfall, providing Gerard Gordon looked upon certain antiques with disfavor.

As he sat looking around, Gordon saw Harry Horn waddle toward him from between two six-foot cabinets.

"What the devil are you doing here, Harry?" he asked.

"Just once is not going to hurt me," Harry answered, sitting heavily and noisily next to him. "Hear about de Bartro?"

"Yes, I read about it. I was shocked. Terribly shocked. A business feud is one thing. Death is

another. Our little quarrel certainly seems puny today."

Horn tsk-tsked. "Awful. So young, too."

"You should be thinking about yourself," Gordon said. He hammered his chest. "Bad for the heart to be here. You said as much many times."

"I know," Horn said, woefully. "I know. I'm a fool. But I wouldn't miss this auction for anything. Such a pity about de Bartro. Still, with him not here it's money in the bank. Right, Gordon?"

Horn had been tough on the auction floor in his day. But that, Gordon hoped, was a thing of the past.

"Don't be disappointed," Gordon said. "I can be just as formidable as de Bartro."

"I hate to be disappointed about something I want to own," Horn said, wheezing a laugh. "That's how I always was, and I haven't changed. So watch out."

Horn left, making his way to the privileged chair on the side of the auction stand. Gordon's worried eyes stayed on him. Any doubt that Horn meant business, fled with the crack of the auctioneer's gavel. Horn went one bid better, and the first item on de Bartro's list was gone. Minutes later the second was lost; then the third went to a fat man who raised a single finger with absurd daintiness.

Had Horn gone wild with fever to possess? Had one demon replaced another? What happened?

But Gordon's luck changed with the carved and grooved oak food cupboard. Horn backed down and from that point on *stayed* backed down.

Gordon relaxed. He touched the breast pocket where he kept the annotated sheet. He trusted it. De Bartro had exhibited extensive and sure knowedge. Every cent Gordon had would be invested in the dead man's acumen.

Over piece after piece the English mahogany dressing table, the regency gilt mirror, the George I armchair—Horn battled and lost. It didn't matter to Gordon that Harry Horn was forcing him to spend up to the limit for each piece. Everything Gordon wanted was now his. In a matter of weeks, he would make back all that he had spent, and from then on every sale would be one hundred per cent profit.

When the last bid of the day was over and the floor began clearing, Gordon made preparations to have everything picked up and delivered. Meanwhile, he surrendered as deposit the cash he had on him, including the two thousand three hundred he had emptied from de Bartro's security box.

He turned from the teller's cage. Horn faced him stolidly.

"It wasn't your day," Gordon said, commiserating. "But then I deserve a break after all the bad luck I've had."

"Your luck is *still* bad," Horn said, shaking his head. "Because you won't be around to sell what you bid for. Just like Danny de Bartro. Your stuff'll go back on auction, too. Gordon, you killed him."

Whatever Horn knew he seemed to know positively. How he knew didn't matter. Gordon pondered an attack, *anything* to stop the sick man's heart from taking another beat.

"You're getting senile," he said. "I wasn't anywhere near de Bartro last night."

"I know you killed him," Horn said. "You killed him, then robbed him."

"That's insane. You must be out of your mind to say such a thing."

"It's the truth," Horn said. "Danny and me were partners. Yes, partners. I was getting old. I needed somebody young, somebody with energy. So I made him a partner. Of course it was better nobody knew. That way we got rid of things we didn't want through me."

"De Bartro's partner! You! Why you're worse than he was!" Gordon's head reared back, leonine, suddenly disdainful. "But you're lying Horn. For some weird reason you're lying."

From a distant doorway, one of the laborers moving auctioned pieces called out Harry Horn's name.

"Over here'" Horn shouted, his breath ending in a whistle.

"No, I'm not lying," Horn said as a tall, hatless man was pointed in their direction. "De Bartro wasn't smart enough to know value. I had the brains. De Bartro had the energy. I wrote out a description of every piece he was to bid for. And I wrote down the prices. I know you've got the paper because you were bidding like you know as much as me. Which you don't. After the first three bids, I watched you hit every ceiling price I wrote down."

The plain-clothes man introduced himself unceremoniously, and Gordon's hand automatically went to his breast pocket. But he knew it was too late to destroy de Bartro's list.

A murder occurs, and the police cry, "Find the woman!" And because a murder is an occasion, their outcry is, of course, in French. Fortunately, for all of us, their Irish lilt enhances, "Cherchez la femme!" *In the story confronting us, it is money that is sought—but, undoubtedly, for some femme or other.*

The Last Gourmand

by Donald Honig

THEY walked past the monument and crossed the avenue, appearing in the streetlight for a moment and then fading back into the dark. The candy store was the last place open in that end of the neighborhood. They passed it without looking in and then passed the empty lots. A breeze sighed through the weeds.

"I still say it's crazy," George said. "I don't care what you say."

"When you lay your hands on five thousand," Joe Geeb said, "you'll see how crazy it is."

"I don't know what makes you so sure it's there."

"Because it has to be. Carl Muldoon put it there."

"And then they killed him."

"That's right," Joe Geeb said. "They killed him because he wouldn't tell them where it was, or maybe because he tried to make some deal, or for some other reason."

"How do you know he didn't tell them?"

"Because they killed him, man," Joe Geeb said. "Why do you think they killed him? If he would have told they wouldn't have killed him. They would have taken the money

and bugged out. But he wouldn't talk, so they tried to beat it out of him, but they couldn't do that either. He wasn't a very big guy but he was tough. My old man knew him. He says Carl Muldoon was real tough."

"How do you know they beat him to death?" George asked. He was tall, walked slowly, his eyes watching the sidewalk with quiet gravity, disgruntled-seeming, as if he had been impressed into this scheme, his hands in his pockets.

"I saw him, remember?" Joe said. "I was the one who found the body, me and Inchy Hines. Ever since that time, God, it's almost ten years ago now, I've been thinking about it, figuring it out—the whole story, from that dead guy and the newspaper stories to Carl Muldoon dead in that house and all that money never turning up."

"Listen," George said, "do you know how many tramps and hoboes and kids and midnight lovers have been in and out of that house in ten years?"

"Not that many," Joe said. "You don't get that many hoboes in Capstone to begin with, and kids have been afraid to go near the place, and the midnight lovers don't tend to go exploring around."

They crossed to the next block. There were a few two-family houses here, dark now, quiet. The avenue was very still.

"If you're that sure then that it's there," George said, "why don't you go in yourself and look for it?"

"I wouldn't go into that house alone for—five thousand dollars," Joe said.

"But you'll go with me for twenty-five hundred?"

"You said it just right," Joe said.

"And how come you've waited all this time?"

"It took me that long to convince myself that it's in there. And besides, didn't you know they're tearing the old place down in a few weeks? This is my last chance."

They came to the house. It was a two-story faded clapboard. It had been abandoned a long time ago, perhaps twenty years. It stood alone in this quiet, lonely part of the neighborhood, gloomy and windowless. The wind came low and smooth across blocks and blocks of empty lots. The neglected hedges in front soared to an incredible height. They were black and shaggy and almost as tall as trees, running the length of the house's avenue frontage, about fifty feet, parting where the cracked concrete of the front walk began.

Ten years before the hedges had not been as tall but they had been just as wide and intractable and the house had been just as bleak and vacant but only not serenely old as it was now, but with a kind of whining self-sorrowing and desperation as though it knew that there was still hope, time, for it

then and that that hope and that time were waning. That end of Capstone had been even quieter in those years. The few houses that were there now had not been built yet. No one ever walked there. But it was different down at the other end. It was, not livelier really, but more exciting then, particularly down around the desolate Baker Avenue cemetery streets. It seemed that people in the city and in Brooklyn knew about Capstone's mild and quiet streets. Whenever something happened in those unpredictable sections in those gun-wild days, whenever someone had to be taken for a ride, it was done in Capstone. Dead bodies were always being found along the roadsides, in the empty lots, around the cemeteries, marked with bullet holes, gentlemen given the short action by their peers for reasons seldom quite discovered. (The police were never really that interested; the deposed men were almost always public liabilities the police had been looking for.)

Carl Muldoon was walking down that way one morning when he saw protruding from the grass a pair of gleaming black shoes, the toes pointing obliquely at the sky. Muldoon stepped into the lot and looked down into the grass. There was a very disgruntled face there, glaring sightlessly at the blue sky. Because the bullet holes were in the back of the head, Carl was not sure that the man was dead, although he suspected it firmly because, as the boys in Paddy's said, once they headed in that general direction they had sung their last song. He got down and fumbled his hand over the man's heart. It was stone still. Having gotten that close to him, Carl decided to speculate further. He slipped his fingers in and out of every pocket, finding nothing. He was about to get up when he noticed a bulge on the inside of the man's jacket. There was no pocket there. Whatever was there had been sewn into the lining. Carl covered the man's face with a handkerchief and then proceeded to tear open the lining. A roll of bills fell into his hand. The top one was a hundred. He riffled them with his thumb. They were all hundreds. He stuffed them into his pocket, uncovered the glaring face and got up and walked away, his legs weak, his head hot, giddy.

He walked up to Grant Avenue and then turned up the police block where he went into the station house and reported what he had found, saying nothing, of course, about the money. (It was five thousand dollars; he had counted it in the washroom in Paddy's.)

The story was in the papers the next day, with Carl Muldoon of Capstone being accorded the proper credit. The motive for the slaying, the paper said, had probably been robbery because something had been torn out of the lining of the victim's jacket.

Carl Muldoon didn't know it, but someone else had been walking in the cemetery that morning. Stephen had seen everything. Stephen was an itinerant odd-job man who lived in the neighborhood. He was a hapless blunderer, with a child's vague mind in his man's body. He had been in the cemetery, near the fence, walking around looking for his mother's grave. (He had forgotten where it was; had been going there for the past six months with flowers looking for it, leaving the flowers on some other grave each time and going home.) He had seen Carl Muldoon kneeling in the grass, staring covertly about. Stephen had frozen among the tombstones, his head thrust forward, peering intently. He watched Muldoon do something. Then Muldoon was walking away, stiff and unnatural, walking quickly. When Muldoon had gone a few blocks, Stephen dropped the flowers and climbed over the fence and ran into the grass. He came to the body and stopped short, tilting his head and staring down at it with wide lachrymose eyes. *Dead,* he thought carefully, concentrating hard upon the word until he had made it positive, lucid. He looked up. Muldoon's hurrying figure was becoming smaller and smaller. Stephen began to follow. *Muldoon did something,* he thought.

He followed Muldoon up to the avenue. He sat on the curb while Muldoon was in Paddy's. He stared at the cobblestones, holding his hands tight around his ankles, trying to think upon the mystery that he knew was in Muldoon's actions. His eyes dilated at the thought of the torn jacket. *Muldoon took something,* he thought, decided, after much intense concentration.

When Muldoon came out of the bar, Stephen got up and followed him around the corner, walking under the shady trees on the police block. He stopped, watched Muldoon turn in between the twin globes and go up the steps and pass through the doors. Stephen sat down on the curb again, under the trees, holding his ankles, brooding, staring across at the old wooden building, ex-schoolhouse, that was the police station now. Muldoon came out in a little while, a policeman following. They came down the stairs. They talked. Muldoon was pointing with one hand, rubbing his cheek with the other. Then the policeman said something and Muldoon shook his head. The policeman got into a squad car and drove away.

Stephen watched Muldoon. Muldoon was walking, slowly now, staring down at the sidewalk. *Muldoon is still doing what he's been doing,* Stephen thought. He got up, followed Muldoon around the corner, staying a block behind. Once Muldoon stopped and scratched behind his neck and then began walking again, quickly now, purposefully, his hands jammed in his

pockets. Stephen had stopped too, held his breath, and then was following again, down to the avenue. He stopped on the corner, watched Muldoon hurry along the avenue.

When Muldoon turned into where the high wild hedges were, Stephen began running. He ran past the empty lots and cut around the hedges toward the side of the house. He stared at the house, his heart thumping. He waded through the weeds and stole up to a window. He peered into the empty house. He had never been inside. The sign warned against going inside. The sign was the law, grim and baneful and implacable. He heard Muldoon upstairs, could hear him walking on the crackling floor. He became very excited, his hands grabbing the window sill. And then he heard Muldoon coming down the stairs, coming quietly. He sank into the weeds, lay there waiting to be discovered and thrashed. He shut his eyes. And then the sounds stopped. He opened his eyes and through the weeds he saw Muldoon passing on the other side of the hedges, fragments of Muldoon walking and walking interminably, and then gone. He felt the weight lift from him and he picked up his head. He got up, looked into the house again and then climbed in through the window. He tiptoed through the empty room, the floors groaning. He came into a still, barren hallway. There was a staircase. He looked up, touching the bannister. *Muldoon was up there before he came down,* he thought, his foot lifting to the bottom step, his eyes staring wide as he climbed the stairs.

He stood at the head of the stairs, leaning forward, listening, his eyes roving from room to room. All the rooms were empty, the doors hanging back. He began going into the rooms, gazing mutely at each blank paintless wall, his eyes dumbly struck and astonished, his mouth agape, as if this were a place of sacred and inviolable ceremonies. He stared at the drab radiator in the corner of one of the rooms. He stared at it for almost five minutes before he went toward it. He stood over it, hovering, looking down at the lumpy handkerchief that had been stuffed between the pipes. *Muldoon did it,* he thought gravely. He dropped his hand down between the pipes and touched the handkerchief and pulled it up. He opened it and the money unfolded.

The money lay in his flat, steady, dumbstruck hand, beneath his amazed, peering eyes. He closed his hand then, making a fist over the handkerchief and the money. He left the room and went down the stairs, carrying the clenched fist in his pocket. He stopped before the front door. *Muldoon will come back,* he thought. There was a back way out, he knew, that came up from the cellar. He went down the hall, found the cellar door and

went carefully down the dark wooden steps.

His feet touched the concrete floor. The cellar was black, with a cool, dank, malodorous smell. He walked through walls and walls of swaying dark, feeling ahead of himself with his free hand. He touched a heavy wooden door, making it move inwards sending all of daylight and freedom ahead. The door creaked evilly. He shuffled forward, cautiously, because it was dark. His foot struck the wall of a storage bin, and then his hand touched the wall, flattened against it. He turned, suddenly frightened, and walked into the partially opened door and was stunned for a moment by the impact. Then, like an afterthought, he heard the click of the lock on the other side of the door, and didn't realize until then that his bumping into the door had slammed it shut. He lunged forward, grinding his shoulder against the door, his feet kicking and scuffling. His fists rose high and began beating. And then his fingers scratched down over the door searching for a knob, a handle, a latch, scratching and clawing in tragic disbelief, and then stopped. There was no inside handle, no knob or latch, on the heavy door. He stood there, staring at the dark, smelling the small damp empty bin in which he was trapped.

The sounds woke him up. He was sitting with his back against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chest. He opened his eyes, thought immediately of water. (He had often gone a day or two without food, tramping around the neighborhood waiting for an odd job to be offered, so the hunger hadn't begun to work upon him yet.) He leaped toward the sounds, gasping, laying his ear against the door, his body trembling and tensing. He wanted to shout to the sounds but did not, listened instead because he was afraid because they were harsh sounds, snarling and ugly, that became shouts, especially one voice that kept insisting over and over and then something striking the floor hard with a thud and then the sounds swarmed and jumbled unintelligibly in scuffling and pounding, fast and furious, and then stopped. He caught his breath, listening to the sudden quiet. He heard foosteps cluttering down the stairs, loud and pugnacious. He covered his mouth until they were gone. Then the house was quiet again. He waited a long time, until the utter stillness had settled again, before thinking covertly, *Something is upstairs.*

He sat in the bin, in the dark, sat cross-legged, staring at the door, scratching vaguely at his beard. It was four days now. He had howled and wailed and whined for four days, and now there wasn't any more of that left. The thing that he suspected as upstairs and to which he had cried had not once answered, so he had forgotten

about it. He had pried about at the edges of the door with his fingers until his fingers were swollen with pain. He had risen and pressed his back to the wall and taken one swift furious step and driven and rammed against the door, perhaps a thousand times and his shoulders and arms and hands were full of deep, sullen, brooding pain. He was staring at the door now, his fingers sliding along the lumps of pain in his arm, his eyes lifted high upon the black impervious door, appealing now, childlike, flickering with fear and pain and bewilderment. Occasionally a sound would fall from his dry, slack lips, a faint moan that he was unaware of.

His eyes fell in moody outrage and his hand swept around through the dark and touched the money, his fingers rummaging idly through it as though it were leaves. He crumpled the money and crushed it into balls, became fascinated by it not as money but as something that was there with him in the dark, trapped and doomed the same as he, and he began to caress it softly, gently, and then buried his face in it and felt hot tears running off into it, sobbing into it. He fell asleep with his head on the money.

And then a few days later the money changed. It was his torment, his satan – because of it he was there. He began to snarl and rage, with a voice he did not know was left in him. The intense hunger made the sounds primitive, animal. He flung the money about in the dark, flailing at it with his arms, smashing his arms against the walls and door and squawking with his dry, grating lungs until he felt things stabbing and throbbing in his arms and fingers and felt the grotesque terrifying pains of broken bones and felt his own hot blood seeping out of him. He stopped then, not so much from the terrific swelling pain as from the soft, hot blood. It made him docile. It made him collapse to the floor, weakly, whimpering. His dry, flaky lips licked at the blood.

He sat still until the blood stopped. And then he slept. He kept opening his eyes and shutting them, drifting from sleep to sleep, trying to stay the great yawning agony in his stomach. And then the hunger would not let him sleep. He began biting at the cuffs of his shirt, tearing loose threads with his teeth and taking them into his thick, dry mouth. And then he was on his hands and knees, growling and whining, crawling over the money.

"Don't turn on the flashlight until we get inside," Joe Geeb said.

They went through the hedges and up the dark walk. Tall grass grew through cracks in the concrete.

"You were saying," George said, "how you knew about the money."

"It was because of the story in the paper. I cut it out and saved it

for years. The body they found down near the cemetery was that of some small time hood. The paper said that whoever had done him in had torn five thousand dollars—which his family said he had been carrying when he left the house—from his jacket lining. Only it was Carl Muldoon that lifted the money, and these guys who had pulled the assassination read about it the same as me, realized they had been tricked and came back and got Carl and made him bring them here to give back the money or part of it or whatever the deal was. But something went wrong, the hoods didn't get the money, beat Carl to death in lieu of payment, or however you say it, and left him here—with the money. See? Now switch on the light, man."

George shined the light upstairs.

"Let's start there," Joe said.

They went slowly up the yielding groaning steps, following the beam of light. They prowled from room to room, flashing the light over ceiling and walls and floor, prying into the closets.

"This is where he was lying," Joe said, standing in the middle of one of the rooms, staring at the bald white floorboards under the pool of light. "Me and Inchy came here that day and saw him lying here all beat up. You should have seen him. They figured he'd been here a month. It gives me the creeps."

"Let's try downstairs," George said.

They went downstairs and explored the rooms there, edging forward behind the flashlight. Each room was empty. In one, they did find a few empty beer cans. Joe Geeb sent the cans sailing out the window, cursing.

"I told you," George said.

"There's still the cellar," Joe said.

They went around the hallway and found the cellar door, swung it creaking back and went down the stairs. They sent the light sweeping through the dark. Cobwebs were fanned out in all the corners. They began going through the bins, Joe Geeb getting down on all fours and scratching into every corner, digging with his fingers, looking for loose bricks and then standing up and knocking on the walls, tearing the drawers out of an old dust-covered bureau that was standing in one of the bins, George swinging the light to follow Joe's every movement.

One of the doors had a spring lock. It was a very heavy door. With a great effort, Joe finally pushed it open. George spotted the light on the wall and then waved it down to the floor.

"Oh my God!" George gasped.

There was a skull there, the light burning on its leering, whiteness and then moving down the rest of the skeleton which lay stretched out, the naked bones jutting fierce and fragile.

"Look at this, would you," Joe whispered.

"Who do you think he is?" George whispered, holding the light fast on the ghastly, empty thing.

"Was, you mean," Joe said.

"Let's get out of here, Joe."

"Wait a–Hey, what's that?" Joe said, bending, picking up something. He held it under the light. It was a torn piece of a hundred dollar bill, a ragged corner. They looked at each other. Joe grabbed the light and whirled into the bin.

"Don't touch the–" George gasped.

"It's here, it's got to be here," Joe said, stepping over the thing on the floor, flashing the light up and down, pounding the wall with his fists. "It's got to be here!" he said feverishly. He searched every corner, beating on the walls while George kept imploring him to be careful not to touch the– (He couldn't say what it was, merely The–.)

But Joe found nothing really, only fragments of green paper. He stepped back, staring at the maddening piece of bill in his hand. "It was here," he insisted doggedly. "In here."

"Well the money's not here now," George said.

Joe splashed the cobwebbed skeleton with light. "He must have had it," he said, dejected.

"Well even if he did," George said, "how long can you live on five thousand dollars–in here?"

Is it possible that crime does not pay? Some wealthy crooks, with a show of pride, dispute the claim. And Ruby Martinson, our hero and all-American criminal, accurately maintains that not only does crime not pay, but that he can barely afford it.

The Love Song of Ruby Martinson

by Henry Slesar

IF you know about the Great Delicatessen Robbery, or the Earrings Caper, or the big Bathroom Burglary*, then you probably know that my cousin, Ruby Martinson, is the most notorious criminal in modern history. It's just plain fiendish the way Ruby's mind works, especially when you consider that that mind is cleverly hidden in the skinny, freckled body of a 23-year-old accountant. And you probably know that Ruby's crimes, diabolically ingenious as they were, have never really netted him a fortune (he's *lost* money, if you want the truth). But before I started writing these revelations, nobody in the whole wide world knew about Ruby Martinson's criminal escapades but me. I was his sole confidant and henchman, and a pretty ineffectual one at that. I was eighteen, and didn't even know how to make an *honest* living.

It was easy for me to understand why Ruby's parents never knew about his loathesome secret life. His mother, my aunt, was a little round woman who made chicken soup and thought that Ruby was smarter than Einstein and handsomer than Valentino (or maybe it was the other way around). His father gave piano lessons, and didn't think about anything except A flats and playing chess in the park. But how Ruby ever kept his illegal activities from Dorothy, I'll never know.

Dorothy was Ruby's moll, or broad, or chick. I mean, that's what Ruby called her, but she's actually just his girl. She's a nice, whole-

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* *See previous issues of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.*

some-looking girl who wears middy blouses and takes piano lessons with Ruby's father, and she'd be just horrified if she knew the truth.

Sometimes, Ruby would invite me up to Dorothy's apartment on 76th Street, when they would just be sitting around and talking and drinking coffee. I was usually pretty uncomfortable around them. That smoochy stuff kind of embarrassed me, but more than that, I was always fearful that Ruby would somehow give away our lurid past. But the day that Ruby and Dorothy had The Fight was the worst.

It was a Friday night in March, and Ruby was broke, so we went up to Dorothy's place just to sit around. Ruby's giant criminal brain had been dormant for almost a month, and I was relieved that he hadn't involved me in any more dastardly schemes. For one thing, Ruby had just taken a new job with a firm of accountants, and the income-tax season was keeping him hopping. But I knew the quiet was only temporary; I had long ago given up hope for Ruby's reform.

