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Obsession



BY
ROBERT PAGE JONES

The thought of seeing her again, of miraculously returning to Havelburg and finding her there occupied his mind, fed his withered body and gave him a strength that was present in none of the other prisoners.

IN THE FALL of the year the skeletons were loaded into a string of freight cars and sent to harvest crops in the fields near Lutsik.

The train was one that the Russians had built during the Civil War of 1918-1921. It was old and worn out. Its roof leaked and a

damp wind came up between the warped boards in the floor.

The train passed through an occasional village, past lonely little houses, their stubby chimneys puffing smoke like brick bake ovens. Its searchlight shone on the houses and on the endless welt of trees and

on the dead stalks of summer's weeds. But the prisoners could not see these things. There were no windows in the tomblike cubicles in which they rode and the heavy doors were kept locked when the train was moving.

They could only listen.

Skeleton 21710—his name was Ernst Moeller—sat with his cheek pressed against the inside of the car, his ear a filter, sifting the pounding and the clacking for the tiniest noise that might tell him something. Already a little worm of suspicion had begun crawling in his stomach. He was intensely aware of it. They were on a bridge. Moeller heard the big steel girders rushing past—girder, space, girder, space, girder, space—until the bridge was behind and he heard only the wheels again.

The even sway of the car sent a rush of blood through Moeller's rope-like limbs. A few minutes passed while he held his heart in the tips of his fingers. There was absolutely no doubt now. The train was traveling west toward Poland and Germany. It was traveling in the direction of Ilse.

Moeller listened intently until the cold dampness of the boards numbed his ear. Then he leaned forward again.

He was a man of forty-two who looked twenty years older than this. His face was fleshless, pitted deeply in the hollow cheeks, as if the skin had been gnawed by a rodent. Wild

tufts of hair stuck out from under his woolen cap. Except for the eyes, his face would have been expressionless and old, the face of a dead man. But the eyes were alert. They flashed with a surprising brightness, as if they contained the only remaining living cells of a dying body.

Moeller listened to the long, low whistle of a distant train and blew warm breath onto his fingers. When he rubbed his palms together, his coarse skin made a faint rasping noise, like a knife sawing through stale bread.

He heard the whistle again and turned to the man seated next to him and said, "There! Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" the man said sleepily.

"The whistle. It came from a long way off. We wouldn't have been able to hear it if the country around was not very flat."

The man looked at him.

"Don't you *feel* how level the country is?" Moeller said.

"Eh?"

The man rolled on his side, closing the space between them.

"We have been traveling west for days," Moeller said. "We may even be in the Ukrain."

"Nonsense." The man drew in his lip in contempt. His face was like a potato peeling. "It is foolish to even think of such things."

Moeller regarded the man with disgust. They fell silent again and

for a long while no one spoke. Then Moeller shook the arm of the man seated on his other side. At first the man did not respond and Moeller shook him again.

"I tell you," he said under his breath, "they're taking us toward the West. Toward Poland."

"How can you be sure?" The man—his name was Heinz—pricked up his ears and shifted his position on the straw. His hair was unkempt and hung over his ears and forehead.

"I can *hear* it," Moeller said.

"Impossible."

Moeller looked at him sullenly.

"How do you know what is possible or impossible?" he said acidly.

A man with haggard eyes, as if he had not slept in days, sat with his back against the opposite wall, watching them indifferently, his head rolling back and forth on his skinny neck like a meatball on a stick.

"It may be so," he muttered across to them. "We have come a long distance since getting on the train."

"But how can you know in which *direction* we have come?" asked Heinz.

"It is not too difficult if you know how to observe things . . ."

"*Ach*," Heinz made a vulgar gesture and spit into the straw. "I say they're taking us to work the mines at Yarkovo."

"You are a fool, Heinz," said the other. "You never use your brains."

They began to squabble.

Moeller moved away from them, crawling on all fours on the damp hay, looking for Buerger. The car was crowded. Men lay jumbled together like tangles of chicken bones with the meat sucked off. A man stood over a bucket in the center of the car, looking very silly but somehow dignified. His arm was gone. The train lurched suddenly and the man cursed under his breath.

"Watch what you're doing, can't you!"

The train jolted on. Moeller found Buerger at the far end of the car and knelt down beside him. The wheels hit the cracks between the rails with a hammering thud, like a distant bombardment.

"We should be stopping soon," he said conversationally.

"Yes, soon," Buerger said. He rubbed his eyes wearily with gnarled fingers. "Tell me, have you noticed the difference in the terrain?"

"Yes." Moeller could scarcely conceal the excitement in his voice. "What do you think it means?"

Buerger looked at him. "I'm not sure."

"Nevertheless, tell me what you think."

"Why should I?"

Nerves had become raw after long days in the cars.

Moeller only shrugged.

"We are in the Ukrain," Buerger said after a while.

Moeller let his breath out slowly, as if he was afraid to disturb the air in which the words had been spoken, and said, "You are sure?"

"Yes." Buerger had been a clergyman before the war. He did not believe in God anymore, but the prisoners regarded him as a prophet, because he sometimes had a way of knowing things even before they happened.

Moeller dug a cigarette from inside his tunic. He said breathlessly, "Sometimes it is difficult to relax, eh?"

Buerger nodded.

"It is a Russian cigarette. Do you like them?"

"Who can afford to be choosy in such matters?"

"Will you share it with me?"

"Yes."

They smoked, letting the smoke ease slowly through their nostrils, enjoying the feeling of luxury and extravagance it gave them.

When they had taken the cigarette down half way Moeller turned to Buerger and said guardedly, "It gives one a good feeling, eh . . . to be this close to home again."

"Home?"

"We haven't been this near the Fatherland since the big retreat in 1944," Moeller said.

"Home," Buerger said again disgustedly. He laughed and spit into the hay. "What is home but habit and the fact that at home you have enough to eat? Chances are you were miserable at home. You just

don't remember. Give me enough to eat, right now, and I'll call this place home."

"Just the same, if I have to be hungry anyway, I'd rather be hungry in Havelburg."

"Havelburg?"

Moeller nodded.

"That's where you're from?"

"Yes." Moeller nodded again. "A small town on the Oder. My wife is there."

"Probably dead . . ."

"That's not true!" Moeller shouted quiveringly.

Before Buerger could move, Moeller was on him, yelling insanely. His stick-like arms were surprisingly strong. The two men beat each other with their fists.

"She is not dead! She is not dead! She is not dead!" Moeller screamed.

He grabbed for Buerger's genitals.

Buerger drew his legs up and rolled away. Before he could reach Buerger again, Moeller felt several hands holding him from behind, gripping him.

After a while the men settled down as if nothing had happened.

"I only told you what I saw,"

Buerger said matter-of-factly. "I was on leave in Berlin a few weeks before they took us prisoner at Kiev. Everything had been smashed. The churches, the monuments, everything. The people were living in the rubble like rats."

"I've heard that," Moeller said.

"But Berlin was a big city. The

capital. Not like Havelburg. They didn't drop their bombs on Havelburg . . ."

"They dropped them everywhere. And when they were through with the bombs they came in with their tanks and smashed everything that was left." Buerger looked at him. "I tell you, Germany is smashed. You can count on that. A rubble heap. Thousands dead. Believe me . . . you're better off right here."

They sat motionless again. The train thudded over the rails. Moeller sighed.

There was no sense in talking.

He knew that Ilse was alive. He did not know how he knew but he knew. It was a feeling inside of him as big as life itself.

The thought of seeing her again, of some day returning to Havelburg and finding her in their home near the Oder, was a source of physical nourishment. It kept him alive. It occupied his mind, fed his aching body, gave him a strength that was present in none of the other prisoners.

After a while Moeller turned to Buerger and said softly, "Is it true that a priest may never have a woman?"

"It depends on the religion." Buerger scratched his beard. "Catholic priests may never marry."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No."

"Have you ever been with a woman?"

"Yes." Buerger said. "Often."

Moeller leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "It is a beautiful thing," he said.

"Yes, always."

Almost the instant Moeller closed his eyes he felt a hand touching his.

It was Ilse. They were on the beach at Scheveningen on the North Sea. For most of the day they had sat in the sun and talked and now it was dark and they were alone. She wore a dress that showed her tan breasts. Her feet were bare. Blond hair fell to her shoulders, very casual and straight, bleached almost white by the sun.

He had known her for less than a week. They had met in Munich, of all places, and quickly discovered that they were from the same home town. They had come to Scheveningen together for their holiday. In a day or two they would have to start back again.

Ilse sat up and looked straight into his eyes.

She said seriously, "I shouldn't have come."

"But you came anyway."

"Yes." Something in her eyes told him how serious she was. "I came in spite of myself."

"Are you sorry?"

"No. But I sometimes wish that I knew more about you. That we were introduced . . . properly."

"We grew up practically on the same street."

"Perhaps that's why I never noticed you . . . until you came home on leave from the Army."

Moeller looked at her.

"Sometimes it takes a war to get two people together," he said.

"I don't know." Her hand trembled on his arm. "I only know that we are together and the war is somewhere up there beyond the stars."

She did not resist when he kissed her. She closed her eyes and he could feel her breath on his face. He began to undress her slowly.

The memory of what happened then was like a physical pain in Moeller's chest . . .

He was almost asleep when the train began grinding to a halt. For a while Moeller continued to lay with closed eyes. It was as if he was reluctant to leave the warmth of his memories. *His* memories. His home, his wooded hills, the little streams where he used to fish. And Ilse. Always in his dreams there was Ilse.

The train stopped suddenly and Buerger tumbled against him. They sat silently and then Buerger looked at him strangely and said, "What kind of game is this?"

"What game?"

"This game you're playing with yourself."

"Mind your own goddamned business," Moeller said.

Buerger's face was overlaid with dark shadows. He said, "We're still eight hundred kilometres from the Oder. And in between are the Poles. The Poles haven't forgotten what we did to them."

"I'd rather die trying to get back home again than spend the rest of my life pulling turnips out of the ground."

"Life is not so precious to you, eh?" Buerger said.

"It's just that I think . . ."

"Don't think so much." Buerger laughed grimly. "It is a better world when you do not think at all."

It was a foolish conversation.

They ended it by simply not talking.

After what seemed like a long time the big door was opened. Moeller could see that the country around was very flat, almost black under the moon, the stars shining through the trees like Christmas ornaments. A Russian soldier stood with his shoulders on a level with the floor of the car.

"Bring the bucket," the Russian said in very bad German.

"Where are we?" someone asked.

"No questions," said the Russian. He carried a gun slung over his shoulder. "Bring the bucket. *Schnell!*"

"Whose turn is it?"

There was no answer.

Suddenly Moeller's head was filled with only one thought. He began crawling toward the door. After a few seconds he found the bucket and picked it up. The handle was wet.

"It is my turn," he said.

It really was his turn. He had almost forgotten. Being on the

bucket detail was a privilege. The work was not so pleasant but it gave him the opportunity to stretch the kinks out and breathe in some fresh air.

Moeller lowered himself to the ground and waited while the guard closed the door and locked it. He heard voices further down the train. At the end of the train he saw a caboose, its little windows throwing out a yellowish light, smoke curling up from its narrow smokestack.

That's where the guards are, he thought. It disturbed him that the guards had windows through which they could look out at the countryside as the train moved along.

The locomotive let loose a hiss of steam. Moeller took a shovel from the guard and went with him into the trees. Nothing stirred. All movement seemed frozen in the cold of night.

"*Hier ist gute,*" said the Russian after they had walked a little way.

They stopped. They were in a small clearing. The branches of the trees cut them off from the sky but the moon gave enough light to see by.

Moeller began to dig. His arms were so weak he had trouble getting the shovel to go into the ground. After a while he felt a pain in his chest and knew that it was caused by the cold air rushing into his lungs.

The Russian lit a cigarette and

leaned against his rifle, smoking. "Hurry," he said. "It is cold here."

"I am doing the best I can," Moeller said weakly. "The ground is hard."

Minutes passed.

"Put your back into it," the Russian said. He grinned. "I have a girl waiting for me in Lutsck. A Pole. She's ugly, with thighs like an elephant, but she knows how to warm a man on a cold night like this."

Lutsck.

The word hit Moeller like a rifle butt. He wanted to sit down. His mind reeled and the soft wind chilled the sweat on his body. He felt like crying. He still could not believe it.

"You will see her tonight?" he said carefully.

"Not if you don't finish digging that hole." The Russian began stamping his feet on the blanket of pine needles. "What is the matter with you, anyway? Why have you stopped digging?"

"I told you. The ground is hard." Moeller placed the spade against the ground and shoved it with his foot. It did not go in very far. He stepped back from the shallow hole as the Russian came forward in the darkness of the trees. The wind made a scratching noise in the branches around them. The Russian stopped and peered down at the ground.

He said acidly, "Are you weak? Do you call this a hole?"

Moeller felt a hard lump in his skinny throat. His mind reeled. The odor from the bucket was very bad.

"This is foolish. A foolish regulation," the Russian said impatiently. He stamped vigorously. "Empty the bucket into the bushes and we will go back to the train."

Moeller swallowed frantically. He felt suddenly excited. He did not understand exactly what was happening to him. But he knew that he could never go back to the train. It would be like returning to a mass grave . . .

He did not stop to think but went straight for the Russian with the shovel, swining it club-like over his head, a harsh cry escaping his broken lips. Tears squeezed out of his eyes. The rifle clattered to the ground. The Russian dropped to his knees. Blood welled out of his nose and mouth. Moeller was terrified. He had never seen that much blood. Not even in the war. He felt suddenly sick. He fought against the blackness that threatened to envelope him, swinging blindly, feeling the strength drain out of his sparrow-like body.

A sudden, terrifying thought struck him.

He was afraid that he might not have enough strength to kill the Russian.

He swung the shovel again and again. There was almost no force in the blows. The strength gradually drained from his arms. When

he could no longer lift the shovel, he leaped onto the dying body and began to jump up and down.

When it was finally over, Moeller stood for a long moment, panting from the effort he had made. He bent down over the bloody, battered body of the Russian and listened and felt for some sign of life. Then he removed the Russian's leather boots and exchanged them for his worn-out-shoes.

A shrill whistle from the locomotive shrieked through the tree branches. It was a lonely sound.

Moeller started off rapidly through the trees.

He had traveled for days. He no longer knew exactly how many. The Russian boots were worn nearly through and his tunic was torn and shredded by the thousands of branches that had stood in his path. He was very tired and hungry. But his mind still concentrated on the thing he had set himself to do.

Only now and then had he seen a living soul. He had traveled almost entirely at night, skirting the farm houses and villages that emerged out of the dark like lighted steam ships, living on what little food he had managed to grub from the ground.

Cold and fatigue nearly killed him on several occasions, but he managed to keep on, driven by the shivers along his spine and by thoughts of Ilse.

She was so much a part of him, so ingrained in his mind and his soul, that by returning to her he would be returning to himself.

He *had* to find her.

It was no longer a matter of choice . . .

The road he was on ran uphill beside the plowed furrows of a beet field and to his left the trees, gaunt and towering, shut out the moon. He stopped and looked around him. He was in Poland. Everything about the region looked neat and orderly. Here and there, beyond the fields, light shone dimly from the windows of a farm house.

Grubbing a beet from the ground, he sat down beneath the low-sweeping branches of a fir tree, and began filling his stomach. He felt utterly exhausted. His head throbbed and there was a smear of blood on his hand where he had scratched it against a thorn. For a moment he did not want to go on. For a moment he confused warmth with death and it gave him a happy feeling inside. But the feeling passed quickly and he forced himself to his feet.

He knew that he could not remain in the open much longer. In a few hours it would be dawn and he would have to find a hiding place for the day.

He went back to the road, walking in the shadows of the woods, swinging his arms to work some warmth into his body. The wind rustled through the trees and a

hound bayed off in the night somewhere. There was no other sound.

He skirted a small village, not bothering to note its name, and made his way back to the road. The country around was broad and flat, a continuation of the endless steppe country of Asia, the trees thinning out occasionally into barren tracts of ploughed land.

The terrain looked vaguely familiar to him and in his mind he saw the towns he had passed through during the *Wehrmacht's* drive into Poland nearly twenty years before. The houses had burned then like gigantic torches. Now everything seemed so peaceful. He wondered if the same peace had returned to Havelburg . . .

Moeller was so absorbed in his thoughts that he was not aware of the car bearing down on him from behind. When he finally responded, it was too late. The whine of the engine sent him staggering into the shelter of the trees, ignoring the branches that lashed at his narrow face, his breath a wild hammering in his throat.

He ran blindly. The car had stopped and he could hear voices behind him on the road, heavy and menacing, speaking in Polish. He did not stop to think. He dashed across a small clearing, stumbling and clawing his way through a copse of small pines, until he found a path. He could hear his pursuers crashing into the undergrowth behind him. They were

chasing him. A border patrol, probably, that had spotted him diving into the woods.

He lost the path again, running crazily, not caring where he went so long as he put distance between himself and the voices behind him. He felt very tired and very sick. He had lost all sense of direction. His legs began to feel as if he were walking against the current in a stream up to his waist.

He found another clearing, surrounded by heavy undergrowth, and fumbled his way into it. He crouched there, shivering, his mind a blank. The cold lay like a sheet over everything.

There was a feeling in him somewhat like the feeling he used to get in church. It spread through his whole body. It was as if everything around him was unreal. In the half-darkness every shadow became a man with a gun, ready to shoot him, eager to kill him. For a moment he tried to imagine what it would be like to be shot. He pictured himself with a gaping hole in his stomach, writhing on the ground, while his pursuers stood over him.

He began to pray silently.

He did not know how long he remained hidden. He had not heard the voices for some time. The silence troubled him. It was unreal. Perhaps they had spotted him lying there and were sneaking up on him cautiously. He swallowed repeatedly. He was surrounded by

growth so thick that he couldn't see anything more than ten feet away. Minutes passed. In a little while he heard the whine of an engine as the car started up the road. He did not move. He remained where he was, his mind racing, thinking that perhaps they were trying to trick him. It was possible that they had sent someone to drive off in the car to make it appear as if they had given up.

Moeller waited for almost an hour before the first rays of dawn filtered down through the wet tree branches. He had heard nothing during all of that time. He got cautiously to his feet. He would have to find somewhere to hide for the day. When he stepped forward, he could see the hoarfrosted, towering fir trees taking shape against the sky. In a few minutes it would be completely light.

He struck out through the trees, his back to the light that shone in a bright gash between earth and sky, walking westward. He wondered how far he was from the Oder. His body felt as if there had never been a time when he was not walking. The cold had gotten into his bones, turning them to ice, so that with every step he half-expected to shatter into a million small pieces.

He walked for some time before coming out of the woods onto the edge of a ploughed field.

All about him was empty desolation. It was a sugar-beet field, bar-

ren and rutted, frost-white in the cold light of dawn. His steps no longer rang firm. The smell of baking bread lingered in his nostrils as he started across the frozen ruts. He remembered a bakery he had known in Havelburg as a boy, where rock-hard *pfeffer* cookies spilled out of a jar in the window, filling the street with their fragrance.

On the far side of the field the sharp edges of a rectangular shed stood gaunt and black against the sky.

Moeller quickened his pace.

He no longer cared about the danger. He cared about nothing except getting some warmth into his body. He half stumbled across the field. The crack of frozen earth beneath his boots sounded alarmingly loud. He reached the shed. There was a rusted padlock on the door, but the wood was rotten, and with a little effort he was able to work it loose. Inside, beets had been heaped up on the dirt floor, and in one corner was a pile of straw.

Moeller stumbled into the straw and with a little sigh of relief closed his eyes. But it was too cold for him to sleep. He rolled over on his back. The roof of the shed was solidly built of rough-hewn boards and cross-beams. It reminded him of another place when he had lain just like this . . .

It was in summer, 1942. Berchtesgaden. A little villa standing by

itself beyond the village. The rooms had been filled, and the owner of the house had put them in an attic in which there was nothing much but a bed, with only the heat of their bodies to keep them warm.

"You made me feel so humble." Ilse's face was right above him. "I wish I could be of help to you."

"But you are. You make me happy."

"Do I really please you?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad," she said in a choked voice. "I want to spend my life doing that: to talk to you or remain silent as you wish, to write you letters when you are away, to share your pain . . . to make love to you."

A lock of her hair was touching his face. It brushed across his lips. He blew it aside and pulled her violently into his arms.

"Ilse," he said softly.

The owner of the villa, a friendly woman with a hatchet face, had brought their supper and left a vase of cut flowers on the floor and a bottle of wine.

They could eat nothing. It was their honeymoon. In a few days he would return to the front.

Sometime during the day, Moeller slept fitfully. But he awoke in a short while with the feeling that something was wrong. He looked around. The shed was just as it had been when he laid down. But something had jolted him out of sleep.

Moeller guessed that it was the middle of the afternoon. The sun was up and steam rose from the straw and from the mound of sugar beets. A damp chill entered his body and made him shudder.

He was about to eat one of the beets when the door was opened and three men came into the shed.

A hot stab went through Moeller's stomach. He dropped the beet and scrambled to his feet. He stood there, facing the men, his heart pumping wildly.

The men were silent for several seconds. They stood gazing at him, straddlelegged, hands thrust into the pockets of their baggy trousers or hanging limply at their sides. They were not young men. Moeller saw that at once. The oldest appeared to be nearly seventy.

Moeller wondered if it had been the sound of the men approaching the shed that had awakened him.

The men exchanged a few words and then all three looked at Moeller again. They had faces like the beets heaped up on the floor. One of them held the rusted padlock in his hand. He spoke to Moeller.

Moeller understood a few words of Polish. But he could not make any sense out of what the man was saying. They were obviously farmers. They had undoubtedly stumbled across Moeller in the beet shed and now they apparently wanted to know what he was doing there.

Moeller could see no point in trying to answer.

The dried up old faces wore expressions that disturbed him.

After a while one of the men put his hand on Moeller's arm and led him out of the shed. The others followed. The sudden sunlight hurt Moeller's eyes. He squinted into the face of the man who held his arm. The man was as old as the others but his grip was surprisingly strong. There were deep lines in the flesh around his eyes.

The man eyed Moeller's tunic.

Then, without explanation, he hit Moeller on the temple with the side of his fist. Moeller staggered back, freeing himself from the other's grip, swaying dazedly. But he took the blow without going down.

The others stepped back simultaneously. Moeller went after the nearest of the three. He drove his gnarled fist into a face that bobbed suddenly before him. Rotten teeth shattered under his knuckles. The man reeled backwards, throwing up his hands to protect his face, and began to yell.

Moeller was about to run when the sharp edge of the padlock landed at a spot just above his ear. The blow sent a shock of pain through his skull and his mind reeled. His scrawny knees buckled and he pitched forward on his hands. Stunned, he pulled himself forward, crawling on all fours.

He felt like a feather sailing through the air.

He saw Ilse's face distinctly and

he was about to say her name as three pairs of hands gripped his hair, his clothes, his arms and pulled him over onto his back. He gazed up at the three old faces like chewed leather, at yellow eyes that peered at him mercilessly, and he started to scream as the blows beat down upon him.

Bony fists landed on every part of Moeller's body. They beat against his face and throat and chest and groin and legs like the flapping wings of muscular birds. Moeller kicked out blindly. His boot landed against one of the arms as it descended and there was a sound like a dry branch being broken.

Moeller chose that moment to come awkwardly to his feet, lurching crazily, a hoarse roar escaping his lips. He began to run. He hurt all over and there was a taste of blood in his mouth. The leather of his boots squeezed his swollen feet. He did not run parallel to the furrows, but cut across them, heading for the protection of the woods.

He stumbled once and went down. He smacked the ground on his hands and knees. A stone wrenched at his kneecap. He didn't waste any time, but scrambled to his feet, not even bothering to look back.

The crash of feet behind him told him all that he needed to know.

Moeller reached the edge of the woods and scrambled through a

small thicket. Branches clawed at his face and chest. He kept running, concentrating on the sounds behind him, only half-conscious of the pain in his legs.

The trees became taller, the undergrowth thicker, harder to push himself through. His body made a thrashing noise as he shoved against the low-sweeping branches. Leaves crackled under his feet. But being quiet took too much time. His only chance was to run until his pursuers were too exhausted to follow.

After a long while he turned his head and glanced back. He saw nothing, but heard struggling in the thicket behind him, off to his left somewhere. He began to run faster. He came to a small incline and crawled up it on all fours. His heart felt as if it might burst.

As he ran, a feeling of self-pity penetrated every pore of his body. He had done nothing but steal a few worthless beets. He felt suddenly angry. Cursing, he grabbed a stone from the ground and whirled. He stopped short and listened. He still heard the thrashing but it seemed to be going in another direction. He dropped the stone and pressed himself flat against the ground under a bush. Minutes passed. He had no way of knowing how many. The thrashing continued. Then he heard nothing. More time passed. The cold from the ground penetrated his body and sent racking shivers through

him. His head sagged and his eyes began to close. A fog seemed to be entering his brain. He saw the frozen limbs of soldiers who had been his comrades. A little cry escaped his lips and he jerked himself straight and forced his eyes open.

With a great deal of effort he got to his feet and began walking through the trees. The woods around him were quiet and he guessed that his pursuers had given up or gone off in a different direction. He took a deep breath. He stopped and sniffed the air several times. His heart began to slam. The smell of the river was unmistakable.

He could barely keep from crying out as he started forward again.

He had just stepped out of the woods into a sloping meadow when he saw it. He recognized the spot almost at once. He had never seen it from this side but nevertheless it was familiar to him. He had fished from that precise spot on the opposite bank before the war. It was only about four miles north of his home in Havelburg.

He began to run. He kept running for quite a while, keeping to the woods, a wild slamming in his chest. At last tiredness overcame him and he threw himself on the ground. He lay there panting. His bones ached where he had been beaten. He rolled over on his back and gazed up at the sky. The woods

were very thick in that spot and he knew that he would be safe from patrols until night came.

Moeller could hear the water gurgling against the banks as it flowed past him. He thought about running down to the water and swimming across without waiting for dark. But he knew that would be foolish. The current was swift and he would have to rest and build up his strength. But he was not afraid. He did not even consider the possibility that he might not be able to swim the river.

He lay there and smelled the pines and listened to the shrill cry of a bird. He was overcome with such a feeling of happiness that he felt like crying. Just across the river was his home, in the town where he had grown up, and his wife . . .

As he lay there streams of memories released themselves. He saw Ilse's face. The face of his wife, familiar in every line, like the lantern slide projected on the inside of his skull. She had been so much of a presence during his time in Russia that the image of her that he carried in his mind had actually changed with the years. She was nearly twice as old now as when he had seen her last. Darkly-blond hair brushed back a little too severely from the face, and the face itself, a little more generous than before but with the same strongly-cut nose and the same firm mouth. Her eyes the same smoky blue, as

intelligent as ever, but quietly submissive now, their passiveness revealing, almost as if they harbored a feeling of immense guilt.

Was there such a thing as guilt, Moeller asked himself experimentally. He knew the answer to that. His mother had given him the answer in his childhood, and he had carried it with him, even though it disturbed him sometimes.

Moeller's hand moved instinctively to the pocket of his tunic. It was a wasted gesture. The letter had long since disintegrated into a thousand particles, like pulpy snowflakes, rubbed into nothingness by his coarse fingers. But the words had remained. They were etched into his mind like a physical pain.