Anyway, we were eating strudel and drinking coffee and talking about movie stars, when the argument started. It seemed that Dorothy was cuckoo about Van Johnson, and Ruby wasn't. Then Dorothy said something about a guy named Buckholtz, and Ruby's narrow little face got all tense, and his skin got so red that the freckles stood out like polka dots. It seems that this Bill Buckholtz was a classmate of Ruby's and Dorothy's at City College, and Dorothy thought he was a dead-ringer for Van Johnson. Well, that really upset Ruby. The things he said about Buckholtz made my cheeks burn. I'll try and repeat how the conversation went, but I was so embarrassed that I kind of shut my ears.

"Buckholtz?" Ruby said. "That clown? He looks more like Mortimer Snerd, if you ask me. No, I take it back. Mortimer Snerd's *better* looking."

"I don't think that's very nice," Dorothy said primly. "You know he was voted most popular boy."

"Sure," Ruby sneered. "Life-of-the-party Buckholtz. Him and his practical jokes—"

I got the impression Ruby didn't like Buckholtz, and I reasoned that a lot of the practical jokes must have been at Ruby's expense. The talk went on like this for awhile, with both contestants getting hotter and hotter, until Dorothy swung the real haymaker.

"Well, as a matter of fact," she said, "Bill called me the other day."

"He did *what?*" I never saw an apoplectic fit, but I guess that's what Ruby was having. "What's he poking around you for?"

"He wanted me to go to a concert with him tonight. I told him I was seeing you."

"Listen, what right does that guy have—"

"It's not a question of *right,*" Dorothy said. "There's nothing wrong in Bill Buckholtz asking me for a date, is there? I mean, it's not as if we were *engaged* or anything."

The word embarrassed everybody, so we didn't talk for a minute. Then Ruby stood up, and his face was a real, George Raft-type mask.

But all he said was, "I don't think you should see Buckholtz, Dorothy."

"Is that an order?"

"You can't *trust* a guy like that—"

"Oh?" I never saw Dorothy look so coy. She picked up her hair from the back and got all soft-looking. It was unnerving.

Ruby said, "What I mean is, he's such a clown. He'll pull chairs out from under you. You know what he's like."

"It's been two years. Maybe he's changed."

"Listen, if Bill Buckholz sets foot in this house—"

"Yes?"

"Ruby," I croaked, trying to help the situation. "Do you like Betty Grable?"

"If he sets foot in here—"

"Yes?" Dorothy said, dangerously.

"Ruby," I said, "who do you think is tougher? Edward G. Robinson or—"

"Then I won't!" Ruby shouted. "Get me! I won't!"

He went striding to the coat closet and started yanking his topcoat from the hanger. Everything started to fall down, including Dorothy's good beaver coat. I rushed over and helped him, and then grabbed my own windbreaker, not wanting to be left alone with Dorothy.

I followed Ruby out into the street, and he carried on about his broad as if he wanted to cut her throat. I felt terrible about the bust-up. When I got home that night, I couldn't sleep. My insomnia worried my mother, who thought I was cold, and she forced a hot-water bottle under my blanket. Somehow, the darn thing worked its way upwards during the night, and when I woke up in the morning and saw that red monstrosity next to my pillow, I screamed, thinking I was bleeding.

I didn't feel good all the next day, a day I spent looking for work. I had been fired from my former job in the garment district, and was looking for something white collar. There was an ad in the paper for a Young Man, Alert, to learn the Advertising Business. I answered it, along with forty other Young, Alert Men, but when my interview came, my sleepless night did me in. When the man behind the desk asked me the first question, I opened my mouth in a great big yawn and just stared at him helplessly. It was some yawn, let me tell you. It went on for about

an hour and a half, and he just sat there, tapping the desk with a pencil, waiting for me to get through. I had a sneaking suspicion that I wouldn't get the job, and that turned out to be right.

Frankly, I was worried about Ruby's estrangement from Dorothy for a very good reason. Knowing Ruby as I did, I was afraid his reaction would make him consider another caper, and Ruby's capers always wound up with me in hot water, *without* the bottle. When I met him in Hector's Cafeteria (our place of rendezvous) I kept expecting him to spring the details of some new crime he was contemplating. But he didn't. All he talked about was Dorothy.

"She's seeing him," he said one night.

"Who?"

"Buckholtz. Dorothy went on a date with him last Friday. And she saw him again last night. They went to the Roxy."

"How do you know?" I said.

"How do you suppose?" Ruby snapped. "I been trailing them."

"Gosh, Ruby. Do you think you ought to do that?"

"Why not? Who's got a better right?"

"I know, but—"

"Listen!" he said, whirling on me with killer's eyes. "Dorothy's my moll, and anything she does is my business. Get it?"

"Sure, but—"

"If I want to trail her, I'll trail her. I gotta see this guy doesn't take advantage of her."

For almost a month, Ruby brooded about Dorothy and her new flame, and he grew more morose than I'd ever seen him. One night, he dragged me along when he was shadowing them, and for the first time, I got a look at this Bill Buckholtz. I wouldn't admit it to Ruby, but he *did* look a little like Van Johnson. I mean, he was one of these big, rugged guys with blond hair and tweeds. We followed them into the movies, we followed them into Howard Johnson's, and we followed them to Dorothy's house. Ruby even made us wait outside until Buckholtz emerged. When the big guy came out, he was wiping his mouth with a handkerchief. It *could* have been strudel-crumbs he was wiping away, but Ruby was sure it was lipstick, and his face was a mask.

The next night, Ruby gave me the chill of the century. He leaned across the table at Hector's and said, "I'm gonna kill that guy."

I spluttered French cruller all over everything.

"Easy," Ruby said. "It's the only thing left to do. If that guy got what I think he got—I'm gonna let him have it."

"Got what?" I said, thinking dreadful thoughts.

"Her picture."

"What?"

"Dorothy's picture. If she gave him one—"

"You mean that graduation picture?"

"Yeah."

Ruby took out his rather seedy wallet and flipped it open. In the little plastic window there was a photograph of Dorothy taken on her graduation day. It was a real nice picture, but to be absolutely honest, kind of retouched. It made Dorothy look like Lana Turner or somebody. She was fond of the picture, and had three of them around the house. She even gave me a print one day, but I lost it.

"Aw, gee, Ruby," I said. "What's the difference if she *did* give him her picture? That doesn't mean anything."

"It does to me," Ruby said grimly.

"But how'll you find out? Dorothy won't tell you."

"No. But Bill Buckholtz will. I'm gonna have a look in his wallet, and you're going to help me. We're gonna stick him up."

Though this wasn't as bad as killing Buckholtz, I began to babble as soon as he said, "stick him up."

"Why not?" he said. "That guy robbed me of my girl. Why shouldn't I pay him back? You're going to finger him for me, kid. You're going to drop in on Dorothy tomorrow night. I heard him make a date for tomorrow. And you're gonna lead him to me."

"I won't do it!" I squeaked. Ruby had committed crimes before, but nothing so blatant as a hold-up.

"Besides," I said, suddenly hopeful, "you don't have a gun."

Ruby smiled. "I don't, huh?"

"You *do*?"

"Don't underestimate me, pal. Meet me in front of Dorothy's place tomorrow at eleven. I'll give you the rest of your instructions then."

I wasn't an insomnia victim that night, but it would have been preferable to my crazy dreams. A car backfired around three o'clock, and I woke up yelling. It was Spring, and around seventy degrees, but my mother insisted on the hot-water bottle again. I walked around in a daze all the next day, and eleven o'clock came around much faster than usual.

I met Ruby in front of the darkened window of the Chinese laundry across the street from Dorothy's apartment house. He was wearing a big topcoat with the collar pulled up, and there was a suspicious bulge in his right pocket.

"Okay, here's the caper," he said, as he pulled me into a doorway." Buckholtz took Dorothy bowling or something, and they ought to be back within the hour. As soon as they go in, you head upstairs and knock on the door. Hang around until that joker leaves."

"But, Ruby," I protested. "What'll I say?"

"Just say you were in the neighborhood and wanted to drop in. Then, when Buckholtz leaves, you say to him, 'Boy, it's dark out.

Would you mind walking me to the subway?'" Ruby said this last speech in a faint, girlish voice, supposedly an imitation of me. I would have been grievously insulted, except I was too nervous.

"Walk me to the subway? I can't ask him to do that!"

"Why not? Just tell him you're scared of the dark."

I *am,* to tell the truth.

"But he'll never believe me—"

"Stop arguing! You walk him down to 74th Street, and then say you know a short cut. You lead him down the street, on the south side. I'll be waiting for you there."

About twelve-fifteen, Dorothy and Buckholtz pulled up in a taxi. Ten minutes later, propelled by a shove from Ruby, I went across the street and into the building. I rang the bell of Apartment 6-B and Dorothy opened the door and looked surprised.

"Hello," I giggled. "Is Ruby here?"

"Ruby? Of course not."

"Oh," I said, zipping my windbreaker up and down. "I thought he might be here. How are you, Dorothy?"

"I'm fine," she said, looking over her shoulder. "Do you want to come in?"

"Okay."

She frowned, but I followed her into the living room. Buckholtz was browsing at the bookshelf, and he turned and raised an eyebrow when he saw me. Dorothy introduced us, and he gave me a bone-crushing handshake. She didn't look very happy about the circumstances, but I had my orders. I sat down and looked like I intended to stay put.

"I just made some coffee," Dorothy said. "Do you want some?"

"Sure, that'd be fine."

When we were alone, Buckholtz considered me, and said, "So you're a friend of Ruby Martinson's?"

"Cousin," I said.

"Brilliant guy, that Ruby. We were in college together, you know."

"That's nice."

"Yeah, I'll never forget old Rube. We were great pals. I even carry his picture around with me."

"You do?" I gulped.

"Sure. Want to see it?"

I nodded, and he reached into his pocket and produced a key chain that looked like a miniature plastic telescope.

"Hold it up against your eye and look at the light," Buckholtz said. "Keep turning it, and you'll see the picture."

I turned it around and saw the picture, all right, but it wasn't Ruby. It was a voluptuous blonde wearing three playing cards, all aces. I blushed so hard that I probably overheated the room. Buckholtz laughed and took the gadget away. When Dorothy came back into the room with the coffee, his face went sober again, and he said,

"Gosh, Dorothy, I didn't know you liked Dostoevski. He's my favorite author. You've sure got good taste in books."

"Really?" she said, looking pleased. Then, when she handed me my cup, she said, "For heaven's sake! What happened to your *eye*?"

"My eye?"

"What did you do, walk into a door?"

I jumped off the sofa and went to a wall mirror. There was a black ring around my eye. I wiped at it with my handkerchief, and gave Van Johnson a dirty look. He returned an innocent expression, and then started chatting about Russian novelists.

I sat and listened to him for awhile, and began to feel more and more sympathy for Ruby. Around two o'clock, Dorothy started to yawn, and he took the hint. We left together.

As we went down in the elevator, I forced myself to say, "Gosh, it's late, isn't it? I'm kind of jumpy about walking around the streets so late. Been a lot of hold-ups lately."

He chuckled, and his chest swelled. "Nothin' to worry about."

"Maybe not for *you*," I said. "But I've got to walk five blocks to the subway. Would you walk me there?'

"Okay," he said.

It worked out fine. We walked down the street together, Buckholtz taking big steps that forced me into a dog-trot beside him.

When we reached 74th, I said, "Say, I know a short-cut. If we go down here—"

"I never heard of any short-cut."

"Oh, there is," I said. "I usually don't take it, because the street's so empty. But if you don't mind—"

"*I* don't mind," he said, the big showoff.

I tried to slow him down a little, hoping he wouldn't sail past his hidden rival. But I didn't have to worry about Ruby. We hadn't gone more than twenty yards, when he came out of nowhere.

"Stick 'em up!"

I yelped and jumped convincingly, mostly because I was convinced. I didn't even recognize Ruby. There was a dark green handkerchief tied around his mouth, and he was holding a dull black automatic.

"You heard me!" Ruby rasped. "Both of you. Stick 'em up and don't make a sound!"

"Hey, what's the idea?" Buckholtz said brazenly, not even lifting his hands. I had hoped he wouldn't be so brave.

"*This* is the idea, you dope!" Ruby waved his gun menacingly. "Let's have your wallet!"

"G-g-give it to him," I pleaded.

He looked Ruby's slight figure up and down, and then the big guy shrugged and reached into his jacket. He brought out a pigskin wallet, and Ruby snatched it from his hands.

"I've only got a couple of bucks," he said contemptuously. But Ruby wasn't listening. He was going through the wallet eagerly, completely occupied with his search. He backed away from us, holding the automatic loosely, his eyes glued to his task. It was too dark to see what he was up to but I knew his behavior was pretty careless for an armed robber. Unfortunately, Buckholtz noticed it, too, because he suddenly lashed out and smacked Ruby on the nose with a fist about as big as a basketball. Ruby was so surprised he didn't even have the sense to fall down. He staggered backwards on one leg, like a drunken ostrich, and Buckholtz hit him again, this time with a straight left. Ruby went kerplunk to the sidewalk, and his gun and Buckholtz's wallet went with him. The wallet made a louder thud than the gun; the automatic clanked to the pavement with a tinny sound that immediately revealed its true nature.

"A toy," Buckholz sneered. He picked up his wallet and then turned to me. "You run get a cop. "I'll hold on to Dillinger here."

He hoisted Ruby from the ground, and I said, "Aw, let him go. He didn't hurt us—"

"Are you kidding?"

I was thinking as fast and as desperately as ever in my life. I looked wildly up and down the street, and then I shouted, "Look, there's a cop now!"

"Where?" Buckholtz said, letting go of Ruby's lapel.

"Down there!" I shrieked, and bulldozed between him and his captive, heading for the corner. Ruby got the idea, because he took off after me, his skinny legs pumping so hard that he almost passed me. I could hear Buckholtz shouting after us, but I wasn't listening. I kept running until I had rounded three corners, and ended up at the subway station. I skittered down the steps, gasping for breath. I waited a few minutes to see if Ruby would join me. When he didn't, I took the downtown express home, unhinged completely by Ruby's unsuccessful hold-up.

I slept until noon the next day, and would probably have slept until evening, if Ruby hadn't awakened me with his telephone call. I was surprised to hear from him after what had happened; I figured he would be laying low, licking his wounds. But his voice sounded cheerful.

"Kid?" he said. "Meet me at Hector's, same time. Got an important assignment for you."

"But, Ruby, after last night—"

"Never mind. Just meet me at Hector's and keep cool."

I met him at the cafeteria at six, but I wasn't cool. Between hold-ups and hot-water bottles, I was registering about 105 on the fever meter. It didn't help to see Ruby behind coffee and apple pie, looking relaxed and in good spirits.

"I want you to visit Dorothy tonight," he said.

"Again?" I squealed.

"Don't worry about Buckholtz, he won't be there. I want you to deliver this note for me."

He handed me a grubby envelope with no address on the front. I blinked and said, "Gee, Ruby, couldn't you *mail* it to her?"

"No. I want you to see what she says when she reads it."

I sighed, but I didn't argue. I've never won an argument with Ruby.

When Dorothy opened her apartment door for me that night, she looked more surprised than she had the evening before. But she wasn't the only one who was surprised. Ruby had goofed on his information, because Bill Buckholtz, big and blond as life, was sitting in the living room.

"Well!" he said, greeting me with a big Van Johnson grin. "Here's our friend now. I was just telling Dorothy about our stick-up last night."

Dorothy was chewing on her unlacquered nails. "It must have been *dreadful*. It's a good thing Bill was with you."

"Yeah," I said. "Heh-heh."

"You got to know how to handle these guys," Buckholtz said. "Too bad the dirty rat got away."

"Yeah," I gulped. "Dorothy, could I see you alone? Just for a minute?"

She gave me a puzzled look, but said okay. In the kitchen, I handed her Ruby's letter. At first, she acted snooty about it and wouldn't even take it. Then I guess she got curious, and finally agreed to read it. I saw her go into the bedroom and shut the door behind her; then I returned to the living room.

"Say, kid," Buckholtz said, amiably. "Do me a favor, will you?"

"What kind of favor?"

"Don't tell Dorothy about the gun. I didn't tell her it was only a toy."

"Why should I tell her?"

"That's a good kid," he said, and for a minute I thought he was going to pummel my back appreciatively. I hated him.

A few minutes later, Dorothy came out with a funny expression on her face. She said, "Bill, could I see you a minute, alone?"

He looked up and grinned wolfishly. "You betcha."

He went into the kitchen with Dorothy, and I waited around, hoping to make some sense out of their murmuring conversation without actually eavesdropping. After a couple of minutes, I heard Dorothy's voice raise in anger, and then Buckholtz's go up an octave in what sounded like protest. The next thing I knew, the big guy was storming out of the kitchen with his face all red and his shoulders hunched. He went to the closet, yanked out his hat and coat, and slammed out of the front door.

It was a mystifying performance, but I didn't get any explanation from Dorothy. She trotted into her bedroom and shut the door, leaving me to my own devices in the living room. My devices weren't so hot; so I waited around for ten minutes and then left.

I didn't know what really happened until the following evening, when I met Ruby at Hector's Cafeteria. He was wearing his best blue suit, and looking like he had just swallowed Hector's daily supply of cream.

"What's with you?" I said. "You look awful happy."

"I am," Ruby said smugly. "I got a date with Dorothy tonight."

"You have?"

"Sure. She's through with that guy Buckholtz. Didn't she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me nothing. What the heck did you write in that note?"

"Oh, nothing much. I just told her she was making a mistake, that Buckholtz was still the same old joker he always was. And if she needed any proof, all she had to do was look in his wallet."

"What for?"

"For her graduation picture. Here—Dorothy gave it to me as a souvenir. This is what Buckholtz was carrying."

He dug into his blue serge and handed me a glossy photo. It was Dorothy, all right, but she was somewhat altered. There was a fancy black moustache under her nose, and her eyes were crossed behind big eyeglasses. Two front teeth were missing from her smile. It was a pretty funny picture, and I couldn't help snickering.

"See what I mean?" Ruby said, shooting his cuffs. "When she saw that, she knew what a bum he was. We're going to the movies tonight. No Van Johnson movie, either."

He leaned back in his chair and looked blissful, and then I knew what he had really been up to the night of the holdup. He wasn't just taking something *out* of Buckholtz's wallet. He was putting something in. It was a pretty dirty trick, but I had to admire his cunning. I guess it was the only kind of love song Ruby knew how to sing. That's my cousin. That's Ruby Martinson.

Surely you're familiar with that nostalgic ditty which implores, "Make me a child just for tonight." The word "just," of course, should be underscored. Who, after all, really wants to retrogress to a state in which one is incessantly having one's nose wiped. Naturally, our hero's nostalgia – I'm happy to announce – led him to something entertainingly terrible.

A Walk

"WELL, here we are!" he said to his family. "Here's where your old man used to come in the summer when he was a kid!"

But even as he said it, Charlie Walters felt foolish. The place didn't look the same, not the friendly, comfortable nostalgic place he liked to remember. Sure, he'd expected a place to change in twenty years, but . . .

"I don't like it!" little Chuckie bawled. "I *hate* it! I wanna go to the *beach!*" He began to jump up and down on the floor of the car.

"Shut up, Chuckie!" his mother said sharply, her patience exhausted many miles earlier. But it was as if he hadn't heard her.

Charlie turned the car off the dirt and drove through the pool of red mud that marked the entrance to the weed-grown yard and pulled to a stop. It certainly was different! The cottage seemed smaller, and the old beech tree that he and Billy Nelms used to play in was gone. Not even a stump left. Beyond the thick tangle behind the cottage he could see the lake. And it was different. It didn't seem to have the sparkle it used to have and it wasn't as wide. Not nearly as wide.

"Mommy, I wanta go to the beach, too," Susan, the oldest of the Walters' three children, said, her voice a little tremulous. "I'm *scared* of this place!" She was almost seven and remembered the air conditioned motel where they stayed

at Saint Simons the summer before, with the wide white beach out in front, and all the other children to play with. There was nothing here she could see but an old shack and a dirt road and thick woods all around. That did look like water there through the trees, but there wasn't any sand.

"Charlie," Nancy said, "you told me—you didn't say it was like *this*." Nancy was Charlie's wife, usually a very agreeable woman. "Do you mean we're paying forty dollars a week for *this?*" She put her arm protectively about little Janie, the youngest, who sat very still with her thumb in her mouth.

They didn't understand! "Nan, for the Lord's sake, let's not start a squabble now! We're all tired from the drive. Now let's unpack the car and get settled and then take a nice cool swim in the lake—"

"What do you expect me to do with these children for two weeks while you're off fishing, or visiting those old boyhood cronies I've heard so much about? Just turn them loose in this—this *forest?*"

Charlie gritted his teeth and got out of the car. "Come on, kids! Everybody take something in, and then we'll go down to the lake for a swim!" He spoke loudly, trying to overcome the gloom that had settled over all of them, trying to sound happy, like the fun was just about to begin. But two of the children were crying now, and Nancy was glaring at him. So maybe he'd made a mistake! Couldn't they give him one night's sleep before the inquisition started?

He went around back of the car and began taking the luggage out of the trunk. "Come on, Chuckie, give your old man a hand."

Little Chuckie was wading through the mudhole with his shoes on.

"Chuckie!" Nancy screamed, grabbing his arm and snatching him clear. All the children were crying now, and Nancy wouldn't look at Charlie.

on the Mountain

by Richard Hardwick

The night was very nearly unbearable, with the last of the children falling into exhausted sleep after midnight. It was the most uncomfortable bed Charlie had ever slept in. When he awoke just before daybreak, he sneaked out of the cottage and walked down to the lake. The water was too cold for swimming so he began to walk along by the lake. The old paths were still as he remembered them, probably kept open by animals coming down to the lake for water. How many happy hours he had spent here! Then he stopped and began to wonder. Happy? Maybe he just *wanted* to think of them as happy. Was that what had brought him back to this place after twenty years, to relive it through his own children? That surely wasn't giving them a vacation; that was *inflicting* it on them.

The path followed the irregular outline of the lake. It *was* a small lake. From a little promontory he could see the dam, and back up the other way, the boathouse where everybody went on Saturdays and Sundays. That view was strange, because the boathouse had seemed so huge, so—so *terrifying* when he was ten years old. Suddenly, he wondered why he thought of it as terrifying. He'd never done that before. It *was* depressing, and he certainly hadn't expected that. He was beginning to wonder just what he had expected, when out of nowhere, a strange feeling swept over him. A completely nonsensical feeling that he was *lost,* and unaccountably he turned and began to trot along the path back towards the cottage. The strange feeling had touched deep inside him, like a cold finger laid against his heart. He slowed to a walk, blaming his mood on the utter quietude of the lake and the mountain. It was *so* quiet, it seemed lake and mountain were *waiting* for something, somelong forgotten. He was walking faster, stiff branches slapping against his face and briars tearing at his trouser legs. Faster and faster he walked, until once more he was trotting, then running. He noticed the path was taking him up the mountain, not down along the lake where the cottage was, but *up.* He looked over his shoulder and a patch of water shone briefly through the tangle of branches, like a piece of tarnished silver under the leaves.

The other place was up there. He remembered now. Funny, he hadn't thought about it before he planned the trip. That place was something about the mountain he should have remembered.

He stopped beside a tall, lean hickory to catch his breath. He used to run all the way from the lake to the top of the mountain, but that was twenty years ago. Used to run with Billy Nelms and—there was someone else. Someone else was there, when they were whooping through the woods, their clothes

covered with beggar-lice and their short-trousered legs criss-crossed with briar scratches.

Yes, sir! Those had been the days! *Don't go up the mountain, son,* Mama said, and *stay down here near the cottage, son, near the lake,* Papa said. So he went up the mountain the first day to see *why* they didn't want him to go up there, and that was where he found Billy Nelms.

He turned now and started up the mountain again. It was strange, that with everything so green—the trees and the moss and all the growth covering the ground—he seemed to remember *red* more than any other color.

Don't go up the mountain, son. He could still hear her saying it, God rest her soul. It wasn't much farther. He went up the steep slope, pushing against trees to ease the burden on his legs. Then he saw it, only somewhere down the years the house had burned and there was only the skeleton of a stone chimney standing there, with trees grown up where the house had been. Billy Nelms had lived here.

Then, for the second time, the sudden coldness reached inside him, sending a shudder through him. *Lord!* it was quiet on the mountain! Not a bird and no wind in the trees. Only the drip of dew off the leaves and the wet mouldy smell of the earth. The mountain, soundless as a tomb, smelled of death. Why in God's name had he come back to this forsaken place!

"Hey, Billy!" he shouted suddenly, unexpectedly. Anything to break this silence! "Billy Nelms!"

My God, now, that was silly! He looked about, sheepishly, as though expecting to see someone watching. It was as quiet as ever. Nothing was there but the old chimney, standing as if it had grown up out of the weeds. It was as if the mountain was trying to tell him something.

He'd left his watch at the cottage, but judging from the increasing light the sun was almost over the mountain and Nancy and the children would be waking up. He'd promised to take Chuckie fishing this morning. Nancy would be burned up if she had to handle the kids alone. He couldn't blame her. It was a crackpot idea coming up here. Try to recapture the past and you make a mistake. That psychiatrist he'd gone to for awhile, certainly hadn't been any help. Anyhow, they had all wanted to go to the beach where their friends were. Nobody went to the mountains anymore. The only reason they ever did was to get away from the heat, and now everything was air conditioned.

They'd leave as soon as he got down the mountain. The agent could keep the forty dollars. He didn't even want to talk about it. Any place that could make you feel like *this* wasn't fit to talk about! He'd admit to Nancy and

the children that he'd always *hated* and despised this red mountain and Billy Nelms . . . and . . . there *was* something else! *Evan*— Oh, God, how he'd hated *Evan!*

He was crying. Sitting at the foot of a tree with the tears pouring down his cheeks. Business pressures on and on; he surely needed a rest. If Nancy knew he'd gone to a doctor—or the psychiatrist—maybe she wouldn't be so quick to shout. He took out his handkerchief and tried to laugh, but ended sobbing. *Now what made me call a big green mountain like this a red mountain?* he asked himself, trying to make a joke of it. *And why would I say I hated Billy Nelms when he was my best friend?* But he had hated Evan; there was no denying that. Evan, bigger and stronger than the rest, and a bully.

He got up and turned away from the ruins of the house, intent on going back down the mountain while he was still thinking straight. This mountain was doing something to him. There was nothing here, just memories of a place that never was as he remembered it. It was cold. Not just the morning air, but the way it seemed. Chill and quiet, deathly quiet.

He started down the path, but took a wrong turn and suddenly he was looking at the tree. It was the beech tree—the one with the crooked limb, like a crippled arm —and he wanted to laugh because he remembered it being down at the cottage. It stood just alongside the path and when he walked over to it, he saw that the pieces of boards that had been nailed to its trunk for steps, were gone. There was no sign they had ever been there.

Had he come all the way up this mountain to see a tree? What was special about this tree? The urge to run was strong inside him, to hurl himself down the side of the mountain as fast as his legs would carry him. But he didn't move. He stood and looked at the tree and he thought of Evan. How he had hated and despised that boy. Dirty. He even smelled. He never went in the lake when the other kids took a swim, but waited on the bank and pushed them and threw them back in or stole their clothes. *Mean . . .*

It was strange that in all these years he had never thought about Evan. It should have been Evan that stood out above everything else. Stranger still, that he ever wanted to come back here.

Then get up and get down the mountain . . .

But he remained seated beneath the beech, leaning back and looking up at the bent limb, the muscles in his jaw knotting. He was cold, and yet the perspiration was streaming, making his clothes damp.

"How silly!" he said aloud. "How completely and utterly

stupid! Sitting here looking at a—a *tree*—" He tried to laugh again, but he couldn't. The mountain was closing in on him. *Crazy* . . . to come to the top of a crazy green mountain and stare at a stupid tree with a bent limb. A bent limb . . . a rock in his hand . . .

His mind came suddenly alert. Suddenly suspicious of itself. Now what was that all about? His thinking of a *rock*. He remembered. The last day of the summer. The last day of a month of misery. The last day of being terrified by Evan, of being tormented by Evan, bullied, scared. But the hate had built up too tight, simply to go away and leave. It had to express itself; so he took a big, jagged rock and he went up on the crooked limb that hung over the path. He could hear his father calling from down the mountain, his voice echoing through the woods in the cool morning air. The Dodge touring car was packed and they were waiting for him. His father did not like to wait when he was ready to do something. The shouts grew more insistent, and now he could hear his mother's voice, high and clear, "Chaar—lie!"

But the voices were blotted out, because something bigger entered his mind, requiring all his attention. It was Evan, jogging along the path, his big head flopping about on his shoulders as he ran and the matted black hair falling over his forehead. The rock sped down toward him and everything suddenly was *red!*

"Mama, where's Daddy?" little Chuckie said, "I wanta go fishin'. Daddy promised that me and him would go fishin'."

"I wanna go to the beach, Mama," Susan said for the hundred and fiftieth time. "Mary Ann's family went to the beach. Why can't we—"

Nancy reached out and put her hand over the child's mouth.

"Didn't I hear your father?" she said, tilting her head, listening.

"I didn't hear any—"

"Sssh!"

Then from up the mountain they heard him calling, in a strange, childlike voice: *"Daddy! Mommy! Wait! Don't go and leave me!"*

It sounded as if he was running down the mountain, crashing through the underbrush as though something were pursuing him. And as he drew closer, it sounded, too, as if he were crying . . .

I was nine years old when my father was murdered. The shock made all my earlier childhood memories indistinct and unreal. It was as if I were really born the night he died.

My father's face is worn and blurred in my mind like the surface of an old coin, but his laughter rings clear in my ears and I recall with tolerant affection his careless and indifferent habits. I remember the dust! In our house, the house of a man and a boy, it lay in a thick velvety fuzz over everything. Perhaps it was not really so bad, but now in my mind I see the house under veils of dust, dust that drifts and falls like snow, obscuring the outlines of pictures and furniture.

My dead mother had become a pallid memory long before my father was killed. There was a cleaning woman, perhaps a parade of them. They came infrequently and seemed to leave the dust as they found it. I remember none of them. It was not a household. It was a neglected house inhabited

An Instrument of JUSTICE

by Margaret Manners

If right and wrong were pure, instead of alloys, life would be infinitely simpler. But in such a world, this admirable story would be incomprehensible, for it concerns itself with an unreal, fantastic world—precisely the one we inhabit.

by a careless, pleasure-loving man and a lonely boy.

There was a school, and that I remember better for I was a good student and continued to go there after my father's murder.

I have no memory of anyone ever preparing food in our house. My father never ate with me. I went to my uncle's for meals. He was a scholar and a bachelor, but he had a good housekeeper. There everything was polished, there was no dust, no dust at all. I never saw a speck of it anywhere.

Long after I had put myself to bed, I would be awakened by the sound of my father's unsteady footsteps mounting the stairs. If I called out he would answer in a blurred, affectionate voice. He was handsome and must have had great charm, for I never reproached him in my mind for the forlorn house that was usually empty when I came home from school. As long as a ruin is romantic, one can love it. I loved my father.

He was murdered one night while I lay sleeping. In the morning I found his body sprawled on the living room floor. His skull was crushed and beside him lay the short heavy poker we used for the old pot-bellied stove. There was blood on it, dark, dried, almost black.

I ran screaming for help to my uncle's house. They kept me there until the day of the funeral. The bitter silent grief of those days found no expression. I had no one to talk to. At night I lay for hours, dry-eyed, burning with hatred.

In time I came to know and admire my uncle, but I could not love him. He did not want love. But he was a good man, quiet, passionless, judicious, buried in his study, surrounded by his books.

After the funeral we had a talk. He explained that I was to remain in his house and finish school. The housekeeper would take care of me. If I wanted anything I was to ask him.

I chafed at the details. School plans were nothing to a boy whose father had been murdered.

"Who killed Dad?" I demanded.

My uncle had been looking out of the window as he talked. I thought he was admiring the huge wistaria vine that climbed up beside it all the way to the roof. He turned and I felt the keen eyes studying me and knew he was not thinking of the vine. His dry voice went on as before. "The police have been unable to discover the person responsible. They may find out who did it, they may not. But I can tell you one thing. Another human being killed your father, a man or woman in the grip of passion, believing that your father was in some way his enemy. So much I know because it would be true of most deeds of violence since the world began. But does it matter to you, Richard?"

I can hear my own voice now,

fierce and choked with tears. "I'll find him and when I do I'll kill him!"

To my amazement he did not censure my desire for vengeance.

"Of course, you will," he said quietly. "That is why you must continue to go to school. You must learn to govern your feelings, so that when the time comes and you discover the man you will not be the tool of primitive rage, but an instrument of justice!"

I thought his answer strange. But I put it down as one of the transparent devices with which adults seek to delude the young. "What do you want to do?" they were always asking craftily. It seemed to me that if you answered frankly that you wanted to kill someone they would smile and agree, but urge you to go to school and study hard so that you could learn to kill properly. Anything to get you to study! Still, I think it must have been at that moment that the idea was first implanted in my mind that my uncle was on the side of vengeance, and I was his instrument.

A few days after my father's funeral, a strange thing happened. Coming home from school, I halted outside my uncle's study because I heard voices, and it was usually so quiet there. A woman was crying and sobbing behind the closed door. Her words squeezed my heart so that I could scarcely breathe.

"You must let me see the boy! He's all that's left of Robert. I must see him!"

I remained glued to the spot. My father's name was Robert, and the wildness of the pleading voice speaking his name was infinitely terrible and poignant to me. The book bag I was carrying fell from my hand and clattered on the polished floor. Almost at once the study doors opened and a woman rushed out. Her tear-stained face was pathetically pretty. She fell on her knees beside me and pulled me into her arms. She cried and patted me until my pity turned into disgust. What had sounded strange and dramatic behind a closed door seemed only sloppy now. I squirmed away, humiliated.

She must have felt my discomfort, for she stopped crying and stared at me. What she saw must have dismayed her, because her face set in lines of unbelief and disillusion. A surly, ordinary little boy is hardly the ideal partner for an emotional debauch.

The moment was painful. Avoiding her eyes, I looked past her and saw my uncle gazing at us with sardonic amusement. When she rose there was something so helpless and defeated about her that I almost felt sorry for her all over again.

She turned and thanked my uncle. "If the boy *needs* anything, I'll always be glad to . . . This is a strange household for a child, isn't it?" With that she left.

My uncle said, "What do you think of that lady?"

"Very pretty," I said politely.

He nodded and waited.

"She cries too much. Did my father love her?"

"She loved your father," my uncle said. Which to my mind was the same thing.

We never saw her again, but her visit must have affected my uncle. Shortly after, he informed me that he was going to be married. I hadn't thought of my studious uncle as the marrying kind and I was shocked. It didn't once occur to me that he wanted to give me a normal home life.

When I saw the woman, I was no longer surprised. She was so much like his departing housekeeper that one knew immediately that my uncle had no intention of changing his habits. Aunt Henrietta, for I called her that almost immediately, was tall and strong and marvellously efficient as a housewife. There was no feminine weakness in her stern face. She had no coquettish gestures, no softness, but she was kind.

Between my uncle and his wife there lay an elaborate courtesy. She never interrupted his work or disturbed him in his study. She ran the house, and although my uncle was a moderately wealthy man spent almost nothing on herself. My uncle seemed quite satisfied with his new domestic arrangement.

On the whole, life in my uncle's house was peaceful and orderly. He was patient with me and never unkind. He encouraged me to bring him my problems in schoolwork, but he avoided personal chats. If I volunteered information about my thoughts and feelings, he seemed bored and spoke in vague general terms. I came to understand that he was scrupulously fulfilling his duty to his brother's child, but his own life was dedicated to his thoughts and his books. He was writing a monumental work on ethics and morals, a subject that interested me not at all.

My new life, so well-regulated and healthy on the surface, provided me with no emotional outlet. For months there was only my father's murder as a dark and secret focus for my passions. I gloried in ridiculous day-dreams of revenge that had nothing to do with sorrow or love for my father. Proudly I tracked down and killed without mercy a shadowy creature who pleaded in vain for my pity. It was my substitute for the ordinary boy's fantasies of pirate treasure and desert islands.

My one concrete step toward vengeance was taken blindly and had an unexpected result. I went to the Chief of Police and asked him to give me the weapon that had killed my father. I remember he put me off saying they still needed it for tests. But he looked at me queerly and I knew he dis-

approved of me and my request.

He must have spoken to my uncle, for a few weeks later I was called into the study and the poker was placed in my shaking hands. The police had come no nearer to a solution of the crime. There were no fingerprints, and the weapon was of no practical value to them any longer.

"What will you do with it?" my uncle asked.

"I'll put it away. I'll keep it."

"Why?"

I answered without thinking. "So that I won't forget."

"Very well," he said. "And now that you have it, you can stop brooding can't you?"

A weight fell from my heart. My uncle had been right. Now that I had a tangible proof of my intention to do something, I was free from the worst of my obsession.

I took the poker upstairs to my room and removed the drawer under the old oak wardrobe. It fitted easily into the space between the floor and the drawer.

After that my life was less haunted. I studied hard, played with the other children and enjoyed the normal pursuits of adolescence. Shortly before my graduation from high school, I had another talk with my uncle.

I can still see him sitting behind his desk, the scattered books filled with slips of paper, his eyes peering through the strong lenses of his reading glasses, his long fingers playing with the dagger he used as a paper cutter. Like everything else in the house, that paper cutter was well polished, the edge was bright and sharp. I had coveted it for a long time.

"It's time to talk about college," he said, "and other things, my boy. I presume you do want to go to college?"

I said that I did, stammered that I wanted to be an architect, and added some timid words of gratitude for all he had done for me.

He lifted his head and sniffed as if the air had suddenly become unpleasant to breathe. "What makes you talk of gratitude? There must never be any question of gratitude. Perhaps I had better make everything clear right now. I have given you nothing. No!" He raised his hand to stop my protest. "I assure you I have *given* you nothing. I have kept a record of all I have expended in your behalf and some day you will repay me. Consider it a loan, a debt of honor, if you like. I want you to be free of all real burdens, even that of gratitude. Financial indebtedness is easy to bear because it can be eradicated. Gratitude might some day prevent you from freely expressing yourself, and I want only unfettered intelligences about me. Your life is your own responsibility. Now that you are old enough you can examine the account with me and choose your college with an eye to what it is going to cost

you. You may go where you like, of course, but I warn you not to choose hastily."

My face must have reflected my chagrin for he added, "This is not meanness or penny-pinching on my part. I believe that in the end you will prefer this arrangement. Now, if you will bring me that large account book over there . . .?"

I studied the figures with amazement; every penny he had spent on me was carefully noted, and any work I had done at home had been credited at the prevailing rate and deducted. Lawn-mowing, cleaning the attic or cellar, painting the porch furniture; he had missed nothing.

He charged me a modest but fair amount for room and board, precisely, he explained, what I had cost him. He had kept the household on simple, inexpensive fare solely out of consideration for me, so that I should not pile up a heavy debt before I knew I was to owe it. He also assured me that I could pay him back when and as I pleased.

I immediately changed my college plans and chose a well-known institution where all students worked for their tuition as part of the curriculum. My feelings were mixed. I was glad to have the matter on a business footing, but underneath I was hurt and angry. Behind the facade of my uncle's indifference, I had occasionally believed I detected evidences of affection. It annoyed me to know I had been mistaken.

I took leave of him with a detachment that concealed a real wound.

At college I worked like a fiend and managed to support myself, but I couldn't pay off any of the debt. I was determined to start making payments, however small, the minute I had my first full-time job. If the western town of Battlehorn hadn't taken a hand in my fortunes, I might still be paying.

The town, a typical result of frontier enterprise had grown up in the familiar, sprawling, unsightly fashion. Recently expansion had crowded it until it was an unhealthy mass of inefficient ugliness. The town fathers, in a burst of progressive forethought, decided they wanted a planned community. A prize was offered for the best and most economical layout. I went to work. My grim need must have inspired me. I won the award, a week before I took my degree.

There was enough to clear my debt and leave me with a little money of my own. It was a great moment for me when I walked into my uncle's house again, a very great moment.

Aunt Henrietta rose to the occasion with a lavish dinner. My uncle played the host with an air of nervous joviality that rather amused me. I had never seen him so talkative. Somehow, I felt this was not

the evening to settle my account with him.

All the next day he put me off with talk about his book. It was finished at last and he was very busy. But of course he wanted to talk to me, later on perhaps.

Late that night I entered the study. He didn't seem to be working at anything. In fact, I felt that he had been waiting for me for some time. His nervousness had increased, he played with the paper dagger, twirling it this way and that. The blade caught the light and I smiled remembering how I once longed to possess it.

I made my gesture.

He let the check lie on his desk, looking at it sadly. His face was gray. I was shocked to see how much he had aged in the one day since my arrival. At last, with a heavy sigh, he stretched out a hesitant hand and picked up his share of my prize money. "I had no idea you would repay me so soon," he said softly.

I had expected him to be proud of me and compliment me on my achievement, but without a word he opened the account book and with a trembling hand wrote, *Paid in Full,* across the page and signed his name. He gave me a twisted smile. "Do you remember the day of your father's funeral?"

I thought back, seeing myself small, bereft, fiercely determined.

"Well, do you remember?" My uncle's impatient question told me I was not there to indulge in sentimental memories. "Do you still have the poker?"

"Poker?"

"The weapon that killed your father."

I was horribly embarrassed, troubled by a vague sense of guilt. "I suppose it's still under the wardrobe drawer. I haven't looked since I put it there."

"Forgotten?" He was not scornful, not angry. He sounded almost envious. "Well, remember it again. Remember your vow."

"What is it? What's the matter?" I felt cold and afraid.

"I said you would find the man some day. You have found him. I now deliver him to your justice. I killed your father!"

A long silence followed. It is a tribute to my uncle's character that I did not for an instant think he was mad. I believed him utterly. But I could not say a word.

Slowly he began to speak, a little loudly, as if I were deaf and he had to make it clear. Even so, I missed much, but a word or phrase here and there caught in my mind. I heard him without hearing, I understood without understanding.

"Always fond of you . . . but couldn't let you . . . had to keep you free of all obligation and affection . . . bad enough . . . but to add to your conflict would have been villainous . . . study of moral obligation the work of my life . . . finished my book recently . . . never

thought to escape the consequences of my act."

I looked at him and remembered the emotional wasteland of my childhood.

My uncle went on anxiously explaining. "Why are murderers executed? Not so much to punish them as to protect society. In my case there was no danger to the community. My crime was an aberration brought on by a set of circumstances that could never occur again. Society would not have been better for my death, and there was so much in my life of real value. My book. You, yourself, growing up in the shadow of violence. It would have been worse for you, if I had been tried for my brother's murder. Think what the newspapers would have done to you. But I have never deluded myself into thinking my deed was not a crime. To destroy a human life! Since you are the only living injured person, you must decide what to do with me."

I stared at him. "All this time you've been preparing me to be your judge! But why did you kill him? What happened?"

For the only time in my life I saw my uncle blush. "That is the most difficult thing to explain now. My motive has become ridiculous, inexplicable. You remember your mother?"

I shook my head. I was so stunned by what he had told me, that I could only concentrate on trying to understand what he had done.

"No? I rather thought not. Do you remember the woman who came here after your father's death, wanting to see you?"

"The one who cried? The one he was in love with?"

"The one who loved him," he corrected me. He paused. "You must understand that there was a difference of temperament, a great difference between Robert and me. I was always more or less as you know me, bookish, orderly, and well, rather a romanticist.

"Your father, on the other hand, was charming and utterly selfish, incapable of real devotion or feeling, a creature of appetite, refined appetite perhaps, but appetite none the less . . . Your mother died, literally died of his neglect and lack of love. He didn't even have the insight to know he had killed her. When he became interested in the woman you saw, I . . . well, I was deeply attached to her, although she never knew. Marriage to Robert would have destroyed her.

"Now," he added, smiling bitterly, "I find all this incomprehensible. She was really a very stupid person. I am almost tempted to claim a higher motive, to plead that I was aware that your admiration for a worthless father would have destroyed you, too. But it would not be true. My crime was rooted in the passions, not in the mind. You will find the effect of all this in my book when you read

it. It changed my way of thinking about many things."

"And I—what—?" I was unable to go on.

"You will settle the score. I believe you still have the poker."

I must have looked ill at that moment, for he hastened to explain. "You may consider the poker a symbol. I don't seriously recommend that you use it on me, for your own sake. Although under the circumstances, you might get away with it. Still I would prefer you to administer justice without putting your head in the noose. However, that is your problem." His voice trembled.

"What about your wife?"

"My wife will receive a modest, but adequate income after my death."

"What will you do with your money?" I asked in amazement.

"Leave it to the man I have wronged, of course. You."

"But . . ."

"No, I'm not bribing you," he said harshly. "I am simply doing my duty. In a long and not wholly misspent life I have learned that it is useless to anticipate the actions of others, or, to try to solve their conflicts. You must work this out for yourself."

He waited anxiously, his eyes fixed on mine, but I was powerless to give him an answer. "I'm going to bed," I said heavily. "Give me your manuscript. I'd like to look at it."

I sat in my room for a long time staring at nothing. Then I pulled out the wardrobe drawer. The poker was lying in a bed of soft dust puffs. This trivial detail upset me strangely. It was as if the dust did not come from my uncle's neat house, but from that other house, and along with it had come all the emotions of a lost bewildered boy. I picked the poker up, hefted it, and tried to imagine killing my uncle. I threw it on the chair in disgust. I ought at least to have told him that I could never be moved to such a savage retaliation. I realized that the fear had been very much in his mind. I was angry, too. What business had he to burden me with his unappeased conscience?

The whole thing seemed wild and unreal. Ought I to hand my uncle over to the police? I knew what the man had suffered. I knew he was spending a sleepless night in the room below, tortured by fear and doubt.

I began to read his book, turning the pages, skipping, seeking an abstraction called justice. It was a good book, I could see that, finely written, well-reasoned, stressing the moral responsibility of the individual.

At last, tired to the point of absolute exhaustion, I took three aspirins, went to bed and fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke, it was very early. My mouth was dry, my whole body

dull and unresponsive. I lay there in the stillness trying to believe that I had dreamed the melodrama of the night before, but the poker lying on the chair where I had left it was a grim witness to all that had happened.

The money! That was the thing I had not wanted to face the night before. I thought about it and a quiet horror filled me. It was as if I were looking through layer upon layer of purpose—subtle, gossamer veils of motive—and that I was at last seeing an un-clouded vision of my uncle. Despite the spartan morality and the prestige of his intellectual superiority, I was sickened by what I saw.

I was to believe that my choice was free, was I? How could it be, when all the circumstances had been directed by my uncle's brain? Did he want punishment? Or did he want *absolution?* I realized with amazement that he had always been a moral coward. Not hard enough to bear his guilt serenely, he had not been brave enough to confess it. His book was a rationalization of his fear. An excuse for putting off the day of reckoning. He had told himself he had to raise the child he had orphaned. He had mortified his soul by bringing me up to be his judge. All that elaborate business of keeping me free of gratitude! Wasn't that the surest way to bind me in the end? I couldn't help remembering that he had thought it would be many long years before I could pay my debt. Years of truce with his conscience. How he had aged when I paid him!