The letter was short:

Dear Ernst, it said, you will never know how I have prayed that it might fall to someone else to tell you of this thing. But because you are my son and a soldier I know you would want the truth. And you must be brave enough to accept the truth even though your heart screams that it can not be so. You see, my son, I have watched them together. I have seen them! I have actually seen the marks of his teeth on her body . . .

Moeller looked up at the sky. In the air was the smell of the river and of the pines. A bird took off from a tree and flew up toward the sun. Moeller's heart ached in his chest. His mind became lost in

memories as the sky took on a rosy glow and the trees and hills eventually became black silhouettes.

He had to wait another twenty minutes before it was dark enough to cross the river. When he walked down to the edge of the water he stood for a moment looking at the surging current. For the first time since leaving the train near Lutsk he felt something like fear.

After a minute he jumped into the water. It was so icy that it took his breath away. His head went under. He came closer to panicking then than he had at any time in his life. His arms thrashed out wildly as the current carried his thin body like a twig toward the center of the river.

He began spinning crazily. His mouth opened and filled with water. He began swimming with all of his remaining strength toward the opposite shore. Minutes passed during which he seemed to be getting nowhere. The coldness of the water numbed his mind and started a dull ache in his chest. He had a sudden, sickening feeling that he was going to die.

He was about to give up when his fingers slapped against soft mud. He located an exposed root and used it to haul himself up on the bank. For a long time he lay face down on the wet grass.

There was a strange sweet taste in his mouth. An odd feeling came over him and he began to laugh softly. It was as if he had lain like

this once before in his life, on this very same spot, experiencing the very same thoughts and smells and feelings. For a while he could not understand. Then it struck him that it was because he had done this so many times in his mind.

He did not try to rest any longer but got to his feet and started off through the trees. In a few minutes he came to a road that he knew and began to walk along it. It ran gently uphill, away from the river, and when he reached the top he saw the town spread out before him.

He walked faster. The houses on either side of the road became more numerous. He found the one he was looking for and stopped in front of it. His heart was racing with a wondrous excitement. He had come home at last . . .

The house was set in the middle of a small yard. It had a very deep roof and wide flagstone chimney. Neat, bloomless flowerbeds were laid out along a gravel-strewn path.

Moeller opened the small gate and stepped noiselessly into the yard. He followed the path to where a light shone from a window in the rear of the house. He climbed the stairs and went into the kitchen. Ilse was there. He recognized her immediately. It was as he had imagined: blond hair pulled straight back from the face, the cheeks a little fuller, tiny lines at the corners of the eyes.

She sat at a table near the stove on which there was a book and a half-eaten apple and a small paring knife. She didn't cry out when she saw Moeller standing there. There was a quick intaking of her breath, and her hands fell to her lap, but her eyes remained fixed.

He must have been a sight. His clothes were wet and smeared with mud. Blood welled from the cuts on his face. His hair was matted, plastered to his head, like an abandoned birds nest.

"Ernst?"

She looked at him, fascinated, and rose slowly to her feet.

"Yes."

"I knew you would come . . . someday."

He took a step toward her, his eyes on her throat, wondering if that was the precise spot where the teethmarks of her lover had been.

"I've come home at last."

"Thank God," she said almost inaudibly.

He pulled her to him.

They stood that way for a long moment before his fingers found the knife and picked it up from the table.

The blood ran down between her breasts.

So intent was he on what he was doing that he did not see the look that had come to her eyes, as if to her soul had finally come a feeling of release and expurgation . . .

It's the Law

In California

it is against the law to interfere with children jumping over water puddles.

In Ohio

it is prohibited by law to cool one's feet by sticking them out an automobile window.

In Kansas

a law regulating hotels reads: "All carpets and equipment used in offices and sleeping rooms, including walls and ceilings, must be well plastered at all times."

In Massachusetts

there is an old law that specifically forbids hens to wear trousers.

In Pendleton, Oregon

a man is not eligible to be a town councilman if the city limits run through his living room and he thus lives outside the city some of the time.

In St. Louis, Missouri

it is against the law to operate a power lawn mower before 9 A.M. on Sundays.

In Oakland, California

neighbors have the right, by law, to insist that owners restrain overaggressive tomcats.

HALF PAST



ETERNITY

Dr. Geet turned to the blonde woman who sat beside him and squinted against the glare of sunlight that flashed from the silver wing outside the window. "Do you have the time?" "It's eleven-twenty," she said . . . and a cold sweat broke out over his body.

BY

ROBERT LEON

DYNAMITE, clock, wire, detonator, fuse, pipe, batteries, airline ticket, insurance—Doctor Geet hesitated, his ballpoint pen ice-skated in a trail of circles on the prescription pad.

"Let's see now," he said aloud, "have I forgotten anything." He massaged his forehead with the back of his hand, while his gaze stole toward the stack of unopened letters on his desk. They had been on his desk now for a week, and Doctor Geet had no intention of inspecting their contents, now or ever. One particular envelope, from the Medical Association, was the stimulus for all of this. Undoubtedly it bore a demand for his resignation; one mistake might have been pardonable, but not five. And when, like a child, a man does something wrong and his hand is not slapped, then it is inevitable that he does something wrong again. He had a self-abnegating virtue of trying to help those who needed him desperately, and in giving his

talent and brain to those, neglected himself and forgot society: the unwed mother; the wounded burglar who needed medical aid, just a youth who did not realize the seriousness of his crime; administering adrenalin to another doctor's patient; and a few other things which at this time Doctor Geet could not remember for his brain was filled now with the devastating thing that it formed. But one thing he did know; that aside from the humility and disgrace, the loss of a license, there remained a wife and a daughter. A man of sixty, with but one profession and not too much time left to pursue another, had very few choices.

"Dear, are you in there?" The voice penetrated the closed door, and somewhere, like an echo, another door slammed.

Doctor Geet leaped from his chair and noiselessly gathered the material and dropped them into the top drawer of his desk. Just as the door to his study was opening, he

slipped the prescription pad into his pocket.

Guiltily Doctor Geet turned to face his wife, adjusting his face with an inquiring expression that was characteristic of him. "Why, Emily—what on earth brought you back so early? Is everything all right?"

Emily, a thin candle of age with a wrinkled but saintly face, took a moment to pull the hair pin from her white, wig-like hair. "Don't be silly, dear . . . of course everything is all right. I finished what I had to do and here I am." She looked at him. "What are you doing?"

Doctor Geet, standing at attention before the scrutiny of her eyes, brushed back his bushy, gray hair and cleared his throat. "Oh, just trying to get a few things in order. You don't expect me to leave anything undone before plane time, do you?"

Emily frowned and added a dozen more wrinkles to her pale face. "Oh dear, I wish you didn't have to go."

"Now, Emily," he said, cocking his head and approaching her, with his arms outstretched. "I must. I can't cancel the trip now." Gently he settled his hands on her thin shoulders. "It's a little too late."

She removed her hat, shook her head slightly, then kissed him on his veined cheek. "Well, don't you work too hard. I'll prepare a little lunch for us."

When she closed the door and left him alone again, he stood there staring at the mahogany door. This, of all times, was not the moment to become sentimental or repentant. At the most how many years could he give Emily? Even she was cursed with so few years of her own. To hang on to the branches of life while the gravity of death tugged at you was a waste of effort, strength and good sense. It was his daughter that really mattered right now, and this he recognized as the only important truth. Everything he had ever done, each worry or sleepless night, was spent in behalf of her. He was on the brink now, about to plunge into the arms of life's enemy, and he had to leave behind something worth the trouble he had caused. Inhaling deeply, filling the engine of his determination, he turned with renewed ambition to his desk.

He made a clicking noise with his tongue. "Let's see . . . have I forgotten anything?" He ran his fingers through his hair then he snapped his fingers. He reached over beside the desk, where there were four black bags, and one by one, he placed them before him. He studied the black, grained leather of each bag carefully. Two of the bags had his initials inscribed on them in gold; and these two bags he returned to the floor. He had to think now; should he take both bags with him, or only one? He contemplated this for a mo-

ment, then decided to take only one. He took one of the bags, clicked it open and spilled its contents onto the desk, then he opened the middle drawer of the desk and swept the instruments into it. After making sure that the door to the study was locked, he began the tedious and careful task of assembling the death components into the empty bag. Every single detail was soldered into place, the clock at the top, where it would be easier to set, and finally with a wry smile of satisfaction, erasing all traces of benevolence, he snapped the bag shut.

The phone rang. It rang again. It rang a third time. He lowered the bag cautiously to the floor and contemplated the phone. On the fifth ring, he reached out impulsively and answered it. "Hello . . . Doctor Geet speaking. No. No, Miss Williams, I'm afraid I won't be able to see anyone. Please refer all patients to Doctor Trebord. Me? I should be back next Thursday."

He dropped the phone into its cradle and slumped into the chair. He took out his wallet and from it removed an airline ticket. After examining the particulars of the ticket, he returned it to his wallet. Then he tore the first three pages from his prescription pad and destroyed them with a match. He rose and leaned against the desk. The unopened letters continued to draw his attention. Drumming all ten fingers on the desktop, he reviewed everything he had to do. Somehow,

at this moment, only one day away from oblivion, he felt comfortable, and in a way, even eager, like a child who is looking forward to a new experience. When he was sure that he had not overlooked the smallest detail, he unlocked the door and joined his wife in lunch.

At seven in the morning, Doctor Geet had already dressed and had his breakfast. It was difficult for him to attend to the most important matters of his mission, for Emily insisted on following him about the house. He recognized in her uplifted face an expression of solicitude.

"My dear," Doctor Geet said, trying not to turn suddenly on her. "You're hanging onto me like a shadow. I can do so much more if you would only stay put."

"Must you take the plane?" she asked.

He smiled. "And must I give you a lecture on its safety? There's absolutely nothing to worry about. Now please, there are some things I must do in my study. I won't be long, I promise."

He closed the door behind him and locked it. The first bag contained his surgical instruments and he set it aside. Then he placed the other bag on the desk and opened it. With fingers that had performed life-saving surgeries, he attached the last two wires to the clock and set the hands on seven-thirty. He set the alarm for eleven-thirty. Then he closed the bag and looked

around the room. There must not be any notes; no tell-tale clues to tell future investigators that anything was wrong. He remembered the unopened letters and burned them in the waste-paper basket. Time was running out and he must not forget a thing. He unbuckled his watch from his wrist, dropped it into the drawer, then removed all the contents from his wallet with exception of a singular card that told of his identification. He stuffed a five dollar bill back into his pocket; everything seemed to be ready.

Hunched over the desk, thoughtfully, he stared at the wall, at the clock on the bookcase, the window, and finally his gaze sank to the phone. He dialed a number and waited.

"Would you please send a cab to the Doctor Geet residence . . . 406 North Cedros Street. Just tell the man to blow his horn once and I'll be right out. Thank you."

The knock on the study door startled him and he hurriedly returned the phone to its cradle. "What is it?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Dear?" the muffled voice raised anxiously, "why do you have this door locked?"

Almost upsetting the chair, he rose and hurried to the door, opening it. "I did it unknowingly," he said to her.

Her gaze reached beyond his shoulders, searching into the room,

then it returned to examine his face. "You look tired, dear," she said. "Are you sure everything is all right?"

He placed his hands affectionately on her shoulders. "Positive. Now please. Your concern confuses me, and I don't want to forget anything."

She kissed him on the chin. "All right, dear, I don't want to be a nagging wife. How about one more cup of coffee before you go?"

He wanted to please her and he nodded, looking one more time into the room, then he walked with her to the kitchen, their hands clasped together. He smoked a cigarette while he sipped the hot coffee.

"Now you be a good girl," he winked at her.

She admonished him with a slender finger. "And you don't forget to send me a telegram the moment you land. Or better still you can call me on the telephone. Until I hear from you I'll worry myself sick."

"Now now," he said, patting her hand. "What could go wrong?"

She pouted and looked away from his unblinking eyes. A horn, signaling from outside, made him rattle the cup in its saucer. "That's the cab," he said, rising awkwardly. The horn sounded again. "Darn it!" he said, rushing toward the front door, "I told them to blow the horn only once." The horn had sounded a third time as he pulled

the door open and stepped out onto the front porch. "All right, all right—I'll be with you in a moment."

Emily had come up behind him now, and she handed him his jacket and his bag. Draping the jacket over his arm, he instinctively held the bag to his ear and Emily's eyes widened. "Why, dear, what's the matter?"

Lowering the bag, he smiled at her. "Nothing . . . nothing."

She had noticed his bare wrist and she said: "You forgot your wrist watch, wait a moment and I'll go get it for you."

"No, don't bother—I haven't got time."

"Don't be silly, dear, you can't go off without your watch."

"Look, I don't want it!"

She was startled. "I don't understand, dear, you never leave without your watch."

"Please, you said you didn't want to be a nagging wife—"

"I'm sorry."

He kissed her on the cheek. She drew her sweater tight around her body. Pouting, she said: "I don't see why I can't come with you to the airport."

With the bag gripped in a sweating palm, he tried to appear calm. "You know how I feel about scenes at airports. And please don't worry. Everything will be fine."

He kissed his wife once more, before she could reply and hastened into the street. He climbed into the cab, and through the window,

waved at the frail woman who stood forlornly on the porch, staring at him. "The airport," he ordered the driver, and settled back, removing his eyes from the memory that would haunt him from now until eleven-thirty. He leaned in one corner of the back seat and thought about his daughter. Should he have called her and said goodbye? Many times he had gone away on trips without calling her; no, he was right in leaving it as it was, for calling her would only provoke thought. It made no difference his not calling her, because for him it would be a memory short-lived; for her it would have been a seed of sadness that would grow with the years.

When the cab stopped for a traffic light, and only the faint hum of the engine could be heard, Doctor Geet listened intently for sounds from the bag. He was grateful that he could hear nothing, no ominous tick, but through the stiff, stippled leather the pulse of the bomb throbbed into his fingertips. During the ride, he showed no signs of anxiety or restlessness, even when, on several occasions, the cab was sucked into a mire of slow-moving traffic.

"Driver, what time is it?"

"Eight-thirty, buddy."

The plane was to leave sharply at 10:00 A.M. And somewhere, high up, over some unknown terrain, at precisely eleven-thirty, the bomb would explode. With each tick of

the clock, destiny was leading him by the hand toward eternity.

"Why don't you watch where you're driving, you lunkhead!" The cabbie's voice startled Doctor Geet and he looked up from his reverie. The cabbie had pushed his head through the window and was glaring at the driver of another car. "You want to kill somebody?"

Doctor Geet placed the satchel on the seat beside him and shoved his hand into his pocket in search for cigarettes. After a careful, double search through all his pockets, he conceded that he had left them at home. The cab pulled into the circular driveway in front of the air terminal. Doctor Geet waited patiently while the cabbie fumbled through his pockets for change, then tipping the cabbie fifty cents, he entered the waiting room.

Clusters of people, all shades and shapes, clothed in varieties of color, were scattered here and there throughout the huge room. Blurs of faces rushed past as Doctor Geet walked slowly toward the counter. Behind the clerk, on the wall, was the black slate with the horizontal and vertical chalk lines, an abstract composition with time as the theme. Down the vertical column, like a black shaft into a dark mine, Doctor Geet's gaze skipped until he saw the blazing number: Flight 1670. Departure 10:00 A.M. And alongside it, ironically, in straight, precise letters, the words: On Time.

Doctor Geet confirmed his flight.

The clerk smiled politely, although his eyes betrayed that his nerves were already frayed from answering and directing people. "Any luggage?"

"No," Doctor Geet said softly.

The clerk leaned over the counter and eyed the bag in Doctor Geet's hand. He gripped the bag tightly, suspicious of the clerk's inquiring eyes. "I'm permitted to keep this with me, aren't I? I'm a doctor."

"Of course," the clerk said and swung around to donate his attention to an impatient, naval officer. The officer was leaning against the counter as if he had just been shot. "What time does the plane arrive in New York?"

"About eight o'clock, sir," the clerk said.

"Is it non-stop?"

"Only a twenty-minute layover in Chicago," the clerk said.

The naval officer pushed himself away from the counter, nodded and strolled away. Doctor Geet, holding the handle of the satchel with both hands, turned from the counter and looked for the magazine stand. He purchased a package of cigarettes and asked for ten quarters in his change. Then he went to the insurance machine. As he filled out the insurance form, he faltered when a lady came up behind him. She was reproaching a small boy.

"Now, Tommy, you can't have any ice-cream, and that's final."

"Awww," the boy whined.

"Now you stop that this minute, do you hear, or I'll have that man put you into his black bag and take you away."

Doctor Geet's hand began to shake, and he had to scratch out his home address and re-write it. With his hands visibly trembling now, he pulled the paper from the machine and walked away. He turned momentarily to observe the woman insert a quarter into the machine. She looked up and smiled at him, tacitly thanking him for permitting her to use him as a prop to quiet her son. He smiled weakly back and sat on a bench, using the satchel as a desk as he addressed the envelope to his daughter. At the magazine stand he purchased postage stamps and posted the envelope in a letter box.

He paused in front of the coffee shop but instead he settled for a cigarette. He found a long, empty bench and sat down. How many times he had lighted a cigarette, smoked it briefly and extinguished its short life. He made up his mind that he would smoke this one down. He settled back on the bench, the cigarette gripped loosely in the center of his mouth, the satchel held firmly on his lap.

From the corner of his eye he noticed the olive drab uniform and the pink coat. He did not wish to turn his head to look. He stared straight ahead as the soldier and the girl claimed a section of the long bench.

"Will you write me?" she asked. "You know I will, baby."

"When will you get another leave?"

He was silent, blowing a cloud of smoke past Doctor Geet's face, then he said: "Maybe in a month."

Her voice sank with disappointment. "A month. Oh how could I live without you for a month."

"But I'll write," he said earnestly.

She lowered her voice, evidently aware of Doctor Geet's presence. "Do you love me?"

"You know that I do, baby."

"I love you," she said, making a fair exchange of words.

"Sure," he said.

"We had a lot of fun, didn't we?" she said.

He paused to puff on his cigarette. "I'll be out in a year—we'll really do it up then . . . won't we?"

"Have you got cigarettes?"

"Yeah."

"Do you need anything . . . magazines? Candy?"

"I'll read your last letter over and over until I get back to camp."

"You will write, don't forget."

"You know I will, baby."

Doctor Geet suddenly rose. Above the counter the large clock told him that it was nine-thirty. He was sorry now that he had risen from the bench because he was beginning to feel tired, and the bag was beginning to feel heavy. An impulse stormed into his head and he wanted to go somewhere, where he

could be alone, to open the satchel to see if everything was in order. But he shook off the impulse, walking slowly, the satchel a sudden ton in his hand, trying to enjoy the cigarette. Then another impulse as he passed a regiment of telephones—he thought about calling his daughter, or even Emily—or Miss Williams, to see if there were any calls. He revolved toward the phones, stared at each one for a moment, then shrugged and kept on walking.

He walked to the plate glass that overlooked the air field. The sky was a clear, blue canvas with three strokes of vapor trails high above him. The immediate field was empty, and the two runways, that intersected each other, stretched out beyond the scope of the eye. In the distance were several gray planes, three huge hangars and a long wooden barrier. The emptiness of the field made him feel that the airport was stepping aside for flight 1670.

"Hey, mister, what you got in that bag?"

He clutched the satchel, as a shiver shot up his back, and looked down. A small boy, with wild, blond hair, reached out to touch the satchel.

Pulling the satchel up to his chest, and taking a step backward, Doctor Geet shouted: "Don't touch that!"

A woman streaked into view. Under one arm, like a football, she

carried a screaming infant. The woman's face softened when she perceived the small boy by the doctor's side. "Jimmy," she shouted, "don't you go wandering off again—do you hear?"

With her free hand she grabbed the boy by the arm, almost lifting him off his feet, and without a word to Doctor Geet, dragged the boy off through the waiting room.

Doctor Geet could feel his heart pound. He was sure that anybody, within ten feet, could have seen it. His entire chest shook like an old engine about to stall. When he looked through the window again, he saw the huge airplane wheel slowly along the runway toward the terminal. A glance at the clock told him that it was almost fifteen minutes to ten.

A woman's voice crackled through a speaker above his head: *Flight 1670 loading at gate 40 for New York.*

The passengers began to fall in at gate 40. Like playing cards they shuffled themselves into line. As Doctor Geet walked unsteadily toward the line, his gaze was drawn to the people. In front of the line, proudly having established a strategic beachhead, were two marines; their pink faces had never experienced the touch of a razor. Behind them, apparently alone, a slim, sad-eyed blond, seeking comfort by drawing her white fox wrap tight over her shoulders. Four men, sinister-looking in trench coats, wear-

ing gabardine hats and clutching brief cases, were formed in a conversational square. An elderly couple, with their arms locked together, as if they were supporting each other. The ice cream boy and his haggard mother. The fullback with the football infant and the curious brat. The olive-drab soldier and his pink-coated girl friend; only she wasn't going. Doctor Geet wondered how strong their love was, and which one of them was the luckier; the one that went, or the one that remained. How many months from now would she despair over the accident, or how quickly would she forget it? The elderly couple was lucky. They were going together. If they only knew that he was leaving Emily behind, what would they think?

As he neared the line, the conversation became louder, clearer. "Try to sit a little in back of the wing."

"For the last time, Tommy, no! You can't have any."

"Won't Aunt Pauline be surprised. She never imagined that we would come."

"Now remember, don't let anyone shove you back, try to get a good seat."

"You know this is my first time—I'm scared."

"It's raining like hell in New York."

"Don't worry, dear, I've taken care of everything. We've got reservations to all of the shows."

"Bet a buck! I know I'll draw K.P. next weekend for sure, and I promised Helen that I would see her."

Doctor Geet fell in at the end of the line. The people had lost their faces as he stared down the line at the backs of their heads. He wished they would open the gate so he could get on the plane and sit down; the bag was beginning to feel heavy.

A hand on his shoulder almost caused him to drop the bag. Although the hand rested gently, he felt the imposing authority in the large fingers, and slowly, almost fearfully, he turned his head to regard the person.

The police officer released his hand and with an expression that disclosed nothing, said: "That satchel—you're the doctor, aren't you?"

"Doctor?"

"Yes," the officer said. "The clerk told me there was a doctor on this flight. Are you him?"

Doctor Geet's fingers curled stubbornly on the handle of the satchel. "Yes. What's . . . the trouble?"

"A lady fainted," the officer said. "Down near gate 11." The officer reached over for the satchel. "Here, let me carry it for you."

Doctor Geet backed into the person who stood in line before him, pulling the satchel hard against his chest. "No . . . no. . ."

The officer's head went back. He stared. "What's wrong?"

"I can't! My plane—"

The officer smiled. "Don't worry about the plane. This will only take a minute."

Reluctantly Doctor Geet followed the officer to gate 11. A small group of people were gathered there, and when they saw the officer and him, they parted generously. Doctor Geet knelt beside the woman, keeping the satchel close by his heels. He took her hand into his and began to rub it vigorously.

The officer's legs were slanted apart just in front of him. "Don't you have anything in the bag for her?"

"Huh?" he looked up. "No . . . nothing. She'll be all right—she'll be coming around."

The woman stirred and started to moan. Doctor Geet lifted her head and said to the officer: "You see. Get some water."

A voice over the speaker crackled urgently: *Will Doctor Geet report to gate 40. Will Doctor Geet report to gate 40.*

Doctor Geet straightened quickly and looked at the speaker. Looking at the curious faces that regarded him, he said: "That's me! She'll be all right! She's coming to. Tell the officer that I had to catch my plane."

He picked up his satchel and ran to the waiting airplane. The stewardess checked his name off the list as he climbed the stairway to the door. He hesitated a moment to regard the terminal, the sky, then he

entered the plane. He took the one empty seat, next to the sad-eyed blond, and rested the satchel on his lap. A few minutes later the propellers began to spin and as they gained momentum, the entire plane shook. At ten o'clock the plane raced down the runway and slipped into the sky.

When the passengers were instructed that they could unfasten their safety belts and could smoke, Doctor Geet relaxed and fished his cigarettes from his pocket. He offered one to the blond, but she shook her head.

"Chicago or New York?" he asked her.

"Pardon."

"I just asked whether you were going to Chicago or New York."

"Chicago," she said.

The plane left the clear, blue sky and climbed into a snowdrift of bright clouds. Doctor Geet finished his cigarette and settled his head back, closing his eyes. The hum and gentle rock of the plane lulled him into a semi-sleep. A couple of times the satchel almost fell. He blinked to keep his eyes open.

A commotion, down front, opened his eyes with a start. A wide-eyed stewardess hurried along the aisle, peering into everybody's face, then upon noticing him, came over breathlessly. "You're the doctor, aren't you?"

He frowned as he set the bag on the floor and pushed it beneath the seat with his heel. "Yes?"

The stewardess smiled apologetically. "Would you mind? A woman up front is having labor pains—she needs attention—"

The voice droned onward as he closed his eyes and swallowed. What outrageous irony is this, he thought, why should something like this have to happen now? As he opened his eyes again, he looked up at the stewardess.

"Please come, Doctor," the stewardess said, "the woman's whimpering is upsetting the other passengers."

"What time is it?" he asked dryly.

The stewardess squinted at the small wrist watch. "It's a little after eleven."

Reluctantly he rose and followed the stewardess down the aisle. As he looked at the woman twisting in the chair, he raked his lower lip with his teeth. The co-pilot came up behind him. "Are you the doctor?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is she going to have the baby?"

"I don't know yet," Doctor Geet said.

"Can you do something for her?"

"I'll try," Doctor Geet said. He bent over the woman and whispered. "How do you feel?"

She opened her eyes to look at him. "It hurts." She sucked air noisily through her teeth. "It hurts."

"I'll do what I can," he said, hoping to comfort her. "Are these your first pains?"

She nodded. He took her wrist,

aware that there was a circle of eyes behind him embracing every move.

"When were you expecting?" he then asked, placing his palm on her forehead.

Her lips were white where her teeth had pressed. "Two weeks from now," she moaned.

Doctor Geet felt uncomfortably warm. The perspiration itched beneath his collar. The plane must not turn back, nor must it land. He had to make a decision.

The words spoken by the stewardess chilled him. "I'll get your bag."

He spun around. "No!"

The co-pilot was stunned and he exchanged glances with the stewardess. Doctor Geet tugged a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed his forehead with it. "I don't have anything in my bag that will help her," he said. "Do you have a first aid kit?"

The co-pilot stared at him. "Yes."

"Get it. I can give her some morphine to quiet her."

After he administered the morphine and the woman's whimpering had ceased, Doctor Geet returned to his seat. He sat there staring hypnotically ahead. The thought of a baby to be born disturbed him. His right hand felt his wrist and he remembered that he had left his watch at home.

"Do you have the time?" he asked the blond.

Her slender fingers surrounded the jeweled watch on her wrist.

"It's eleven twenty," she said.

A cold sweat broke out over his body. He was immediately sorry that he had asked her the time. He swore to himself that he would not ask her the time again. The sunlight caught the silver wings and danced off to flash into his eyes. He removed his gaze from the window and stared down the darkened aisle. The blond's body, stirring in the seat beside him invited his stare. She had fallen asleep, her head hanging loosely in the fur of her wrap, her left arm dangling pleasantly near his thigh. The dial of her watch was caught in a dust-filled ray of light. It was twenty-eight minutes past eleven o'clock.