I saw that his confession to me was neither noble nor spartan. He had invited me to kill him, true, but in terms that he was pretty sure I must refuse. He had told me he was leaving me his money. That made it hard for me to go to the police. My God! In a sense he was trying to make me an accomplice in the murder of my own father. How he had insisted that his crime had not hurt society. I was the sufferer and I alone must judge. In other words he was asking for nothing less than my complete forgiveness. A free judgment? With all the cards stacked for one verdict?

But just as I had made up my mind to hand him over to the police, I did an about-face. I realized that my duty was not to society, not even to my father's memory, but to my uncle's soul.

He had set the stage and managed me like a puppet. I wondered what would be the outcome if I simply played my role. Could I really forgive him? I thought I could. I had loved my father, but the pain of his death had been nothing compared to the years of suffering of the man who had killed him.

Let my uncle have his way then. Why not? It would not give him peace; only an acceptance of his

inability to evade responsibility could accomplish that. I was taking a chance, but it was worth it.

I picked up the manuscript and the poker and went downstairs.

The edge of light under the study door told me that he had kept a sleepless vigil. I knocked and went in.

The eyes he raised to mine were haggard with weariness. He saw the poker in my hand and his face turned ashen.

I placed it on the desk in front of him. "You keep it now," I said. "I won't need it any more." I saw the tense muscles in his neck slacken, something like a smile played at the corners of his mouth. He was enjoying a foretaste of victory. I put the manuscript beside the poker.

"Is this going to be published?"

"I hope so. I am sending it to a publisher who expressed interest. Did you read it? Do you like it?"

His eagerness made me feel how monstrous and inflated was the human ego, mine, as much as his. "It's a good book," I said, "but I don't like it. The whole thing is a lie behind which you have been able to hide all these years."

He was astonished. "You hate me then?"

"Not you, your book. Can't you see that under the circumstances it has no meaning?"

"What are you going to do?" He was frightened, less sure of himself.

"You said I was your judge. I accept that. Insofar as any man can accept the judgment of another's soul I accept yours. I forgive you completely and absolutely. Last night I was too shocked to think clearly. But this morning I considered it carefully. I have no bitterness toward you. I only wish you not to suffer. The slate is clean." I held my hand across the desk to him.

He sighed deeply, like a gambler who has staked all on one throw of the dice and won against the odds. But he did not take my hand.

"God bless you, my boy," he said. "God bless you."

We were silent and then he said anxiously. "But you don't think my book is honest? Because of my guilt?"

"And I don't think my forgiveness can make it more so, do you?"

He smiled. "I seem to have been responsible for a very nice sense of morality in you. Perhaps you are right." He sighed again and got up and paced the room nervously. I could see that I had been right. The release I had offered him was not having the effect he had expected.

"I'll be in my room if you want me," I said and left quickly.

I waited upstairs in a cold sweat. Suppose I had been wrong? Suppose he had simply manipulated me into condoning crime. The minutes dragged.

Within half an hour he knocked

at my door and asked me to come to the study.

He was tense and jumpy. Several times he opened his mouth to speak and shut it again. I stood there.

"How do *you* feel?" He asked suddenly.

"Fine!" I said. "I feel good."

"I see." He bit his lip. "Well, strangely enough I don't. Do you know why?"

"No," I lied.

"In forgiving me you relieved your own soul, not mine. I've been a fool. A man cannot be forgiven by anyone but himself. And I cannot forgive myself."

My feeling of triumph lasted only a moment.

He said, "You must kill me. It's the only way."

I felt as if I had received a foul blow. This scholarly moralist was hard to handle. Did he mean it? He'd been up all night under great strain; perhaps he didn't realize what he was saying.

"Why don't you kill yourself?" I said as casually as I could.

He swallowed with difficulty, shook his head.

"Do you think having me hanged for your murder will do you any good?"

He thought hard for a moment. "I think we could arrange things," he said, "so there'd be no danger of your being hanged. The poker is there and my paper dagger. That is sharp enough. I'll attack you, a bruise or two, you wouldn't mind that would you? Then you could plead self-defense."

"It would be a fraud just like your book," I said. "But, if you want it that way . . ."

"Yes," he said. "I want it that way."

It was fantastic. How could a man have so divorced himself from reality as to believe what I'd just said.

But half way to the desk he turned and I saw his face. It was filled with despair. He didn't *want* me to kill him at all, and he realized that I knew it, had seen through his self-deception. "You're a devil!" he said.

"No. You are. No man on earth could think of so many subtle ways of hiding from himself."

"So this is the end of all my careful planning? Why could I not foresee it?" He shook his head sadly. Then he put his hand on my shoulder. "Go into the living room and light a fire, will you? I feel chilly. I'll be with you in a moment."

When he came into the living room a few minutes later, I had a blaze roaring up the chimney. He was clutching his manuscript to his chest as if that would keep him warm. I thought. Now he's going to defend it, chapter by chapter, topic by topic.

"Do I look different to you?" he asked shyly.

I shook my head.

"I just wondered," he said, "if a man looks different after making the most important decision of his life. Now, I want you to witness this." He went to the fire and began tearing pages out of the manuscript and throwing them into the flames.

I cried out in protest. It was awful to watch him. It was like watching a murder. I grabbed his arm. "Don't! That's your life's work. There's no need . . ."

"Oh yes there is." The words seemed to hurt him, but he got them out. "A book of this sort mustn't be a fraud. I'm proud of you, for making that clear to me. I couldn't have been all bad, you know, or you wouldn't have turned out so well. There's one other thing I want to say. I went to talk your father out of marriage that night. He was drunk and abusive. I lost my temper. It wasn't premeditated, my boy. I never intended to kill him."

He stood watching his work burn, poking sheets into the blaze. Then he stirred the blackened pages into ashes.

"There's only one thing left now," he said. "The police."

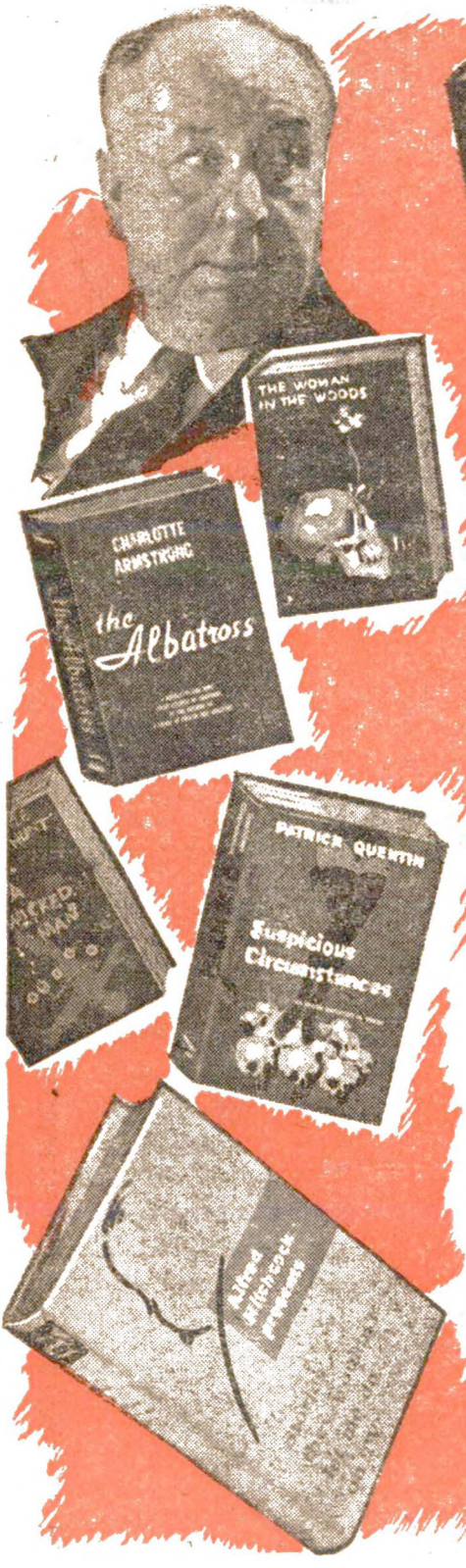
But as he moved from the fireplace he gave a low moan. He spun around as if to snatch back what had been destroyed. His face twisted horribly. Then he went down on his knees and with a sigh pitched forward across the floor.

I ran to him, called to him, tried to lift him. Then I felt his pulse. My uncle was dead.

The doctor said it was one of those inexplicable things. A man with no history of heart disease, no warning, drops dead. "If he'd had a shock," he said, "it would be easier to understand. But you hear of cases . . . Just like that!" He snapped his fingers. Then he added gently, "It's the best way to go."

I said nothing. But I was thinking that my uncle had raised me to give him justice, and because I was the product of his up-bringing I had given him the justice he had taught me to give. Accepting it had killed him.

I could not wish my uncle back. He had achieved a hero's death and I knew of his heroism. It was not immortality, but my knowledge was an honest monument. And yet, it seemed to me, I had only been the instrument of a mechanical justice that cannot be cheated. Each man, in the end, must submit to it.



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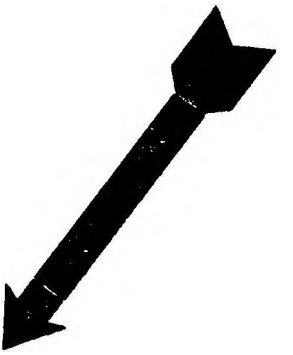
Sophistication is not for the birds. Though birds do get around, they would be completely at a loss, let us say, at a cocktail party or in a non-objective art gallery. For that matter, they couldn't even commit a murder with finesse—the objective of our hero—if their reputations depended on it.



c/o HARRY WRY

by Gary Jennings

THEY had met in the club car and they must have been a little tipsy, or likely they would not have been talking about Murder, How to Do It. Now the train was nearing Grand Central and they were seated side by side in one of the smokers, their coats on their knees.

"*I* couldn't murder anybody," said the fat man, with a fat hiccup. "I wouldn't know how to begin."

"Just what I'm trying to point out," said the tall young man. "It's not who you pick as a victim, or how you do it—it's how you *begin*. If you work out all the details beforehand, you can take your time about cornering your quarry, and get the actual nastiness over with at your leisure."

"Have *you* ever?" asked the fat man, a trifle uneasily.

"No, but I might want to, some day. Now, if this were Kansas farm country, I'd prepare a way of going about it to suit the local conditions. In the Alaskan tundra, I'd use a different method. Here in New York—"

"Too many witnesses around," said the fat man.

"But New York does have its compensations. For instance, dropping-in for cocktails is an institution here. Say I invite my victim over for a drink. During the course of the evening, I contrive to spill a bottle of bitters over his suit."

"Well, that ought to kill him," the fat man muttered drily.

"I apologize to him," the young man went on. "I tell him to go into the bathroom and hand out his clothes to me, so that I can sponge them off. While he's stranded naked in there, I run a rubber tube from my gas stove unobtrusively under the bathroom door. Another compensation of New York is that all apartment bathrooms are tiny. So it takes no time at all. And he has already done me the favor of disrobing for the operation. I merely topple him into the bathtub, mince him into conveniently small pieces, and flush him down the—"

"Oh, good Lord!" said the other, making a face.

The young man grinned. "Of course, I might have to use the incinerator for bones and things."

The fat man was pinching the bridge of his nose and trying to sober up. "All right. So how do you keep the cops off your neck?"

"There are ways. In the first place, I wouldn't murder one of my own enemies, or even an acquaintance. I'd pick a stranger."

"Kill an innocent stranger?" exclaimed the fat man. "What on earth for?"

"Well, right now there's no particular person I want to get rid of. But if I just wanted to *murder,* it really wouldn't matter who I picked."

"You'd never get away with it," said the fat man. "They'd pin it on you somehow. They always do."

"They try to pin it on somebody, that's true. But suppose all the clues led to Harry Wry . . ."

"Who?"

The tall young man tapped an advertisement in the newspaper that lay open on his lap. "Harry Wry Associates. It's one of those you-name-it-we-do-it companies. You know, they'll take on any job from walking your dog, to rejuvenating your grandmother."

"They do murders, too, I suppose," the other said sarcastically.

"For all I know. But that's not the point. Suppose now I quietly become a sort of *Doppelganger* Harry Wry. I go around the city collecting whatever I need for a murder project—poison, a pick-ax, cement, quicklime, a casket if I

like—and sign for everything in the name of Harry Wry. Nobody would think this odd, because in his business Mr. Wry must buy some pretty weird tools himself. But they *would* remember, when the murder came to light and the police reconstructed the crime. And all the scattered clues would point to Harry Wry."

"There probably isn't any Harry Wry. It's probably just the name for the organization. Like Packard or Remington-Rand."

"Then this may be the first time a corporation has ever been framed for murder. But me—I have no connection with Harry Wry, no connection with the victim, and so I just fade away in safety when the job is done."

"What about fingerprints? What about all those storekeepers and people? They can describe you!"

"As far as I know, my fingerprints are not on file anywhere. And I can wear gloves. They won't hamper me; I once played the piano with gloves on. As for the witnesses, how will they describe me? I'm too average. Why, ten minutes after we get off this train, *you* couldn't give a description of me that wouldn't fit a quarter of a million other people in this city."

The fat man grunted. "So who would be the lucky victim?"

"Oh, you know that old theory that some people are predestined to be killers' victims. Like some people are accident-prone — always mashing their thumbs or falling down stairs—others are murder-prone. I'm sure that when I need a candidate for a corpse, one will come along."

The train plunged underground with a screeching racket. "I'm beginning to feel halfway sober," said the fat man. "I don't think you are."

"You think it's those martinis talking," said the young man, with a slight pout. "I'll show you I'm serious. I'm actually going to commit this murder, compliments of Harry Wry. The more I think about it, the easier it sounds. Besides, I like the name—it has a nice ironic twist."

"I was wrong," said the other. "You're not drunk; you're crazy."

"No, no, no. If it hadn't been for you, I'd never have decided."

"Now *wait* a minute! I didn't make any *bets* or anything. I'm not going to get involved in anything as lunatic as this!"

"Naturally not. You don't know my name and I don't know yours. That way, I can't implicate you and you can't turn me in. I wouldn't want it any other way."

"For the love of Mike, knock it off, fellow!" The fat man, along with all the other people in the coach, began to gather up his belongings.

"You just watch the papers," the young man persisted. "I'm going to make this especially macabre, so the name Harry Wry ought to be

all over the front pages. When you see it, you'll know I made my point."

"You're crazy," said the fat man simply. He stood up and went down the aisle to the vestibule. The young man followed him off, onto the station platform, and the crowd milled about them as they stood looking at each other for a moment.

"Well," said the fat man. "So long and—good luck."

"Good-by," said the tall young man, with a wicked leer. "I do hope you're not murder-prone."

The fat man exited, quick-step.

That afternoon, a tall young man, well-dressed and wearing a new pair of gray suede gloves, spread three hundred and twenty dollars in cash on the desk of a dapper sub-executive at a midtown bank, and requested the convenience of a Special Checking Account in the name of Harry Wry. The deposit being in cash, he was spared the necessity of having to provide any substantial identification. A couple of personal letters with his (Harry's) name on them, previously prepared by the young man, proved sufficient.

That night, carrying the classified ad page of *The New York Times* in his gloved hand, he roamed Greenwich Village looking at for-rent furnished apartments. He investigated only the ones that were in dingy-made-over little brownstones on unfrequented dark streets. The apartments, variously described as "1½ rms.," "bachelor apt.," and "lt. hskpg." were uniformly dirty, dark, smelly, and furnished long ago by witches.

The one he liked best was a back room opening on a "courtyard" that was a quadrangle of blank brick backs of other buildings. It had a curtained-off alcove containing a two-burner gas stove and a wheezy refrigerator under a tarnished sink.

The superintendent who had shown him in pointed to a second, closet-sized room. "Bathroom," he said. "Bathtub; no shower."

"That's all right," said the young man, because it was.

"One year lease," said the superintendent.

"I'll take it," said the young man.

The superintendent went elsewhere in the building and returned with the contract. The young man looked it over; it was the usual New York lease, the main provision being that the landlord could hold him responsible for the entire year's rent if he moved out before its expiration. Let them sue Harry Wry, thought he, signing that unfortunate's name at the bottom of the form. He made out a check for a month's rent, plus a month's "security," and signed it Harry Wry.

The next day, he went to a department store near his bank and requested a charge account, giving the bank as a reference. The credit manager made a telephone call to

confirm, and that was that. When he left the store, he carried in his pocket a Charge-a-Plate made out to Harry Wry of the Greenwich Village address.

He stepped into a branch office of the Bell Company and requested telephone service in his new apartment. The Charge-a-Plate for identification, a check for the required deposit, and the telephone would be installed the day after tomorrow, sir.

Another stop at another office, another deposit check, and Consolidated Edison promised that electricity and cooking gas would be supplied instantly to Mr. Harry Wry.

The next day was an even busier one. He went first to his department store's hardware section, where he bought a hack-saw, a chisel and a cleaver. He had them all charged to his account and requested that they be delivered as soon as possible to the Village address, care of Harry Wry.

Then to a surgical supply store on Lexington Avenue, where an antiseptic sales clerk helped him select a beautifully matched set of scalpels, a heavy-duty dental forceps and a bone saw (which he decided was better suited to his purpose than the hardware hack-saw). The salesman refrained from comment while the tall young man assembled his purchases, but his expression was peculiar.

"Doctor Harry Wry?" he asked, as he made out the sales slip for the items.

"No, just plain Harry Wry," said the young man. He paid with a check, and again asked for delivery to his apartment.

From there he took a subway downtown to a wholesale restaurant supply house, where he bought a quantity of insulated food bags. These are heavy manila pouches lined with aluminum foil. Between the outer bag and the lining is stuffed some sort of shredded padding. In these bags, hot foods stay hot and cold ones stay cold. And a perishable product, like meat, can be stored for an appreciable time or shipped for a considerable distance before going bad and announcing itself.

His next stop was a stationer's, where he bought a number of corrugated cardboard boxes, big enough to contain the food bags, for convenience in mailing. At both these places, too, he paid by check and specified delivery.

Lastly, he went back to his bank, where, on a piece of scrap paper, he calculated the total of the checks he had handed around: $284.63. He figured another two dollars should cover the cost of the checks themselves. That meant $286.63 subtracted from three hundred and twenty. He went to a teller's window and drew a check to "Cash" for $33.37. No point in leaving Harry a balance.

Two nights later, he was living

in the apartment; the telephone was connected; the gas and electricity were functioning. It was a very hot night. He wore only shorts and his gray suede gloves as he sat at a table laboriously hand-printing labels for his mailing boxes. He was indiscriminately selecting the names and addresses of his intended recipients from the brand-new directory the telephone man had given him. Around him were piled heaps and bundles of the insulated bags and the flattened-out boxes. On another table, his tools and instruments gleamed oilily under a reading lamp.

The telephone rang.

He turned slowly and stared at it. No one knew he was here, either under his own name or Harry Wry's. His number would not be in the directory until a new issue came out. Who could this be? Probably the telephone company's business office, he decided, and went to see what they wanted at this time of night.

"Harry Wry Associates?" said a high, nervous female voice.

"Wry Associates," he said crisply. "Harry Wry speaking."

"Oh, I'm so glad I got you, Mr. Wry!" wailed the voice. "I tried and tried your offices, so finally I called information to see if you had a night number and they gave me this one. I'm sorry if I—"

"Quite all right, madam. Day and night service at Wry Associates. What can we do for you?"

"It's about our little Dickie-boy. You see, my eighty-year-old great-aunt is mortally ill, down in Richmond, Virginia. And Dickie has always been her favorite; he was born at her place four years ago, and—well—I thought if he went down to see her it might just cheer her up and make her last hours happier."

"Uh—yes?"

"My husband and I just can't get away. And all our friends are at Southampton, most of the servants are away, there's just no one we can turn to. And it's so important that Dickie go to visit Great-Aunt Myrtle. He's her favorite, as I think I said, and she hasn't seen him since he was a year old, and—you never know—there may be the matter of an inheritance."

"I see," said the young man. "Quite. You want a companion to accompany — er — Dickie. May I have your name please, madam?"

"Mrs. Vinnie Simpson," she said, and gave a Park Avenue address. "Great-Auntie is so very ill, and who knows how little time she may have left, so he's got to leave just right away. We couldn't take the chance of waiting to find someone to go along with him. But I wouldn't dream of entrusting him to a conductor or a porter for the whole trip."

"Of course not, Mrs. Simpson," he said unctuously, thinking meanwhile how *very* murder-prone some people were. Dickie.

"Dickie is small for his age, and a trifle delicate, but he's very well-mannered. I'm sure he'll behave like a perfect angel. I do hope someone from your office can—"

"On a job of this nature and urgency," said the young man, "I don't want to depend on a hired underling. I shall insist on accompanying Dickie myself."

"Oh, that's *ever* so good of you, Mr. Wry!" she gushed. "I can't begin to tell you how *thankful* I am!"

"With Wry Associates, Mrs. Simpson, the *best service* is our *standard* service. Now, I understand you wish me to take the train rather than fly?"

"Dear, yes! I'm scared to death of airplanes and I certainly wouldn't want my darling to go up in one, even if you were there to protect him."

The young man smiled sweetly into the telephone.

"Can you come up right away, Mr. Wry?" she asked anxiously. "In the meantime, I'll have Mr. Simpson telephone and arrange reservations on the earliest train, and I'll have Dickie ready to go."

"Very good, madam. I'll start immediately."

He hung up and meditatively lighted a cigarette. He glanced at the neat row of cutting tools lined up on the table, then looked over at the addressed labels; there were twenty-nine of them so far. A four-year-old boy. It made the actual job a little easier, of course, and the headlines should be spectacular, but he wondered if there'd be enough to go around.

He arrived at the Simpsons' duplex apartment to find it in a state of some turmoil. A harried housemaid was flittering around, carrying sweaters and what-not. The rumple-haired gentleman who had admitted him, presumably Simpson *pere,* was smoking one cigar and had two or three others burning in various ashtrays.

"Sit down, Mr. Wry," he said, waving the cigar and sprinkling ashes about. "My wife is just finishing Dickie's packing."

"Don't rush yourselves, sir," said the young man, relaxing in a wing chair. "I've already checked—the next train is still an hour away."

"Yes," said Mr. Simpson. "That's the one I got your reservations for. A drawing room. The tickets are waiting at the station in your name. Would you like our chauffeur to drive you down?"

"Oh, don't bother, sir," said the young man quickly. "I've—uh—got my own man waiting downstairs."

"Good. Fine," said Mr. Simpson, lighting another cigar. "Now, about your fee . . ."

"Exclusive of the railroad fare," said the young man, taking out a sheet of paper covered with figures, "it will be two hundred eighty-six dollars and sixty-three cents, plus incidental expenses en route. If you care to pay in advance, the expenses will be included."

"Most fair, most fair," mumbled Mr. Simpson. "I'll give it to you now. Don't want you to get caught short on the way, in case Dickie needs anything."

He left the room.

From somewhere else came Mrs. Simpson's high voice, anxiously exhorting Dickie to hold still while she put his sweater on. The maid appeared with a small overnight case. She set it by the hall door and said to the young man, "This is all he'll need, sir. They've already made preparations on the other end."

The young man nodded and smiled pleasantly at her.

Mrs. Simpson came into the room and greeted him.

"Dickie-boy will be out in a moment," she said apologetically. "He wanted to go to the potty first. Nervous, you know. I can't tell you, Mr. Wry—this *is* so good of you. And I feel confident that Dickie is safe in your care. You *will* be careful, won't you?"

"Caution is my middle name," he said, with a smile, and Mrs. Simpson disappeared again into the other room.

"Now, you're going to be a good boy, aren't you, Dickie?" she said.

There was an answering murmur that could have been taken as an affirmative.

"And you're not going to give Mr. Wry any trouble . . .?"

Murmur.

"All wight. Dickie go bye-bye now — see Gweat-Auntie Myrtle who woves him so much."

Mr. Simpson returned, to hand over a sheaf of attractive green bills. The young man stowed them away in his wallet, as Mrs. Simpson came out of the other room leading a small, black, curly, besweatered, grinning French poodle.

Somewhat later, "If I didn't have my particularly keen sense of humor," the young man said to Dickie, as he carried him onto the train, "I probably wouldn't see the rich humor in this." And all the way to Richmond, he chuckled to himself.


ON AIR

LT. MIKE VEGAS had the irresistable urge to slick back his hair and straighten his tie before knocking on the door marked "PRIVATE." He was a cop, and cops weren't paid for looking handsome, but there was something about a television star's office that made him self-conscious about his rumpled suit and stubbled chin.

Wally Adams answered the door himself. Mike blinked at the sight of the familiar face, and stammered out a self-introduction. Adams looked just like the Adams he'd seen on his TV screen, and the fact seemed remarkable.

"Thanks for coming, Lieutenant," he said. "I hate to bother you guys, but this may be important.

WHODUNIT?

by O. H. Leslie

Wither television? Above the clicking sound of TV sets being clicked off nationally, this is a question that can be heard quite plainly on any clear night. Our story suggests an entertaining remedy: live, honest to goodness, unfilmed murder.

I'm just not sure. Come on in."

"Thanks," Mike mumbled, and took a leather-padded chair beside the desk. "You said there was something about a letter, er, Mr. Adams. What was it, a threat?"

"No, nothing like that. Matter of fact, I can't absolutely guarantee that the letter isn't the work of a crackpot. But I've got a sneaking hunch it's more than that."

"Could I see the letter?"

Adams reached inside his tweed jacket and withdrew a folded sheet. "You know the show we do Thursday nights, Lieutenant? This might not make any sense if you don't."

"I've seen it," Mike said. *"Whodunit."*

"Then you know the gimmick. We get people who have been in the news recently to come up and wear black masks. The panel's supposed to guess who he or she is, and what it was that they did to make headlines. We do give them clues.

"Sometimes, we seek out the contestants, and sometimes they write to us. Like this guy did. But read the letter for yourself."

Mike read it. The handwriting was small and precise, full of cramped loops and elaborate capitals.

Dear Mr. Adams:

I have been viewing your television show for some time, and it has occurred to me that you may be interested in myself as a contestant. I prefer not to describe myself too fully, for reasons which will be apparent, but I am forty years old, a draftsman for an engineering concern in Long Island City, a resident of Manhattan, married, no children. My wife has been a devoted fan of yours for years.

I believe I have done something newsworthy, which would be a most interesting challenge for your panelists.

I am a murderer.

I know that a man in your position must receive thousands of letters from what may be termed crackpots. I would certainly understand if you were to label me the same way, and all I can do is assure you in all sincerity that I am mentally competent and that my statement is authentic. I am responsible for a premeditated murder, and am quite willing to reveal this fact on your program. Naturally, I will provide you at the time with all details and evidence regarding my crime, and will be perfectly willing to turn myself over to the authorities.

I realize that my offer borders on the sensational, and for that reason may not appeal to your sponsors or your producers. However, there is a civic duty involved here, for I will not reveal my crime to the police unless I can do so in the manner specified. You have the opportunity to see justice done; I trust this aspect will appeal to you.

If you are interested, I can be

reached through the General Post Office, Third District, under the psuedonym of John Rice. Any attempt to trap me through the postal department will be fruitless, for I will simply deny the facts herein stated.

With best wishes for your continued success, and in the hope of hearing from you soon, I remain,

"John Rice"

Lt. Vegas was conscious of Wally Adams' inspection of his face as he finished the letter. He kept his expression suitably unemotional, and said:

"Quite an offer. What do your producers think of it, Mr. Adams?"

The performer grinned ruefully. "I wouldn't kid you, Lieutenant. When Mr. Rice called his idea 'sensational,' he wasn't whistling Dixie. We're leery of the whole thing, of course, but you'll have to admit—it's sure-fire publicity."

Mike grunted. "It's that, all right."

"There wouldn't be a paper in the country that would miss out on the story. *Whodunit?* would be in the headlines. But we're afraid the whole thing could backfire; that's why we thought we'd get the advice of the police."

"You did the right thing." Mike got up and paced the lush carpet, feeling more relaxed now that the problem was stated. "We can't afford to make a mistake about this. This Rice guy may be genuine. He may *really* have killed somebody, and this may be the only way we can get our hands on him.

"Then you think I ought to let him on the show?"

"I'd say it was the only way, but I don't call the shots on this, Mr. Adams. I'll have to get the District Attorney's office to vote on procedure."

Adams shrugged. "It's up to you fellows, Lieutenant. We'll cooperate in any way we can."

"We appreciate that, Mr. Adams. Now suppose I take this letter along with me. We'll run it through the lab and see if analysis leads us any place. Then I'll get hold of the D.A.'s boys and find out what they want to do."

"Suits me fine," Wally Adams said. He stood up and thrust out his hand.

It took almost a week before Mike Vegas was able to pay a return visit. Adams wasn't alone in the office when he walked in, and he found himself getting introduced to a roomful of famous faces. He felt strangely reticent.

"You've probably seen this fellow before," Adams said, putting his hand on the shoulder of Jake Jenkins, the comedian. Jenkins looked dour and turned up his coat collar in a passable imitation of a hunted criminal. "And this is Bennet Ives, our anchor man. Sally

Burack, and Lila Conway. That's our panel."

Mike nodded at them in turn, trying to look blase, and fighting the urge to collect autographs. They greeted him cheerfully, and filed out of the room with assorted witticisms directed at Adams. When they were gone, the TV star chuckled and flopped onto a leather couch.

"Getting ready for the show tomorrow," he said. "I haven't told them about our letter-writing friend, of course, just in case he *does* appear on the program. How about it, Lieutenant? What did the District Attorney's office say?"

Mike cleared his throat. "Well, the department's willing to go just this far, Mr. Adams. They want you to write this guy Rice and tell him you're interested. They want you to ask him to come up to your office for an interview first. All in complete privacy, of course. Now that won't be strictly true, I'm afraid, but there's a larger issue than truth involved here."

"I get it," Adams said. "The only thing is, Lieutenant, he's liable to smell the trap. He doesn't sound easy to fool."

"That's what I told them." Mike's scowl flashed across his homely, good-natured face. Then he got loyal. "But that's the department decision, Mr. Adams, and they're usually pretty correct. If he's so anxious to appear on the show, he may agree to an interview, too. We'll use that opportunity to investigate him upside down and sideways."

From the look on Adams' face, it was plain that the decision was disappointing.

"Okay, Lieutenant. If that's how you think we should play it, that's what we'll do. This is really your show this time."

"Thanks, Mr. Adams. By the way, we didn't get much out of the letter itself. No fingerprints except yours and mine; our friend's pretty cautious. The only one who seemed able to tell us anything was the police psychiatrist. He thinks Rice is a psychotic, with a strong need to make a confession. Something to do with guilt feelings. He thinks Rice wants to use your show, for the biggest public confession in history. It's a pretty big audience, right?"

"Almost forty million, they tell me."

Mike whistled. "He's a nut all right. The only thing is, the psychiatrist also thinks he may mean what he says. He may be a killer, all right."

"What a stunt," Wally Adams said softly, the light of the showman in his eyes.

In four days, Adams had his reply, and Mike Vegas had the satisfaction of knowing that his viewpoint was right. John Rice *was* too smart to walk into a police trap.

Dear Mr. Adams:

I must admit to being disappointed by your reply. I do not intend to reveal myself to you or anyone, unless the terms specified in my original letter are met. Even though mere knowledge of my identity will be of no value to the police, I still do not desire to be the subject of an investigation. Therefore, I must respectfully repeat my position. I will supply all the facts and evidence required concerning my murder, and make full confession, only if I am allowed to appear on your television program. I will not be available for any interviews prior to the broadcast, and will arrive at the studio just before air time. If these conditions are met, I will cooperate fully. If not, then I must cherish my secret as long as circumstance will allow. If you agree to these terms, kindly specify time and place for my appearance.

Yours,
"John Rice"

Mike Vegas sighed, and tapped the letter against his chin.

"What do your producers say now? Would they be willing to go through with this game?"

Adams said: "If it's okay with the police, it's okay with us. We're happy to be of help."

"It'll have to be okay," Mike said grimly. "I'll call the D.A. this afternoon, but it looks to me like John Rice has left us only one alternative." He looked up quizzically. "How do you feel about it, Mr. Adams? Having a killer on your show, sitting right next to you—may be a dangerous maniac? That'd make a lot of guys nervous."

"Who's nervous?" Adams grinned, stamping his cigarette out on the desk blotter.

From the control room, Lt. Mike Vegas watched half a dozen Wally Adams bouncing across the television monitors, doing his pre-broadcast warmup. The audience was in a receptive mood, laughing appreciatively at Adams' antics, but Mike's keen eyes picked out the six solemn faces in the crowd. They were plain-clothes men, strategically seated near the exits of the theatre, ready for any trouble on the part of the evening's scheduled guest. There were two other detectives backstage, tensely awaiting the arrival of John Rice.

Adams didn't seem to be affected by the sinister possibilities of the evening. His grin was as wide as ever, as he took his place behind the *Whodunit?* desk that confronted the panelists' table.

Then the panel members were introduced, and took their places to a round of applause. Bennet Ives, blinking genially at them through horn-rimmed spectacles, held the chair for Sally Burack, while Jake Jenkins, dourly comical, dusted off

the seat for Lila Conway. The floor manager, trailing microphone wire, signalled the cast to their places, made a last minute check of the stage, and the show was under way.

A tall man, wearing a black mask with eyeholes, stepped to the front of the stage curtain, onto the chalked outline of feet on the boards. He looked towards the director, and then stiffened as an off-screen announcer said:

"One day last week, in the city of Chicago, this man performed an act of heroism that made headlines across the country. Do you know . . . *Whodunit?*"

The program's theme music swung out of nowhere, and the announcer continued over rolling titles. He praised the sponsor's product, a toilet soap, and then introduced, "America's most exciting panel show . . . starring Wally Adams!"

Adams came out of the wings to the accompaniment of enthusiastic hand-clapping, and took his place behind the dual microphones at the desk. "Thank you, and good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to another edition of *Whodunit?,* the game that introduces you to names in the news." He introduced the panel members one by one, and then the first masked guest.

She was an elderly woman with white hair and a grandmotherly voice, and when Wally Adams showed the viewing audience the headlines concerning her, they laughed loudly. She had won a national hog-calling contest held in Louisiana a week before. The round of questioning by the panelists started with Jake Jenkins, but before Mike could hear the first question, a detective entered the control room.

"What's up?" Mike said. "Our friend arrive yet?"

"He's here. Brought his own mask, and he's not talking to anybody. The director's backstage with him now, giving him instructions. He'll be the next-to-the-last guest."

"And he didn't say a thing?"

"Just wanted to know if the cops were here, and the director said yes. But that's all."

"Let's not rattle him," Mike said. "Our best bet is to play it just the way he wants it. I'll come backstage when he goes on the air, but not before that."

"Right," the detective said.

Mike turned to the stage again, and heard Sally Burack ask: "Let's see. You say this is something you did recently? And there were other people involved? Was anybody *related* to you involved?"

"No," the masked woman answered, a smile in her voice.

"Were these people men?"

"Yes, most of them were men."

The buzzer sounded, ending Sally Burack's questioning period. Bennett Ives frowned, and then asked: "Is this something you're *proud* of, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes."

"Was it something in the nature of an accomplishment, or an award, something like that?"

"Yes."

"Did you win a prize? Like in a cooking contest?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it a cooking contest," the old woman said delicately. The audience giggled over the sound of the buzzer, and Lila Conway took up the questioning chores. By the time they were midway through the next round, the panel had their answer, and Wally Adams had the opportunity to do a commercial. The next contestants were three auto speed racers who were the only survivors in a competition that had involved seven cars. Lila Conway pinned down the secret on the first round. Then, a masked Hollywood celebrity, who had broken his leg while making a difficult scene, was brought on stage. He was unmasked at ten minutes to the hour.

Mike tensed as Wally Adams returned to the microphone to announce the next guest.

"Before we go on with the show," he said, "I'd like to give the panelists and our television audience fair warning. A lot of our *Whodunit?* guests have done interesting things, and most of them, we hope, are pretty amusing. Our next visitor is an unusual one, and one whose secret can't be called amusing by any stretch of the imagination. I myself don't know this man's name, nor do the producers or sponsors of this program. But we do know that his identity is the strangest and most dramatic we've ever had on the show."

He nodded towards the wings. "Okay, then. Let's have our Mr. X."

Mike held his breath. The man who walked out onto the stage was slight in build, with tufts of rust-colored hair jutting above the black facial mask. He wore a neat, colorless suit with a starched collar and tightly-knotted tie. He seemed eminently and completely in possession of himself.

"Panel," Wally Adams said, "We're going to dispense with the usual *Whodunit?* clues, and won't reveal the news item to our studio or home audience. We'll start the questioning with Jake Jenkins."

Jenkins squinted at the man. "This all sounds rather earth-shaking. You sure you're not the sponsor?"

The audience tittered, too much awed by Wally Adams' sober preamble to laugh outright.

"No," Mr. X said, in a placid voice. "I'm not the sponsor."

"Do you have any connection with politics, or art?"

"No."

"Is this something exclusive you did?"

"In a way." The man's lips, only partially revealed beneath the mask, curled upwards. "Although others have done similarly."

"Was this some kind of record you set?"

"No."

The buzzer sounded, and Adams said: "Sorry, Jake. We'll have to continue the questions with Sally Burack."

"Does your occupation have anything to do with this?" she said. "Would it help us to find out what you do?"

"I think not."

"Is there somebody *else* connected with this?"

Mr. X hesitated, and then leaned over to whisper in Wally Adams' ear.

"Er, there *is* somebody else connected with the event," Adams said, "but Mr. X doesn't believe it would help to know the identity of that person."

"Then this is something you did with somebody—or *to* somebody?"

Lt. Mike Vegas drew a sharp breath in the control room.

"Er, yes," Mr. X said airily. "I'd say that's true."

"And it won't help us to know *who?*"

The buzzer sounded. "Bennett Ives," Adams said.

"Mr. X.," Bennett Ives said, tugging at his eyeglass frame, "is the person involved in this event any *happier* because of what you did."

"Happier? Some might think so."

"I think we'd say no on that," Wally Adams interposed, not looking very happy himself. "I doubt if the person was pleased about this thing."

"Then I assume it wasn't a very *nice* thing you did?"

Mr. X. chuckled dryly.

"When you did this thing, Mr. X., did you in any way *touch* the person?"

"No, I didn't actually touch them."

"Then this wasn't something *physical* you did?"

"Oh, it was physical, all right."

"If this was physical, and you didn't actually *touch* the person, was it sort of—remote control?"

The buzzer sounded. Lila Conway took over the last question, and Mr. X. answered:

"Yes. I think it's fair to say yes."

"Did this thing cause any physical pain?"

"Oh, I doubt that very much."

Adams interrupted. "Wait a minute, that—might be misleading. We can't be absolutely *sure* there wasn't physical pain involved. In fact, I'd say that pain was a very definite aspect of this thing."

Lila Conway looked more puzzled than ever. She poked a pencil into her hair and said: "Was this something in the nature of a practical joke, Mr. X?"

"In a manner of speaking . . ."

"No," Adams said hastily. "This was certainly not a joke." Even in the monitor, Mike Vegas could see that sweat was beading Wally Adams' face. He looked like a man in the middle of an ordeal, and the

quiet, smug manner of the masked contestant by his side created a sharp contrast.

"Would it help us to know *when* you did this thing, Mr. X?"

"Perhaps. It happened tonight."

Mike started at the answer.

"You mean you did this thing before the show?"

The buzzer sounded, and Jake Jenkins asked: *"Did* you do this before tonight's show, Mr. X?"

"No. I did it during the show. Only a few minutes ago."

Mike slapped one of the studio engineers on the shoulder. "I'm going backstage," he said. Even as he hurried to the rear of the theatre, he could hear the questioning continue.

"You mean we *actually* saw you do this thing?"

"Not really."

"Did *anyone* see you do this thing?"

"No one."

"Except the person involved, of course?"

"No. Not even her."

"Her?" Sally Burack asked. "Then it was a woman—"

"Not your turn, Sally," Adams said, quickly, nervously.

"Was it a woman?" Jake Jenkins said.

"Yes, it was a woman. That's not important to the fact, but it was a woman."

"Was this woman related to you? Your wife, for instance?"

"Yes. She was my wife."

Wally Adams' face was bordering on the frantic. He looked up at the studio clock and said: "I'm afraid we'll have to call time, panel. So if Mr. X will take off his mask and tell us what his secret is—"

"Gladly," the man said, removing his mask. There was nothing extraordinary about the man's face. It was a bland, undistinguished face, and the brightness of the eyes were minimized by heavy lids. "My name is Harold Flaxer," he said proudly, "and about ten minutes ago, I murdered my wife, Beebe Flaxer."

The gasp emitted by the audience might have come from one shocked throat. The mouths of the panelists fell open, and Wally Adams went to the microphone quickly.

"Mr. Flaxer has agreed to turn himself over to the police and make full confession of his crime. The idea was entirely his own, and we have cooperated fully with the police department in this matter. In our audience right now are representatives of the force, and detectives are waiting to take Mr. Flaxer into custody—"

"Just a moment," Flaxer said, smiling thinly. "I'm not quite finished. I'm sure everyone will want to know why I killed Beebe, and more importantly—how. The why is simple. My wife has never been an intellectually stimulating companion. This didn't matter much in the early years of our mariage; she had a certain youthful charm then.

But as time stole those charms, it also stole her intellect. And then television – dear television – came along, and my Beebe found herself. Night and day she found herself, in front of the tiny glowing screen, eyes big and empty as saucers, living her entire life in the shadowy world on the cathode tube . . ."

Wally Adams was looking offstage, tugging at his shirt collar.

"I knew she would be watching this program, of course. She's watched every program of yours, Mr. Adams, ever since you first appeared. She is—was, rather—fanatically devoted to you. She used to run off and attend your broadcasts in person, until I expressly forbid it; then she became content to watch you on the screen. I am extremely sorry to have cost you such a loyal fan."

The audience din almost drowned out his words.

"Because I knew she would be watching tonight, I simply wired an efficient bomb beneath her favorite armchair, timed to go off approximately ten minutes ago. I know the bomb has worked; I was an explosives expert during the war. But we can take one small comfort from this." He batted his eyes at the audience. "Beebe died happy, Mr. Adams, watching her favorite television performer."

He scraped back the chair and stood up.

"Now I'm ready," he said.

Backstage, Mike Vegas was waiting with open arms to receive his killer, and he greeted him with a burst of angry invective.

"So you weren't a murderer when you wrote the letter? You were waiting for tonight—"

"Nevertheless," Flaxer said hautily, "I'm a murderer now. That's all that matters."

A detective interrupted. "You want the boys back here, Mike?"

"No, I'll take this joker in myself." He frisked Flaxer swiftly, but found no weapon. "Okay, let's have your address, pal. Where do you live?"

"On Thirty-Fourth Street," the man said, giving him the house number.

"That'd be Third Precinct. Watch him," Mike told the detective. "I'm going to check that story of his."

He hurried to a backstage telephone and dialed a number.

"Hello, Desk Sergeant? This is Lt. Vegas, of Homicide. I'm checking to see if there was an explosion in your neighborhood, around Thirty-Fourth—"

"You heard right, Lieutenant. Hell of a blast over on Thirty-Fourth near East End. Apartment building. We haven't been able to get inside the apartment yet, but no other injuries are reported."

"Get into the apartment," Mike said tightly. "There's a woman in there." He slammed the receiver back and called to the detective. "Hey, Phil! I changed my mind.

You take that bird downtown with you. I want to get over to the apartment house."

"Right, Lieutenant."

There was a burst of music and applause as the show out front ended, and Wally Adams, his tie disarranged, came backstage.

"Lt. Vegas? Wait a minute—"

"Got to be going, Mr. Adams. Want to check that apartment house. There was a blast, all right."

"Can I go with you?"

Mike hesitated. "Sure, why not. You're as much involved as anybody else."

"This way," Adams said, taking Mike's elbow and steering him towards an exit.

They came out in an alleyway, but it wasn't deserted. Five women were waiting, ranging in age from adolescence to early sixties, and the squeal they set up at Wally Adams' appearance was indicative of their purpose. Adams tried to push his way past them, but one was particularly insistent—a small, dark-eyed woman who shoved her autograph book directly beneath his nose. Adams shrugged and took her pen. The woman leaned forward and said:

"I've *always* been a fan of yours, Mr. Adams! Won't you write something personal? Like, 'To Beebe, with Love?'"

"What's that?" Mike Vegas said. "Miss who?"

The woman looked frightened. "Beebe. Beebe Flaxer. And it isn't Miss—it's Mrs."

Adams and the lieutenant looked at each other.

"How long have you been here?" Mike asked.

"Since the beginning of the show. I couldn't get inside. My husband went out tonight, so I thought I'd try, but they wouldn't let me in without a ticket."

Adams started to laugh. He looked as if he didn't want to, but the laughs kept coming.

"I don't see what's so funny," Beebe said. "I really like that show of yours, Mr. Adams, that *Whodunit?*, I mean."

"Lady," Wally Adams said, putting his arm around her shoulder. "You made a mistake. This isn't *Whodunit?* It's *This is Your Life.*"

MAN With A Problem

by Donald Martin

Very high places are not meant for rotund, top-heavy individuals. Low places, especially in the better suburban developments, tend to be damp. And so there is nothing left for the more sensitive among us but to do our promenading on ledges that are a modest twenty or thirty stories up.

WITH dull curiosity he watched the crowds gathering far below on the sidewalk. They had become a sea of bobbing upturned faces. It was rapidly increasing in size, swelling out into the street. The hurrying newcomers moved with insect-like briskness, drawn into the rest as if by magnetic tides. The traffic was beginning to back up with a cacophony of agitated horn sounds. It all looked very tiny and mysterious and incredible from twenty-six stories up. The sounds that reached him were faint, but the excitement in them unmistakable.

He was paying little heed to the startled, gasping faces that kept popping in and out of the window to gape or plead. First it had been a bellhop, staring with a disapproving look, crinkling his nose; then an elevator operator who in a hard gravelly voice had demanded to know what this was all about.

He looked at the elevator operator's face. "What do you think it is all about?" he asked calmly.

"You gonna jump?" the man asked, intrigued.

"Go away," the man on the ledge said irascibly, and looked down at the streets. The traffic was still flowing quietly, undisturbed; he had not been noticed yet.

"You won't walk away from a jump like that," the elevator man growled as his head ducked in.

A moment later, the head of the assistant manager poked through the window, the curtains flying around his distinguished, clean-shaven, rather indignant face.

"I beg your pardon," the assistant manager said.

The man waved him away.

"You're contemplating a very foolish thing," the assistant manager said, smug and comfortable in what he knew was unassailable logic.