Emily Geet, feeling a wife's kind of loneliness when her husband is gone, moved around the house rest-

lessly, dusting. The fact that the house was already immaculate did not disturb her. She had to do something; anything that would clear her mind from thinking. Doctor Geet's absence disturbed her. Pushing the door to his study open, she entered, touching the surrounding furniture lightly with the feathers of the duster. At the waste paper basket she allowed her eyes to lower and puzzle at the pieces of charred paper that lay there. The feathers shook across the desk top until they touched the black bag. Fondly she placed both of her hands on the bag and reminisced. A sudden curiosity prompted her fingers to press open the catch and lay the bag open.

The clock that was strapped there startled her. It's hands were just touching eleven-thirty.



GUN LOVER

BY CHARLES CARPENTIER

He put the gun on the ground, as far away from them as he could reach. "Don't try anything," he said. "If you do, I'll fix the kid." He pulled her close. "Now, just do what you're supposed to."



THE GAS STATION man took her five dollars and went inside to get change. He didn't come out again.

Standing on the back seat, Pamey said, "I'm hot, mommie."

"It won't be long, honey," she told the child. "Mommie's finished shopping and we're going home now."

Another man came out of the gas station, a young dark-haired man wearing a black leather jacket. He came up to the passenger side of the car and leaned on the window

opening. "How much dough'd you give that guy, lady?"

"A five dollar bill," she said.

He peeled a bill from a wad of money he was holding and handed it to her. "Gas is on the house today," he said.

She looked at the bill. "I don't understand."

"Compliments of the guy inside. He filled the tank, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I don't see what it's all about. Is this a prize or something?"

He opened the door and got in beside her. "It's a *surprise*, lady. You've just won yourself a little trip across the border. Nogales."

"Now just a minute," she said. And stopped when she saw the gun he'd slipped out of his jacket pocket. He held it down on the seat, pointing up at her.

"Drive normal and head toward Tucson," he told her.

She rolled the car slowly out onto the road.

The jail was only three or four doors away from the gas station. She hoped Bill or his assistant Hank Crane would notice her driving by. They'd know right away something was wrong.

But there didn't seem to be anyone around the place.

After all the little one-story buildings had gone by, there was a Chamber of Commerce sign that needed repainting:

Leaving
TAPIA CITY
Arizona's Fastest-Growing

Community

Population 1965 Elevation 2480 ft.

HURRY BACK!

"Dump's got more feet high than it's got people," the man said.

"My name's Pamey, what's yours?"

He turned quickly, starting to bring the gun up.

Pamey had her chin resting on the back of the front seat.

He relaxed almost as quickly as he'd jumped. "My friends call me Ray," he said.

He glanced over Pamey's head through the rear window. "Kick it up to seventy," he said. He watched the dial while the needle climbed.

"Your kid?" he asked.

She nodded.

He looked back at Pamey again. "Too bad."

"What's too bad?"

"Her being here," he said. "She's old enough to remember—and talk."

"She's only four."

"You know where Nogales is, kid?" he asked sharply. "You know *what* it is?"

Pamey slid back onto the seat. She put her thumb in her mouth and shook her head solemnly.

"She better not know," he said.

The tires were singing in the hot asphalt and the low mountains beyond Tucson shimmered in the hazy distance.

She wanted to find out what he

was going to do. "I'm old enough," she said.

He let his gaze wander slowly and insolently all the way down from her face to her legs under the dash board. "What's *your* name?"

"Linda." She tried not to show how self-conscious he was making her feel.

"You don't have to tell me, baby," he said. "I know you're old enough."

"You robbed him, didn't you?" she said.

"Who?"

"Stan. The man who runs the gas station."

"Had to, baby," he said. He kept one hand on the gun while he shook cigarettes out of a package and gave her one.

Her grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Did you—kill him?"

"Naw. I just tapped him a little. He'll be all right. Why? He mean something to you?"

"No. Except that I live here. And everybody knows everybody in a small town like that."

Still using only one hand, he flipped a book of matches open, bent one over and scratched it aflame with his thumb. He lit his own cigarette. Then he lit hers.

"I'm gonna need the dough down in Nogales," he said. "That stupid cop back there lifted everything off me. This is his gun I've got."

She bit her lip. She was thinking

of Tapia City and all the things that had happened to her there. It was the only place in the world where she'd known love. And out of that love had come more love. She glanced over her shoulder.

Pamey had fallen asleep on the back seat, her thumb still in her mouth and her toy bear, the one that used to play 'Rock-a-Bye Baby' clutched close to her. Linda remembered she hadn't had her afternoon nap.

"Which cop?" Linda asked, watching the road again.

"There were only two cops in the whole town, the way I figure it," he said. "A chief and one indian, a guy named Hank. The chief was the cluck I got the gun off of. He sent the indian out somewhere. That left just me and him."

"Bill Delano."

Ray laughed. "That's the guy. Delano. What a rube. Lifted this gun off him easy as lifting small change off a snoozing begger."

She took a breath. "What about him? Delano, I mean. Did you kill *him*?"

"Had to, baby," he said. "How do you think I got to keep the gun?"

She didn't say anything.

"Hell, I didn't want to," he told her. "See, this guy Delano had one of those 'Wanted' posters the cops put out. Had a couple of my pictures on it and everything. They want me because of that dumb-cluck bank dick in Lubbock. I did-

n't get a dime out of the bank. Had to blow the job when this idiot decided to be a hero. Well, he's a-hero all right, I guess, but he ain't the walking-around type hero. Anyway, I hopped off a freight back there in Tapia City this morning. Looked like a nice quiet place to lay low for a while. But this Delano guy spotted me and picked me up before I even got out of the rail yards." Ray flipped his cigarette out the window. "All because of that dumb-cluck bank dick, they could give me the chair. So you see, I had to bust out of that dump back there. And killing that guy Delano . . . ? Hell, what's the difference? They don't boost the juice on you any for knocking off more than one guy, you know."

She still didn't say anything.

"Why? Is this Delano guy somebody real big back there?"

"No. It's like I told you," she said. "Everybody knows everybody."

"They'll be looking for us down this way," he said, after they'd driven around Tucson. "And they'll be waiting for us at the border. So we'll hole up until they figure we've headed in some other direction. Turn off on the next dirt road you come to."

They had stopped at a small Mexican grocery store on a quiet crossroads outside of Tucson. Ray had her stop the car where he could watch her from inside the store. "Be smart and don't try anything,"

he said. He took the car keys with him.

When he came back he had a bag full of groceries and a couple of blankets. "Got some milk for the kid, too," he said.

The road off the highway came to a dead-end at an abandoned mine.

Ray passed out some of the food from the grocery bag and saw to it that Pamey drank her milk. He held the gun in one hand all the time.

"I don't like you," Pamey said, drinking her milk obediently. "You talk mean to me. About no-something." She was trying to say Nogales.

"She'll forget all about it by tomorrow," Linda said quickly.

"Tell the kid to go for a walk or something."

"I can't do that. It's getting dark."

"Well, do something with her."

Linda went over to him and stood very close to him so he'd feel the promise of her words. "What's the hurry?" she said. "After all, we've got all night."

Ray slipped an arm around her waist, pulled her roughly against himself, and smashed his mouth down on hers.

"What are you doing to my mommie?" Pamey started pulling on his leg. "You leave my mommie alone!"

"I'm only kissing her," Ray said. Then he said to Linda, "Get rid of her. I don't care what you do with

her, but get rid of her. I don't like having an audience around."

Linda picked Pamey up. "I'll see if I can get her to go to sleep on the back seat again."

"I don't want to go to sleep," Pamey said.

"You do what your mother tells you to do. And be quick about it."

Pamey put her thumb in her mouth. "Okay," she said.

"Is that thing growing out of your hand?" Linda asked.

He bounced the gun gently in his hand. "It's beginning to feel like it," he said. "It's just to remind you not to try anything."

"I just don't happen to like doing this sort of thing with a gun stuck against me. After all, it's not the most romantic thing in the world."

He put the gun on the ground, as far away from them as he could reach. "Don't try anything," he said. "If you do, I'll fix the kid. Remember that and just do what you're supposed to do."

Afterwards, he said, "You had a thing going back there with this guy Delano, didn't you baby? I could tell by the way you acted when I told you I had to knock him off. Well, forget it, baby. You've got yourself a new boy now." He reached over and picked up the gun again. "You got any complaints?"

"No."

"You liked it, didn't you?"

"I liked it fine," she said.

He got up. "That's the way I thought you were playing it," he said. "That's the smart way. Till some guy knocks me off, I'm your boy. Right?"

"Yes."

He picked up one of the blankets.

"Where are you going?"

"Over there someplace," he said. "Over by the mine. And remember. You'll never know when I'm asleep or awake."

It was already hot again. The sun softened the surface of the road and the car was swaying gently.

"From here on," Ray said, "we don't try breaking any speed records. And we gotta stay off the main highway as much as possible." He pointed with the barrel of the gun to a thin black line on the old road map he'd found in the glove compartment. "We'll take this road. Map says it's paved. Goes through a place called Apache Wells. Dump's gotta have at least one motel. We'll lay up there for maybe a couple of days and see how things go after that." He folded the map and put it back in the glove compartment. "It's State Route 16. Goes off at a town called Dry River, about twenty, twenty-five miles from here."

On the back seat, Pamey was singing a song to herself about Chicken Little.

"Kid needs singing lessons," Ray said. "Well, what about it? Is it

smart?—my idea about laying up in Apache Wells?"

"It's a fine idea," Linda said. "It'd be nice in a motel—with you."

"That's what I like to hear, baby. That means you really meant it last night."

They were coming up over a low rise just outside Dry River when they saw the roadblock. There were two police cars angled across the highway, one on each side.

"Turn around," Ray ordered. He looked back. "Christ!"

There was another police car behind them.

"Highway Patrol," Ray said. "Those guys behind us must have just come off some side road, looking for us." He stuck the gun in his belt under the leather jacket. "Okay," he said. "We'll play it cool."

Linda slowed the car. "Don't be a fool," she said. "That's what all this is for. You'll never talk your way through. You've got to make a break for it. I'll keep them busy."

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Stop the car. I'll run for it." He opened the door. "See you in Apache Wells."

"See you," she said.

In the rear-view mirror she watched the patrol car stop behind them. The doors flew open and two uniforms leaped out. They fired their revolvers into the air. The shots reverberated across the thin atmosphere of the high desert.

Ray was running fast for a tree-filled canyon off the road. He spun

around. He fired twice and ran again. The last she saw of him, he was disappearing into the canyon.

She slammed the car into gear. "Sit back on the seat, honey, and hang on," she said to Pamey.

She gunned the car wide open. The uniforms at the roadblock fell all over themselves trying to get out of the way. She swerved around one of the blocking cars, running off onto the shoulder of the road.

But she couldn't keep the car under control. The steering wheel snapped out of her hands and the car smashed into the embankment at the far side of the road.

"Let him make it," she said aloud to herself. "Please let him make it."

Then she looked back at Pamey. Pamey was still watching out the back window. "Bang, bang," she said, laughing. "Bang, bang, bang!"

"I just want to go home. That's all," she said.

"You're sure you're all right, lady?"

"Yes."

"He didn't—bother you?"

"No. I'm fine."

"There's just one thing I don't understand," the man said. "You knew he'd jumped out of the car?"

"Yes."

"Then why'd you try running the roadblock? You sure caused a lot of trouble. He might not have got away if it hadn't been for that."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't

know. I was nervous, I guess. I didn't know what I was doing."

"You're lucky you didn't kill yourself. And the little girl. Your car's beat up a bit. It's okay, though. I had one of the boys check it over."

"Thank you. Can I go home now?"

"It's a pretty long drive home for you, lady. We'd be mighty happy to put you up here in Dry River and you could get a fresh start back tomorrow."

"No. Thanks, but I'd rather go home now."

"When we get him, we'll have to have a statement from you. We can call you in Tapia City?"

"That'll be fine. Any time."

Only she didn't go home.

She turned off on State Route 16.

She was giving Pamey some of the food left in the grocery bag.

"I want some milk," Pamey said.

"Honey, mommie forgot to stop and get you some. And it's too late now. The stores are closed."

"He didn't forget my milk," Pamey said.

There was a soft tapping on the door. Linda went over to it. "Yes?"

"It's me. Open up."

He came in out of the darkness with the gun in his hand. He locked the door behind him.

"You made it," she said. "I'm glad you made it."

"Hell, it was easy," he said. "Swiped a car right out from under

them while they were running all over the countryside looking for me." He pulled her up against him. "You sure kept 'em busy all right. But the thing that gets me, baby, is you being here. Guess that means you really go for me, huh?" He kissed her savagely.

"Don't you hurt my mommie." Pamey pulled on his leg. "Are you kissing my mommie?"

"Yeah, but that ain't all I'm gonna do," he said. "Do something to get rid of the kid while I have a quick bite out of the bag."

"I'll see if she'll sleep out in the car again."

He still had the gun in his hand.

Linda said, "I'm never going to learn to like doing this with a gun stuck in my ribs."

He laughed. "Guess it's just getting to be a habit." He put the gun down on the little table beside the bed. "After what you did today, I won't be needing it around you any more." He lay back on the bed. "Around you I need something else, so hurry it up, will you?"

"Sure. Just let me get my things off."

She leaned over him to kiss him. He pulled her down, crushing her against him. When he came up for air, he said, "Hurry."

"Sure," she said, getting up. "Only now there's no need to hurry."

She had the gun in her hand, backing away from the bed.

"What the hell!" he said, sitting up.

"Now look who's got a gun."

"Baby, I don't get it. Last night I thought . . ."

"Last night was the worst night I ever spent in my life."

"Yeah, but what about today? You helped me get through those guys. You were waiting for me."

She was back against the wall with the gun leveled steadily at him. "I didn't want them to get you. I wanted to save you—"

"Baby, if you want out, okay. We'll deal it any way you want it."

"—just till I could get hold of this. I couldn't reach it last night. That's why last night happened."

He started up out of the bed.

"Stay there, she said. 'It'll be easier all the way around.'"

He slumped back. "Baby, I don't

get you. I don't get you at all. Unless. . . ." He sat up again. "That guy Delano. That's the hitch, isn't it? You *did* have a thing going with him, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes. I had a—*thing* going with him. But not the kind of thing you're always thinking of."

"Then . . ."

"That's right."

"Your old man!"

"That's right. It's a thing they call marriage. That's why I didn't want them to get you. I just wanted you to know about it before . . ."

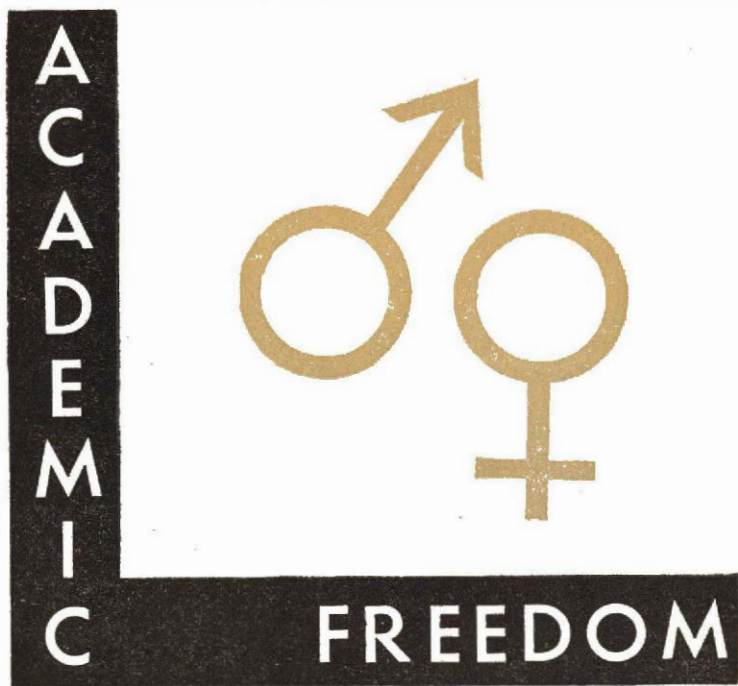
The gun was like thunder in the tiny room.

He slammed back against the headboard. He groaned, twisted, and then lay still.

She threw the gun on the bed and went out to the car.



Professor Aaron Warner was president of his university. A relatively young man, and distinctively handsome, he was subjected to some rather unique forms of temptation.



BY GLENN CANARY

THE LETTER lay on his desk, unfolded, and anyone who came in could see it there, but there was no reason for him to worry about that. No one would come in; Miss McIntire would see to that. And it was so cryptic that no one could understand it anyway. Even Miss McIntire wouldn't understand it. She was graying and very thin and

she was obviously devoted to him, so devoted that he was considering a replacement for her. As president of the university he wanted a secretary who was crisp and demanding, who would keep him aware constantly of the things he had to do, but Miss McIntire tiptoed. The letter wouldn't shock her, but it shocked him.

The letter said, "Miss E.D. has a problem. I think it would be mutually beneficial for us to discuss it." It was not signed.

Aaron Warner knew the letter was a blackmail threat, but he did not think anyone else would know just from reading it.

He picked up the letter and re-read it. It worried him, but not even Miss McIntire who saw him every day would have been able to tell that it did. He was a handsome man, tall, just a trace of grey at his temples. Anyone would have said that he looked distinguished. And he was perfectly calm. If anything, he appeared to be mildly amused by some secret thought, and his well-manicured hands were steady.

He folded the letter and put it into his coat pocket. Then he swung around in his chair and looked out the window at the campus. It was early November, his favorite time of the year. The sky was clear, bright, and the sunlight was sharply yellow, but the air was cold and everything had a brittle, unreal look.

Miss McIntire knocked on the door before she opened it and when he turned to look at her, she said, "Professor Martin is here to see you."

"Tell him that I am sorry," he said, "but I am expecting a visitor."

"He said his business was urgent."

He hesitated, but there was no way that an efficient university

president could refuse an appeal like that. "All right," he said. "Have him come in." He shuffled the papers on his desk. He knew Professor Martin as a shaggy, pedantic man, and he thought that the urgent business was probably a janitor who was neglecting his duty. Then he looked up and smiled.

"Professor Martin," he said. "It's nice to see you."

They shook hands and the professor took a chair by the desk.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Aaron Warner said. "Miss McIntire said it was urgent."

"It is. Quite."

"I'm sorry that we won't have more time together, but I *am* expecting a visitor at any moment."

"Your visitor has arrived."

"What?"

"I am the visitor you were expecting."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You received a letter from me. And yesterday I telephoned you and said I would be here at three o'clock."

"It was you."

"Yes, Doctor Warner." The professor took a large pipe from his breast pocket and struck a match to it. "It was I."

Aaron Warner said, "Then perhaps you can explain this nonsense to me."

"It is not nonsense, Doctor. I simply wish to be appointed head of the English department." The

match went out and he struck another and held it to his pipe.

"What has your letter to do with that?"

"I think you know. A man as young as you are could hardly have become head of this university and not be intelligent. Therefore, I have to conclude that you do know why I wrote the letter. I'm not surprised, however, that you pretend not to."

"Blackmail?"

"Precisely."

"I can go to the police."

"Why should you? I only want to make sure that I get a job that should be mine anyway, but which, I suspect, you were planning to give to someone else."

"I was."

"I thought so. But all I want is that job." He puffed his pipe into life. "And five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars?"

"Yes. I hate to ask for the money, too, but you may know that my wife has been ill for some time. She is better now, but our financial condition is rather precarious. I think five thousand dollars would set me up quite nicely, considering the raise in salary as head of the department."

"No."

"I think so."

"You have no hold on me."

"Haven't I?"

Warner turned around in his chair again and looked out at the campus. "Just what is it you think

you know that would be worth so much?"

"I know about a girl named Elaine Darma. Isn't that an odd name, by the way?"

"What do you think you know about her?"

"I know that you and she have been having . . . I believe it should be termed a love affair."

Warner spun around to face the professor and he was smiling. "That's ridiculous," he said.

"You have been to a motel with her on at least three different occasions."

"How would you know that?"

"Since I decided to become a blackmailer, I entered into it in a thoroughly efficient manner. I've been following you every evening for the past month."

"All right," Warner said.

"Understand," the professor said, "I do not object on moral grounds. Frankly, I do not object at all. You are unmarried and Miss Darma is . . . well, let us say she is a fully matured young lady. However, she is one of your students and she is only nineteen. I looked up her age in the registrar's records. And you are forty-four years old."

"Forty-three."

"If you prefer. Still, hardly a suitable age for a nineteen year old girl."

"No?"

"No. At least, not under the circumstances. I hardly think the board of directors will applaud.

"I can deny it."

"Yes, except that if you do, I will resign my post here and release a statement to the press that I cannot continue to work under a man who would victimize one of his students in such a way."

"Victimize?"

"I understand. I also know Miss Darma, but I do think it would be the best word to give to the press."

"I can still deny it."

"Yes, but the press will have out with the truth in such cases, won't they? And you did register at three different motels, the names of which I can furnish, and you are a rather striking looking couple. I believe the desk clerks will remember you."

"All right," Aaron Warner said. "You win."

"I thought I would."

"I will appoint you head of the English department."

"And don't forget the money."

"You'll get it."

"Tonight, please."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. I need it."

"All right," Aaron Warner said. "Where shall I bring it?"

They decided on a place and Professor Martin thanked him and congratulated him on his wisdom and then Aaron Warner watched him leave, but he didn't get up from his desk. After the professor was gone, Warner buzzed for Miss McIntire. "I will be out the rest of the afternoon," he said.

He snapped off the intercom and gathered up some papers which he put into his briefcase. He always took papers home with him and if he didn't it would be unusual and he didn't want anything unusual to happen.

When he passed Miss McIntire's desk in the outer office, she said, "Doctor Warner?"

He stopped. "Yes?"

She looked at him for a few seconds and he waited, but she blushed and dropped her eyes. "Nothing," she said. "It wasn't important. I'll talk to you about it tomorrow."

He nodded and went out.

He drove to Miss Elaine Darma's apartment. He rang the bell and she opened the door. She was wearing a paint-spattered smock, but her legs were bare.

"Hello," she said, accenting heavily on the last syllable.

"Are you working?"

"I'm doing a self portrait. Nude."

She laughed at him and he laughed too and took her into his arms.

When he left his office, he hadn't intended to go to Miss Darma, but then he hadn't intended to have anything at all to do with Miss Darma. Or with Miss Lippi, who came before Miss Darma. Or with Miss Evans, who was before Miss Lippi. Or with any of the others. They simply just happened. He was a young man, a handsome man, and university professors and presidents especially are subjected

to some rather unique forms of temptation. Once he thought that a casting director might be faced with the same thing, but then he decided that it wasn't similar after all. Actresses want something. The girls he had known didn't want anything. At least, nothing material. History is full of women who loved men for their intellects. That's the way it was with him. He didn't ask for their attention, but a man is a fool to turn down the proffered charms of beautiful women. What else is life for?

He was only an instructor the first time it happened. He was teaching sociology to a freshman class. He was twenty-four at the time.

Well, he was only forty-three now. He had become president of the university because he deserved it and if he thought it was his due that some of his more beautiful students should be attracted to his intellect, he was charmingly modest about most other things.

And he had reflected more than once that he gave far more than he took. He had not hurt a single young woman and in every case he had returned them to the world improved. When they came to him, they thought they were worldly, poised women. When they left him, they were.

Miss Darma wanted to prepare dinner for him, but he left her to her painting and went to his own apartment. He ate a leisurely din-

ner that he prepared himself. Sometimes he thought that it would be pleasant to have a housekeeper, but she would have been in the way too much of the time.

Professor Martin was waiting for him at ten o'clock that evening. He was sitting on a bench in back of the library and he was smoking his pipe.

"Good evening, doctor," he said to Warner.

"Good evening."

"Did you bring the money?"

"Yes."

"May I have it?"

"One thing first."

"What is that?"

"Have you told your wife what you are doing?"

The professor laughed. "Good heavens, no," he said. "She would be horrified."

Dr. Aaron Warner shot Professor Victor Martin just above the briefcase the professor had brought to take home the money. He used a gun which he had taken from a dead English soldier during the war. It was a small pistol, non-regulation, and the report was not very loud, only a sharp crack, but the slug hit the professor just below the heart and he only had time to say, "I only . . ." before he died.

Dr. Warner threw the pistol into the river that ran back of the football stadium. Then he went home and drank a small glass of whiskey before going to bed. He slept well.

When he entered his office in the

morning, two men were waiting for him. Because he had expected them, he just nodded Miss McIntire into silence when she said they were detectives. He took them into his office.

"I read the news in the paper this morning," he said. "It was a horrible thing."

"Do you know of any enemies Professor Martin may have had?"

"None whatever. Professor Martin was a beloved and respected teacher. I don't know of anyone who would wish him the slightest harm. I can't even conceive of it."

They tried to question him further, but there was nothing more to ask. No one had a motive for murdering Professor Martin and there were no fingerprints on the bench and no footprints on the ground there and no one had heard the shot or seen anyone. Warner could see that it was all very frustrating for the detectives. The best they could do would be to find the gun, and that couldn't be traced to him. Besides, the river was deep and the bottom was mud. They weren't likely to find the gun anyway.

He talked to them for nearly an hour, but when they left he knew the case would not be solved. It was motiveless and therefore the police had no starting point. They could do nothing but assume that the crime was senseless, the work of a maniac of some kind. Their only chance would come when the

maniac killed again. Under the influence of the full moon, Aaron Warner thought.

But, of course, Aaron Warner had no intention of killing anyone else. He was sorry that he had had to kill the professor, and he would not have if he could have been sure that paying the professor would have been the end of it. But it is axiomatic that blackmailers never stop and he could not have stood living that way, always afraid that he would be exposed to the eyes of a public that would not have understood how he felt about the young women.

He went to the window and looked out at the campus. The sky was clear, a beautiful, cold November day. He watched the students crossing the campus and he thought there was nothing more beautiful than young women at that stage of life.

The ones who came to him were attracted to him and they were often grateful to him for the life he introduced them to, but they never knew how grateful he was to them.

They had an enthusiasm for everything, a freshness of mind and a firmness of body, and by the time they reached twenty-five they had lost both of them. But at the school here, they never reached twenty five. They always stayed breathlessly twenty with the November wind turning their legs rough pink and blowing their hair.

The door to his office opened and Miss McIntire came in. He turned to look at her and she said, "Wasn't it a sad thing about Professor Martin?"

She interrupted his thoughts and when he looked at her, he could not help comparing her to the others. "It was a tragedy," he said.

"May I talk to you?" she said.

"Of course."

He offered her a chair.

"As you know," she said when she was seated, "I have **never** married."

"Yes, I know."

"Well," she said, but had difficulty going on. She was embarrassed. "Now I am going to get married."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. I am going to marry you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

He laughed. "Well, you flatter me, Miss McIntire, but I'm afraid that I am a confirmed bachelor."

"I was listening yesterday when Professor Martin was here."

"Listening?"

"Yes." She blushed again. "That dirty old man."

"I don't understand."

"I heard what he said about you and that girl."