The manager finally appeared, a fat red face that first looked down and then looked over at the man

standing on the ledge, contemplating him for a moment.

"What are you doing out there?" the manager asked.

"I'm going to jump."

"Who are you? What's your name?"

"Carl Adams. And the reason why I'm doing this does not concern you."

"Think what you're doing, man," the manager said, his double chin trembling as he spoke, the strain of leaning forward out the window turning his face even redder.

"I've thought about it. Now go away and leave me alone."

The ledge was narrow, about eighteen inches in width. He stood between two windows, but there was no chance of reaching him from either of the windows. His back was against the wall, the bright sun falling full upon him. He had left his jacket inside. His white shirt was open at the throat and he quite resembled a figure prepared for execution.

Successive heads kept poking through the window. They spoke quietly to him, addressing him as Mr. Adams. Some spoke to him condescendingly, as though they had already convinced themselves he was a paranoid. They identified themselves as a physician, various hotel officials, a clergyman.

"Why not come in and talk it over?" the clergyman asked gently.

"There's nothing left to say," Adams said.

"Do you want me to come out and guide you back through the window?"

"If you or anyone else steps out," Adams said tersely, "so help me I'll jump."

"Can't you tell us your problem?"

"No."

"How can we help you then?"

"You can't. Go away."

For awhile no one came to the window. And then a policeman's head popped out, looking at him for a moment, rather cynically.

"Hey, fella," the policeman said.

Adams looked at him, studying his face. "What do you want?" he asked.

"They called me up from downstairs. Said there's a guy up here threatening to take a dive. You're not really going to jump, are you?"

"Yes."

"What do you want to do that for?"

"It's my nature to do spectacular things."

"Hey, you got a sense of humor," the policeman said. He pushed his cap back on his head, sitting out on the window sill. "I like that. Want a cigarette?"

"No," Adams said.

The policeman shook a cigarette loose from his pack and lighted it. He inhaled deeply, expelling the smoke out into the sunshine where the wind snapped it up. "It's sure a pretty day, you know?"

"A good day to die," Adams said, looking at him.

"You're pretty morbid, fella. You got a family?"

"No. Do you?"

"I've got a wife."

"Well I have no one."

"That's too bad."

"Yes," Adams said. It wasn't so long ago that I did have a family, he thought. Only yesterday in fact. He had left the house in the morning to go to work and Karen had said good-by to him at the door (not kissed him, like she used to do; theirs was a kissless marriage now, but she was still his wife, he still loved only her, then and forever, would never give her the divorce, remained firm about that even though she said she would leave him eventually). And then he had come home at six o'clock and there was no wife anymore, no love, nothing, only the empty bottle of sleeping pills and the note and the silent apartment . . . and Karen's body lying on the couch.

She had left the note on his pillow. It was written neatly, thoughtfully, explaining. Steve had told her he could not go away with her. Steve had deceived her. (It was that open, that blunt and brusque; she could mention Steve like that and he would know—as he had known for months now. Once he had even seen them together in a neighborhood cabaret. There had been nothing surreptitious about it on her part. She told him that their marriage was over, spoke freely of Steve to him.)

He had gone out that night and walked the streets until after midnight, come back to the house and gone to sleep. He awoke that morning knowing immediately that his mind had been made up, that he was going to do this which he was now planning. He walked to this part of town and checked into the hotel, asking for a room near the top. He knew that what would happen after that would happen naturally, as a matter of course.

The streets were black with gaping, morbid, curious people now. The police had forced the throngs back, creating a great clearing directly below, should he decide to jump. He could see the firemen standing with their canvas life-net that looked like a round black pancake, a red circle painted in the center, but he knew that that could do nothing for a body hurtling twenty-six floors. There was no way his would-be rescuers could get at him. The fire ladders did not reach that high. A cornice protruding directly above him from the roof precluded any rescue attempts from that quarter.

"This is useless, senseless," a man was saying to him, his head leaning out of the window.

"You might think so," Adams said.

"Look, I'm a doctor," the man said earnestly. "I can help you."

"In which ward?"

"No wards, Mr. Adams. I promise you."

"It's too late now."

"If you jump then it will be too late. Now there's still time."

"You'd better go and attend to somebody who needs you, doctor. I don't need you."

The doctor disappeared. Adams stared critically down at the crowds. Already he had the strange, singular feeling of apartness, the nearness of death having established the gulf between him and other men. He was different now, apart and alone. All those people down there waiting, waiting. They'll see something all right, he thought. And those men in the room, he could hear them jabbering, plotting, scheming, figuring ways of seducing his mind, probably making frantic phone calls to experts on the subject of suicide.

He looked around, a face was out the window, staring at him. It was the clergyman again, a round, concerned, sincere face.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" the clergyman asked.

"No," he said.

"Do you want to come in now?"

"You're wasting your time, father."

"I'm not wasting my time."

"Yes you are. I'm not coming in."

"Do you want us to leave you alone to think?"

"Do as you please."

The clergyman's head disappeared. He was alone again. He watched the crowds, a soft amusement in his eyes now. The height did not bother him any longer, as it had when he had first stepped out onto the ledge. He felt close to the buildings that soared around him.

He wondered what intricate methods of rescue they were planning. Ropes, ladders, nets, dangling chairs. They would have to be very careful, he knew, because they were never quite certain what his state of mind was.

The policeman reappeared. Adams knew he would. He had been more responsive to him than any of the others and so the policeman would try again.

"You know, Adams," the officer said, sitting out on the window sill again, casually, "in a way you're doing me a favor."

"How's that?"

"Well, normally I'd be down there directing traffic. But because of you I'm up here taking it easy."

"Is that so?"

"That's so."

"You might just as well be up here. That traffic isn't moving anyway."

The policeman laughed. "That's right," he said. "Those people down there," he said with a gesture, "are expecting you to jump. They're looking forward to it."

Adams looked at him. "Looking forward to it?"

"Sure. They've made up their minds that you're going to jump and they want to see it. You going to disappoint them?"

Adams looked down, his eyes sweeping over the blocks and blocks of clustered people.

"You can't hear them up here," the policeman said, "but they're yelling for you to jump."

"Are they?"

"Uh-huh. They feel you owe them that for making them stand around here all afternoon."

"They're like a pack of hungry wolves," Adams said.

"That's right. Why give up your life just so they can have a thrill?" The policeman watched Adams' face, thought he detected a flicker of uncertainty. "Come on in," he said in a low, cajoling voice. "The hell with all those people."

"Maybe you're right," Adams said.

"Sure."

Adams wavered, his back coming away from the wall for a moment, then he fell back, covering his eyes for a second.

"What's the matter?" the policeman asked.

"I guess I'm a bit dizzy. Maybe you'd better give me a hand."

The policeman looked across the street, there were news photographers on the roof there, their cameras poised. It would make quite a picture for the morning papers.

"All right," the policeman said. "Hold on."

The crowd sent up a roar of thrill and terror when they saw the policeman climb out of the window and stand on the ledge, a few feet from the immobile man in the white shirt. They watched him edge along, carefully extending his hand.

Adams reached his hand toward the policeman's.

"I knew you would come up eventually," Adams said. "That's why I chose this place."

"What?" the policeman said, trying to maintain his balance on the narrow ledge.

"My name isn't Adams, Steve. Karen was my wife. Do you know that last night she . . ."

The terror spread over the policeman's face as he tried to draw back, but his hand was locked in the other's, and then there was a sudden lunge and sickening thrust and twist and as he began to topple softly out into space, toward the rising roar from the crowd, the last conscious thing he felt was the firm, hard hand gripping his like a vise.

Never underestimate the power of a bartender. They are not above encouraging conversation. Willy nilly, you will soon find yourself determined to top their stories. This may end anywhere—and frequently does.

THAT night was a black, rain-drenched sea. It tossed pale and agitated Hewett into one of the few bars in which he had not yet spent some lonely lost evening.

"What'll you have, young friend," the bartender asked. The voice was abruptly so intimate and warm that it pierced the shell of Hewett's festering suspicion of everybody.

"Beer, man," Hewett said nervously.

"What label, friend?"

"Any kind, man. Any kind."

The bartender polished a shiny glass with a steady, rhythmic turning. He said gently, "You just don't care anymore, that right, troubled friend? One much like every other?"

"Yeah, that's it, man. Just much like every other?"

"Yeah, that's it, man. Just bring me a beer."

"Life can sure lose its savor can't it?"

"A beer," Hewett repeated.

"World's so complex. A man wants to reduce it to some simple symbol, like a beer."

"I thought it was going to be simple," Hewett said.

"By saying just any kind of beer would do? Huh-uh. Even a wrong but definite decision is better than uncertainty."

"When do you think you'll make the decision to bring me a little old beer, man?" Hewett whined.

"And even beer isn't simple," the bartender said. "Pick hops, visit a brewery, and you'll see what a complex thing it is just to get a bottle of beer."

"It's hitting me now," Hewett said. "The complexity."

"Patience is the only way to strike back, friend. Slow down, look into yourself, let the big complex river flow by."

Hewett started to yell. The bartender put a big moist hand over Hewett's shivering fingers. "Easy," he said softly. "Just take it easy, young friend. That's it. Relax, just relax and I'll bring your beer. And we'll talk about things some more. It's that kind of night."

It was remarkable, Hewett thought later. Calmness. The heartbeating slower and slower, falling easier by the minute. He lit a cigarette and looked at the aged blonde playing the brass-plated piano by

by Bryce Walton

the door up front. The muted song of rain reminded him of when he was a kid, snuggled in cozy blanket warmth, listening to the soggy old rain, feeling all secure and cozy hearing his old man singing dependably downstairs.

The rain's song went on and on. One man, a stilled mobile, hung at the other end of the bar. One man and one chick perched on two of the high stools around the piano, two wet pigeons practicing lonely togetherness, singing *Danny Boy* sadly to one another oh, so sadly.

That kind of a night, Hewett thought, fighting the panicky pangs of aloneness and guilty regrets. Like every other night, only lonelier, more full of empty holes. If he could only tell someone how it was. But each one in this big lonely world was cut off, numb, each behind the closed locked door of self. Like the play-for-pay chick halfway down the curving highway of the bar. She would look, listen, smile and cry. Sure. Almost anyone

would do that if there was something in it for them.

She coasted down the beach of the bar shore and anchored to the stool beside Hewett.

"You look so bitter and so full of trouble, Johnny," she said.

"Fly away, chick," Hewett said. "I got no golden grain."

He sipped his brew and looked at his sallow face in the mirror of no return. He'd spent many hours in bars. Knew the ritual from vague beginning to misty end. Everybody got troubles. Talk it up, listen it out, end up as before, out the same door as in he came with the wind willy-nilly blowing. It meant nothing, and even if someone sometime really dug him, he couldn't tell them all. Informers, tattle-tales. A close friend couldn't even be trusted. And Hewett had no friends, had been born without friends.

"You came to the right place, Johnny," the woman said.

"All bars are alike, girl," said Hewett.

"This one's different." She was gazing at the bartender as he slid Hewett another beer. The bartender smiled at Hewett like a high-priest, then looked down at the girl.

"How's your world tonight, Lois?" the bartender asked.

"Tranquil, Steve," Lois said, transfixed by the bartender's rotating shot glass. "Smooth and tranquil."

"That's right, Lois," Steve the bartender said softly. "Your own private little world, Lois. The only one there is."

"Yes, Steve," she said dreamily, "the only one left."

Hewett moistened his lips. Steve moved down the curving bar.

"Steve helps people," Lois said in a disciple's whisper. "He helped me. Once I didn't even want to live."

Hewett sneered. "Know something, girl? I never saw a barkeep yet who really dug anything from people but hate and depression."

"Oh, not Steve. He helps all kinds of people—in so many ways." She touched his arm. "You can tell him anything—just anything."

"All my sins?"

"What else?"

Hewett's forehead was damp. "Odd place, this joint, for a confessional."

"It's like that, I guess. Steve holds everything in sacred trust like. If you knew what some people have told him."

"I hide nothing," Hewett said quickly. His hand shivered.

"That's your trouble," she said. "Steve explained that. You can't hide anything. Whatever it is, it's murder to try keeping it under wraps."

She moved down the bar to make up with the stilled mobile in the faded gray flannel.

Steve was there suddenly, bending low. "Slow night," he said. The

shiny glass in his hand turned round and round, a twisting wheel. "Long and slow. That kind of night. A night to talk and settle things."

"Yeah, man," Hewett said.

The bar seemed different to him now; he had to admit it. Warm, safe, in a way cozy. He looked dreamily at his watch. Eight-thirty something or other. He settled down with his beer and looked at the soothing way the glass turned round and round in Steve's dexterous hands. He listened to the rain, soft soothing rain, going on softly and quietly.

He requested bourbon now. He started using the beer strictly for a chaser. A dreamer's drink.

Sometime later he looked at his watch again. It was after midnight, past the witching hour. But they had discussed that too. Time. Time and everything else in the human warp and woof. Time was arbitrary, an imposition. The hell with time. Man should not be pushed by time, or anything except his own free-wheeling will. He and Steve had settled that, settled pretty near everything. Lois had been right. Steve was one in a million. Genuine, sincere warm human being Steve.

The individual was everything, right, Steve? Right, Al. No one should believe in anything else but themselves, and they should know themselves, not be false then to any man. More, much more, the high spots from Plato to Bertrand Russell and Toynbee.

The all important point passed, returned to, dwelled upon. No man is a judge or jury of others, only of himself. Every man does what he has to do. Not a matter of ethics or morality. Right or wrong came from the heart of every man, and for every man it was a thing for that man alone. Every man did what he had to do. Only a question of knowing thyself, being honest, not being false.

Lois went out with the gray-suited mobile, set suddenly in faulty motion. A girl came in, perched like a robin out of season on one of the high perch stools at the piano, sat cross-legged in tight purple toreadors and sang show tunes in a high lyric soprano, sweet, full of nostalgia and heartburn. Others drifted in and out. The bar an island, an oasis, in a crazy frothing sea world.

"You'd feel the same way about a man killing a man?" Hewett mumbled.

"Murder, death, all a part of life, the human situation," Steve said.

Hewett gazed fixedly into the bartender's twirling glass. "Yeah, man," he whispered.

"Listen, Al, this is the age for drowning the individual. He's being drowned in the sea of everybody. A man ought to be his own law first and last."

"I dig you, man."

"And if a man kills, he does it for a reason. He needs to do it. Sometimes he knows what it is. Anyway, it's a thing he has to do."

"Go on, into it deep," Hewett said.

"A man kills. He has to do it to survive. A guy killed his wife. He told me all about it afterward. He said it was like being reborn, Al. Sort of purged him. Been building up in him all his life. Pressure. Pressure. Then it exploded. He did it, then he was clean. Cleaned out, he said, a free man."

"I'm digging it deeper," Hewett whispered. He had never felt so up and light and airy for many long months. "He told you all that, man? And what then?"

"He still comes in now and then. Why should it have gone any further than me?"

"You're out of this world, man, that's why it didn't."

"Think I would tell cops? Why? Listen, this guy's all cured now, well and he's got release. He won't kill again. Only pros do that, or now and then a psycho case, because one isn't enough for them kind. Sometimes two, ten aren't enough. Sometimes millions aren't enough. Hitler never got enough, never got cleaned."

"You can't dig anything in the millions, man," Hewett said.

"A man does what he has to do —and for a good reason of his own."

"What about the annoying conscience, man?"

"Conscience is just confusion, Al. A man's real self is all in conflict with built-in phony ideas of wrong and right. A man who knows himself he isn't bothered with conscience is he? Guilt isn't anything but self-deception, Al."

"Yeah," Hewett said vaguely. "I know a guy—conscience eating him alive, so he thinks. He killed a girl, sort of an accident, I mean, man, he didn't intend to do it. Now he can't eat, sleep, keep a job, like that. Maybe he's kidding himself is all."

"Maybe it wasn't an accident, Al. If he admitted it wasn't and that he did it for a reason and found out the reason, he would sleep, eat regularly. He'd be okay then."

"Then he might want to confess," Hewett said. "He might even want to rub himself right out of this world, wipe himself clean off the overcrowded slate."

"Sure, that's a possibility. Countless possibilities. One is as good as another, long as it's honest and genuine. From the heart."

A tremendous weight flew up and away from Hewett.

"But what," he asked, "if this guy knew what he wanted to do, and couldn't do it? Just didn't—have the guts, let's say, to kill himself."

"Excuse me, Al," Steve said. "Keep that on ice. I'll be right back." He serviced a customer down at the other end of the island.

This island bar, Hewett thought in crooning revery, this island bistro. Sanctuary, sanctuary—

Steve was back, leaning closer, closer, whispering behind the turning, turning wheel of shining glass in his hands.

"Level with me, Al. I've settled everything with myself, that's why I'm no judge. I had a wife and kids once. Walked out, left them and never went back, never heard of them again. I got no ties, no loves, no connections, no prejudices. I'm clean, clear with myself. You got something pressing, get rid of it. If you think it'll help, you want to talk about the bug, tell me." He leaned closer. "You can level with me. This guy you're talking about, who you say killed a girl. It's you?"

Round and round she goes, Hewett thought, watching the polishing glass that seemed to expand and contract and turn like a transparent ferris wheel. Then Hewett was nodding, admitting all.

And Steve nodded, too, and smiled with gentle compassion and understanding.

Hewett wanted to cry. He wanted to bawl out all the suppressed years in a few seconds of joy. He wanted to bawl and laugh with the release he felt, the feeling you'd have if you'd just been shot skyward from a metal straitjacket.

And then he heard Steve whispering, tell me about it, friend. It's safer between us than bottled up. Bottled up inside you, it's liable to explode in the wrong place at the wrong time. Don't let the world pull your cork, kid, pull it yourself.

"Yeah, that's it, that's it," Hewett said.

There was the waitress on a stormy night. He had parked his car behind the desert inn and was showing her some affection and she started screaming. All he wanted her to do was shut up before someone heard her screaming that way, and the highway patrol owls came swooping down to snatch up nightly prey. But she wouldn't stop screaming, and the next thing he knew he was taking his hands from her bird neck and her head fell down at a funny angle. She was gone, gone to over there, way on the other side forever. And he buried her in the bottom of a dry wash and put rocks and dirt over her, and transplanted a sagebrush for the look of nature's reality. But she did not stop screaming.

"I kept hearing her," Hewett explained. "Sometimes I'd hear her while I was laboring as a wage slave. She would scream in the night and I'd wake up. It happened last night. I woke up and I could still hear it. It gets me, Steve. Maybe you got no real idea. Gets me. I wonder if maybe other people don't hear it too."

"Remember one thing, Al. Other people don't matter. Forget them. Then you won't think they're hear-

ing this private scream of yours. Just remember that."

"Yeah, I got to remember. I know that, man."

Steve polished the glass. He considered it calmly with due seriousness. But not too seriously, Hewett realized with joy. He wanted to laugh again and he wanted to hug the bartender and call him brother, because he seemed like the sweetest bald-headed big brother in the whole friendless, brotherless, sisterless, motherless world.

Steve brought him bourbon on the house. The glittering glass went round and round. Round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows, Hewett thought, his thoughts seeming to giggle in his throat.

They discussed the murder, too. Talked it over calmly, seriously, but head-above-water style. Like any other kind of daily problem into which blind stumbling bumbling man runs. Like a family quarrel with wife and kids, neither of which Hewett had contracted. Or a little work problem, school problem, anything a man might run into along the crazy ups and downs and turns and detours and wrecks of that unpredictable, tear-muddied highway called existence. Calmly talking it over between them at the local bar, not like it was the end of a beleaguered world surrounded by brand new moons, but like it was just part of the business of life, just another bump on the rocky way of getting from here to there.

"It's up to you," Steve said and patted Hewett's shoulder. "What do you want to do?"

"Wipe the killing clean, like I told you, man," Hewett said in a voice that sounded like it had been taped previously long ago. "I know that for sure, man."

"Well then, friend, why don't you do it?"

Hewett swallowed heavily and felt his eyes burning and his throat scorching with a sort of shocked gratitude. "You—you go along with that too, man? My polishing myself off."

"If it's right for you, how can it be wrong for me, or for anybody? With some people I wouldn't go along. If you weren't responsible for yourself, maybe I wouldn't. Listen, I'm interested in helping a man do what he knows he has to do, and needs to do."

"Yeah," Hewett said. "I want to. I know what's right. But I'm too big a coward to do it. I've tried things."

"Such as?" Steve was quietly encouraging.

"A high dive. From top of the Edsel Building. But I got a height phobia, I mean, man, I couldn't go near the brink."

"You've tried other ways?" Steve asked, with the same level of practical concern he might have used

asking why Hewett didn't switch to filter-tips.

"Tried hanging myself. The necktie broke. So did the water pipe. I was evicted from a two-bit room for negligent property damage."

"You didn't expect doing away with yourself to be as easy as some other things did you?"

Hewett wanted to cry. "Thanks, thanks, man," he said. His voice broke. Steve was accepting it all, like it was no different from heartbreak.

No doubt now about Steve's sincerity. No phoniness in Steve. No mock sentiment, false concern, preaching or soul-saving spittle. Just sympathetic respect for a very human tragic problem. Just respect for Hewett's sacrosanct person and his right to treat his strictly private, *status quo* soul-house any way he saw fit to treat it. And if Hewett felt that his soul-house was a vacant shrine built of mud and unsparked by celestial fire, it was Hewett's business and no other.

Am I my brother's keeper? No, no, man, that's impossible. Help your lonely brother? Sure, you help your lonely brother. But you help him to find his own way, find himself, be himself, do what he wants, do what he has to do in this our life.

That's a real friend, brother. That, friend, is being a real brother's keeper, like friendly brother Steve.

"You tried poisons?" Steve was asking.

The girl perched on the stool perch was singing *Getting to Know You* in a clear lyric trill of pure joy, with all the appropriate gestures, all to an empty house as if it were overflowing with applause and recognition. Hewett no longer envied her type. Phony dreams he had had already in abundance.

"Yeah, man," Hewett said. "I've tried poison." He told Steve about the bottle of harshly corrosive poison that is sold as drain-cleaner. He had spent a night, shivering in the park on a bench under a dewy grape arbor, unable to drink it. He tried several times to down the thick brown fluid. He walked all the next day carrying the bottle, and that night sat in the park under a cold moon and tried again. He managed to sip it, then screamed and threw the bottle into the bushes and ran holding his burned tongue and blistered lips.

"I'm too craven," he said.

Steve was checking the cash register again. He called out and asked if anyone wanted one more for the road, because they were closing at two. He came back still polishing the glass.

"I just thought of something, Al," he said, "that girl."

"Yeah, man."

"You could confess to the cops and they'd be glad to take care of you . . . think of the state, in this

case, as your tool, a means to an end. Confess. Say it was premeditated murder. They'll arrange everything."

Hewett managed a rasping chuckle. "I'm ahead of you man."

He told Steve about going to the cops and confessing after he had given up the suicide attempts. The cops didn't seem interested when he first told them. They explained how every month murder confessions came in by the dozens. Not a one was sincere. But the cops always had to follow up the possibilities. Finally, they drove him out to this place on the desert in their police car. It was out near the roadhouse, made up Spanish style, with a pioneer museum and a snake exhibit, reptile farm, just as he remembered it. He knew exactly where he had buried her, but she wasn't there.

Steve smiled sympathetically. "Well I'm damned," he said, and continued polishing the glass. "That's the damnedest thing, isn't it?"

"She wasn't there. I knew the exact spot—but nothing—blank hole in the ground. Those cops, one of them was a fatso, dug up sand like crazy. But they found nothing."

"Maybe it wasn't the right spot."

"It was, man. I figured out what happened though. One of those flash floods. It came boiling down that little old arroyo and washed her away. Maybe after that, night creatures, coyotes, wolves, wild cats, rats, owls or eagles and vultures, disposed of her remains here and there. Were those cops mad, man. Boiling over, steamed up and cuffing me about."

"Did you tell them what her name was? She would be reported missing. They could check with friends and relatives. Did you do that?"

"I never knew her name," Hewett said. "Just a little old pick-me-up on a lonely night. Guess nobody missed her. Who would miss me either if I disappeared tonight? Nobody. You wouldn't. And except maybe for Lois and a few like that, maybe me a little, who would miss you much either, Steve?"

"Nobody," Steve said. "That's the way I made it for myself."

The blonde was playing *Goodnight, sweetheart, till we meet tomorrow, goodnight sweetheart, sleep will banish sorrow* . . . and the few others in the bar slipped out to get home before the morning light.

Hewett stayed on at the bar. Steve locked the front door, got his coat from somewhere in the rear of the place and came back to the bar. He mixed something in a tall glass. "You want a nightcap too, Al? Orange juice and vodka!"

"Thanks, man," Hewett said. They sat and drank nightcaps together. Then Steve stood in the dimness, walked up and down a while, thinking.

"So you see," Hewett said, "I

got a real deep down problem eating me. Too craven to die, and can't get myself hanged."

Steve snapped his fingers. "I read a case once, very interesting. A man killed deliberately, so the state would hang him."

"Yeah, man."

"Anyway, it's a thought, Al. Kill to be hanged. It's been done. It's certainly another possibility. Of course, only you yourself know if you could do it. Murder someone else instead of yourself. You would have to plan it carefully though, so the cops would be sure."

Hewett stood up. His feet floated several feet off the floor, in accordance with the measure of liquor inside him. "I got to use your phone, Steve."

"Go ahead."

"Got to make a date for myself."

Soon Hewett came back into the bar. Nothing, but nothing, he knew, was as quiet as an empty bar at nearly three on a rainy morning.

"You make your date?"

"It's made, man."

They drank another nightcap. And while they drank, Hewett watched Steve and waited and watched and was happy once again.

Steve heard the wailing approach of sirens. The glass slid from his fingers as he felt the sharp pressure against his ribs. Then he saw Hewett bending over a little, his eyes glazed and wide.

"You hit it, man. Kill to be hanged. But not just any joker. My conscience—confusion—would make me sorry if it was somebody who would be missed, like maybe a woman with kids, a kid with hopes, a guy really loved by a dream woman. You know, man?"

Steve whispered hoarsely. "Me?"

"Who else, man? With you, there won't be any sorry to it."

"Me?" Steve said again.

"And who else would really understand it?" Hewett said.

The sirens came up loud in the rain. Hewett was still snicking away with the switchblade, when the gleaming sheen of rubberized cops came crashing through the door, with everything there like a photograph in subdued kodachrome, Hewett in the midst of the bloody deed, so that there was no mistake, no argument, no more question of his guilt.

Steve rolled over. Each word that he spoke faded farther away, as though calling him to follow into nothingness.

"It was that kind of night, friend," Steve said. "I knew it would be—slow—"


Dick Shelton

Murderers are obliging. They not only dispatch someone, but leave a clue or two so that the police aren't left completely in the dark. In this story, we have such a considerate gentleman—polite to the extent of choosing women as his victims.

Pattern of Guilt

A NOVELETTE
by Helen Nielsen

KEITH BRISCOE had never been a hating man. Disciplined temper, alert mind, hard work—these were the things that made for success as a police reporter, and in the fourteen years since he'd returned from overseas, too big for his old suits and his old job as copy boy, Keith Briscoe had become one of the best. Enthusiasm was a help—something close to passion at times, for that was the stuff brilliance was made of—but not hatred. Hatred was a cancer in the mind, a dimness in the eye. Hatred was an acid eating away the soul. Keith Briscoe was aware of all these things, but he was becoming aware of something else as well. No matter how hard he forced the thought to the back of his mind, he knew that he hated his wife. And the thought was sharp, clear.

It was Sergeant Gonzales' case—burglary and murder. Violet Hammerman, 38, lived alone in a single apartment on North Curson. She worked as a secretary in a small manufacturing plant from Monday through Friday, played bridge with friends on Saturday night, served on the Hostess Committee of her church Sunday morning and died in her bed Sunday night (Monday morning, to be exact, since it was after 2 A.M. when the crime occurred) the victim of one bullet through her heart fired at close range. Sergeant Gonzales was a thorough man, and by the time Keith Briscoe reached the scene, having responded with fire horse reflexes to the homicide code on his short-wave receiver, all of these matters, and certain others, were already established and Gonzales

was waiting for the police photographer to complete his chores so the body could be removed to the morgue.

She wasn't a pretty woman. A corpse is seldom attractive.

"You can see for yourself," Gonzales said. "It's a simple story. No struggle, no attempted attack—the bedclothes aren't even disturbed. The neighbors heard her scream once and then the shot came immediately afterward. She should have stayed asleep."

She was asleep now. Nothing would ever rouse her again. Briscoe glanced at the bureau drawer that was still standing half-open. One nylon stocking dangled forlornly over the side. He fingered it absently and then, without touching the wood, stuffed it inside.

"Fingerprints?" he asked.

"No fingerprints," Gonzales said. "The killer must have worn gloves, but he left a pair of footprints outside the window."

There was only one window in the small bedroom. It was a first floor apartment in one of the old residential houses that had been re-zoned and remodeled into small units, but still had a shallow basement and a correspondingly high footing. Violet Hammerman must have felt secure to sleep with her one window open and the screen locked, but that had been a mistake. The screen had been neatly cut across the bottom and up as far as the center sash on both sides. It now hung like a stiffly starched curtain, that bent outward at the touch of Keith Briscoe's hand.

"Port of entry and exit."

"That's right," Gonzales said. "But the exit was fast. He must have made a running jump out of the window and landed on the cement drive. It was the entry that left the prints. Collins, shoot your flash under the window again."

Collins was the man in uniform who stood guarding the important discovery beneath the window. He responded to Gonzales order by pointing a bright finger of light down on the narrow strip of earth that separated the house from the driveway. It was a plot barely eighteen inches wide, but somebody had worked it over for planting, and because of that a pair of footprints were distinctly visible on the soft earth.

"We're in luck," Gonzales explained. "The landlord worked that ground yesterday morning. Set out some petunia plants—ruffled petunias. Too bad. A couple of them will never bloom."

A couple of them were slightly demolished from trampling, but between the withered green the two indentations were embedded, like an anonymous signature. Briscoe shoved the screen forward and peered farther out of the window.

"It must be nearly six feet to the ground," he remarked.

"Sixty-eight inches," Gonzales said.

"The footprints don't seem very deep."

"They aren't—no heels. If you were down where Collins is, you'd see what I saw a few minutes before you walked in. Those prints are from rubber soled shoes, 'sneakers' we used to call them when I was a kid. At closer view you can pick up the imprint of some of the tread, but not much. Those particular soles were pretty well worn. But you're thinking, Briscoe, as usual. That earth is soft. We'll have to measure the moisture content to get an idea of how much weight stood above those prints to make them the depth they are, but at first guess I'd say we're looking for a tall, slender lad."

"A juvenile?" Briscoe asked.

"Why not? Like I told my wife when she came home from her shopping trip last week, no wonder so many kids are going wrong. They come home from school and find their mothers dressed up in a sack with a belt at the bottom. That's enough to drive anyone out on the streets."

Keith Briscoe pulled his head in out of the window and ran a searching hand over the cut screen. It was a clean job. A sharp blade of a pocket knife could do the job. Gonzales could be right about the juvenile angle.

"You sound like a detective," he said.

"Gee, thanks," Gonzales grinned. "Maybe I'll grow up to be a hot reporter some day. Who can tell."

There was no sarcasm in the exchange. Gonzales and Briscoe had been friends long enough to be able to insult one another with respect and affection. Gonzales had a good mind and an eye for detail. He also had imagination, which was to building a police case what mortar is to a bricklayer.

"We found a purse—black felt—on the driveway near the curb," he added. "People in the building identified it as belonging to the deceased. There's no money in it except some small change in the coin purse, but there's this that we found on the top of the bureau—"

Gonzales had a slip of blue paper in his hand. He handed it to Briscoe. It was the deduction slip from a company paycheck. After deductions, Violet Hammerman had received a check for $61.56.

"Payday was Friday," Gonzales continued. "The landlord told me that. He knows because he's had to wait for his rent a few times. Violet Hammerman didn't have time to get to the bank Friday—she worked late—but she cashed her check at the Sav-Mor Market on Saturday." Gonzales had another slip of paper in his hand now. A long, narrow strip from a cash register. "When she bought groceries to the sum of $14.82," he added.

There was such a thing as sounding too much like a detective. Briscoe returned the blue slip with

a dubious expression. It was barely two-thirty. Gonzales was a fast worker, but the markets didn't open until nine. But Gonzales caught the expression before he could fit it with words.

"I'm guessing, of course," he said quickly, "but I'm guessing for a reason. $14.82 from $61.56 leaves $46.74. Assuming she spent a few dollars elsewhere and dropped a bill in the collection plate, we see that Violet Hammerman's killer escaped with the grand sum of $40 or, at the most, $45."

"A cheap death," Briscoe said.

"A very cheap death, and a very cheap and amateurish killer." Gonzales paused to glance at the slip of blue paper again, but it was no longer entirely blue. A red smear had been added to the corner. "What did you do, cut your hand on that screen?" he asked.

Briscoe didn't know what he was talking about, but he looked at his hand and it was bleeding.

"Better look in the bathroom for some Mercurochrome," Gonzales said. "You could get a nasty infection from a rusty screen."

"It's nothing," Briscoe said. "I'll wash it off under the faucet when I get home."

"You'll wash it off under the faucet right now," Gonzales ordered. "There's the bathroom on the other side of the bureau."

Gonzales could be as fussy as a spinster. It was easier to humor him than to argue. The photographer was finished with the corpse now, and Briscoe pulled the sheet up over her face as he walked past the bed. A cheap death and a cheap way to wait for the ambulance. Violet Hammerman had lived a humble and inconspicuous life, but she might rate a conspicuous obituary if he could keep Gonzales talking. Of course, Violet Hammerman might not have approved of such an obituary, but she now belonged to the public.

"A cheap and amateurish killer," Briscoe said, with his hand under the faucet, "but he wore gloves, rubber-soled shoes and carried a gun."

Leaning against the bathroom doorway, Gonzales rose to the bait.

"Which he fired too soon," he said. "That's my point, Briscoe. There's a pattern in every crime—something that gives us an edge on the criminal's weakness, and we know he has a weakness or he wouldn't be a criminal. It takes a mind, some kind of a mind, to plan a burglary; but it takes nerve to pull it off successfully. This killer is very short on nerve. One cry from the bed and he blazed away at close range. A professional wouldn't risk the gas chamber for a lousy forty bucks. Don't use that little red towel. Red dye's no good for an open cut."

Gonzales, with an eye for detail even when his mind was elsewhere. Briscoe put the guest towel back on the rack. A silly looking thing—red

with a French poodle embroidered in black. It seemed out of place in Violet Hammerman's modest bathroom. It was more the sort of thing Elaine would buy. Elaine. He thought of her and slammed the faucet shut so hard the plumbing pipes shuddered.

"A killer short on nerve, but desperate enough to break into a house." Briscoe recapitulated, his mind busy forcing Elaine back where she belonged. "A forty dollar murder." And then he had what he was groping for, and by that time he could face Gonzales without fear of anger showing in his face. "Sounds like a hop-head," he suggested.

Gonzales nodded sadly.

"That's what I've been thinking," he said. "That's what worries me. How much of a joy-ride can he buy for so little fare? I only hope Violet Hammerman isn't starting a trend."

Among his other characteristics, Sergeant Gonzales was a pessimist, and Keith Briscoe couldn't give him any cheer. He had troubles of his own.

Judge Kermit Lacy's court hadn't changed in four years. The flag stood in the same place; the woodwork still needed varnishing; the chairs were just as hard. If the windows had been washed, the evidence was no longer visible. Courtrooms could be exciting arenas where combatting attorneys fought out issues of life and death, but there was nothing exciting about a courtroom where tired old loves went to die, or to be exhumed for delayed post-mortem.

The dead should stay dead. The thought tugged at Keith Briscoe's mind when he saw Faye sitting at her attorney's table. Faye had changed in four years. She looked younger, yet more mature, more poised. She wore a soft gray suit and a hat that was smart without being ridiculous. There had never been anything ridiculous about Faye—that was the only trouble with her; she always carried with her the faint aura of Old Boston. She looked up and saw him then. And when their eyes met, there was a kind of stop on time for just an instant, an almost imperceptible shadow crossed her eyes, and then she smiled. Keith walked to the table. He didn't quite know what to do. Was it customary to shake hands with an ex-wife—the sort of thing tennis players do after vaulting the net? He kept his hands at his side.

"You're looking good, Faye," he said, "—great, in fact."

Clumsy words, as if he were just learning the language.

"Thank you," Faye responded. "You look well, too, Keith. You've lost weight."

Keith started to say "No more home cooking" and thought better of it. And he didn't look well. It

wasn't just because he'd been up most of the night delving into the violent departure of one Violet Hammerman from this vale of fears; it was because he had that depth-fatigue look of a man who's gradually working up to an extended hangover.

"I keep busy," he said.

"And how is Elaine?"

That question had to come. Keith searched in vain for a twinge of emotion in Faye's voice. There was none. Elaine was a knife that had cut between them a long time ago, and old wounds heal.

"Elaine's fine," he said, and then he couldn't be evasive any longer. "Faye—" The bailiff had entered the courtroom. In a few moments the judge would walk in and there would be no more time to talk. "—I wish you'd reconsider this action. We have a good arrangement now. If you take the boys east, I'll never get to see them."

"But that's not true," Faye objected. "They can visit with you on vacations."

"Vacations! A few weeks out of a year—that's not like every week end!"

"Every week end, Keith?" Faye's voice was soft, but her eyes were steady. Faye's eyes were always steady. "You've had four years of week ends to visit the boys. How many times have you taken advantage of them?"

"Every week end I possibly could! You know how my job is!"

Faye knew. The half-smile that came to her lips had a sadness in it. Now that he really looked at her, Keith could see the sadness. She was lonely. She must be lonely, bringing up two boys with nothing but an alimony check for companionship. Now she was bringing suit for permission to take the boys east — ostensibly to enroll them in prep school; but Keith Briscoe suddenly knew the real reason. There were old friends back east to wipe out the memories—perhaps even an old flame.

Keith felt a quick jab of pain he didn't understand.

"I'm going to fight you, Faye," he said. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to fight you every inch of the way."

It was nearly eight o'clock that night before Keith got home to his apartment. Nobody came to greet him at the door except Gus, Elaine's dachshund. Gus growled at him, which was standard procedure, and made a couple of wild snaps at his ankles as he passed through the dark living room and made his way to the patch of brightness showing down the hall. At the doorway of Elaine's bedroom, he paused and listened to the music coming from the record player at her bedside. It was something Latin with a very low spinal beat. He listened to it until she came out of the bathroom wearing something French with an equally low spinal beat. Keith was no couturier, but he could see at a glance that

Elaine's dress wasn't percale and hadn't been designed for a quiet evening at home. He could also see that it was expensive. He would know how expensive at the first of the month.

She looked up and saw him in the doorway.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't hear you come in."

Keith didn't answer immediately. He just stood there looking at her—all of her, outside and inside. The outside was still attractive. He could feel the tug of her body clear across the room.

"Do you ever?" he asked.

Elaine turned around and picked up an ear-clip from her dressing table. She raised her arms to fasten it to her ear.

"Going out?" he asked again.

"It's Thelma's birthday," she said.

"I thought it was Thelma's birthday last week."

That made her turn around.

"All right," she said, "what's eating you? Have you been playing with martinis again?"

"I'm old enough," Keith said. He came across the room. She not only looked good, she smelled good. "I just thought you might want to stay home for one evening."

"Why? So I can sit in the dark alone and watch Wyatt Earp? This lousy apartment—"

"This lousy apartment," Keith interrupted, "costs me $175 every month. Considering certain other expenditures I have to meet, it's no wonder I devote a little extra time to doing what is known among the peasants as being gainfully employed. If I didn't, you couldn't look so provocative for Thelma's birthday."

Elaine picked up the other ear clip and fastened it in place. It were as though he hadn't spoken, hadn't reprimanded her. And then her face in the mirror took on a kind of animal cunning. She turned back toward him with knowing eyes.

"How did you make out in court?" she asked.

"We got a continuance," Keith said.

"A continuance? Why? So you can suffer a little longer?"

"I want my boys—"

"You want Faye! Why can't you be honest enough to admit it? You've always wanted Faye. You only married me because you couldn't have your cake and eat it, too. That's your big weakness, Keith. You want to have your cake and eat it, too!"

"I want a divorce," Keith said.

He hadn't meant to say it—not yet, not this way. But once it was said there was nothing to do but let the words stand there like a wall between them, or like a wall with a door in it that was opening. And then Elaine slammed the door.

"You," she said quietly, "can go to hell."

That was the night Keith Briscoe moved out of the apartment. He'd

been spending most of his nights in a furnished room anyway, a room, a bath, a hot plate for the coffee and a desk for his typewriter. And a table for the shortwave radio alongside the bed. The typewriter had bothered Elaine at night, and that was when Keith did most of his work. He could pick up extra money turning police cases into fabrications for the mystery magazines. Extra money was important with two boys growing their way toward college.

But on the night he moved into the room to stay, Keith didn't work. He just sat and stared at the calendar on the desk and tried to get things straight in his mind. He had a one week's continuance. One week until he'd walk back into Judge Lacy's courtroom and see Faye sitting there calm and proud and lonely. Elaine was a stupid woman, but even the biggest fools made sense when the time was right. It was Faye that he wanted —Faye, the boys, everything that he'd thrown away. Elaine was a bad dream. Elaine was an emotional storm he'd been lost in, and now the storm was over and he was trying to find his way home through the debris. But a week wasn't very long. Perhaps his lawyer could find a loophole and get another stay. It was actually only six days until Monday . . .

On Sunday night, at a half hour past midnight, the shortwave radio rousted him out again.

Dorothy McGannon had a cheerful face even in death. She must have smiled a lot in life. Once her moment of terror was over, the muscles of her face had relaxed into their normal position, and she might have been sleeping through a happy dream if it hadn't been for the dark stain seeping through the blanket.

She was alone in the room, except for Sergeant Gonzales and company. She had lived alone, an unmarried woman in her late twenties. The apartment was small—living room, kitchen, and bedroom. It was on the second floor, rear, one of eight apartments in the unit. The service landing stopped about eighteen inches from the window where the screen was cut three ways and now poked awkwardly out into the night. It had taken agility to balance on the railing and slit that screen; it had taken even more to swing out onto the railing and escape after the fatal shot had been fired.

"Our boy's getting daring," Gonzales reflected. "Still nervous with the trigger, but daring."

"Do you think it's the same killer who got Violet Hammerman last week?" Keith asked.

Up until this point, nobody had mentioned Violet Hammerman. She was just last week's headline, forgotten by everyone but next of kin. But the cut screen and swift death were familiar. Gonzales, the pattern-maker, was already at work.

"That was a .45 slug ballistics got out of the Hammerman woman," he answered. "When we see what killed this one, I'll give you a definite answer. Unfortunately, there's no soft earth out on that porch landing—no footprints; but the method of entry is the same. That's a peculiar way to cut a screen, you know. It takes longer that way."

"But makes for a safer exit," Keith said.

"That's true—and this caller always leaves in a hurry." Gonzales turned back toward the bed, scowling. "I wonder if he kills them just for the fun of it," he mused. "Nobody heard a scream tonight. The shot, but no scream. Still, with five out of eight television sets still going, it's a wonder they heard anything."

"Did he get what he came for?" Keith asked.

Still scowling, Gonzales turned and looked at him. Then he nodded his head in a beckoning gesture.

"Follow me," he said.

They crossed the small bedroom and went into the living room. They turned to the right and entered the kitchen alcove, which had one wall common to the bedroom and faced the living room door. The far wall of the kitchen was cupboard space, and one door stood open. On the sink top, laying on its side as if it had been opened hurriedly, was a sugar can which contained no sugar—or anything else.

"What does that look like?" Gonzales asked.

"It looks like Dorothy McGannon kept her money in a sugar can," Keith said.

"Exactly. She worked as a legal secretary. She was paid Friday and gave $10 to the manager of this place Friday night in payment for $10 she'd borrowed earlier in the week. He saw a roll of bills in her purse at the time—$50 or $60, he thinks. We found the purse in a bureau drawer in the bedroom—there was $5 and some change in it."

"The killer missed it."

"The killer didn't even look for it. That drawer stuck—it made enough noise to wake the dead, well, almost. It's obvious he didn't bother with the bureau, and that's interesting because it's what he did bother with last week. Instead, he came straight to the kitchen, opened the cupboard door, and now it's bare."

What Sergeant Gonzales was saying explained the frown that had grown on his forehead. It meant another piece of the pattern of guilt was being fitted to an unknown killer.

"He might have been a friend of the woman," Keith said, "—someone who had been in the apartment and knew where she kept the money. A boyfriend, possibly. She was single."

"So was the Hammerman woman," Gonzales reflected. "But

no boyfriend. We questioned the landlord about that, definitely no boyfriend. But you're right, she was single. They were both single and both killed on Sunday night. It's beginning to add up, isn't it? Two murders, each victim a woman who lived alone, each one killed on a week end after a Friday payday. Do you want to lay a small bet that's a .45 slug in the corpse?"

"No bet," Keith said. "What about groceries?"

"Groceries? What groceries?"

"McGannon's. Does she have any? Hammerman did, as I recall. Over $14.00 worth."

Gonzales looked interested. He glanced behind him at the living room door clearly visible from the kitchen.

"You're thinking again, Briscoe," he said. "A delivery boy—but wait, Hammerman's groceries were paid for at the market. Still, it might have been a delivery boy. Tall, skinny. The lab says not over 150 pounds. It's worth looking into. I don't like the idea of a murder every week end."

Dorothy McGannon did Keith a big favor getting herself killed when she did. It was a good enough story to keep him away from court until another continuance had been called, and that meant another week to try to reach Faye. He caught her coming down the courthouse steps. She was annoyed that he hadn't shown up—obviously, she thought it was deliberate, and Keith wasn't certain but what she was right.

"If we can go somewhere and have a drink, I'll explain," he suggested.

"I'm sorry, Keith. I've wasted enough time as it is."

"But I couldn't help not showing. I was on a big story—look."

He unfolded the late edition and handed it to her. She hesitated.

"One drink to show there's no hard feelings," Keith said.

She consented, finally. It wasn't a warm consent, but Keith took it as a major victory. He drove her to a small bar near the news building where she used to meet him in the old days, when their marriage, and the world, was young. Faye had always been a little on the sentimental side. He led the way to their old booth at the back of the room and ordered a scotch on the rocks and a Pink Lady. That was supposed to indicate that he hadn't forgotten.

"Make it a vodka martini," Faye said.

"You've changed drinks," Keith observed.

"I've changed a lot of things, Keith."

That was true. Now that they were alone, he could see it. This wasn't going to be easy. Faye took a cigarette from her purse. He fumbled in his pocket for a lighter, and then studied the situation in

her eyes, lustrous over the flame.