"I see." His skin felt as if it were drawn tight across his face.

"I don't believe a word of it, of course, but it would be better if we were married." She looked up at him defiantly.

"You know how I have admired you," she said, speaking quickly, flushing darkly under her yellowed skin. "And I think that is the proper basis for a marriage. Intellectual admiration."

"Yes. I suppose it is."

"So I think that since I know about the girl and your appointment to meet Professor Martin last night, it would be best for us to marry quickly."

"Do you?"

"I only want a man whose intellect I can admire, whose interests I can share." She looked down at the floor. "That's why I used to listen at your door. It hurt me to be shut out of your life."

"Are you blackmailing me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Just so we understand each other."

"I think we do." She blushed again, but she met his eyes and held his gaze.

"It *was* a tragedy about Professor Martin," he said.

"Yes," she said, "but he brought it on himself by not being fully prepared."

"And you are fully prepared?"

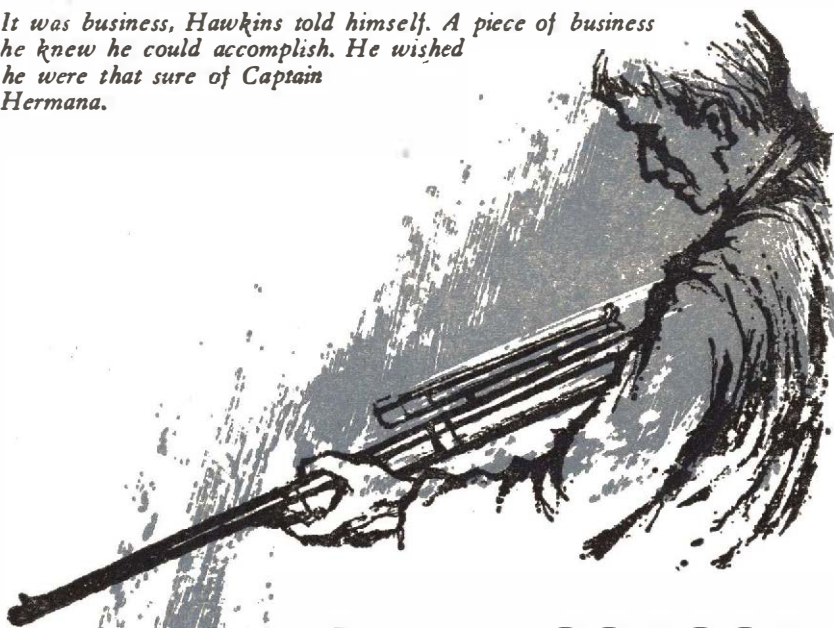
"Yes. I wrote out in full everything I heard . . ."

"That's not original."

"No, but effective." She smiled then. "You won't be sorry. I can be a good wife to you."

There was something in her eyes that made him shudder.

It was business, Hawkins told himself. A piece of business he knew he could accomplish. He wished he were that sure of Captain Hermana.



THE ASSASSIN

BY PETER MARKS

HAWKINS moved across the Plaza Grande, the sun warm on his back, feeling the muggy heat that rose, shimmering, from the freshly-hosed cobblestones, and in his pocket he could feel the bullets jiggling and clinking among his change. He pushed his way past the huge statue of the Generalissimo, past the fresh wreaths of flowers

that lined its base, walking steadily now toward the steps of the hotel. He made his way up the steps slowly, a trickle of sweat already beginning to run down his face, wetting the thin grey stubble of his beard. He was about to enter the lobby when something caught his attention and, looking at it out of the corner of his eye, he saw the jeep

parked alongside the whitewashed wall of the hotel. The sunlight was dancing on the barrel of a sub-machine gun held by the soldier sitting in the jeep. As he hesitated, half-in, half-out of the lobby, the soldier looked up at him and smiled.

Hawkins checked the time; it was twelve thirty. He had three and a half hours.

He started to cross the lobby of the hotel, started to walk toward the bank of elevators, and then changed his mind. It would be better to take the stairway, better not to get into a conversation with the elevator boy. He did not want to be observed by anyone just now.

There was no one on the stairs, no one in the hallway on the second floor. Hawkins took the key from his pocket, his hand brushing against the bullets there as he searched for it, and checked the room number stamped on the key. It had not changed since the last time he looked at it. He turned the key in the door and walked into the room. For an instant he was startled by his own image, reflecting in the huge mirror that covered the opposite wall. He locked the door behind him and took a long look at himself, at his thin grey beard, his sweat stained hat, the ill-fitting dirty white suit. You look like a man just out of jail, he thought, just out of jail and headed right back to it.

He crossed over to the wall that

looked out on the Plaza and threw open the French doors. On the far side of the Plaza he could see the workmen, draping the bright bunting on the wooden platform that had been erected that morning. You can see it all right, he thought. There will be no trouble seeing anyone who stands on that platform. He stepped out onto the balcony for a moment, looking particularly at the low concrete wall that enclosed it. Stooping down, he looked through one of the drain holes in the low wall. Just above the speaker's stand on the platform he could see the large glass globe Captain Hermana had told him about, the one that was painted with the symbol of the regime: a bright golden eagle holding a snake in its mouth. It's an easy shot, he said to himself, there will be no trouble hitting that globe with the first shot. Satisfied, he stood up and checked the direction of the wind by the flags that hung all about the square, then closed the large doors after him as he went back into the room.

The heavy, blood-red carpet seemed to suck at his shoes as he moved across the room to the small table. He sat on the bed and took the bullets from his pocket and stood them up on end on the table. It was then that he noticed the picture of the Generalissimo hanging just over the bed. He laughed, a short bitter grunt of a laugh that was quickly gobbled up

by the thick carpet. "Don't be afraid, Generale," he said softly, "you will not die today." He placed his hat on top of the table radio, turned the radio on and lay back on the bed.

WE ARE SPEAKING TO YOU FROM THE MOTORCADE OF THE GENERALISSIMO AS IT MOVES ALONG THE CALLE JUAREZ ON THIS, THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GOLDEN RULE OF OUR BELOVED LEADER. REJOICE, CITIZENS, AS WE CELEBRATE TWENTY YEARS OF ENLIGHTENMENT, TWENTY YEARS OF PROGRESS! ON THIS FESTIVE DAY, THE GENERALISSIMO WILL VISIT MANY OF THE GREAT MONUMENTS THAT HAVE BEEN ERECTED FOR THE GREATER GOOD OF THE PEOPLE UNDER HIS EXCELLENCY'S GUIDING GENIUS. THE GENERALISSIMO WILL VISIT THE HOSPITAL FOR UNWED MOTHERS AT ONE O'CLOCK. AT TWO O'CLOCK, HIS EXCELLENCY WILL BE AT THE MUSEO NACIONAL. AT THREE THIRTY, HE WILL DISTRIBUTE BASKETS OF FLOWERS TO THE CHILDREN OF THE NATIONAL HOME FOR ORPHANS AT SANTA MARINA. AT FOUR O'CLOCK, THE GENERALIS-

SIMO WILL SPEAK AT THE RE-DEDICATION CEREMONIES TO BE HELD IN THE PLAZA GRANDE. LET US MAKE THIS THE GREATEST ANNIVERSARY IN THE HISTORY OF HIS GOLDEN RULE! LONG LIVE THE GENERALISSIMO! LONG LIVE THE PROTECTOR OF THE PEOPLE!

Oh, you are a protector all right, thought Hawkins. Brother, you are some protector. You and your Captain Hermana, you can protect up a storm. How many men are there in the security police? Five hundred? A thousand? That's some protection, eh Generale? He stared up at the picture that hung just over his head. Generalissimo, he thought, we've got a lot in common today. You are riding all around this damned country and I am waiting up here in this room but we still have a lot in common today. Let's hope we can trust that Captain Hermana of yours.

Hawkins pushed himself off the bed and walked to the closet. He opened the door and took the long, slim package down off the shelf. Bringing it back to the bed, he put it down and untied the heavy twine and spread the brown paper out flat. The rifle was a beauty.

He slipped the stock carefully into the barrel assembly and then, gently, he hefted it and felt its weight. He put it back down on

the brown paper and began attaching the telescopic sight. He stopped suddenly and, acting on the thought, placed one of the bullets in the chamber. It was the right calibre, all right, no problem there. He unloaded the rifle, re-wrapped it in the paper, and placed it under the bed. Now that he was here, now that he was ready to do the thing, he found that he was no longer afraid. It was business, he told himself. A piece of business he knew he would be able to accomplish. Hitting that glass globe across the Plaza was a sure thing. He wished he were that sure of Captain Hermana. Wondering about him, thinking of Captain Hermana and what he had to do, he sat back down on the bed. He did not like to think about the Captain.

... IS NOW AT THE HOSPITAL FOR UNWED MOTHERS. CITIZENS, I WISH YOU COULD SEE HOW HE IS BEING GREETED HERE. I WISH YOU COULD SEE THE TEARS OF LOVE AND AFFECTION ON THE CHEEKS OF THESE BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMEN. HOW THEY LOVE OUR GLORIOUS PROTECTOR! ONE OF THE YOUNG WOMEN HAS TAKEN HIS ARM. SHE IS KISSING HIM ON THE HAND. OH, CITIZENS, HAS THERE EVER BEEN A MAN AS DEMO-

CRATIC AS OUR DEAR LEADER? LET US MAKE SURE WE TELL HIM HOW MUCH WE LOVE HIM, TODAY. LET US ALL GREET HIM AT THE PLAZA GRANDE WHEN WE REDEDICATE THE REGIME. FOUR O'CLOCK AT THE PLAZA GRANDE. WILL YOU BE THERE, CITIZENS?

The heat of early afternoon came into the room, and with it the sounds of the people collecting out there in the Plaza. Hawkins could hear the cries of the flower vendors, the sounds of the little old men who sold the flags and balloons. Somewhere out there a mariachi band was playing, the music drifting up softly in the hot, lazy afternoon. He felt a drowsiness now, a longing to sleep, to forget the business of the afternoon. Doggedly, he forced himself to sit up. This was no time for sleep. No sleep this afternoon. He looked at his watch. There were two and a half hours left.

He forced himself off the bed and went into the bathroom. The rusty water came spitting up out of the tap, splashing up now and discoloring his shirt. He washed his face with care, then took a towel from behind the door and wet it with the cool water. He removed the shirt and tossed it on the foot of the bed. Then he lay down and covered his face with the towel.

Lying there, the towel over his face shutting off the brightness of the afternoon, he had the feeling he was still in his cell at the jail. It had been dark there, in his cell, dark and damp. The jail was in the old section of town and Hawkins knew that there were dungeons under the jail that had been built centuries before by the early Spanish Conquistadores. His cell must have been in one of those dungeons he had reasoned, lying there in the dark, in the uninterrupted quiet of his cell, thinking of where he was and what they would do with him. He remembered how the police had come and taken him away in the night. It was not a hard thing to do in this country; a country where there are no protections, no liberties, where people had a habit of disappearing without a word, without a trace. In the dark silence of his cell he had wondered what they would do with him.

The guard opened the door for him and pushed him into the room. A big man, with heavy black eyebrows, sat behind a desk at the far side of the room. Over his head, on the wall, was a framed picture of the Generalissimo; on the desk was a rifle.

The man sat looking at Hawkins.

"You will sit down," he said.

Hawkins sat down in the chair by the desk. The big man sat look-

ing at him, looking especially into his eyes.

"I am Captain Hermana," the big man said. "You have heard of me?"

Hawkins nodded. "You are the head of the Security Police."

"That is correct," the Captain said. He opened a drawer and took out a brown leather humidor. Carefully, he selected a cigar and then held out the box to Hawkins. "You wish a cigar?"

"I do not smoke," said Hawkins.

The Captain nodded. He lit the cigar with a small silver lighter, taking plenty of time. Hawkins looked at the rifle. It was a hunting rifle, a very good one, with a telescopic sight. He did not recognize the make.

The Captain put the humidor away and took a file from another drawer. "You wish to know how long we have held you here?" asked the Captain.

Hawkins did not answer.

The Captain leaned forward and placed his hands on the desk. "It has been thirty days," he said. "Does that surprise you?"

Hawkins shrugged. It did not matter.

The Captain continued to look at him and suddenly Hawkins had the feeling he should have answered the last question. The Captain flicked the ashes from his cigar onto the floor. "I am interested in how well our prisoners keep track of time," he said. "You

would be surprised how many of them think they have been here for only a few days." He leaned back in his chair and took a long pull at his cigar, the smoke spiraling up lazily in the quiet room.

Hawkins said nothing.

For a long time they sat that way, the Captain at ease in his big leather chair, Hawkins sitting stiffly at the edge of his. Their eyes met and locked for a long moment and, finally, it was Hawkins who looked away first.

"If you will not talk to me, Mr. Hawkins," said the Captain, "I will talk to you." He opened the file folder and began to read. "Name, William Lee Hawkins, age, 38, married once, divorced, no children. Former wife's name, Florence Masters. You were employed by The Bank of New York for the past 15 years. Last November 2nd a shortage of \$25,000 was discovered in your accounts and a warrant was issued for your arrest on a charge of embezzlement. Our records indicate you entered this country on November 3rd, declaring you carried no more than \$500 with you in cash or checks. You have been living in the El Mirador, a small rooming house run by a Señora Diaz. When apprehended by the Security Police you had a total of 50 pesos on your person, and a check of your room failed to uncover any of the missing funds." The Captain put the file folder back down on the desk and looked

at Hawkins. "Now will you say something, Mr. Hawkins?" he said quietly.

"You are going to send me back, then," he said quietly.

"We may send you back, yes" said the Captain. "It has not been decided."

"I do not understand," Hawkins said.

"We are not put on this earth to understand everything that happens to us," said the Captain. "There are certain things that happen, certain events in our lives, that we must accept. They happen. Period. You cannot argue with them. You must live with them and see how you can turn each event to your own advantage." He smiled at Hawkins, the tip of his cigar glowing red between his teeth. "Here you sit," he continued, "a prisoner in a foreign country, wanted in your own country for a crime we would shoot a man for in ours. And here am I, your captor, with your fate completely in my hands. No one knows you are here but myself. I can send you back to America, or not send you back, as I choose. It is an interesting situation, is it not? I could keep you here, you know. Oh, I could keep you here until you rot away to dust, Mr. Hawkins. I could even have you shot. Yes, I could. It would not be too difficult. So you see, Mr. Hawkins, if I were you I would listen very carefully to what I am going to say." He

dropped his cigar to the floor and pressed it slowly under his foot.

"I want you to know something," Hawkins said. "I did not take the money."

"I do not care about the money," the Captain said. "Do you think I am interested in money?"

"I thought, perhaps . . ." he said and let it go unfinished.

"No, Mr. Hawkins, I do not want your money. You see, I wish to make you an offer." The Captain turned about in his chair and looked up at the picture of the Generalissimo. "There have been great pressures against the regime," he continued. "There is a mood in the country these days—a mood of revolt, of revolution. The people are restless, they are stirred up by our enemies. They sense the tiredness of the Generalissimo. They think he is too old. They think he is ready to be overthrown. And what is more, Mr. Hawkins, they are right." The Captain turned his chair around and looked at Hawkins. "It surprises you to hear me talk this way, yes?"

Hawkins nodded.

"Well, that is my job. I am supposed to know these things, to feel these things, to be on the alert against those who plot revolution." The Captain stood up and walked to the window.

"We know who these people are, of course. We have watched them do their work. We have given them time to corrupt the others, to

gather up the weak ones who would seek an easy way to power. Now, we are ready to spring the trap and catch them all." He brushed a speck of ash off his sleeve. "We have uncovered plots before. We have shot traitors before. But this time it will be different."

The Captain came back to the desk and sat down in the chair.

"This is where you come in, Mr. Hawkins. You see, this time there will be a trial. It will be a big trial. The trial will be broadcast on the radio. We will have it on television, too. It will be the first time the regime has ever given traitors a trial before they were killed." He sat back in his chair and smiled.

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Hawkins.

"Do not be impatient," said the Captain. He opened a drawer and took out five bullets. Hawkins watched him place them on the desk. "We need a star witness for the trial. Someone who was part of the plot and will give testimony against all the others. Someone we know we can trust to play his part to the hilt." He paused for a moment and looked at Hawkins' eyes. "Someone who would play his part as if his life depended upon it." The Captain's hand reached out and caressed the smooth wood stock of the rifle. "That witness is you, Mr. Hawkins. You are just the man to help us make sure our trial is a success. We will give you

all the names you need to know. We will teach you your story so well you will begin to believe it yourself. You see, this trial of ours fits in quite well with the speech the Generalissimo will give next week at the re-dedication of the regime. He is going to promise more freedom to the people. He is going to assure them certain rights. Among these rights will be the right to a fair and impartial trial before a jury. The way it is planned, the trial of the traitors will be the first. That is why it is essential that everything goes off smoothly. That is why we need you."

"That is what you're asking then," said Hawkins. "That I testify against these men?"

"Yes. That, and one more thing." The Captain picked up the rifle and cradled it in his arms. "Do you know how to fire a rifle, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Yes," Hawkins said. "When I was in the army—"

"We know you were in the army," the Captain interrupted. He put the rifle back down on the desk.

"You will go to the Hotel Nacional next week, during the re-dedication ceremonies, and you will attempt to assassinate the Generalissimo with this rifle."

Hawkins fell back in his chair, stunned.

"Do not jump to conclusions, Mr. Hawkins. You will not try to

succeed. You will merely fire one shot above the Generalissimo's head at a target I will tell you about. Please take care to leave a safe margin. We do not want you to make a mistake."

He sat back and grinned at Hawkins.

"I assure you," he said, "there is absolutely no danger. There will be a guard outside the room who will rush in and arrest you as soon as you have fired the shot. Then you will be escorted back here to the safety of the jail and kept under lock and key until the trial. Believe me, we do not wish any harm to befall you. We need your testimony."

Hawkins sat staring at the Captain. "I think I would like a drink," he said.

The Captain smiled and, taking out a key, unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk and took out a bottle of brandy. Hawkins reached out and took a long drink right from the bottle.

"That is very special brandy," said the Captain. "We usually only serve it to those who have been condemned."

Hawkins choked a little and placed the bottle on the desk. He sat still for a moment, trying to control a twitch in his leg. The brandy had given him a jolt; it seemed to make him think more clearly. He let his breath out slowly and said, "I want to know something, Captain. I want to know

why you have chosen me. Why me?"

"It is really quiet simple. We need an incident—an act of violence. After you fire the shot we shall tell the people that the plotters hired an American gangster to assassinate the Generalissimo. It will give us a rallying point to arouse anger. It works against the cause of the plotters. Hiring a killer is much different than doing the job yourself. It will rob the plotters of a certain respectability all revolutionists have. It makes them appear cold-blooded, calculating . . . a little too shrewd. My people will not respect a group that would hire an assassin to do their dirty work for them. And your being an American—that is a good thing for us, too. You know, Mr. Hawkins, Americans are not liked very much in our country these days."

The Captain took another cigar from the humidor in the desk. Hawkins watched him light this one, watched the blue smoke swirl about in front of his face. For a long time, neither of them spoke.

"What if I refuse," Hawkins asked quietly.

The Captain shrugged. "You have that right, of course. You could refuse. In that event, however . . ." He smiled. "Believe me, it would be much better for you if you said yes."

"And afterwards," Hawkins said, "what happens to me?"

"We are willing to pay you well for your effort. We will pardon you for confessing and helping to convict the others. You will be given a passport. I understand you are in need of a passport. And, in addition, we will give you enough money to make a new start somewhere. Shall we say in some part of Europe, perhaps? Anywhere, in fact. You see, our emigration quotas are strictly controlled by the State. We will let you settle anywhere you choose."

"You have it all figured out, don't you Captain? Everything nice and neat. No holes, no loose strings. One neat little package."

"That is my job," said the Captain, "to think of everything. I leave nothing to chance."

"There's one thing I want to know," said Hawkins, "one thing before I agree. And that is . . . how do I know I can trust you?"

The Captain laughed, a deep, rich laugh that sounded good to Hawkins. He watched the Captain fall back in his chair, still laughing. "Mr. Hawkins," he said, "that is something you will just have to take on faith. After all, do you really think you have a choice?"

. . . IS LEAVING THE NATIONAL HOME FOR ORPHANS AS THE CHILDREN STAND IN RANKS IN THE COURTYARD, APPLAUDING. CAN YOU HEAR THE

SOUND OF THEIR VOICES? HOW WONDERFUL! WHAT A TRIBUTE TO HIS EXCELLENCY. HE IS WALKING TO HIS AUTOMOBILE NOW. IN ONE MINUTE WE SHALL BE SPEAKING TO YOU FROM THE MOTORCADE AS IT MAKES ITS WAY TO THE PLAZA GRANDE. JOIN US THERE, CITIZENS! TEN MINUTES FROM NOW IN THE PLAZA GRANDE!

The sound of cheering startled him and he sat up on the bed, the towel falling to the floor. Hastily, he looked at his watch. He had five minutes. The noise was getting louder now. A chorus of "vivas" echoed and reechoed in the Plaza and he could hear a procession of motorcars approaching. The noise coming through the open doors was deafening. He got up off the bed.

Bending down, he reached under the bed and pulled out the brown paper parcel. He placed it on the bed and took out the rifle. Slowly, very slowly, he took one of the bullets off the nightstand and fitted it into the chamber. He slid the bolt back once. The click was heavy and substantial. He picked up the rest of the bullets and put them in his pocket, then turned to face the door to the balcony.

From where he stood, well back in the room, he could see them mounting the steps of the wooden

platform. The Generalissimo was the first one to reach the top, a procession of aides following close behind. The crowd was going wild now. Hawkins saw hats being thrown in the air. People were releasing balloons and he watched them float up, slowly turning in the bright sunlight.

They were all seated on the platform and someone, it was Captain Hermana, was at the microphone, raising his hand to quiet the crowd. They were taking their time about it and even now a few last "vivas" sounded weakly in the quieting square. Finally, there was silence.

Hawkins dropped to his knees in the room. He lay down on his stomach and listened to the voice of Captain Hermana resounding in the Plaza as he introduced the Generalissimo. There was a loud burst of cheering as he finished and Hawkins began to crawl slowly toward the balcony. Inch by inch he moved, being careful to stay as close to the floor as he could. The carpet was rubbing against him as he moved, scratching at his undershirt, chafing at his arms. He inched to the edge of the carpet and slid the last few feet to the open doors.

The Generalissimo was speaking now and Hawkins could hear the silence of the crowd. He felt his heart beating loudly in his chest. Carefully, painfully, he inched his way out onto the bal-

cony, covered from the crowd by the low wall running around it. If I stay down, he thought, they cannot see me. I must stay down.

He had reached the front of the low wall. So far so good, he thought. I mustn't hurry. I must take my time. He slid the rifle in front of him until the barrel was lined up directly with the drain hole. Hawkins tightened the muscles in his chest and put his shoulder against the stock of the rifle. He looked down the sight; the Generalissimo was directly in the cross hairs.

Slowly, very slowly now, Hawkins moved the barrel of the rifle. He could see Captain Hermana standing just to the left of the Generalissimo. It would be easy, he thought, so easy. For a long time he squinted through the sight, looking at the smile on the face of the Captain. Gently, he swung the rifle back to bear on the Generalissimo.

One pull, he thought, one pull. I could just pull the trigger and he would be dead. The sun danced on the Generalissimo's cap and in his mind's eye, Hawkins saw him fall. He could see the blood spurting from the hole in his chest, his body twisting in pain on the platform. I could do it, he thought, I could.

He found himself breathing very hard and for a moment he relaxed, taking his eye away from the rubber tip of the sight, looking at the

low wall in front of him. An ant walked slowly across the floor of the balcony and disappeared into the drain hole. Hawkins listened for a moment to the shrill voice of the Generalissimo, his throat dry, the hot concrete floor searing his bare arms. There was a drop of sweat on the tip of his nose. Gently, he wiped it away with a finger. I must be calm, he told himself. I must keep control of myself. There was a gagging feeling in his throat and somewhere, deep in his belly, a snake was crawling. Now, he thought, now.

He took a deep breath and looked into the eyepiece. Slowly, he moved the cross hairs up until they pointed at the Generalissimo's head. He moved the cross hairs higher. There was the glass globe, hanging there just a few feet above the head of the Generalissimo. He pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The safety, he thought, stupid, I forgot to remove the safety catch. He reached out and clicked the tiny lever. Once again he looked into the eyepiece and aimed at the globe. He squeezed the trigger. He saw the glass explode, saw the shattered fragments scatter about the platform.

At that instant, he heard another shot and there, on the platform, the Generalissimo was falling, falling, down now, his hand clutched to his chest.

Hawkins drew back and looked

up to see a thin puff of smoke coming from the balcony directly above him. In the Plaza, the crowd was going crazy. The noise was tremendous. There were people swarming all over the platform, pointing his way, pointing up at him. He had to get out of there. He had to get off that balcony. Wildly, he drew his legs under him and jumped to his feet.

The first burst from the sub-machine gun hit him as he turned, jerking him about, and he spun, a dying puppet, as another burst from below thudded into his chest. The rifle flew out of his hands and tumbled, end over end, to the street and Hawkins fell, half-draping himself over the low wall, his body twitching, the arms over the low wall swinging, swinging gently. And then they were still.

And down below on the Plaza, a few drops of blood sizzled on the hot cobblestones.

On the platform, the Generalissimo was dead.

Lieutenant Morales, the assassin, ran down the steps from the floor above, his rifle, still warm, already slung over his shoulder. He turned his key in the lock and ran into the room. When he reached the balcony, Captain Hermana was speak-

ing to the crowd. The Lieutenant stepped back into the room and ripped the cords from the venetian blinds that covered the doors of the balcony. He went outside again and tied the cord around the feet of the body. Quickly, he ran the other end of the cord through the drain hole and made it secure. Then he pushed the body off the balcony and watched it dance about at the end of the cord, swinging and turning in the hot, bright sun. After a while it stopped turning.

Captain Hermana, thought the Lieutenant, you are a genius. A true genius. He straightened himself up to his full height and saluted the Captain who was still talking to the crowd. Tonight, the Lieutenant said to himself, tonight we will be calling you the Generalissimo. He laughed and went back into the room.

The Government wishes to announce that the body of the assassin, William Hawkins, shall continue to hang from the balcony of the Hotel Nacional during the period of mourning for our late leader, the beloved Generalissimo.

Official Government Communique




SET-UP

TEN O'CLOCK. Mist shrouded the street-lamps, the avenue looked dead. Tony stood on the corner, right hand in his pocket, gripping the gun. Across the street, light glowed from the window of a bar. The damp sidewalk gave back streaks of faint emerald fire. Shadows moved behind the window, soft voices and muted music came through the door.

Puddles from the afternoon's

BY

HAL ELLSON



She had a child's face. She was only a kid . . . sixteen at most . . . and she'd saved his life. What the hell! In five years maybe he'd forgotten the difference between a girl and a woman.

rain clotted the gutter and gave off tiny splintered fractions of light. Tony's eyes skipped the black pools. On the opposite corner the grey walls of a bank rose toward the starless sky. The rigid hands of the clock above the entrance stated the exact time—one minute past ten.

One minute gone. So slow. Like those five years in prison when time didn't move and waiting was agony. Now the agony was worse. But he had to be sure.