"I've changed, too," he told her. "I'm working nights now, Faye. Real industrious. I've been doing a little writing on the side—may even get at that novel I used to talk about."

"That's good," Faye said. "I'm glad to hear it." And then she paused. "How does Elaine like it?"

Keith snapped the lighter shut and played it back and forth in his hands.

"Elaine and I aren't living together any more," he said. "I moved out last week."

He watched for a reaction, but Faye was good at concealing emotions. She was like the proverbial iceberg—nine-tenths submerged. If he'd realized that four years sooner, he wouldn't have been sitting there like a troubled schoolboy waiting for the report on a test paper.

"I'm sorry, Keith," she said.

"I'm not. It's been coming for a long time. It was a mistake from the beginning—the whole mess. I don't know how I could have been so blind."

One drink together. He didn't say much more; he didn't dare push her. Faye was the kind who would walk away from him the minute he did. But at least he had said the important things, and she could think about them for another week.

Not until he was back in that small, furnished room did it occur to Keith that he was playing the fool. He was trying to get Faye back when he didn't even know how to get rid of Elaine. He sat down to work. He pushed the problem back in his mind and concentrated on Sergeant Gonzales' problem. The case was beginning to fascinate him. What kind of a killer was it who would operate in this way? A half-crazy hop-head, yes; but with enough animal cunning to make some kind of plan of operation. Now he understood what Gonzales meant by that pattern talk. If it were possible to think as the killer thought . . . Obviously, he'd been in Dorothy McGannon's apartment prior to the murder. Very few people kept household money in sugar cans any more. Elaine kept money anywhere —scattered about the bedroom in half a dozen purses. The "cat-killer," as Keith had dubbed him in his latest story, would have a holiday if he slashed her window screen.

But how would he know? He thought of Elaine again — she wouldn't stay in the back of his mind. He thought of her alone in the apartment. What did she do all day? She never went to the market; she telephoned for groceries. But she didn't pay for them, except to give the delivery boy a tip. The bill, along with many, many others, came in at the first of the month. There were other deliveries: the cleaner, the liquor store . . . And what else? And then he remem-

bered that in the early days of their marriage, before Elaine learned to go outside for her amusements, she'd been a pushover for all the gadgets peddled by the door-to-door trade. It was a thought, and an impelling one.

A gadget. It would have to be something easy to sell; getting the door slammed in his face, wouldn't help the killer at all. He had to have a few minutes, at least, to size up the possibilities: learn if the woman lived alone, see where she went for the money when he made the sale. Perhaps he had a gimmick —the "I just need 100 more points" routine. There were other approaches, legitimate ones that could have been borrowed: items made by the blind, items made by the crippled or mentally retarded. Something a woman would buy whether she needed it or not.

The next day, Keith went to Gonzales with his idea. Together they paid another visit to the McGannon woman's apartment. They examined the drawers in that kitchen cupboard — all standard items from bottle opener to egg beater, but nothing that looked new. Gonzales moved to the broom closet.

"Sometimes peddlers handle cosmetic items," Keith reflected. "I'll have a look in the bathroom."

He went through the tiny bedroom and into an even tinier bath. There was no tub, just a stall shower and a pullman lavatory. He pulled open one of the lavatory drawers and then called to Gonzales. When Gonzales came into the room, Keith stood with a small guest towel in his hand. It was green this time, a sort of chartreuse green with a black French poodle embroidered at the bottom.

"Familiar?" he asked.

And Gonzales remembered, because a red towel was bad for an open cut.

They made an inquiry at every apartment in the building where anyone was at home. Afterwards, they went to the apartment on Curson and interviewed all of the available tenants there. Out of it all, a picture emerged. In both cases, on the Saturday prior to the murder at least one tenant at each address remembered seeing a peddler with a basket on his arm entering the premises. One tenant at the Hammerman address, an elderly woman living with her retired husband, actually stopped the peddler on the walk and conversed with him.

"He was selling little towels and things," she reported. "Real pretty and cheap, too. I bought two for a quarter apiece. Would have bought more, but a pension don't go far these days." But did she remember how the peddler looked? Indeed, she did. A tall, gawky young man —hardly more than a boy. "Not much of a salesman," she added. "He didn't even seem to care about selling his things. I had to stop him

or he would have gone right past my door."

He had gone right past all of the doors, apparently, except two—Violet Hammerman's and Dorothy McGannon's. A check on the mail boxes at each unit indicated an explanation. All of the other apartments in each building were occupied by two or more tenants. The cat killer concentrated on women living alone.

"That's great," Gonzales concluded. "In this particular area we have the largest concentration of unmarried people of any section of the city. Now all we have to do is locate every woman living alone and warn her not to buy a guest towel from a door-to-door peddler."

"Aren't peddlers licensed?" Keith said.

"Licensed peddlers are licensed," Gonzales said. "But what's more important, merchandise of this sort is manufactured. There's a code number on the tag inside. Keep your hat on this operation for a few days, Briscoe, and you may have an exclusive. In the meantime, this whole area will be searched for a tall, thin peddler carrying a basket."

"Or not carrying a basket," Keith suggested. "I don't think your man entered these buildings blind. I think he had his victims selected days before the Saturday check-up. I think he watched them, studied the location of the apartments—planned everything in advance. He's probably out lining up next Sunday night's target right now. He's making headlines, Gonzales. Everybody has an ego."

Gonzales made no argument.

"You've really been doing some head work on this," he said.

"Yes," Keith answered, "I have."

There was more head work to do.

Keith went shopping. He left Gonzales and found his way to one of the large department stores. He located the linen department and wandered about the aisles avoiding salesladies until he found what he was looking for: guest towels in all the assorted colors, guest towels with jaunty French poodles embroidered at the bottom.

"Something for you, sir?"

A voice at his shoulder brought his mind back to the moment.

"No, no thanks," he said. "I was just looking."

He walked away quickly. He was doing too much head work; he needed some air.

That evening he went to see Elaine. He still had his key and could let himself in. Nobody met him at the door, not even Gus.

"He's at the vet's," Elaine explained. "He caught a cold. They're keeping him under observation for a week."

She was in the bedroom doing her nails. She sat on the bed, sprawled back against the pillows. She barely looked at him when she spoke.

"I thought you weren't coming back," she said.

"I'm not," he told her. "I only came tonight so we could talk things over."

"Talk? What is there to talk about?"

"A divorce."

The hand operating the nail polish brush hesitated a moment.

"We did talk about that—last week," Elaine said.

He waited for several seconds and there was no sign of interest in his presence. He might have been a piece of furniture she was ready to give to the salvage truck. He walked past the bed and over to the window. Elaine's carpet was thick; he couldn't have heard his footsteps with a stethoscope. He went to the window and pulled aside the soft drapes. It was a casement window and both panels were cranked out to let in the night air. The apartment was on the second floor. Directly below, the moonlight washed over the flat roof of the long carport and caught on the smooth curve of the service ladder spilling over the side. The window itself was a scant five feet above the roof.

"You should keep this window locked," he said. "It's dangerous this way."

The change of subject brought her eyes up from her nails.

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you been reading the papers?"

"Oh, that!"

"It's nothing to scoff at. Two women are very dead."

She stared at him then, because this wasn't just conversation and she was beginning to know it.

"Stop wishing so hard," she said. "You're almost drooling."

"Don't be stupid, Elaine."

"I'm not stupid—and I'm not going to let you scare me into letting you off the hook. What do you think I am, Keith? A substitute wife you can use for awhile until you decide to go back to the home-fires and slippers routine? Well, I'm not! I told you before, you can't have your cake and eat it. You walked out on me—I didn't send you away. Just try to get a divorce on that and see what it costs you!"

It was two days later that Sergeant Gonzales called Keith to his office. There had been a new development in the case, one of those unexpected breaks that could mean everything or nothing depending on how it went. A call had come in from a resident of a court in West Hollywood. A woman had reported seeing a prowler outside her bedroom windows. Bedroom windows were a critical area with Gonzales by this time, and when it developed that the woman lived alone, worked five days a week and spent week ends at home, what might have been a routine complaint became important enough

for a personal interview. True to his words, he was cutting Keith in on the story if there was one, and there was.

Nettie Swanson was a robust, middle-aged woman of definite opinions on acceptable and inacceptable human conduct.

"I don't like snoopers," she reported. "If anybody's curious about how I live, let him come to the door and ask. Snoopers I can't abide. That's why I called the police when I saw this fellow hanging around out back."

"Can you describe the man, Miss Swanson," Gonzales asked.

"I sure can. He was tall—like a beanpole. Would have been taller if he hadn't slouched so much. Young, too. Not that I really saw his face, but I thought he must be young by the way he slouched. Can you give me any reason why young folks today walk around like they been hit in the stomach? And their faces! All calf-eyed like a bunch of strays trying to find their way back to the barn!"

"Miss Swanson," Gonzales cut in, "how are your nerves?"

Some people talked big and folded easily. Nettie Swanson was as collapsible as a cast iron accordian. She listened to Sergeant Gonzales explain the situation and a fire began to kindle in her eyes. The prowler might come back, he told her. He might appear at her door sometime Saturday carrying a basket of items to sell. Would she allow a police officer to wait in her apartment and nab him?

"That's not necessary," she said. "I got a rifle back in my closet that I used to shoot rattlesnakes with when I was a girl in Oklahoma. I can handle that prowler."

"But he's not just a prowler," Gonzales protested. "If he's the man we think he is, he's already killed two women that we know of."

She took the information soberly. She wasn't blind, and she could read. And then her eyes brightened again as the truth sank home.

"The 'cat killer'! Now, isn't that something! Well, in that case I guess I'd better leave things to you, Sergeant. But I've got my rifle if you need another gun."

Gonzales couldn't have found a more cooperative citizen.

Saturday. Keith sat with Gonzales in a small, unmarked sedan across the street from the apartment house where Nettie Swanson lived. It was an old two-story affair flanked on one side by a new multiple unit and on the other by a shaggy hedge that separated the edge of the lot from a narrow alleyway. The hedge was at least five feet high and only the mouth of the alleyway was visible from the sedan. But the entrance to the building was visible and had been visible for over an hour. Inside the building, one of Gonzales men had been waiting since nine o'clock. It was nearly eleven.

Keith was perspiring. He opened the door next to him to let a little more air into the sedan. Gonzales watched him with curious eyes.

"You're even more nervous than I am," he remarked, "and I'm always an old woman about these things. You're working too hard on this, Briscoe."

"I always work hard," Keith said. "I like it that way."

"And nights too?"

"Nights too."

"That's bad business. We're not as young as we used to be. There comes a time when we have to taper off a little." Gonzales pushed his hat back on his head and stretched his legs out in front of him giving the seat a tug backward. "At least that's what they tell me," he added, "but with five kids they don't tell me how. You've got kids, haven't you?"

Keith didn't answer. He looked for a cigarette in his pocket, but the package was empty. Down on the corner, just beyond the alleyway, he could see a drugstore. Drugstores carried cigarettes and no conversation about things he didn't care to discuss.

"I'm going for some smokes," he said. "Tell our friend not to peddle his towels until I get back."

The drugstore was on the same side of the street as the apartment house they were watching. Out of curiosity, he crossed over and walked past the front door. It was open to let in the air, but the hall was empty. He walked past the alley and on to the drugstore. He bought the cigarettes and walked back, still walking slowly because he was in no hurry to get back into that hot sedan. Gonzales was right: he was nervous. His hands trembled as he slit the tax stamp on the cigarette box. At the mouth of the alley he paused to light a cigarette, and then promptly forgot about it and let it fall to the ground.

A few minutes earlier, the alley had been deserted. Now a battered gray coupe was parked against the hedges about twenty feet back from the street. He looked up. The sidewalk in front of him was empty, but across the street Gonzales was climbing out of the sedan. Gonzales walked hurriedly toward the front door of the building, a man with his mind on his business. He didn't see Keith at all. The picture fell into place. Keith went directly to the coupe. It was an old Chevvy, license number KUJ770. He stepped around to the door and looked for the card holder on the steering post. It had slipped out of focus, but the door was unlocked. When he opened the door, he saw something that had dropped to the floor of the car and was half hidden under the seat. It was dirty from being kicked about, but it was blue and it had a black French poodle on it. He dropped the towel to the floor and went to work on the card holder. The registration

tab slid into view: George Kawalik, 1376¼ N. 3rd Street.

Keith had the whole story in his hand. Gonzales hadn't seen the coupe; he couldn't have seen it from the far side of the hedge. He stepped back, intending to go after Gonzales, and it was then that he heard the shot. He waited. There may have been a shout from within the building. He was never sure because what happened, when it did happen, happened very fast. He had started around the edge of the hedge when suddenly the hedge burst open to erupt a head—blond, close-cropped, a face—wild, contorted with fear,—and then a body, long but bent almost double as it stumbled and fell forward toward the coupe. The door was wrenched open, and the face appeared above the steering wheel before Keith could orient himself for action. He was already at the curb twenty feet away from the car. He turned back just as the coupe leaped forward and was forced to scramble in fast retreat to avoid being run down. The retreat came to a sudden stop as he collided with about a hundred and eighty pounds of mobile power which turned out to be Gonzales.

"Was that him in the coupe? Did you see him?"

The coupe was a gray blur racing toward the corner.

"Did you see the car? Did you get the number?"

Gonzales had a right to shout. A killer had slipped through his fingers. A two-time murderer was getting away.

"That fool woman and her rattlesnake gun!"

Keith recovered his breath.

"Did she fire the shot?" he asked.

"No—but she had the gun in her hand when she opened the door. Clancy, inside, didn't catch her in time. The peddler saw it and ran for the back door. It was Clancy who fired. Did you get the license number?"

Gonzales's face was a big, sweaty mask in front of Keith's eyes. A big, homely, sweating face. A cop, a friend, a man in trouble. And Keith had the whole story on a tiny slip of paper in his hand.

He didn't hesitate.

"No," he said. "I didn't get it. I didn't have time."

Who could tell when decisions were made? An opportunity came, an answer was given—but that wasn't the time. Time was a fabric; the instant called now was only a thread. But it was done. The moment Keith spoke, he knew that something his mind had been planning all this time was already done. The fabric was already woven. He had only to follow the threads.

There was a murderer named George Kawalik who killed by pattern. He found an apartment where a woman lived alone. He watched the apartment, located the bedroom window, waited until Saturday

when it was most likely he would find her home and made his scouting expedition under the pretext of peddling pretty towels. Sunday night was pay-off night. He came, he stole, he killed.

There was another man named Keith Briscoe who had made a mistake. He didn't like to think about how or why he'd made it, but he had to think of a way out. He wasn't a young man any more. A little gray had begun to appear at his temples, and he was beginning to feel his limitations. It didn't seem fair that he had to pay for the rest of his life for a flirtation that had gone too far. It seemed less fair that his sons had no father, and that Faye was becoming a lonely woman who took her drinks stronger and who was running away to find the love he wanted to give her.

After leaving Gonzales, Keith had time to think about all these things. He sat alone in the furnished room and laid them out logically, mathematically in his mind. He put it into a simple formula: Keith plus Faye equalled home and happiness; Keith minus Elaine equalled Faye. The second part was no certainty, but it was at least a gamble and Keith not minus Elaine was no chance at all.

He knew the odds against murder. George Kawalik would be caught. He was no longer a footprint on the earth or a faceless shadow tall enough to reach up and slit a window screen, lean and agile enough to hoist himself into a room. He now had a face as well as a body; he had a method of operation; more important, he had a car. Gonzales had seen the gray coupe fleetingly, but he'd seen it with eyes trained to absorb details. And Gonzales had an organization to work with. Even as he sat thinking about it, Keith knew what forces were being put into operation. The coupe would be found. It might take days or even weeks, but it would be found. In the meantime, George Kawalik would kill again. That was inevitable. The compulsion that drove him to the act, whether it was a mental quirk or an addict's desperate need for money, would drive him again.

And Sunday was the night for murder.

On Saturday evening, as soon as it was dark, Keith went on an expedition. The address in Kawalik's registration slip wasn't easy to find in the dark; it wouldn't have been easy by daylight. It was a run-down, cluttered neighborhood ripe for a mass invasion of house movers. Old frame residences with the backyards cluttered by as many haphazard units as the building code would permit. Far to the rear of the lot he found Kawalik's number. The unit was dark and the shades drawn. He wanted to try the door, but it was too risky. This was no time to activate Kawalik's nervous trigger finger. He walked

quietly around to the rear of the unit. All of the shades were drawn, but one window was open. He stood close to it for a few moments, and it seemed he could hear someone breathing inside. He moved on. The back door had an old-fashioned lock that any skeleton key would open. He fingered the key ring in his pocket and then decided to wait. He left the unit and walked back to the garages, a barrack's-like row of open front cubicles facing a narrow alley. The gray coupe was there.

Kawalik was holed in, the natural reaction to his narrow escape. That was good. Keith wasn't ready for him yet; he merely wanted to know where to find him at the proper time. He found his way back through the maze of units to the street, always with the uneasy knowledge that a crazed killer might be watching from behind those shaded windows. He'd almost reached the sidewalk when a voice out of the darkness brought him to a suddent halt.

"Looking for somebody, mister?"

A man's voice. Keith turned about slowly and then breathed easier. An old man stood in the lighted doorway of the front apartment. He had the suspicious eyes and possessive stance of a landlord protecting his property.

"I guess I had the wrong address," Keith said.

"What address you looking for?"

"A place to rent. A friend of mine told me he saw an empty unit here."

"Nothing to rent here," the old man answered.

"A unit with the shades rolled down," he said.

"That place's rented. The man rents it works nights."

Keith went home then. The old man still looked suspicious; Keith was satisfied.

There was only one thing to do before returning to Kawalik. In the morning, Keith called Elaine. It was nearly noon, but she sounded sleepy. Elaine's nights were unusually long. He'd worked out his story carefully. He was working late that night, he told her, but he had to see her. It was important. How about midnight? Elaine protested. Thelma was giving a party.

"Not another birthday?" he challenged.

She still protested. What did he want that couldn't wait? Freedom, he told her.

"And you know what I told you," she said.

"That it would cost me. Well, I may have a way of raising the fare. You don't dislike cash, do you?"

She fell for it. She would be home by midnight.

He watched the apartment from the street. At midnight all of the lights were blazing. At one o'clock the front lights went out, and he moved around to the rear. At one-thirty, the bedroom light went out. Elaine thought he'd stood her up

and had gone to bed. She couldn't have made a bigger mistake.

Twenty minutes later, Keith entered Kawalik's apartment by way of the back door. The place was dark. For a few seconds, he was afraid Kawalik had more nerve than he'd been given credit for and was out calling on some other victim chosen in advance, but the fear left him when he reached the bedroom. A faint glow of moonlight penetrated the window blind outlining a long body under the sheet on the bed. Keith had his own gun in his hand. He switched on the flashlight. It was Kawalik, but he didn't stir. Keith moved closer to the bed. Kawalik's eyes were closed and his breathing heavy. One arm was thrown outside the sheet. Keith's first hunch had been correct. The arm was tattooed with needle marks and the last jolt must have been a big one. Kawalik wouldn't awaken for hours.

It was a better break than he'd bargained for. He played the flash around the room, not wanting to risk the lights because of the eagle-eyed landlord up front. Item by item, he found what he needed: Kawalik's .45 in a bureau drawer, a pair of canvas shoes with smooth rubber soles in the closet, a pair of gloves, a basketful of colored guest towels. Keith thumbed through the basket until he found a pink one. Shocking pink. It seemed appropriate for Elaine.

In the bathroom, he located the pocket knife among other interesting items: a hypodermic needle, a spoon with a fire-blackened bowl, the remnants of an old shirt torn in strips. One of the strips was stained with blood. Kawalik must have gone deeper than he intended locating the vein. Another blood-spotted strip dangled over the edge of the lavatory. He started to play the light downward and then switched it off instead. He didn't breath again until he was convinced it was a cat he'd heard outside the building. He left the place then, without a light, locking the back door behind him.

Half an hour later, Keith climbed through Elaine's bedroom window. He was breathless and scared. A dozen times he'd expected her to hear him sawing away at the screen and ruin everything; but the other tenants of their building had always been thoughtful about such things as late, late television movies at full volume, or all night parties of vibrant vocal range. This night was no exception and so Elaine would be sleeping, as usual, with ear plugs and eye mask. He really didn't need Kawalik's rubber-soled shoes on the deep-piled rug, but he did need Kawalik's signature—the pink towel to deposit in the linen closet in the bathroom. In the dressing room he found two purses in plain sight. He took the money from them, jamming the smaller, an evening bag in his pocket for subsequent deposit in the driveway

below. That done, he went to the bed, leaned over Elaine and raised the eye mask. She awakened with a start, but she didn't scream. Elaine had nerve—nerve enough to stare at the shadowy figure standing over her bed until recognition came.

"Oh, it's you——"

And then she saw the gun in his hand. That was when Keith fired.

It was easy. Murder was easy. By the time he was safely in his car again, Keith was in the throes of an almost delirious elation. His nerves had been tauter than he knew; now they were unwinding with the power of a strong spring bursting its webbing. He knew how Kawalik felt when the shot in his bloodstream took effect: wild and free and about ten thousand feet up. Elaine was dead, and there wasn't a thing anyone could ever do to him. The noisy neighbors hadn't heard the shot, the evening bag had been dropped at the foot of the service ladder on the garage, the pink towel was in the linen closet and ballistics would match the bullet in Elaine's body to the two other bullets they were holding from two other identical crimes. And the beauty of it all was that Kawalik, when they caught him, wouldn't be able to remember but what he really had killed her. There was nothing left to do, but get the gun, gloves, shoes and the money back into Kawalik's apartment. After that, he belonged to the inevitable.

The inevitable was Sergeant Gonzales. Keith didn't see the police car in front of Kawalik's place until it was too late to drive on. He had slowed down to park, and Gonzales recognized him.

"I see you got my message," Gonzales called.

Keith shut off the motor. He had no idea how Gonzales had located Kawalik so quickly, but he could play dumb. Dumb meant silence.

"I told them at headquarters to call you just as I was leaving. It seemed a shame for you to miss out on the finish."

"The cat killer?" Keith asked, his mind racing.

"We got him. I tell you, Briscoe, I've had an angel on my shoulder on this case. Another lucky break. The landlord here got suspicious. Said a fellow had been prowling around the place last night and heard somebody again, tonight, so he called the police. The boys didn't find a prowler, but out in the garage they found something more interesting—"

Keith's mind raced ahead of Gonzales's words. He wasn't ten thousand feet up any more, but he was still free. They'd have to look for the gun. He could help them do that; in the dark he could be a big help.

"—an old coupe," Gonzales added, "like the one they've been

alerted for all day. They took a look. The front seat was full of blood."

In the dark he could help them find the gun and the gloves and the rubber-soled shoes—And then Keith's mind stopped racing and listened to Gonzales words.

"Blood?" he echoed.

Blood, as on a strip of torn cloth in the bathroom. Blood, as what was soaking into Elaine's bedclothes and beginning to stain Keith's hands.

Gonzales nodded.

"I guess Clancy's a better shot than we knew. The cat killer won't climb tonight, Briscoe, or any other night. He's in there now so doped up he doesn't even know we've found him. It's a good way to kill the pain when somebody's blown a chunk out of your leg."

It wasn't really blood on Keith's hands; it was a gun. When he couldn't stand the weight of it any longer, he handed it to Gonzales. Gonzales would figure it out. A thread, a fabric, a pattern. Elaine had been right: he had a weakness, and a man with a weakness shouldn't play with guns.

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