No one on the bank corner. His eyes swung left, to the opposite one. A Fanny Farmer candy shop, its white trim greyed by the night, windows dark, doorway empty. It was too much to ask for, all four corners deserted, the avenue empty to the right for a stretch of sixty yards to a dark side-street. A row of stores closed for the night, greyed windows.

Too easy. Something was wrong. He was trembling now, wracked by anxiety. The feel of the gun assured him.

Now, he thought, and from behind him, moving up the subway steps came a cool rush of air, an accelerating rumble. A train was coming in.

It propelled him forward against a traffic light gone red. The green neon suddenly seemed far away, the window of the bar melting, the door distorting. He reached the opposite sidewalk, stopped and stared at the door to the bar.

Not that one. The side entrance.

Fast now. He'd forgotten the train. The four corners were still deserted, focused in his mind, stark empty, refusing to submerge. He passed the building line, moving swiftly toward the side entrance, hearing the soft thumping notes of a juke flowing from the open door, voices, someone laughing. Little Joe?

Four steps brought him to the doorway. He stopped there, thinking of the train rushing through the underground, thrusting a column of cool air up the station steps. He was sweating now, fire razed his body. He remained motionless. Beyond the bar facing him patches of light flashed from bottles. Shadow flooded the big mirror. Submerged faces slowly surfaced from it and focused. No one noticed him. His presence disrupted nothing. The conversation and soft music continued.

He drew the gun without hurry. Just then the barman saw him, opened his mouth, closed it and dropped below the mahogany barricade. Instinctively, a short stocky-man in white turned his head.

The gun barked, the mirror cracked open behind the bar, a woman screamed, bottles broke, the man in white fell. The woman was still screaming.

Tony fled with the sound echoing in his head, ran for the corner. Half a dozen people stood frozen at the subway exit on the opposite side. He turned the corner and a

warning shout from behind told him what had happened. A policeman had emerged from nowhere.

A pistol cracked behind him. Sixty yards of empty sidewalk to the next corner. The pistol cracked again. A shadow raced beside him across the darkened shop windows, grocery, bakery, furrier . . .

Leaden legs carried him round the corner into the shadowed side-street. Stark empty, it stretched before him for two-hundred yards. Two-hundred yards of shadowed terror. He'd never make it to the corner.

A doorway beckoned. He plunged toward it. Too late he saw the girl on the stoop, mounted the steps, hurled himself into the vestibule and trapped himself. The inner door was locked.

Frantic, he turned. The girl on the stoop hadn't stirred. Running steps sounded on the sidewalk. The policeman came into view, stopped when he saw the girl. Tony drew back into a corner of the vestibule, listened, heard the policeman's question, the girl's reply: "Down that basement across the street."

The girl sat motionless, watching the policeman till he vanished in the basement. She was still sitting on the stoop when he came out again. A siren sounded in the distance now, grew louder and suddenly a squad-car whipped around the corner. Guns drawn, the policemen leaped out and joined the one on the sidewalk.

Two went down the basement. One entered the house. Two more squad-cars arrived moments later to join the hunt. Windows opened, a group of people clotted the corner.

The girl on the stoop never moved. Twenty minutes later the squad-cars drove off, the group on the corner scattered. The vestibule door opened slowly. Tony looked out, sweat glistened on his face. The girl raised her eyes.

"It's okay," she calmly said. "They're gone."

He came out, staring at her. "I heard what you told the cop," he said.

"Really?"

"But why?"

"I don't like cops."

Her calmness steadied him. He almost grinned. "Thanks for helping out," he said.

Her eyes went over him. They were glazed, probably blue, he thought, noticing the blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. "Why were you running?" she asked bluntly.

"It was nothing."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"All right, I can't . . ."

A squad-car whisked round the corner. "Better sit down with me," the girl said.

He sat, and the squad-car moved slowly past. They watched it go up the block and turn the corner. Tony became aware of the girl holding his hand.

"Scared?" she said.

"No."

"Bull."

He grinned back at her. "A little shaky," he said. "Can you blame me?"

"It's all right. You're safe now."

"Thanks to you."

"It was nothing."

He stared at the girl again. She was still holding his hand. "How old are you?" he asked.

A shrug answered his question.

"How old?" he insisted.

"Let's say I'm old enough to know better."

It was a good enough reply. She was only a kid and trying to hide it. A good-looking kid, but . . . He stood up.

"Where you going, handsome?"

"I've got to be on my way."

"Where's that?"

"No place."

His answer didn't disturb her, apparently nothing did. "No place is where the bums go," she said. "You don't look like a bum."

Her remark made him smile. It didn't matter if she knew. "I just got out," he said.

"Out of where?"

"Prison."

"Oh," she said. It didn't bother her, she wasn't frightened. "And you're already in trouble with the cops."

"That's why I've got nowhere to go," he said.

"You're wrong. You can come up to my place."

"Your place?"

"That's right."

He stared at her again. How old was she? "You're a kid," he said.

"That's what you think."

Was she lying? Couldn't he tell the difference between a girl and a woman any more? He turned away, his eyes searched the dark block. It was deserted from end to end. He could make it now, but where could he go?

He turned to the girl. She'd risen and was standing next to him. "I've got a room upstairs," she said. "Come on. It's all right. The landlady won't squawk."

It was a woman talking, with a girl's voice. This is crazy, he thought, and felt her hand press his arm. "Come on. Don't be scared."

He wanted to laugh. They entered the house and went up the stairs. On the second floor she handed him a key and nodded to a door. He opened it. The girl switched on the light. He barely glanced at the room and turned. The girl smiled and moved toward him.

He was right. She was only a kid. Sixteen? She could have been younger, a girl and yet a woman, with vacant blue eyes staring into his, that empty smile coming closer, the fresh young lips, yellow hair falling to her shoulders. As she moved against him, he wanted to thrust her away, but five years of prison hunger yawned violently

from the pit of his loins. Her breasts nestled against him, full as a woman's.

"It's been a long time," he said.

"How long?"

"Five years."

"You don't have to worry now," she said and pressed harder against him, raised her face, the stark empty eyes. His arms enfolded her, the violence within him exploded. He swept her up and carried her toward the bed. They fell with a crash, the room blackened, he heard her laugh in the dark and thought he was back in his cell till she spoke, the child's voice and woman's fusing and admonishing him, saying: "You're wild. Wait till I get my things off." And he waited, shivering while the room lightened again. She emerged from the shadows, peeled to the skin, pale and startling above him, then bending in slow-motion, with the plunging weight of her quivering breasts carrying her downward toward him.

Rain tapped softly on the window. A grey shadow emerged from the dimness of the hall. A door closed. He lost the shadow and closed his eyes. The mattress sank on one side, threatening to roll him out of bed.

He opened his eyes again. The girl was sitting beside him, smiling vacantly, skin pink and fresh. "Hello, handsome," she said.

"Hello. What time is it?"

"You slept late. It's almost eleven."

It was hard to believe, with the room so dark. Then he heard the rain tapping on the window.

"Hungry? I brought you coffee and doughnuts. Here."

He took the container of coffee, finished it in two gulps and looked at the girl.

"What about last night?" she said.

"What about it?"

"You're not going to tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell," he said and sat up. "Thanks for everything."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes."

"Nobody's making you. Anyway, you can't go. The cops might still be looking for you. Stay here."

He lay back, hands behind his head, and stared at her. That face was a child's face, those vacant glassy eyes . . . "How come?" he said. "You can't be more than sixteen."

"What's age got to do with it?" she blandly answered.

"But this room . . .?"

"It's simple. My mother's dead, and I hate my old man's guts, so . . ."

"What about the rent?"

"I manage that," she said easily and stood up to light a cigarette. Quickly he slipped out of bed and began to dress.

"What are you doing? You can't leave yet."

"I want to see a paper."

"I'll get you one."

Before he could protest, she turned, went out the door and returned ten minutes later. She tossed him the paper. On page four he found what he was looking for. Five years of waiting, and he'd failed. Little Joe had sustained a mere flesh wound in the arm.

Sick, he dropped the paper on the bed. The girl said, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

She picked up the paper and found the item. "Shanly's. That's the bar around the corner," she said, not looking at him. "A small-time gangster known as Little Joe. . . ." Her eyes came up. "You tried to kill Little Joe?" There was a note of awe in her voice.

"I tried," he said.

"But why?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

The girl stared at him vacantly, finally shrugged and stood up.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"I'll be back. I've got to see my old man. He owes me some money."

She went out the door. Rain beat hard on the window. He turned to it and saw nothing beyond the pane but a dismal grey. Unable to face it, he turned away, still hearing the rain. Its cheerless sound made him shiver. This was what he'd come back to, to failure. Five long years of waiting to even the score with that miserable animal

who'd squealed on him and he'd merely nicked him with a bullet.

He felt the gun in his pocket. If he hadn't missed. The next time, he thought, but Little Joe would be ready from now on, his punk gunmen.

He thought of the girl and smiled. If it hadn't been for her, that queer kid with the strange eyes. Where was she?

He waited an hour. The rain continued. It was almost as dark as night outside. The sound of the rain was like a dirge. He grew uneasy, the smallness of the room disturbed him. It was like being back in prison, infinitely worse, for he was free and yet not free, with the odds against him now. The gunmen would be looking for him . . .

How many can I take? he thought, and felt the first tenuous stab of fear. They were waiting for him now.

But he was safe for the moment. Luck had saved him last night, the girl. He smiled and began to undress again, with the intention of sleeping out the rain and morbidity of the day.

The door closed softly. Footsteps crossed the room. He thought he was dreaming, then suddenly sat up. The girl stood at the window. She drew the shade, switched on the light.

"Why the light?" he asked, squinting.

"It's six o'clock."

"That late?"

"I meant to come back sooner, but I couldn't find the old man. Anyway, you're still here."

"You expected me to leave?"

"I didn't want you to, but I took so long and . . ."

"What's that smell?" he said.

"Chow mein. I thought you'd be hungry."

All day yesterday he'd gone without food, with only the container of coffee this morning. Hungry? She brought him the container and a spoon.

"What about you?" he said.

She shook her head. "It's all for you."

There were no more formalities, no exchanges till he emptied the container. Finally he looked up, half-shamed by his gluttony. "I ate that like a starved dog," he said.

"I can get some more . . ."

"No. I don't know how I can repay you. I don't . . ."

His jaw fell. She was smiling. In her upraised hand she held a bottle.

"What the hell. Where'd that come from?"

"I thought you might like it."

That was another of the things they'd taken from him. Five long years without a drink. He reached for the bottle with a trembling hand, afraid it might not be real. Still trembling, he uncapped it and drank, drank again, then looked at the girl. She was watching him

with those same vacant eyes. Nothing bothered her, nothing . . .

"I think I'd like some," she said.

"Are you kidding?"

"I drink the stuff."

"You're not drinking this."

"It's mine, isn't it? Anyway, I only want a taste."

He hesitated, handed the bottle and grabbed it back. "That's what you call a taste?" he said.

She'd gulped the whiskey. Now she laughed and said, "Don't worry. I can take it. My old man started me on it."

"Your old man ought to be horse-whipped," he said and drank again.

When half the bottle was gone, he allowed her another drink and lit a cigarette. A moment later she snatched it from his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke. He laughed.

"Why the laugh?" she asked.

"A kid like you . . ."

"I'm not a kid."

"You're not a woman."

"That's what you think!"

He laughed again, seeing her in a haze now, with the whiskey in his blood. He was sweating, his whole body loose and at ease. This kid had saved him . . .

"Don't laugh," she said, frowning.

"All right, I won't," he answered, laughing in spite of himself.

"Suppose I told you I know Little Joe?" she said.

"Sure, you do."

"It's the truth. Don't you believe me?"

"Yep."

"I met him on the street one time. You see, I bumped into him. The third time he grabbed me by the blouse and shook me up. He wanted to know what I thought I was doing. I was scared to death."

"Sure, you were."

"You don't believe me?"

To appease her he nodded, but he didn't believe a word she was saying. The liquor had set her off.

"Who else do you know besides Little Joe?" he asked.

"Well, I know him, and I know Ziggy Bimstein. He's a rock. Do you know him?"

"I know him too well."

"He's real good-looking. I go for him, but Little Joe is the boss. Then there's Red Mike. Ever hear of him?"

"Yeah, I heard of him," he answered, watching her child's face, the bright but vacant eyes. She was getting silly, trying to impress him, repeating names she'd heard in the street.

"I know all three of them," she went on, "and . . ."

He lifted the bottle, not wanting to hear any more. She was still talking when he finished drinking, still trying to impress him. Did she really believe she was taking him in? He wanted to laugh, but that face devoid of all expression struck him anew. No wonder she lied, with a drunk for a father and . . .

He reached for her and the room grew hazier, then began to spin violently. Oddly, her face remained in focus; he noticed her eyes. They'd suddenly darkened and she was smiling. His hand had reached her.

That was what she'd been waiting for. She came surging at him to join him in the bed. A child? he thought, as her mouth fastened hungrily on his. He still held the bottle. Pushing her off, he placed it on the floor. The girl got up, paused to stare at him with the same curious smile frozen on her face.

The room spun wildly, faster and faster. He could barely follow her movements. Out of the grey blurr her pale young body loomed, and it was a woman's now. She smiled at his astonishment, but her eyes were two burning black coals.

This is wrong, he thought, reaching for her. She was already plunging toward him.

A soft knock on the door froze his writhing body. "Who's that?" he whispered.

The girl rolled away from him, smiled and said, "Don't get excited. It's only my old man."

"Don't answer."

"I got to, but I won't let him in."

Before he could stop her, she slipped from the bed, ran to the door and flung it open. Three men stepped into the room. Little Joe and two of his men. As the door

closed, Tony reached for his trousers. It was a futile gesture. His gun was gone.

The girl laughed and turned to Little Joe. "See? He didn't believe I knew you," she said. "He said I was only a kid."

"Shut up and put your clothes on," Little Joe snapped. He waited for her to dress, then ordered her to leave. As the door closed behind her, Little Joe snapped his fingers and the two gunmen moved in for the kill.



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LITTLE Frank woke up crying and Riba Sue went to the bedroom and brought him out. She held him close to her breast and made slight shushing noises that he seemed to comprehend. Moss looked up from the table where he and "big" Frank sat with the diagram in front of them and gave her a broken tooth, thick lipped smile.

Riba Sue felt a cold revulsion and trained her eyes quickly on the child in her arms. Little Frank cooed up at her, waving his tiny fists in jerking motions, and she carried him to the stove where the bottle was heating in the pan of water.

Moss watched her movements hungrily. The cheap print material of her dress clung tight to the hollows and curves of her small, lithe body, emphasizing the ripple of muscle and flesh. Slowly, he ran his tongue over his dry lips, then reached for the glass of beer in front of him draining it.

"It's perfect, Moss," Frank said, taking up his own glass.

"Wh . . . what?"

"This plan. You got it all here jus' as pretty as you ever wanna see," Frank said, tapping the sketched out diagram on the paper. "I tell you man when it comes to layin' out a job you ain't gonna

LAST JOB

BY

RAYMOND DYER

Here it was again . . . another "last job". Then they'd run again, to God-knows-where, one step ahead of the law, until the money ran out and it was time again for just one more "last job".

be beat much, Moss. Got to hand it to you for that. Eh, Riba Sue?"

Riba Sue didn't answer. She was trying to test the temperature of the milk on her wrist and hold the baby at the same time.

"We gonna do this one an' head out o' this town fast, Frank," Moss said, forcing himself to concentrate on the program before them.

"Tha's the way I got it figured, Moss," Frank agreed. "I intend to get a lot o' distance 'tween me an' this here town once we pull this . . ."

"Then, it's all settled," Riba Sue said flatly. She was facing them, holding the bottle in little Frank's mouth. "We're jus' gonna up an' move agin . . . to no tellin' where . . . with the law after us worse 'n it is right now . . ."

"Now . . . now, honeypot," Frank said soothingly, coming around the table to her and putting his hands on her arms, the baby there between them. "You jus' know we gotta do somethin' mighty quick. We ain't got much loot left, an' little ol' Frank here's gotta keep eatin' . . ."

"First home we ever really had," she said, looking down at the baby. "Runnin' all over creation ever since we left the farm a year ago . . . the law jus' two steps behind us . . . your picture in every Post Office we come to . . ."

"Honeypot. Now, it ain't that bad," Frank consoled. "Jus' you 'member all them good times we

had in Reno an' Las Vegas an' Hollywood an' Mexico, eh? Man, didn't we have some great ol' times though? Eh, Moss? Didn't we?"

"But that was before, Frank," Riba Sue put in quickly. "Now we got little Frank to think 'bout. He's gotta have a home, an' a yard, an' . . . an' a daddy . . ." She burst into tears and wrenched herself free from his hands to run toward the bedroom with the child.

"Riba Sue!" he called after her, and heard the door slam shut between them. He turned and smiled self-consciously at Moss. "I reckon she'll come off it, give her time, eh?"

Moss Wellwood reached out a hairybacked hand for the half-filled quart bottle of beer. He poured into his glass and Frank's.

"Let's git all the little details figured," he said. "She gonna be alright."

Frank nodded. "Sure," he said and went back to his chair.

Riba Sue sat dry eyed on the bed, pillows comforting her back, her legs stretched out and little Frank in her arms. She held the bottle at an angle and watched his baby mouth suck at the nipple. She had wanted to cry, had tried, but it was dried up inside her after the first outburst. She couldn't cry anymore . . . maybe never again. The lump was there in her throat, hurting, almost choking her and she could not relieve it.

In a little while Frank came in like she knew he would, his boyish handsome face caught with that open smile she had fallen in love with seven years before as a child, his pale blue eyes innocent and searching, entreating now as they sought her own. He closed the door and sat on the edge of the bed beside her, his tanned hand finding her small one eagerly.

"Honey, you shouldn't ought to spout off like that," he said to her softly. "'Specially front of ol' Moss. What's he gonna think . . .?"

"Frank, listen to me. I don't care no more what Moss thinks. I'm sick to death o' him an' . . . an' the way he looks at me with those pig eyes just peelin' the clothes right off me . . ."

"Here, here, honey," he said, putting his hand over her mouth. "He's right next there in his room an' he's gonna hear you . . ."

She twisted her face away. "I don't give a damn if he does, Frank Wiess. I tell you I'm sick to death of it. All of it! Him an' his evil ways . . . an' you cavortin' right 'long with him. Look at us? Married a year, an' two months right here, the longest we ever been in one place . . ."

"Hell, Riba Sue, you know we had to keep movin'," he said, withdrawing his hand and getting to his feet. "When you're hot you jus' can't go standin' 'round on street corners . . ."

"An' now you ain't satisfied that

things is quieted down a little . . . You gotta go do somethin' else to get John Law a chasin' us all over . . ."

"We gotta have money don't we? How you think we're gonna git it? Maybe go down to some shop an' work for it . . .?"

"You might try that jus' once."

"You talk like a ninny, Riba Sue," he snapped at her. "How long you think it'd be 'fore ol' Johnny Law come smellin' me out? Eh? Jus' how long?"

He walked away from her, across the small room and back. She put her mind to little Frank, taking the bottle from him and laying him over her shoulder, commencing to pat him in a tender rhythmical fashion.

"Frank, I'm beggin' you," she pleaded softly. "Please, don't do it this time? If'n not for me . . . think o' your son. Please, Frank? They gotta be 'nother way . . ."

"Damnit, Riba Sue, you ain't usin' your head one bit," he said, coming to lean over her, speaking in a harsh whisper. "We jus' ain't got no choice. How much money we got? Maybe fifty dollars. An' when tha's gone what we gonna do?" He sat down on the bed again beside her. "Now listen to me, honey. You know I love you an' little Frank more'n anythin' in this whole damn ol' world. Ain't nothin' I wouldn't do for either o' you . . ."

"Then, do this for us, Frank," she interrupted him. "Please . . ."

"Hear me out," he cut her short. "Jus' hear me out." He took a long breath and lowered his whisper until it was hardly audible. "This is it, honeypot. The last one. We'll take the money an' go back down to Mexico . . . maybe Acapulco or someplace . . . But I promise on my mama's grave this'll be the last one . . ."

He watched her head slowly begin to shake negatively, read the entreaty in those dark eyes that just didn't seem to sparkle anymore, and the sad downward curve to the corners of her pretty mouth.

"It ain't so, Frank. It ain't never gonna be so. You said it the last time, an' the time before, an' the time 'fore that . . . But he won't let you. Him . . . in there . . . he's bad. Bad all the way through . . . an' he's makin' you jus' like him . . ."

"Riba Sue, I swear on my mama's grave . . ."

She laughed dryly. "I 'member you sayin' that the time 'fore you robbed that Post Office in Denver, an' me beggin' you jus' like I am now . . . But no, you wouldn't listen, an' what happened . . . ?"

"I tol' you a thousand times, honey. It couldn't be helped," Frank tried to explain. "He jus' came in on us . . ."

"An' you killed him . . ."

"Damn it, Riba Sue, don't say that! Don't ever say that! You hear me? I never killed nobody . . . !"

"He killed him then. What's the difference? The posters in the post

office don't say no different. Twenty five hundred dollars for either one of you . . ."

"Shut up!" he said, his face flushed in anger. "You hear me, girl? Shut your mouth!"

She turned from him and took the baby from her shoulder laying him across her lap. He slept now, his arms stretched back by his head. She swung from the bed and carried him to his crib, covering him carefully with the small blue blanket.

When she turned Frank was waiting and she went into his arms. He buried his face in her long black hair and held her tight to him.

"Oh, Frank," she whispered. "Take me home . . . I wanna go home . . . I wanna see the cotton in the fields an' smell the earth after a big rain, an' eat corn-bread, an' . . . an' hear daddy cussin' out the flea hoppers and the weevils, an' . . . an' . . ."

"Honey, honey, stop it. You don't know what you're sayin'," he tried to console her. "You jus' upset's all. Listen to ol' Frank now. Jus' listen. Everythin's gonna be alright. You hear me? An' little Frank's gonna have a home jus' like you want. I promise you true. This is it. The last one . . ."

"Frank, Frank . . ."

"Now listen, please," he entreated. "It's a warehouse see. An' ol' Moss has got it figured out like you never did 'magine, even to a fence to handle the stuff. Tomorrow

night. It's a cinch, honeypot. An' you know ol' Moss is top man when it comes to plannin' a job. An' when it's over, we pull out. Jus' you an' me an' little Frank. I swear it on my mama's grave . . ."

She pushed from him, turned away, and began to undress. He came to her again and slipped his arms around her waist from behind. "You believe me don't you, Riba Sue?"

"We've got to think of little Frank," she replied. "I'm beggin' you. Please don't . . ."

"You'll see, honey. I swear it. You'll see."

God! If she could only cry!

It was not cold in the apartment, but outside, the late Fall rain was trying to turn to snow and Riba Sue hugged herself in a gesture of warmth as she stared out the window, shivering lightly, watching the transformation in the glow from the street light below.

They had been gone two hours, Frank and Moss, and it was close to midnight, the scheduled time according to Moss's calculations, when the night-watchman would be at the opposite end of the building.

Now, she smelled the coffee she had set to brewing on the stove. The radio hummed softly and for a moment she listened to the lament of a dying cowboy to his sweetheart and the sad strumming sounds of the guitar. The dry hurt-

ing in her throat that was always there, intensified, and she went to the radio switching it off.

Little Frank whimpered from the bedroom and she moved to the doorway. He slept again. She turned and walked to the kitchen wishing to God it was over.

She had poured herself coffee when the urgent pounding on the door started. Frank had told her to keep it locked and she did. Now, she sucked in her breath and shuddered when it came louder, more pressing.

Frank had a key!

The police?

More hammering . . . then, a voice . . . a man's voice calling her name in a loud coarse whisper . . .

"Riba Sue . . .! It's me, Moss . . . Let me in . . .!"

She crossed the room, pulled the bolt and he stumbled in, clutching at the muscle of his right arm.

"What happened?" She stared at him, then looked beyond as he slammed shut the door, bolting it. "Where . . . where's Frank?"

He went quickly to the window, standing aside, peering out at the street below through the opening of the curtains. Satisfied, he pulled the shade and turned to her, his round stubbled face more ugly now in the throes of pain. The blood had soaked through the sleeve of the cloth jacket and she saw it.

"We were hit," he said.

"Where's Frank? Tell me. Where is he . . .?"

"He's okay," Moss said. "Frank's okay. We meet him later. Listen, I'm shot . . ."

"Why didn't he come with you? Where is he . . .?"

"Damn it girl, I'm shot!" he swore at her. "I tell you Frank's okay. We got a meetin' place. You an' me, we take the car an' he'll be there. He sent me here so's you kin help fix up this arm. Cripes, it hurts bad, Riba Sue . . ."

She went to him and looked close, smelling his wet clothes mixed with the foul odor of perspiration. "Have to cut that sleeve off," she said. "Come over an' set."

"No. They ain't time," Moss said, shaking his head. "You git the aid-kit an' we move out o' here 'fore the cops come. I kin stan' it 'till we git to the farm. Hurry gal, we got-a git."

"What farm?"

"The meetin' place. An' ol' deserted farm Frank an' me found . . ."

"Frank's gone there?"

"He'll be waitin'."

"He ain't hurt is he, Moss . . .?"

"I tol' you gal, Frank's okay. Now, git a move on 'fore the law gits on us."

She nodded. "I'll git little Frank . . ."

The road was greasy and black and the lights of the Ford shown feeble in the thick patch of the night. Riba Sue would not drive fast with little Frank laying on the

seat between them. Twice, Moss urged her to hurry, but she maintained her speed.

"Damn thing throbs somethin' terrible," he whined. "It ain't bleedin' no more though, I don't think . . ."

"What happened?" she asked him when they had come onto a straight stretch and she could see better.

"We jus' got hit's all. Damn police patrol car must o' seen our truck. They jus' come in on us . . . Here, turn right here . . ."

It was a dirt road, muddy looking now and coated with a thin layer of white with brown splotches showing through. She swung onto it, the rear end swerving, the wheels dropping into ruts, spinning, slearing and grinding out, the Ford lurching ahead. She steered in zig-zag pattern, avoiding the ruts, searching for solid high spots.

"They ain't no other tracks here, Moss. You said Frank . . ."

"Right there ahead," Moss interrupted. "Sharp left 'tween those trees. Place is up there over the rise."

She followed his directions, the rear fender scraping the trunk of the tree as the Ford swerved again, found traction and spurted on. They hit the top of the rise, tires spinning until she could smell the rubber, then in the dim cones of light she could make out the dilapidated farm house.

"They ain't nobody here," she

said to him. "Frank ain't here, Moss . . ."

"Alright, shut it off. We'll walk the rest o' the way," he said, climbing out.

"Moss! You're lyin'. What happened to Frank?"

He stopped momentarily to look at her but she could see only a faint pale whiteness that was his face and the outline of his round nubbin head.

"Come on," he said flatly. "Bring the kid."

"Moss . . .!"

He threw the door shut and stumbled away, as if he had not heard. She picked up little Frank putting the flap of the blanket over his face and got out, a sickening emptiness growing in her stomach as she bent forward in the driving sleet to follow him.

Inside, he had struck a match and was lighting a kerosene lamp when she struggled in, shutting the door behind her. The acrid stench of dirt and age and half burned wood in the rusty stove stung her nostrils. The light showed a table with several rickety chairs, some cupboards, and a bed in a far corner, but these things registered only vaguely. She went up to him holding little Frank tight against her.

"Frank . . . He's hurt? You gotta tell me, Moss . . .," she pleaded, her eyes wide, shifting wildly in their sockets, searching his ugly, pain twisted face.

Slowly, Moss nodded his head.

"He . . . he got hit too. . . ."

"Fr . . . Frank shot? Is . . . is he . . .?"

"He . . . he's dead."

She went back from him, slumping a little, still staring blankly. ". . . Dead . . .? Frank . . .?"

"They got him first. Caught him cold. He never knowed what hit him."

"My God!"

Moss set down the first-aid-kit and opened it. "Here. You gotta do some fixin' on this arm. I can't stan' it much longer . . ."

"I gotta go to him," she said, her face empty of expression. "He needs me. . . ."

"He don't need nothin'," Moss said. "Didn't you hear me? Frank's dead."

"I gotta go to him," Riba Sue repeated.

Moss grabbed her roughly by the arm and shook her. "You ain't goin' no place. You're stayin' right here with me an' doin' some fixin' on this arm, you hear?"

"Let go o' me! You're hurtin' . . ."

"I'm gonna do worse, you don't get some sense!" he snarled at her. "Now you listen real good, gal. Frank an' me, we talked a lot 'bout the way things 'd be if'n anything ever happened to him. We was real close, Frank an' me, the best kind o' friends. An' I ain't goin' back on my word jus' cause he's gone now." His voice softened and his lips spread showing the yellow stained

and broken teeth. "I'm gonna take care o' you jus' like I promised, Riba Sue. You an' the kid ain't got nothin' to worry 'bout. Now . . . How's that, eh?"

She stared at him, nausea rising from the pit of her stomach, a tremor passing over her body, and for a moment the room spun before her, and then it was passed, and her brain began to calculate, functioning coldly but clearly. He had a gun someplace on him that he always carried. Somehow, someway, she had to get it.

"I . . . I'll put little Frank over on the bed," she said, controlling her voice with effort. "Try . . . try to get the jacket off," she said, remembering the pressure of the hard object slapping against her when he had shaken her.

"Now, you're showin' some sense, gal," he said, slipping his good arm free of the sleeve, and grimacing with the pain as he slowly tugged the jacket from the other. He was breathing heavy with the effort when she came back coatless now, and more efficient. He had tossed the jacket onto the table and dropped his bulk on a chair.

"Does the pump work?" she asked him, nodding toward the sink.

"Yeah."

"An' the stove?"

"It'll do."

"Gotta have warm water," she said, going over and raising one of the iron lids. Chunk wood and pa-

per filled a box on the floor beside the stove. Quickly, she laid the fire, using splinters for kindling and regulating the drafts. "Take the scissors an' cut away your shirt sleeve," she said to him.

In one of the cupboards she found a pan, and at the sink primed the pump until it spewed water.

"You ain't gonna be sorry, Riba Sue," he said, his voice whiny from the pain. "You've knowed me as long's you knowed Frank, an' you know I'll be good to you. You know that don't you, Riba Sue?"

"How bad's the wound?" she asked him, the nausea creeping on to her again when he talked like that.

"They ain't no bullet. It went clean through. It weren't no mushroom kind neither. But it sure hurts like blazes."

She went close and examined it where he had cut away the sleeve. It had gone through the muscle but had missed the bone. The blood had tried to congeal but he had torn the clot away with the sleeve.

"Water'll be ready in a minute," she said.

He reached out and took her hand with his good one. "You jus' give ol' Moss a chance an' he'll make you cotton to him real good, Riba Sue."

She shuddered at his touch but tried not to show it. Her eyes darted to his jacket and her heart leaped when she saw the handle of the gun protruding from the pocket.

"'Guess that water must be warm 'nough," she said, slipping away and going to the stove. There, she raised her dress and tore a strip from her petticoat. She took the pan, setting it on the table, and began to cleanse the wound, watching him as he winced.

"There. Ain't so bad's it looked at first," she said, for something to say, the plan formulating in her mind.

"Me an' you's gonna git 'long alright, honey," he grinned up into her face and the rancid smell of his breath sickened her again. "Jus' soon's we git to know one 'nother little better," he went on, the full meaning of his words adding to her desperation.

Nervously, she reached to the kit and took the iodine. He was still looking up at her when she opened it and holding it close, poured it into the raw wound.

He screamed, leaping out of the chair as she dived for the gun. It caught in the pocket and she struggled with it stumbling backwards. Realization hit him and he swore savagely, grabbing up the scissors and running toward the bed.

"Drop it!" he barked back at her, his hand raised high, the scissors clamped in his fist, poised over little Frank. "You shoot an' I'll cut him sure!"

Riba Sue froze and little Frank began to cry.

"Drop it on the table! Hurry, 'fore I don't wait no longer!"

Slowly, she lowered the gun and placed it on the table.

"Now, come over here."

She did, with no fear inside her except for little Frank. "Please," she said. "Please, Moss . . . don't hurt him . . ."

He struck her with his good hand and she reeled across the room to the floor. She shook her head to clear it and he was over her.

"You gotta be learnt!" he spat down at her and she saw his belt in his hand. "You're my woman now!" And the leather strip lashed across her back and arms and legs until her senses began to leave her . . . then, he stopped. "Now, git up! You gonna finish this arm fix-in'. Then, you an' me . . . we gonna have a marryin' party. . . . Un'erstan'?"

She nodded her head slowly, his words still sounding far away, but the meaning of them clear to her.

"Git up!" he said, and he jerked her erect by her hair.

Over on the bed little Frank was crying. She tried to go to him but Moss dragged her to the table. He picked up the gun shoving it into his belt.

"Finish," he said. "'Try anythin' more an' I'll kill both o' you. That clear?"

"Yes," she managed, her resistance gone, the aching of her body from the beating secondary to her fear that he might harm her baby.

When she was finishing he ordered her to make coffee. In his plan-

ning he had anticipated the possibilities of having to "hole-up" there and had stocked supplies accordingly. She did as he told her, offering no opposition, and trying not to think of her Frank lying cold and dead someplace, where she did not know. The baby had stopped crying and she had moved him nearer the stove, laying him in a carton she had found and making a bed for him with her coat.

She poured coffee into a tin cup and took it to the table.

"You have some too," Moss said, looking up at her, almost as if he was trying to apologize.

She shook her head.

"Set anyway."

She did.

He slurped from the cup and stared at her, his little eyes darting over her face. "You . . . you hadn't oughta done that, Riba Sue." She looked downward at the table. "Frank an' me was friends an' I promised him. Ol' Moss ain't goin' back on a promise to a dead friend. Now, you know that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"I . . . I'm sorry I had to do you like that. I'm sorry, Riba Sue."

"Y . . . you won't harm little Frank?"

His face broadened in smile. "Pshaw . . . I ain't gonna do no harm to neither o' you . . . you be nice to me . . . Eh?"

She nodded again without looking up.

"Now, tha's my gal," he kept

grinning. "Whyn't you jus' go 'head over an' git ready, an' I'll be long once I finish this coffee, eh?"

She didn't look at him. Her whole body quivered with revulsion but she fought it, knowing that little Frank's safety depended on her every reaction.

"Tha's my gal," he repeated as she rose, going to the far corner of the room to undress.

When she was ready she lay down on the coarse bare mattress with her dress laid over her. She heard the scraping of his chair, watched him blow out the lamp and heard him coming toward her. When he was near she could hear the heaviness of his breathing and the rustling of his clothes as he took them off. Then, as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness she could make out his bulk moving to the bed. Panic gripped her. She swung to the floor and stood.

"What you doin'?" he said, reaching for her.

"I . . . I'm gonna stoke up the fire. Little Frank'll catch cold."

"Alright, alright," he snapped. "Be quick 'bout it."

She went to the stove and lifted off the lids, her brain racing frantically. She had come to the very end. Oh God! Help me! She prayed silently, shoving the chunk-wood into the pit of glowing coals, careful that the sparks would not spatter onto her naked flesh. She could feel his eyes raking her body lust-

fully as she stood there partially illuminated in the flickering light of the open stove, and quickly dropped the lids back into place.

She bent down to little Frank where she had placed him near the wood-box and tucked his blanket about him.

"Riba Sue?" Moss's voice, husky, impatient, came out of the blackness. "What you doin'?"

"I . . . I'm comin' . . .," she said, straightening slowly, resigning herself to what she must do.

He listened to the sounds of her bare feet and waited until he felt her come onto the bed beside him. He reached for her, the breath wheezing in his lungs, and his hands caressed her soft cool body rapaciously.

She let him draw her to him and sought his face with her hand tenderly, drawing her fingers along the stubble of his cheek down under his chin to the fatty part of his throat . . . and as his mouth searched for her own she drove the long jagged splinter with all of her force into that unprotected spot, wrenching her body free of his clawing hands at the same instant.

His cry of agony were choking,

gurgling sounds behind her as she ran to the wood-box, stumbling, almost falling . . . and he was half off the bed to his feet when she came up to him, the stick of chunk-wood high over her head. Once . . . twice . . . three times . . . the chunk smashed his head and face with a sickening, crunching thud, until he didn't move anymore and there was no longer the rattling noises from his throat. . . .

Exhausted, she crumpled to the floor. At last, she cried.

Later, when little Frank awoke, she managed to get up and dress, careful not to look toward the bed where he lay.

She had cried and the hurting had gone out of her throat. A numbing emptiness had taken its place within her whole being. Only the barest outline of a plan lay in her mind. She would take her baby and go home . . . back to the farm . . . to her people . . .

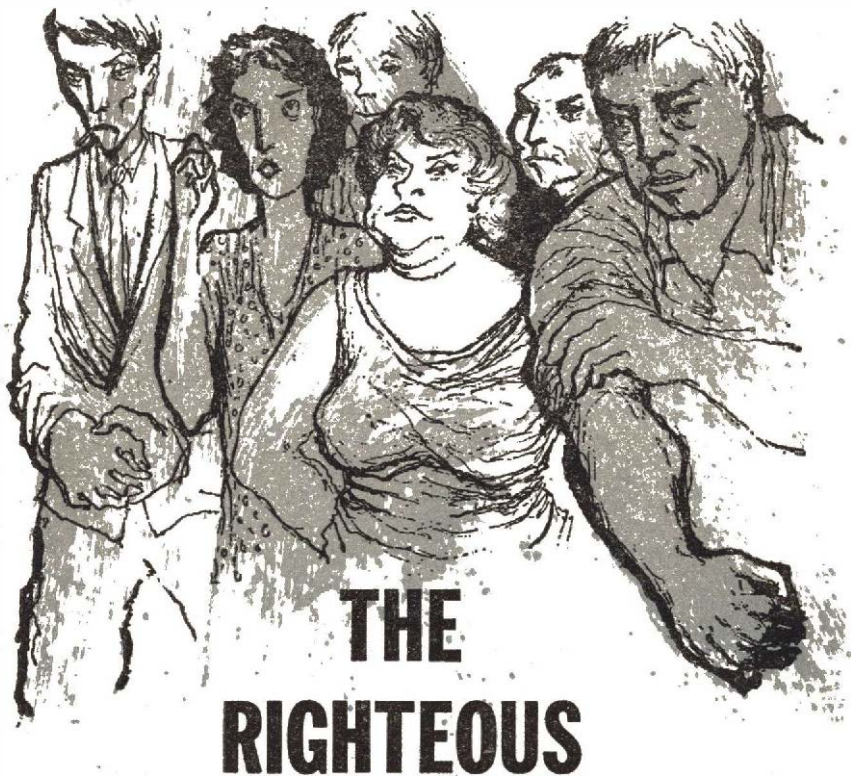
But first, she would go to the police. . . . Little Frank came first . . . and she would need the reward money . . . just as the police had promised her when she'd called them earlier that evening.



WITH HIS HANDS folded on the crook of his cane and his chin on his chest, the old man sat in a peaceful doze on the park bench.

He was a lean, gaunt old man

with long, slender limbs and a sensitive, pink face. His clothing was shabby but clean; his face, with its red-tipped, thin nose, had a scrubbed look; his hair was like a foam of rich, snowy white lather.



THE RIGHTEOUS

BY TALMAGE POWELL

"Slimy creep . . ." he whispered between broken lips. "Fiend . . ."

Neither fully asleep nor awake, he felt wondrously suspended, in tune with the fine summer day, the warmth of the sun, the verdant and clean smell of the park. For background music, the chatter and shouting of several little girls at play filtered into his senses.

Then a quick, but not bruising, blow struck him on the cheekbone. A rubber ball bounced down into his lap.

He picked up the ball and sat holding it while a little girl detached herself from her group of playmates and approached him.

She was frightened, but willing to face him. "I'm very sorry, mister," she said with quiet sincerity.

The old man's eyes glowed warmly. A smile came to his lips. The child became, to his quick intellect, more than a disembodied shout, a passing face. He saw the faded dress she wore, the scuffed shoes, and this touched him. In this respect, she was like all the other children in this run-down end of town. What touched him more was the clear, gentle face, the alert brown eyes, the sensitive mouth.

She seemed to him to be a rare, above average little girl, an unaccountable accident of delicacy and grace in teeming, crude surroundings.

She came a step closer, and he was glad that his smile took some of the fright from her.

"I didn't mean to, honest, mister."

"Of course you didn't," he said. He held the ball up and looked at it. It was tired sponge rubber with several chunks nipped from it by hard play.

"This poor old ball should have a rest," he said. "I think you need a new one."

His smile was so warm and genuine that it drew her closer. She smiled shyly in return. "I don't have any money."

"Well, suppose an elf had slipped a half-dollar in my pocket for a new ball?"

In her world, he realized, elves vanished at a very early age. His reference was quaint, archaic, but she accepted it politely, not giggling or remarking on it.

"I do thank you, mister, but my mother told me not to take candy or anything from strangers."

"And your mother is perfectly right," the old man said. His voice and enunciation were not in keeping with a park bench in this neighborhood. "But I did get in the way of your ball and bruised it. I'd like to make amends."

"It wasn't your fault, mister."

"Perhaps." His smile became a quiet laugh. "Anyway, I'm not a stranger. I live right over there. In that building with the brownstone front."

"Do you have a little girl?"

"Not a little girl. A big grown-up girl, such as you'll be one day."

"Is she pretty?"

"Oh, very pretty. And she has a

fine young husband. They live in a city far away. They don't know the kind of place I live in. They think I moved into a snug apartment from a little house at the seashore."

"I'd like to live by the sea," the little girl said. The conversation had sparked her quick imagination. Her playmates faded from existence. "Is the sea really like in pictures? Green and cool and sometimes blue?"

"Much better than any picture," the old man said with grave assurance.

"Why'd you leave if it's so nice?"

For an instant, his eyes looked into distances that were real, but distances that were not here. "It's a rather long story, child. My girl's husband had a wonderful chance to buy into the business where he works. I sold the house by the sea so they could do that. They don't know I had to sell the house."

"It's a secret?"

"Yes. Just between you and me. I told them I had some extra money. They think I moved into the city because the sea air was getting bad for me."

"I'm awful sorry you had to leave the sea, mister."

Her honest concern brought a catch to the old man's throat. For the first time in days, he was more to someone than a featureless face destined for limbo.

"Don't you worry," he said. "I may go back to the sea sometime.

Meanwhile, I'm glad we're not strangers any longer."

She nodded. "My name's Judy. What's yours?"

"I'm Mr. Moffet, Judy. For many years I was principal of a public school, where there were many little girls. But not many were half so nice as you."

Mr. Moffet's evening was, for him, typical. He ate dinner at Joe's Eatery. He stopped by a neighborhood tavern and sipped a single glass of beer while he watched TV. He retired to his room and his books.

He had little company, although he yearned for human companionship, camaraderie, laughter. Most people his age, he had found, were too old. Beauty had gone out of the world for them. They viewed the world situation with gloom and the younger generation as having gone to the dogs.

He saw the child the next afternoon in the park. He was reading when he became aware that she had been standing near him for some time.

"How are you, Judy?" he asked, closing his book.

"Just fine. We like the new ball, Mr. Moffet." She drew her hand from behind her back. She was holding a small red apple. "Would you like part of my apple?"

"Why, yes, I believe I would."

She sat beside him. He took his pen knife from his pocket and cut the apple in half. He handed her a

half and bit into his own. It was a trifle sour, but he murmured an expression of pleasure.

"What are you reading, Mr. Moffet?"

"A book about the conquistadores under Cortes."

"I remember Cortes. He had a war with Mexico."

He gave her a startled glance. "How old are you, Judy?"

"I'm eight. Almost nine."

"You haven't studied the Mexican conquest in school."

"No, sir," she said. She endured a moment of glum hesitation. "I read it in the library."

"Well, come now, that's nothing to be ashamed of."

She sighed. "I'm not ashamed. Only I run away. The library is a long ways off, and my mother can't take me. She works—my daddy didn't come home once, and ever since, my mother works."

"I see," Mr. Moffet said. He sat in silence for a moment, almost wishing he hadn't met the child. Strangely, she gave him a nagging sense of responsibility.

He stole a glance at her. She was clearly a cut above the average. Perhaps even an unusual child. He recognized her inner hungers, and he knew those aspects of human personality were not to be repressed. She had a spirit destined to feed, on the good or the bad.

"Tell you what, Judy. I have many books. You can read here in the park, under the trees."

Her eyes grew round and shining, and this was reward enough for him.

They were seen together often in the park after that, the quiet old man, and the spider-spindly child with her head hunched and her nose too close to the pages of a book.

In his natural innocence and tenderness, mellowed by all his years, it did not occur to the old man that they presented a sight unusual in any way. Nor did he suspect that the companionship of two people of such marked difference in age began to cause comment among adults who drifted habitually into the park.

His days took on a new meaning. It was a pleasure to talk with the child. She was the most perceptive youngster he had chanced upon in many years. He, the ex-educator, warmed to the task of guiding her reading, answering her questions. He was more than content. He would have been quite happy—had it not been for his suspicion that her eyes needed medical attention.

He thought of writing to Marian, his daughter, about the child. One evening in his shabby room, he started a letter: "There is a little girl of eight . . . she needs clothing and . . ."

He sat back and shook his head. He ripped the letter to pieces. How could he explain about a little girl in this neighborhood without ad-

mitting that he was living in such a place himself? No, it wouldn't do.

He counted his money carefully and checked the number of days until the first of the month, when he received his pension check. The hesitation faded from him. He nodded vigorously to himself, and wished the hours would hurry along to the next day.

It was late afternoon when she came to the park. She explained that she had been doing some housework.

"Did you bring me a book, Mr. Moffet?"

"We're not reading today, Judy."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No, child. We're going to fix it so you can read better. Do you know what an optometrist is?"

"Could you spell it? Lots of words I know when I see them that I don't know when I just hear."

He spelled the word.

"An eye man?" she inquired.

"Right. There's one in that block of buildings over there. He won't hurt you a bit, I promise."

"All right," she said, placing her hand in his.

Mr. Moffet waited in the outer office. It was dingy, dusty, a poor place to care for the treasure of the human eye. But his inability to afford a specialist and prescription did not dampen his eagerness.

He got to his feet when Judy came out of the small adjacent room. She was a solemn marmoset

with black plastic rims bridged across her tiny nose.

Her face held an expression of awe. She stared at the old man. Then her gaze searched the office, coming to rest on the window with the faded lettering and the darkening sky beyond.

She moved her lips wordlessly, and raised her hands to touch the perimeter of the black rims.

"Mr. Moffet . . ."

"Yes, Judy?"

"Everything is so—sharp!"

"Sharp and beautiful, Judy. Go out now and look at all of it."

He was awakened that night by a hard rapping on his door. He sat up on his sway-backed bed, his mind foggy from sleep and the compressed heat of the room.

He fumbled for a light, turned it on. The cheap alarm clock beside his bed reckoned the time at ten o'clock. He had been asleep only an hour.

The commotion outside his door increased. He heard voices rising in anger, a fist beating again at his door.

"What? . . . What? . . ." he said foolishly, stumbling as he got his pants on. "I'm coming."

Before he reached the door, it crashed open. He gaped at the people before him. He knew most of them slightly. Mr. Crosby, from downstairs, who came home drunk occasionally and beat his wife. Lemmon, a toothless, sour smelling barfly, who wasn't quite bright.

Mrs. Marlin, across the hall, to whose room men made surreptitious visits. Bingo, the skinny kid in the basement apartment whose eyes revealed the use of drugs.

There were more, faces Mr. Moffet didn't know. People attracted by the noise, avid for a spectacle.

The woman in the forefront was the first to speak. She was a slender, harried brunette, too skinny to be pretty. Her eyes reminded Mr. Moffet of a cat bitterly accustomed to sticks and stones.

"Where's my little girl?" she said. Her voice quivered with a passion that had passed over the borderline of fear.

"Girl?" Mr. Moffet said groggily.

"I'm Mrs. Parsons, Judy's mother. I've learned all about you! What have you done with my child?"

Mr. Moffet stared at her. Her body trembled like a suppressed steel spring. Her eyes were wild, in shadows of sooty strain. Fine sweat filmed the down on her upper lip and cheeks.

"Mrs. Parsons, I don't . . ."

He fell back a step. They crowded into his room, eagerly, each trying to get nearest to him. More people came up outside his door. The room became oppressive, like the room where a long, rotting illness has lingered.

"Lemme handle this," Mr. Crosby said. "He'll tell us soon enough."

"For God's sake!" the old man gasped. "Tell you what?"

"He knows," Lemmon said. "I've

seen them in the park every day."

"Ain't natural," Mrs. Marlin said. "Ugh!—Old man that age and a little girl . . ."

The old man began to have difficulty breathing. His gaze shied from one to the other of them.

An excited voice yelled in the hallway: "Hey, Joey, come on up! We got a creep in a corner!"

The human mass rolled toward the old man. The experience was so utterly strange and unique to him that he didn't know what to say or do. He stumbled backward, trying to realize that it was all real. They believed that he . . . He shivered. He felt sick.

Bingo's face loomed before him, eyes glittering, a sense of pleasure and self-importance flushing the skin. "I've seen him bringing her in here," Bingo said. "Time after time . . ."

"No!" Mr. Moffet cried in anguish.

"Fondling her . . ." Bingo said, licking his lips. "Now prob'ly killed her . . ."

"You fiend!" Mrs. Parsons screamed. "Where's Judy?"

An angry roar came from the crowd, covering any sound the old man might have made.

He was jerked roughly. He glimpsed the arrogance and hate in Mr. Crosby's face. Mr. Crosby held him by the neck. "Always said you was a slimy rat . . . You and them books . . . Acting like you was too good for the rest of us . . ."

They've resented and hated me from the beginning, Mr. Moffet thought dumbly. Why? What did I do to them?

"Quit fooling around," Bingo said, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "He was the last to see her. She can't be found no place. It's him, all right. Make him talk! Make him spit it all out!"

Mr. Moffet struggled feebly against the choking grip on his throat.

"Look out!" Lemmon said. "He's gonna slug you!"

Mr. Crosby was a big man who gloried in his size and weight. His shield against life's barbs and frustration was in his fists. He backhanded the old man across the face and knocked him down.

Mr. Moffet felt as if he were falling a distance far greater than just to the floor. He tried to get to his feet. When he was on his knees, Bingo kicked him in the face. He fell over backward.

The seething, excited, hard-breathing tide rolled over him. It seemed the room must shatter in one great explosion from the feeling that mounted within it.

Mr. Crosby jerked him to his feet and knocked him across the bed.

The old man glimpsed the faces hovering over him, closing in on him. He screamed wildly and scrambled from the bed.

Without knowing how it happened, he began a crazed fight to

reach the door. Jabbing fingers and arms were all about him like roiling snakes.

A woman struck him on the head with a purse. A knee caught him in the stomach.

He grabbed at the pain in his abdomen and almost fell helplessly under the suffocating mass of them.

Shouts and curses rained on him.

"Slimy creep . . ."

"Kick his filthy brains out . . ."

Their disorganized frenzy worked to the old man's advantage. Pummelled from all sides, he writhed his way into the hallway.

He tripped at the top of the stairs and went falling head over heels.

He crashed to a stop in the vestibule, lying half on his back. He heard the roar of them descending on him. He lurched to the front door, clawing at the doorknob. He fell out, onto the sidewalk, and went crawling twistedly toward the gutter, like a centipede with most of its legs torn off.

He was spent, filled with pain, yearning suddenly for the blackness that threatened to swallow him.

"Slimy creep . . ." he whispered between broken lips. "Fiend . . ."

A siren wailed. Hearing the commotion, someone had called the police.

At 11:05 there was still no word of the child. Reprimanded by the police, Mrs. Parsons and half a dozen of the neighbors waited at the station. The heat of excitement was

dying out of them. They limited themselves to dark murmurs, not quite to the limit of police patience.

At 11:06 a young detective, swarthy Italian and sweating, pushed through the swinging doors of the station and looked at them.

"You were wrong," he said. "The little girl is okay. The old man gave her some glasses. She ran away to the library with them. She was found back among the shelves of books reading when the evening hours were over and it was time to close. She's outside in a squad car waiting for you, Mrs. Parsons."

Mrs. Parsons covered her face with her hands and wept.

No one else moved or said anything or ventured to look at any other person.

Mrs. Parsons raised her thin face. "The old man . . . I think we

should all go in and tell him . . . if it's all right."

The detective shrugged.

The shuffling group followed him down a steel-barred corridor.

The detective tried suddenly to stop them, turn them back, but he was not in time.

Anyway, his effort was not necessary. The group slammed into an invisible barrier and went instantly rigid.

Swaying slightly, the old man's shadow fell across the cell where he had hanged himself.

Mr. Crosby was the first to break the stark silence.

"Geez," he said in the thin, defensive voice of a man trying to believe he's been cheated, "we was going to apologize, make it up to him . . . Whatever made him go and do a thing like that . . ."



DOUBLE PAYMENT

BY

MAX F. HARRIS

They looked down at Barry. "He jumped in too heavy," Hoak said. "Louie said to close him out." Hoak laughed deep and long. "I'll close him out, you betcha!"

BARRY sat on a frayed sofa, legs crossed, the loops of his deck pants riding up over the muscles of his legs. He blew smoke rings at the blackeyed barrel of the .38 staring him in the face.

A big guy in a loose sport shirt barged into the room, clamped yellow teeth down on a cigar and slammed the door. Chunks of plaster shook from the ceiling, fell to the floor and crumbled. The guy growled. His eyelids flipped up toward the ceiling. "A man could get killed in here."

The slim man in the gray suit, who held the pistol on Barry, smiled. Looked like it took effort to Barry. The guy's lips, barely turning up at the corners, stretched across his gray face like strings.

The big man clomped to the sofa, took a deep breath and expelled a cloud of smoke that smacked Barry's shock of blond hair and curled around his ears and neck. "You got the dough?"

Barry hunched forward, still sitting, stuck his hand in his back pocket and produced a bulging

wallet. He opened a compartment stuffed with hundred dollar bills. He drew the bills out and shoved them at the big man. "Surprise, Hoak."

Hoak grabbed the bills and stepped back, twirling the stogie between his thick lips. "Stow the rod, Joe," he said, frowning.

The 38 disappeared somewhere in the gray-faced man's suit.

Hoak's heavy eyebrows, which dipped down into the bridge of his nose, flicked while he counted. He fingered the last bill and looked up. "Five thousand, kid. Just half of it!" His hand shot beneath the tail of the sport shirt to a bulge in his hip pocket.

"The rest will get here," Barry said unruffled. "Don't pull your gat." He took a last drag from his cigarette and dropped the butt on the rug and ground down with the toe of one of his straw sandals. "You gave me to four o'clock."

"On the dot," Hoak said. "Five more grand." He rubbed the stubble on his fat chin. "No slip ups, see!" His hand came out empty from the shirt.

"It'll be here," Barry said.

Hoak made a roll of the bills, stuck his hand in his pocket, brought out a pair of rubber bands. He slipped the rubber bands over the head of the roll, separated them, popped them against the paper and slipped the roll in his pocket. He turned to the stone-faced man. "We have more trouble with these sys-

tem betters than we do the fuzz."

"He doesn't look a bad sort," Joe said, his eyes squinching into cold gray bars of steel.

"He jumped in too heavy," Hoak said. "Louie said to close him out." Hoak laughed, deep and long. "I'll close him out, you betcha!"

Barry watched the slim man. He had the coldest pair of eyes he thought he'd ever seen. "I'm down on my luck," Barry said. "But I've been working nights on a sure-fire scheme—using multiples of threes and sticking to it. Sure, I've had losses in the past, but I'll be back in the chips in no time. I may buy you guys a horse."

"Ha!" Hoak said. "Listen, Joe. See? Why did Li'l Louie let him have all that money? To make it tough on us? Like we ain't got problems?" He looked at Barry. "All I want is five G's. You keep your horse. If I don't get the five grand, it's your neck or mine." He raised his hand to his throat, fitted his fingers in the curve beneath his chin and yanked. "Get what I mean?"

"The money will get here," Barry said. "Stop worrying."

"Your dad?"

"Doesn't he always come through?"

"I wish I knew your old man. He must be the biggest sucker since Barnum. I'd fix up a game for him. Eh, Joe?"

Joe nodded, his face like a mummy.

"Dad said he'd give the money to Wease."

Hoak looked at Joe.

"Yeah, Barry phoned his old man," Joe said, glancing at the telephone. "I let him. Wease'll get the money here."

Hoak looked at his watch. "Two o'clock, Barry. I'll be back."

"Where you going?"

"What's it to you?"

"If the money gets here soon, I'm heading for the tracks. I'm not going to wait for you."

Hoak faced Joe. "Listen to the kid, Joe. Get the rod out."

In one motion, it seemed to Barry, Joe slipped his hand inside his coat and had the .38 out staring him in the eye.

"I'm going back to my trial," Hoak said. "It ought to be over this afternoon, kid."

"Trial? What trouble are you in now?"

"No trouble," Hoak said. "Li'l Louie has taken care of everything."

Barry reached in his shirt pocket, yanked out a cigarette and lighted it.

"You ought to get on our side, kid. We don't have to gamble. Of course, we got problems. I did a job for Louie the other night—a legitimate job, the guy owed us hundreds—and I had to knuckle him to get the lettuce. Pretty bad sight. And he squealed in the hospital—fingered me. I should have finished him while I had the

chance, like I'm going to do you if you ain't got the money by four o'clock."

"What if you don't beat the rap?"

"Ha! With Li'l Louie looking after me? Ha!" He turned toward Joe. "Look after him, Joe. He's a pretty stout kid."

Joe patted his .38, his face still.

Hoak took hold of the door-knob, twisted and jerked. He went through the doorway, pulling the door behind. He banged the door and locked it.

Barry sloughed back on the sofa, pulling up one of his legs and throwing it out on the cushions. He sighed. He was sure glad to know that Hoak was gone. The slim man, Joe, didn't call him a kid. After all, he'd lived almost twenty-five years.

The trial over, Hoak hurried to Li'l Louie's headquarters over a bar on Lewellen Avenue. "Two years, suspended, chief," Hoak said.

Li'l Louie popped the brim of his hat with his finger. "Yeah, you're lucky. One of these days—"

"You fixed it with the judge, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah. He looks after us. But it costs plenty."

Hoak dipped his hand into his pocket. "Here's five thousand," he said, flipping the roll on Louie's desk. "From the kid."

Louie reached his bony fingers

across the top of the desk and snatched the roll and toyed with the rubber bands. "The kid?" He swept his hand across the brim of his hat and his dark, glistening eyes narrowed into slits.

"Yeah. Barry—"

"Yeah. Yeah. Number 601. A tough one to keep up with."

"That's him. Big blonde kid. Lives high."

"But this ain't enough, Hoak. I told you. We're settling with the kid. Where're the other five G's?"

"He's got the rest coming. I gave him till four today." He looked at his watch.

"All right. That's the deadline. Well, this chunk will come in handy. I'm a little short on cash right now. And the day's not done."

"I gotta scram, chief. The kid and Joe, you know."

"Yeah. Yeah."

When Hoak got back to the room, his watch read 3:45. He yanked out a key, unlocked the door, shoved it open and trundled inside.

Barry sat on the sofa smoking nervously, his pants wrinkled, his face drawn. Cigarette stubs covered the carpet at his feet. He bounced up when Hoak banged the door shut.

Hoak stepped between Joe's pistol and Barry. The slim man moved quickly to Hoak's side, near the door.

"The rest of it," Hoak said.

"It hasn't got here yet, Hoak. Honest, I don't know what's the holdup." Barry looked at Hoak's yellow teeth and the twirling stogie. Puffs of gray matter suddenly shot from Hoak's mouth and fogged his eyes. He coughed. "Dad said he was going to give it to Wease. Joe knows Wease was coming straight here when he got the money. Dusie, 304, right?"

Hoak glared at Barry. He said nothing.

"Tell him, Joe," Barry said.

"That's right," Joe said.

Hoak looked at Joe, shifted his eyes to Barry. "Quit stalling, kid. You think I ain't met your type a hundred times?"

"It's the truth, Hoak. Tell him, Joe. Please tell him!"

Hoak looked at his watch. "You got fourteen minutes, kid."

"Maybe Wease got detained," Barry blurted. "Things like that happen."

Hoak looked at Joe.

"Not a chance," Joe said, his lips perfectly still.

Hoak's hand swung down and around to his hip pocket, stopped, swung back up and around with a .45 in the fingers.

"No!" Barry cried. "No! Hoak! It's not four o'clock!"

"What's a few minutes in your young life?" Hoak said, grinning. "You ain't going to deliver."

"Wait! Let me phone my old man once more."

"When'd you last phone him?"

"Ten-fifteen minutes before you got back here."

"What'd he say then?"

"I'm trying to tell you. He said he had the money. He was going to give it to Wease. He said Wease was in the building downtown."

Hoak glanced at Joe. Joe nodded. Hoak looked at the telephone and pointed the .45 at the dial. "Your last chance."

Barry dialed nervously. Sweat was popping out on his forehead. He lit a cigarette hurriedly. The phone jingled twice, and a third time. Barry puffed the cigarette. Then he heard an abrupt, "Hello."

"Dad, you don't understand. I'm in the biggest mess I've ever been in. You—"

"The money's on its way, Barry. I've had a tough day. Don't bother me again."

"Did you give it to Wease? Did you recognize him—worn pin-stripe suit, no chin, brown—"

"He identified himself. I gave the money to the right man."

"He knows where to bring it," Barry blurted, sweat pouring down his face.

"I hope so."

"Well, okay, Dad," Barry said, biting his lip. "Okay." He heard a click at the other end of the line. He dropped the receiver he was holding in its cradle. He looked at Hoak. "You heard him. The money's coming, Hoak."

"How do I know you called your

old man? I don't know your dad."

"That was my dad, Hoak."

"Five G's by four o'clock," Hoak said.

Barry looked at his watch and squirmed. The hands said 3:55. The ticking speeded up, it seemed to Barry. 3:57. No Wease. 3:58. Still no Wease. The seconds ticked. 3:59. "I don't know what's happened to him!" Barry cried. "He—." He saw the pistol get still. "Now, gimme a little time, Hoak. Hoak! Hoak! Ho—."

The slug caught him in the mouth and whipped him over the sofa. He fell with a thud, spears sticking in his body from head to foot. A black cloud formed above his head and descended, stifling his breathing. He gasped once and writhed, his arms floundering helplessly. The black cloud enveloped his body and he lay still.

"All right," Hoak said. "Let's move fast."

Before they got to the door, they heard a tapping.

Hoak stopped. "Joe, who's that!" he whispered.

Joe froze. Then he crossed the floor noiselessly. Placing his thin lips to the crack of the door, he hissed, "Wease?"

"Yeah!" a voice boomed. "Open up!"

Joe unlocked the door, swung it back.

A ratty-faced guy in a pin-stripe

suit walked in. "Where's Barry?"

Joe kicked the door shut. "Behind the sofa."

Wease looked at Hoak, passed in front of him, stepped around the sofa and stared. "Damn! You'll have a hard time beating this one, Hoak."

"Whaddaya mean?" Hoak said.

"It's Barry Caple, the judge's son."

Hoak's mouth plopped open.

Wease reached in his pocket and jerked out a roll of bills and flipped it on the sofa. Hoak looked. The rubber bands squeezed the roll as tightly as when he had first snapped them around the bills.



cops....
you want to see
your husband alive and
healthy. Put the \$100,000
in small bills in a suitcase
and bring it to.....

THE KIDNAPPERS

BY EDWARD CHARLES BASTIEN

THE Cafe Inn Time was jumping. Above the din of boisterous conversation could be heard the raucous tunes of a popular dance band coming from the juke box. On the narrow path of floor between the bar and the tables, a few couples were dancing with exaggerated liveliness.

In a far corner of the room two men sat nursing their beers. They tried to appear casual as they

watched an elderly, well dressed man who sat at the table opposite them. Their attention came alive when he opened a well stuffed wallet to pay his bill. He finished his drink, rose and walked toward the door.

"Come on Mike," said the smaller of the two as he punched a hard fist against the palm of his hand. "There goes our bacon and eggs."

They followed him out and

down the dimly lighted street. "We'll roll him in that alley next to the pool room," said Mike. They quickened their pace to be just behind when he got to the alley. But when they were only a few feet from him, he suddenly broke into a run, turning into the darkened alley.

"After him!" said Mike as he pulled a blackjack from his pocket. They darted into the alley but came quickly to a halt. Standing in the moonlight, facing them, with a smile on his face, was the well heeled man with an ugly looking automatic in his hand.

"Boys," he said jovially, almost laughing, "what a terrible thing to do. Don't you know that we have laws and that judges take a dim view of this sort of thing? My, my, and for what? A few paltry dollars."

The two hoods stood there with a hang-dog look on their faces, completely cowed by the automatic. Finally the smaller man said, "Give us a break mister. We've got to get out of town. We just wanted a few bucks. We didn't mean you no harm. We was—"

"No harm!" he pointed towards the big fellow. "With that blackjack in his hand. You'll have to come up with something better than that boys."

"He was only going to use it if things got out of hand. Mike here is in trouble with his ex-wife. He's three months behind in his ali-

mony payments. She had him in the cooler once before for non-support," he said.

The automatic dropped a little. "Domestic troubles, eh?" the elderly man said. "I can sympathize with you. My own married life hasn't been all milk and honey." He thought for a moment then said. "How much do you need?"

"If we had a 'C' note we'd get out of town and never come back," said Mike, speaking up for the first time.

"Only a hundred," said the elderly man. He cupped his jaw in his hand as though meditating. Then he continued. "You know there's something I've been working over in my mind for a long time. I might be able to use a couple of boys like you."

"Mister you let us out of this and you can trust us all the way," said the smaller man.

The automatic came alert. "Trust you!" the elderly man said with a smile. "I'll trust you when we get out in the light of the street. Tell you what you do. Turn around and walk back to the cafe. I want to talk to you."

A few moments later, over a cool drink, the three men were introducing themselves.

"I'm Jack Hughs and this here is Mike Pado," said the little man.

The elderly man nodded at the introduction and said, "My name is Humphery Nortwick, of Nortwick, Holmes and Carrol. In case

your not up on financial matters, it's an investment firm," he added. "You boys would have been in real trouble if you had pinched my wallet. The wheels of justice run faster and smoother for the well to do you know."

"We're real sorry Mr. Nortwick. I guess we were desperate." Jack said.

Mr. Nortwick was looking about the room. "Let's forget what happened. Say," he said enthusiastically. "Look at that lovely little creature over there. The one in the red dress."

The girl he described was young enough to be his granddaughter. What there was of her dress was skin tight. She was heavily made up with rouge and purple eye shadow.

"That's Tess Daley," said Jack. "Would you like to meet her Mr. Nortwick?"

Still looking at her he said, "No, no, not now. Maybe some other time." He turned back to them and sighed wistfully. "I envy you boys. You can have a ball every night. No worry about snotty newspaper columnists or acquaintances accidentally seeing you. Why it's only once in a blue moon that I dare come down here. When I do, I tell them up town, 'there's a little dive down on Chippewa Street that serves a beautiful steak.'" He nudged Jack in the ribs. "It's really the chicken I like."

Jack gave him a weak smile.

Then a more somber look came over his face. He said, "It still takes dough Mr. Nortwick. Me and Mike here have a tough time making just enough to get by."

"Yes, I guess your right," said Mr. Nortwick. "And that brings me to what I wanted to talk to you about." He stared hard into Jack's eyes, then into Mike's as though determining their trustworthiness. Then in an earnest confiding tone he said, "How would you boys like to split ten thousand dollars between you?"

"Ten thousand!" said Jack, wide eyed. He looked at Mike, then back at Mr. Nortwick. "Are you on the level?"

"Yes I am. I've worked it all out and the beautiful part about it is that it's perfectly legal."

"Well naturally we're interested, but if it's a straight deal why would you want to pay us so much?" hedged Jack.

"A good question. I think you'll understand after I explain. You see boys, it's a kidnapping and . . ."

"A kidnapping!" said Jack raising his voice.

"Please, please, some one will hear you," admonished Mr. Nortwick. He looked about at the tables close by. No one seemed to be paying them any attention. He went on. "Yes it's a kidnapping, but I want to have myself kidnapped."

"Yourself! But why would you want to do that?" Mike asked.

For a minute or so Mr. Nortwick made circles on the table with his glass as though mulling the question over in his mind. "I'll tell you why. Because I'm sick and tired of cocktail parties, canasta and fuddy duddy people. Then there's my wife. Well I've decided to drop out of sight, go to Mexico City or Panama and live a little." He paused. "But as you said a little while ago, it takes money. Well I've got a lot of money, enough for me and my wife, but most of it's tied up with the firm. I could sell my stock but then there would be all kinds of questions. It would never work. If I'm kidnapped however, my wife would sell the stock for my ransom. I'm planning on asking for one hundred thousand dollars."

Jack whistled. Then he said, "But suppose there's a slip up and we get caught. How could we prove we didn't really kidnap you?"

"You want a little insurance. I don't blame you and I've thought of that," answered Mr. Nortwick. "Before we go through with this I'll give you a signed statement explaining the whole plan and describing your parts in it. The most they can charge us with is disturbing the peace."

"No offense meant Mr. Nortwick, but what's to stop you from saying we forced you to write the statement?" asked Jack.

"Simple. Tomorrow morning go

down to the post office and rent a post office box. Mail the statement to that address. If we're caught the date on the post mark will verify that I gave it to you long before I was kidnapped."

When Mr. Nortwick had stopped talking it was obvious that the partners were far from convinced. The idea of an exonerating statement seemed reasonable enough, but in their dealings with the police they had found that the all important point was which side of the law you were on, and they had all too often been on the wrong side.

Mr. Nortwick inhaled deeply on a cigarette, apparently unaware of their hesitancy, he continued. "Every Friday evening," he said. "I go with a friend to the Buffalo Anchor Club. We leave at midnight and walk up Porter Avenue to a taxi stand, hire a cab and go home. Porter Avenue is usually deserted at that time of night. At some point between the club and the stand you pull up alongside, tap my friend on the head, and the three of us drive off. As easy as that," explained Mr. Nortwick.

"What's our part in the deal? Why do you need us?" asked Jack.

"Well for one thing," said Mr. Nortwick, "since this is a faked kidnapping, I want to make doubly sure it looks genuine and what's more convincing than to be picked up off the street by force. Also I need a car. It wouldn't do," he smiled, "to be kidnapped in my

own car. I need you to buy one for me. Something for about five or six hundred dollars. Now if you're interested in all this we'll get started right away. At ten o'clock tomorrow, come down to my office in the Grayson building and I'll give you the money for the car."

Jack and Mike sat there for awhile not knowing quite what to say. "I realize this is a lot to digest all at once," said Mr. Nortwick. "Tell you what. I'll go over to the bar and have a drink. Meanwhile, you talk it over and decide if you want in." Mr. Nortwick rose and smiling urbanely gave them a slight bow and made his way between the crowded tables to the bar.

After he left Jack reached for a cigarette and lighted it. Mike leaned forward resting his elbows on the table. "What do you make of this guy?" he asked.

As he blew a cloud of smoke out of his mouth, Jack answered, "I think maybe he's good for a car and a hundred bucks or so."

"You think he's serious?" said Mike.

"Who knows? Anyway we'll go over to that office tomorrow and find out. Maybe we can even get the ten gees he talked about. And that letter he said he'd write, do you think the cops would buy that?" asked Jack.

"As long as everything happened like the letter says I think they'd have to," answered Jack.

"Well, let's just play him along for as much as we can get. They can't hang us if he wants to give us his money," said Mike.

The two men looked over toward the bar at Mr. Nortwick. He had bought Tess Daley a drink and was engaging her in conversation. She was giving him the cool treatment, playing hard to get, the way the girls did to the uptown business men who were out for a fling. When Tess turned around to look at the clock on the rear wall Jack caught her eye and nodded to Mr. Nortwick, giving her the go ahead sign. As she turned her attention back to Mr. Nortwick they saw her relax into a smile and warm up to him, placing her hand lightly on his arm as she talked.

"Looks like the old codger has changed his mind about Tess. He's a typical uptown sucker for the night life," said Jack. He spotted two unescorted girls a few tables away. They were looking his way invitingly. "What are we waiting for?" he said to Mike with a wink. "Mr. Nortwick will pick up the tab."

With their new girl friends they walked up to the bar where Mr. Nortwick was sitting with Tess Daley and ordered a round of drinks. Mr. Nortwick easily persuaded them to allow him to pay the bill.

"Well boys," Mr. Nortwick said "it looks like you've decided."

The following morning after going to the post office they met Mr. Nortwick in the lobby of the Grayson building.

"Good morning boys," he said with a warm handshake. "I thought it would be more discreet if I met you down here." From an inner pocket he withdrew an envelope and handed it to Jack. "The money for the car," he said. "By the way, I'll meet you tomorrow night at the Cafe Inn Time. I want to pick up the car and park it in a private garage." He smiled and patted them both on the shoulders. "We can't have you out joy riding in that car can we?"

As he talked Mr. Nortwick waved an affable good morning to a few men who got off the elevator. In a quiet tone of voice he added, "About the ten thousand we talked about. I'll have a thousand dollar down payment for you tomorrow night." Turning to go he said, "See you then," and he walked toward the elevator.

Jack and Mike walked out onto the street scarcely able to believe their ears. "Did you hear what he said? A grand tomorrow night. And this envelope he gave us. I can't wait to open it," said Jack.

The following evening when they arrived at the cafe Mr. Nortwick was already there. As they walked up to his table he rose graciously, indicated their chairs and ordered a round of drinks.

"Well boys, did you pick it up?"

"Yeah," said Jack. "A fifty-four Chevy. Not a bad little car either. The engine purrs like a kitten. Shouldn't have any trouble with it."

"Fine," said Mr. Nortwick. "And how many keys did you get with it?"

Relieved that Mr. Nortwick hadn't questioned about the price of the car, Jack answered. "Two. Each one fits all the locks. The doors, the glove compartment, and the trunk."

"Alright," Mr. Nortwick said. "We'll each keep one. Now look, everything is set for next Friday at midnight. It won't be necessary for us to meet again till then. The car will be kept in a private garage near the Anchor Club. During the evening, on some pretext, I'll leave the club and park the car on Porter Avenue. You walk down Porter about eleven-forty-five, get into the car and wait for my friend and me."

"Another thing," said Mr. Nortwick. "Just in case there's a change in plans, I want you to spend Friday evening in the cafe here. I have the phone number and will be able to reach you."

Mr. Nortwick held another envelope in his hand, like the one he gave the partners in the office lobby, but this one was much fatter. They couldn't keep their eyes off it as he waved it temptingly before them.

"After I give you this envelope I

have every reason to believe you boys will carry out your end of our little arrangement." Both Jack and Mike went poker faced, hoping their thoughts wouldn't show. "Because I've done a little checking on you."

There faces fell. "What do you mean?" said Jack apprehensively.

Unperturbed by the note of truculence in Jack's voice, Mr. Nortwick went on. "I have it from a confidential investigator that I have occasion to employ from time to time that you have a minor charge against you in Cleveland. Mugging I believe. Oh, not enough to get the local police interested I agree. But if some one were to . . . well we'll let that go." He shook his head in affected disillusionment. He laid the envelope on the table. "I can count on you then," he said meaningfully.

Friday was a chilly rainy evening. Jack and Mike sat at a table at the Cafe Inn Time near the phone booth. They were drinking beer and eating pretzels. They had not wanted to get this deeply involved with Mr. Nortwick but they saw no way out. Besides, if all went well they would be ten thousand dollars richer . . . and maybe even more.

They were there about a half an hour when the phone rang. Before the waiter could, Jack picked up the receiver. It was Mr. Nortwick.

"Jack," Mr. Nortwick said. "There's been a little oversight. We're going to be in our hideaway for a few days after the job and we'll need a few provisions. However I have them here at my place. I wonder if you would get the car and drive over and pick them up." He gave Jack the address of the garage.

"But do you think we ought to take the chance of being seen over there?" said Jack.

"I don't think there's any danger. It will be dark by the time you get here. No one will notice you. It will be just another car coming into the alley. I've got cots, food and blankets. We can't possibly stay where we're going without them."

About a half an hour later Jack and Mike were driving down Lamarck Blvd. It was a fashionable street lined with stately elms. Even through the rain the street lights revealed beautifully landscaped lawns and shrubbery. The mansions were set deep on wide lots.

"Wow, look at these places!" said Mike. "They're regular palaces. I can't see why a guy would want to leave all this."

"Yeah," said Jack, "but as long as we get our ten grand what do we care."

"That looks like the house over there," said Mike. "It's got hedges down either side of the drive like he said."

"But the house is so far back

from the street I can't make out the numbers.

"Pull in the drive," Mike said. "If it's the wrong house, pretend you're just turning around."

It was Mr. Nortwick's house and they pulled back to the garage as he had instructed them. They turned off the motor and the lights. When they looked around Mr. Nortwick was just stepping from a shrub lined walk onto the driveway to meet them. He was dressed in a dark oil-skin slicker. The rain was dripping from his hat. There was a troubled look of urgency on his face.

"We've got to hurry boys," he said. "Quick, in the garage. Get the boxes on the far side. Put them in the back seat."

They hurried into the darkened garage while Mr. Nortwick took a large bundle from the walk next to the drive and put it in the trunk. The car was loaded in a matter of minutes and the boys were ready to back out of the drive.

"Whee, I'm glad that's over," said Mr. Nortwick as he tilted his head to let the rain water run off his hat. "My friend is due here any minute. Better go right away. Remember, be there at eleven forty-five."

As Jack and Mike backed out they saw him stroll up the walk towards the house.

car Jack and Mike saw two figures in the drizzling rain making their way slowly towards them. Under a street light about twenty feet away they made out the features of Mr. Nortwick. He seemed the worse for drink and if it hadn't been for his companion's tight grip on his arm it seemed likely he would have taken a more circuitous course than the side walk afforded.

Just as they passed the car Mike leaped out, black jack in hand, and struck a numbing blow to the head of Mr. Nortwick's companion. He crumbled to the ground and lay motionless. Mr. Nortwick immediately dropped his drunken role and the three of them quickly got into the car and headed out of town.

They drove for about an hour at Mr. Nortwick's directions until they arrived at an abandoned farm house. It was located on a small hill. To the left of it were the fields stretching over a shallow valley. To the right was a thick woods that extended some distance along a road that disappeared at the top of the hill.

They parked the car in the rear, out of sight from the road. From the back seat they took the boxes of provisions. They went into the house and down into the basement.

"Well boys, this is our home for the next few days," said Mr. Nortwick. "Cover up those windows with the black cloth from the provision boxes and then we can have some light."

Through the rear window of the

A little while later they had made themselves as comfortable as possible on some army cots. Mike was mixing highballs. Jack got the radio out and waited for a news bulletin.

"I don't think there will be any bulletins Jack," said Mr. Nortwick. "I warned them not to notify the police."

Jack and Mike said nothing. They sat sullenly sipping their drinks.

"Come come, is this any way to act?" said Mr. Nortwick. "When I checked up on you I was just protecting my investment." Then he added with a smile. "Did I complain when you bilked me out of a few dollars when you bought the car?"

Mike turned suddenly towards him. "How did you know about that?" he asked.

"I didn't," replied Mr. Nortwick. "But under the same circumstances it's exactly what I would have done." The partners grinned sheepishly. Then all three of them broke out laughing. With the ice thawed they resumed their former cordial relationship. Mr. Nortwick confided in them the details of the plan to pick up the ransom money. If all went well they would be on their way in three days.

He completely won their confidence when he regaled them with stories of shady business deals in which he had been involved.

Towards evening of the second day Mr. Nortwick sat on his cot,

his back resting on a cushion propped against the wall, telling of his plans for the future. There was a look of deep satisfaction on his face, the expression of a man who is finally going to realize his dreams.

"I'm going down to one of those little Latin American countries," he said. "I'm going to buy a small tavern. Something like the one I met you boys in. One where there's a lot of life, music and pretty girls. No wife or business partners."

He raised his glass and drained the last of his drink. "Mike, would you make me another highball?" He held his glass out. Mike took it and poured a shot of whiskey into it and then went over to the water jug. He turned the tap on but only a few drops came out.

"We're out of water," said Mike.

Mr. Nortwick stood up. He went over to one of the shaded windows and drew the covering away. "It's getting dark," he said. "We pick up the money tomorrow night. I had better go and get some water. There's a spring about a half an hours walk from here. It's down near the road just inside the woods. I'll take the water container and be back in an hour."

They walked up with him, out onto the front porch. As he walked down the steps he said, "Remember, don't smoke any cigarettes on the porch. They can be seen for miles around." They watched him disappear into the dusk.

They returned to the basement. Two . . . three hours passed. It had been pitch dark outside for a long time now. Jack and Mike became worried.

"What's keeping the old codger?" said Jack. "He should have been back a long time ago."

"Maybe he's pulling a fast one," said Mike. "Maybe he's going to pick up the ransom money by himself and take off. How do we know when he told them to drop the money off."

"Yeah," said Jack. "You know, there's something fishy about this whole deal. Everything's too pat."

"'Course he did give us the thousand bucks," said Mike.

"What's a thousand when he's getting a hundred gees," Jack said. "I'm for waiting one more hour, then if he doesn't show let's get out of here."

"What was that!" cried Mike. Suddenly bright shafts of light poured through the cracks in the curtained windows. The two men looked at each other in terror. A loud speaker blared out. "Come out of there with your hands up! The place is surrounded!"

"We've got to get hold of ourselves, Mike," Jack said. "Remember, we're not guilty of anything."

"That's right, said Mike with a sigh of relief. "I almost forgot."

They walked upstairs and out the front door with their hands in the air. In seconds two detectives were on the porch frisking them.

"Where is he?" demanded one of the detectives gruffly.

"Who?" asked Jack.

"Come on, you know, don't try to play it cute. Humphrey Nortwick," said the detective.

"Well Mike," said Jack to his partner. "I guess the game's up."

"Search the place," said the detective to his men.

Just as Jack finished explaining the plot, and that Mr. Nortwick had gone after water, a young patrolman called the detective over and talked quietly into his ear. As he spoke he pointed towards the rear of the house.

"Come here," the detective said gruffly. He directed them to walk to the rear of the house. He pointed in among the bushes. "That your car?" he asked.

"Well, not really," Jack said. "We bought it for Mr. Nortwick like I told you."

"Yeah," said the detective cynically. He held out his hand. "Here are the keys to the trunk. Open it."

Jack took the keys and walked over to the car. He opened the trunk. "Jesus!" he cried. "A body." He looked at the detective. "Who is he? How did he get in there?"

"Come off it bud. You killed him and put him there. That's Humphrey Nortwick."

"Your wrong detective, honest your wrong," pleaded Jack. This man's bald and Mr. Nortwick's got thick grey hair. Ain't I right Mike?"

"Yeah," said Mike. "He's telling you the honest truth officer."

The detective snarled. "Listen you cheap hoods, that's Humphrey Nortwick. I know him personal." He took a picture from his coat pocket. "See this," he said. "It's Humphrey Nortwick." The picture was the exact likeness of the dead man in the trunk.

"Now where is the ransom money?" demanded the detective. "You

picked it up three hours ago down at the spring in the woods."

"The spring in the woods! Did you hear that Mike?" screamed Jack. "Why that dirty, double crossing rat. If I ever get my hands on him I'll kill him! So help me I'll kill him!"

"You've done all the killing your ever going to do, punk," said the detective as he snapped the handcuffs around his wrists.



She wobbled dizzily into the kitchen, threw open the window, and sucked mightily of the fresh air. The coffee had boiled over and put out the flame of the gas jet. "His goddam precious coffee pot," she sobbed. "It's enough . . . to kill you!"

Poor Widow

BY MADELINE M. FRASER

SHE DECIDED definitely to kill him the day he found the ad in the paper. She had often wished him dead; but, after all, wishing your husband dead and taking definite steps to assist him to get dead are two different things.

It had been encouraging when he had blacked out—once in a motel room in Visalia and once in the coffee shop in Bakersfield. Maybe, she reasoned hopefully, he might black out again while driving. It would wreck the car of course, but as any shrewd investor knows, it takes money to make money. The loss of a 1955 Plymouth, which she

couldn't drive anyway, was a small loss compared to her freedom, the apartment, their bank account and that nice \$50,000 insurance policy. There it was, a beautiful piece of paper worth \$50,000 to her just lying there snug in the fireproof file until that happy day when Henry would finally considerably die.

So, she waited and consoled herself with the insurance statistics about wives outliving their spouses. It was comforting but she knew banks were obstinate about cashing statistics. Henry, on a rigid diet, grew slimmer and healthier, while Nell's hopes grew dimmer.

It wasn't until the night he rushed into the kitchen with the ad for the ranch that she really decided to assist him out of the land of the living.

"Look, Nell, this is it. Just what I've been looking for." He read the ad aloud and she shuddered in disgust as a trickle of saliva moistened his chin.

"For God's sake, wipe your chin."

She handed him a clean dish towel and as he dabbed at his mouth, she took the paper.

"For sale," she read, "lovely ranch. Six hundred fifty acres Hidden Valley. Illness of present owner necessitates sacrifice sale."

There was more, but she didn't read any farther. She threw the paper on the drainboard.

"You're crazy," she accused, "just plain crazy. What do you know about ranches?"

"Selling farming equipment is my business. I've got a lot of contacts up there already and I know the area. It's beautiful, Nell. You'd love it."

"Like hell I would."

She thrust her hands back into the dishwater. This should end it. The stupid fool should know by now that she wasn't about to move to any God-forsaken ranch.

The stupid fool however didn't get the message.

"You forget, Nellie," he wheedled, "I'm a farm boy from way back. I was born on a farm."

"You call that lousy handfull of dust your parents owned a farm?" "They damned near starved until they had the good sense to die. Then what did they leave you—nothing but a pile of debts."

"That was during the depression. Nobody made any money then. Besides," he reminded cheerfully, "you're always telling me that you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy."

That's for sure, she thought bitterly, that's for damned sure. Once a hick always a hick.

He attempted to put his arms around her but she jerked away.

"Leave me alone, and take this junk and burn it." She thrust the newspaper against him. It dropped to the floor.

"I'm going to look into this, Nell. When I go up Monday I'm going to investigate it. I'm not a young man any longer and these blackouts scare me. I just can't drive two and three hundred miles a day anymore. This just being home on week-ends isn't right. It's not the way married folks should live."

He picked up the paper, tore out the ad and carefully put it away in his wallet.

She looked at him. His eyes were bleak and remote, his mouth set stubbornly. She had seen the same look once before, soon after their marriage. He had brought up the subject of a family.

"I want a son, Nellie," he had

announced quietly, "every man wants a son to carry on his name."

Now Nellie didn't want a son or a daughter or a grandson or a granddaughter cluttering up her life. She didn't even want a pet. Kids and pets, tying you down, dirtying up the house, getting sick all over the furniture.

She was young and still almost in love so she tried to reason with him.

"Babies change things, honey," she pointed out. "We're happy together, why can't we just leave it that way."

He looked grim.

"Women even die having babies," she cried desperately.

"Not anymore. You're healthy as a horse," he reminded brutally, "and anyway, I want a son."

So she had given him a son—or tried to. Some nine months of disfigurement and eighteen cruel hours of labor and she had presented him with a son—a dead son.

He was in her room when she came out from under the anesthetic and holding her tight in his arms he told her the baby had been born dead.

She sobbed hysterically. Oh, God, she thought, I can't go through this again, never, never, never.

"Nellie, baby," he soothed, "don't cry. Please don't cry. I know you're all broken up about the baby, but remember what you said about the two of us. We still have each other."

Later the doctor told her she

could never have a child.

I tried, she thought virtuously. I tried to please him and it damned near killed me. Just like this crazy living on the ranch would kill me. He might just as well take a gun and shoot me outright. That would be murder. Wait a minute, just wait one little minute. Nobody has to stand still and let somebody murder them. Self-defense, that's what they call it—self-defense. That's it, stall for time. If Henry should die before he bought this ranch then everything would be fine. Just time now, it was all she needed, time to think, to plan, time, time. Seconds now, just buy seconds now, then hours, then a few precious days.

She opened the door to the refrigerator.

"Let's have a beer, honey. Go into the living room and relax."

"I'm not forgetting," he warned, patting the wallet in his hip pocket, "you can't talk me out of this."

"My God, what do you think I'm trying to do; bribe you with a can of beer?"

She jabbed the opener four times into the two cans.

I wish it was his fat face she thought viciously.

She drank half a can in quick, greedy gulps, before she felt calm enough to talk again.

"What about our friends. You'd miss them if we moved."

"They're not my friends," he reminded flatly, "they're yours."

"They'd like to be friends with

you. Dan and the other husbands are always asking you to go bowling with them when we play bridge."

"I don't like bowling," he protested pettishly. "Besides when a man drives two or three hundred miles a day he doesn't feel like gadding around at night."

"What about the movies and the shops," she coaxed. "I'll bet you'd miss those."

He looked at her contemptuously.

"You know damn good and well I haven't been to a movie in years and as for shopping, we could drive into Fresno a couple of times a month."

A hysterical giggle rose like vomit in her throat. Shopping in Fresno twice a month. Oh boy, what a gay, riotous, abandoned life we'll live. Put on your old grey bonnet, early to bed early to rise. What fun! Milk the cows at dawn, feed the chickens and then for that special kick, the big fling—slop the pigs. Here sooeey, sooeey, sooeey, come eat your nice, delicious slop because we're going to really live it up. Today is shopping day in Fresno.

Henry took his empty beer can out to the kitchen.

"I'm going to bed," he announced yawning, "you coming?"

"Pretty soon, I've still got the dishes to finish."

She automatically straightened a piece of bric-a-brac on the end table, picked up a ceramic ash tray and

held it briefly, lovingly against her cheek. These are all my things, she thought fiercely, all my lovely possessions. We share this apartment all week, living here happy and secure until he comes home on week-ends with his dirty, smelly laundry cluttering up the place. His thick, moist mouth seeking hers. The fat, fumbling hands caressing her body. No more dirty clothes, slobbering lips, worm-like fingers crawling and pulling at her clothes. She turned out the light. The dishes could soak until morning.

Henry very carefully stayed away from the subject of the ranch during the week-end but Nell noticed him absentmindedly patting his wallet several times.

He hasn't forgotten it she thought grimly.

He packed early Monday morning and she was sitting at the breakfast table over coffee and a cigarette when he came in.

"There's your coffee, honey."

"Sorry, I'll have to skip it. I'm anxious to get past the freeway before the morning rush."

He kissed her perfunctorily and started for the door.

"I may not get a chance to call you during the week. I may try to work straight through so I can have more time to look at the ranch."

She winced. At least he hadn't said, "my ranch" or worse, "our ranch". But the pride of possession was right there.

"O.K., honey, I won't worry if I don't hear from you. You take a look at it and then if it really looks good maybe we can both run up over the week-end and see it."

She saw the eager responsive look of hope and she turned her head quickly before he could see the contempt on her face.

Down boy, she thought sarcastically. Let me beat hell out of you then the first time I toss you a bone you come running to lick my hands.

"Do you mean that, Nell. Will you come up next week-end with me?"

If he had a tail now, he'd be wagging it.

"Why not? I've been thinking it over and maybe you're right. At least it can't do any harm to look at it."

"Nellie, I promise you, I swear, you'll never regret it." He babbled on incoherently.

"The freeway," she reminded gently.

"Sure, honey, sure."

The door closed behind him. Maybe she thought hopefully he might fall and break his neck going down the stairs or perhaps the cable would break on the elevator.

"Wake up," she muttered, "you know there's no Santa Claus."

She added some water to the coffee pot, set it on the fire and turned on the gas.

The coffee pot was an old granite thing which had belonged to Hen-

ry's mother. Early in their married life he had carefully instructed her how to make the coffee, boil it a few minutes then drop in an egg shell to settle it.

She looked at the old coffee pot with tolerant amusement.

"Kid," she confided softly, "you're going to be one of the first things to go. I'm going to replace you with a beautiful chrome and glass job."

She picked up the morning paper, then tossed it aside. No time now for reading. Just thinking and planning. A whole week to do it in. Must keep it simple though, simple and uncomplicated. Too much detail means too many lies and too many lies mean too many chances to get crossed up.

A car accident—now that would be logical. Everybody knows he drives all the time. Un huh, no good, she thought. I can't even drive a car leave alone know anything about what is inside it. Anything I did to it would probably make it run even better. Poison? There's a thought. Every home has poison around. No, she had read somewhere that poison is a woman's weapon. Sleeping pills. Now there is a possibility. They both took them occasionally. How to get them into him. She couldn't just hand him a bunch and say, "Darling, will you please take these sleeping pills and quietly die so I can go on living the way I want to with all that nice money."

Putting them in his coffee might work but it would mean an autopsy, and an autopsy would mean questions. Nobody would believe he would commit suicide just when he was getting ready to buy the ranch. No, it would have to be—. She rubbed her eyes. They were beginning to ache and water. She started to get up. Coffee, perhaps a nice, strong cup of coffee would help. Coffee! She knew then; the coffee had boiled over and put the gas out. Frantically she clawed her way to the window, opened it and drew fresh air greedily into her lungs. She could hear the faint hissing of the gas. She groped her way to the stove, turned off the gas then staggered back to the open window. She lay against the window, weak and trembling; shaken more by the thought of her nearness to death than by the actual toxic quality of the gas.

"His damned precious coffee pot," she sobbed. "I could have been killed. It happens every day."

Her sobs subsided into gasping hiccups, then gradually ceased completely. She stood there by the open window for several minutes—thinking, speculating. If she had died it would have been called an accident. A tragic, unforeseeable thing, but still an accident. This was it. So simple, so uncomplicated and so logical.

She hadn't heard the chimes at the front door so she turned, startled, as her friend from the apart-

ment next door came into the kitchen.

"You didn't answer the door, so I thought you might be in the shower, so I just came on—Omgawd, Nell, what's wrong?"

The other woman pointed to the coffee pot.

"I was reading the paper, Alice. I just put the coffee on to warm it up when, whammo! The first thing I knew everything started getting fuzzy. I got the window open and the gas shut off and here we are."

"You ought to get rid of this monstrosity, it's going to kill somebody some day."

"I think Henry would divorce me if I ever got rid of that coffee pot. It was his Mother's."

"I know what you mean. I've got an old beat up dutch oven that Dan's mother used a couple of thousand years ago and if I don't use that for all the stews, Dan won't eat them."

Alice sniffed the air.

"I don't smell the gas anymore. Do you think its safe if we have a cigarette?"

"We'll soon know." Nell pushed the pack across the table.

They smoked in companionable silence for a few moments then Nell spoke.

"We may not be neighbors of yours much longer."

"How come. Has Henry been transferred?"

"No, he's just decided he wants to buy a ranch."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm serious. He says he's getting tired of the driving and his heart has been bothering him—so it's the pure and simple life for us."

"How do you feel about it?"

Nell shrugged. "It sure as hell isn't my idea but if that's what he wants I'm willing to give it a try."

Alice shuddered. "My God, Nell, I wouldn't be caught dead out in the country. Dan even has to give me a tranquilizer before he can get me past the Los Angeles city limits."

Alice glanced at her watch.

"Oh, Lord," she wailed, "Dan's coming home for lunch. I've got to scoot."

She started to work on the stove, blotting up the cold coffee. It couldn't be better she thought. Alice practically witnessed the coffee boiling over and putting out the gas and if anything ever comes up she can testify that I was willing to go live with him on the ranch. She smiled complacently as she scrubbed at the brown stains.

The remainder of the week she constantly worked and planned her husband's murder. Step by step. It seemed foolproof. She carefully rehearsed all questions and answers which might be asked by police, reporters, or neighbors. She worked to get the right blend of grief, bewilderment and frankness into her actions.

It was after eight on Friday evening when he came home.

He came into the kitchen. His face was drawn and white with fatigue from the strain of the long drive.

"Hi, darling," she greeted, "you look tired."

He sank wearily into a chair.

"God, I'm bushed. I'll be glad when this rat race is over."

She glanced at him warily.

"Did you look at the property?"

"I saw it, Nellie, it's wonderful. Just the way I had imagined it."

He straightened, the weariness flooding away under the deluge of eager anticipation.

"Just wait until you see it," he promised. Then, "you are still planning on going up with me tomorrow aren't you?"

"Of course."

She put a hot plate of food in front of him.

"Better eat your dinner."

He tried a few mouthfuls then pushed the plate away.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm just too damned tired to eat. What about you. Have you eaten?"

"I had a sandwich earlier. I didn't know what time you'd be in."

She opened the door of the refrigerator.

"How about a beer?"

"Will you have one with me?"

Little beads of moisture rimmed the can and she wiped them away with a clean dishtowel.

"I don't think I'll have one now. The girls are playing bridge at Alice's to-night and we'll probably have something over there. I

think I will have some coffee though."

She turned on the gas. This is it, she thought, the first step.

"Why don't you take the beer into the living room," she suggested. "We can talk while I get ready."

Get him out of the kitchen away from the coffee pot. It had to boil over before she left. The ugly brown stains had to be there on the stove, mute evidence of the cause of the tragedy.

He followed her out of the kitchen, yawning loudly. Beer always made him sleepy. So far, so good—right on schedule.

He went into the bathroom and she could hear him searching through the medicine cabinet.

"Nell," he called through the open door, "where are the sleeping pills?"

"Sleeping pills?" "What do you want them for?"

"I want to take one."

"I thought you said you were tired."

"I am physically, but mentally I'm all keyed up. Excited about the trip tomorrow I guess."

Oh you doll, she thought, you sweet, lovable, stupid doll. A sleeping pill on top of that beer and I can come in here later with a brass band and you'll snore right through it.

He went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Then called, "Hey, Nell, the coffee boiled over. Do you want me to clean it up?"

"No," she shrieked. Then calmer, "no, don't bother. I'll get it later."

"Do you want me to pour you a cup?"

"No, not now. I'm late as it is."

She turned as she reached the door and looked back at him. This she had known all along she would have to do. Nothing had happened yet and she knew if she looked at him for the last time and felt anything like pity, love or remorse she could turn back. She looked at him coldly, clinically. He stood there; a middle-aged fat man, yawning and scratching his stomach. She thought with amazement, I've lived with this man for over twenty years and I'll never see him alive again and yet I feel nothing—absolutely nothing.

He stopped scratching and stared at her curiously.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, honey, nothing at all. You go on to bed and I'll see you later."

That's for sure, she thought grimly, that's for damned sure.

She closed the door.

The first opportunity came too quickly. On the second hand she was dummy and while the temptation to get it over with was overwhelming, she knew it was much too soon. He might not be asleep yet. She had gone too far she reasoned to let this nagging impatience ruin everything.

The evening wore on and she

had been forced to play in every game. She could feel the sweat oozing out of her pores and she imagined she could smell the fetid odor of panic mixed with the sweat.

She started bidding frantically, erratically; then finally an adroit underbid threw the play to her partner.

She laid down her cards.

"Nell," her partner protested, "we could have gone to game."

Murmuring an apology she slipped out of her chair. With both tables occupied with the game, she headed for the hallway.

Once in the hallway, hidden from view, she quickly entered the bedroom. The bathroom door was standing open so she pulled it shut. Anyone entering the bedroom and seeing the bathroom door shut would assume she was in there. She crossed to the french doors and stepped onto the small terrace. She glanced quickly down into the service yard to be sure it was unoccupied.

Now the tricky part. A wide step across onto the next balcony. A sudden spasm of vertigo caught her and she had to lean dizzily against the wall.

You fool, she accused herself, you've often stepped across bigger rain puddles than this. Don't look down again—just don't look down.

Stubbornly forcing down the bitter lump of nausea rising in her throat, she stepped carefully across onto her own balcony. Opening the

glass doors softly, she stood there for a few seconds listening to the rhythmic breathing of the sleeping man.

Then, as she had rehearsed so many times during the past week, she glided stealthily across the bedroom floor.

Her outstretched hands groped for the door and found it open.

She felt her way cautiously along the hallway, then into the kitchen. Her hands sought and found the coffee pot. The metal was cool to her touch. It would have to be heated. Someone might think to feel the coffee pot. She quickly turned on the gas and stood, her heart beating furiously, waiting for the coffee to heat.

Suddenly, from the bedroom she heard the creak of the bed and she shrank back, terrorized, against the wall. For several agonizing seconds there was no sound from the adjoining room. Then, she heard a deep sigh and again the steady even tempo of his breathing.

The coffee in the pot was starting to bubble. Lifting the pot, she took a deep breath and bending close to the burner, blew out the flame. She set the coffee pot back over the flameless jets now hissing softly.

When she re-entered the other apartment the bathroom door was still shut. Entering quickly, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands.

She entered the living room unnoticed and sat down in a chair.

The game had gone on for several hours and the players were beginning to yawn first discreetly then openly when they heard their husbands coming down the hall. Two of the men carried large paper sacks.

Dan patted his sack lovingly.

"Betcha can't guess what we've got?"

"Let me try," begged his wife sarcastically, "Brigitte Bardot?"

"You lose. It's beer."

"What happened. Did you drink the bowling alley dry?"

"Well," admitted Dan sheepishly, "they did sort of close up on us. Besides, we thought it would be more fun to bring some beer home and have a party here. Sort of a farewell celebration for Nell and Henry."

Nell's hands, under the bridge table, jerked spasmodically but with an effort she forced herself to speak naturally.

"Poor Henry's really bushed. He had a beer, took a sleeping pill and then went beddy-bye. I'll bet an atomic bomb wouldn't wake him now."

"We can't leave Henry out of his own party," protested Dan. "Come on let's yank him out of bed."

The men started for the door.

How long does it take a man to die of asphyxiation she thought wildly. With his bad heart it shouldn't take too long. What if he isn't dead. Could she lie her way out of it—convince him that he had

turned the coffee on while half asleep? Try once more, maybe he's dying right this minute, try to get a few extra seconds. Don't make it too obvious though, they might remember and wonder later.

"If he's in a bad mood, Dan, don't insist. You know Henry isn't exactly the party type and with his bad heart and all, I just don't want him to get excited."

"Don't worry, Nell, why I'll bet Henry will be the life of the party when we get him over here."

Not likely she thought wryly.

Unable to sit there quietly and wait for the men's return, she followed Alice out into the kitchen.

"What can I do to help?"

"You can get the glasses down and put them on the trays."

She toyed with the glasses, dusting them, rearranging them on the trays, waiting for the shouts and cries from her apartment.

A cigarette, something to occupy her hands. She felt in her pocket. Damn, the package was still in on the bridge table. Turning towards the hall, she stopped. The group was huddled in the doorway staring at her. She forced a smile, a tight, mirthless stretching of the face muscles.

"I'll bet he really gave you hell, didn't he?"

Alice took a step forward, put out her hands and said, "Nell, dear. There's been an accident."

"What is it? What's wrong? For God's sake will somebody tell me

what's wrong," she screamed hysterically.

Dan took her in his arms.

"Take it easy, Nellie." The shock of his discovery had sobered him instantly. "Please, Nellie, it's Henry. He's had an accident. Henry's dead."

"It was his heart wasn't it?" she demanded dully.

Alice spoke, "No, Nellie, it was that damned coffee pot. He evidently started to make himself a cup of coffee then fell asleep. The pot boiled over again and put out the gas. It asphyxiated him.

She made a pretense of wanting to see him. The group, including the doctor called from downstairs, insisted that she remain in the other apartment until the body was removed and the apartment cleared of gas.

She spoke briefly to the detectives when she was allowed back in her own apartment but as the men had already talked to the detectives, their questioning of her seemed to be a mere formality.

After expressing their sympathy and thanking her for her co-operation, they advised her to go in to the bedroom and try to rest.

She smiled bravely, assured them she would be all right and went into the bedroom, leaving the door partially open.

One of the detectives picked up a letter from the desk.

"Well, there's no doubt it was an accident. Listen to this letter. It was

evidently written just before he went to bed."

He started to read the letter.

Her harsh shrieks tore into the quiet peace of the pre-dawn hours. Her face convulsed with rage, she stood in the doorway, screaming and shouting obscenities at them.

"For God's sake, get the doctor," commanded the older man.

Her shrieks had subsided now and they could hear only an occasional animal like moan through the closed door.

"What do you suppose set her off like that?"

The other detective shrugged. "I don't know, delayed reaction maybe. It's funny though, she seemed to be getting along O.K. until you started reading that letter."

They looked at one another.

"Let's hear it again."

"Dear Mr. Olmstead," he read "I received your letter when I checked into the motel. I sincerely appreciate you rushing this into escrow so fast.

"I will have the deed changed later, but right now I want this to be a surprise for my wife.

"It's taking every cent we've got to swing it but I know we can make a go of it. My only regret is that I had to cash in my insurance policy, but the way I feel now, I will live to be a hundred."

"The insurance policy," repeated the older man softly, "that's when she started to scream."

The doctor came out.

"I think she'll be alright now. I put her under pretty heavy sedation. She should sleep now for five or six hours. She should have someone with her when she wakes up," he warned. "Shall I arrange for her neighbor to stay with her?"

The older detective walked over to the club chair, settled himself

comfortably with his feet up on the ottoman and said, "No thanks, we'll be here when she wakes up. Won't we, Fred?"

The other man glanced significantly toward the closed bedroom door and murmured softly, "Yeah. We'll be here, all the time—just waiting."



THE FIX

BY
MAX
VAN DERVEER

*"Three hundred, kid. That's tops. You've
never seen three bills in your life."*

HE CAME into the pharmacy about six-thirty, a small, dark man with a still face. He looked around slowly, taking in everything: Laura in the cashier's slot up front, the sophomore girl sitting at the lunch counter, the boy in the white jacket behind the counter making a sandwich for the sophomore girl, the man standing idle at the prescription counter near the side door, me sitting alone in a back booth. Then he tipped a gray Homburg and said something to Laura. She looked back at me and nodded her head. He peered at me from behind large, black-rimmed

glasses before he came toward me. He moved like he was walking on eggs and, watching him, I sensed an animosity I could not understand.

I started out of the booth, but he stopped in front of me, blocking my path. "You're Candy Kane, the basketball player?" he said.

"Yes?" I said cautiously.

He pushed me back in the booth firmly, slid in opposite me and opened a coat that had been tailored by an expert. I watched him take out a long, silver cigarette holder and fit a cigarette. He fired it with a matching silver lighter and

grinned at me, but it was the kind of grin that didn't mean anything.

"I was told I could find you here," he said.

I wanted to ask, "By whom?" but something told me to remain silent. I waited. He shuffled his feet. His color was bad, a peculiar unhealthy sheen in the florescent light. "Coffee?" he asked casually.

"No. I'm playing a game tonight."

"Riverside gonna win?" He made it sound too casual.

"We should."

"What if you don't?"

"We've been defeated."

"But not by Hammil. Not this season. Right?"

"That's right," I said carefully.

He made a lot of work out of smoking his cigarette before he said, "There's some money out that says Hammil is gonna win tonight. That money needs insurance. Like a Riverside hotshot—Candy Kane, for instance—developing a bad eye, or a fever, or a sprained ankle. You know what I mean?"

"Draw me a picture," I said tightly.

"A two hundred dollar picture?"

"You better get out, mister."

He didn't move. "Two hundred is a lot of fish when you're going to college on a shoestring, kid," he said. "Three hundred. That's tops. You've never seen three bills in your life."

"Forget it."

His mouth became a thin scratch

and his eyes behind the glasses became hard as polished metal. I watched him put the cigarette in an ashtray on the table. He took off his glasses, studied the lens, put the glasses on again. Then he picked up the cigarette. It was all very deliberate.

"There's too much Hammil money out now, too much to lose. Understand?"

Little stabs of fear needled my stomach. He sounded tough and dangerous. I slid out of the booth. He came with me. One of his hands was on my arm and I felt his fingers dig in. Then I felt something sharp pressing against my stomach just below my jacket. I pulled in a deep breath and looked down at the knife in his hand. Most of it was concealed by his coat sleeve. "This ain't Riverside's night," he said calmly.

There was a fraction of silence while a shiver went up my back. Then the man grinned, showing me all of his white teeth. "You ever had a cut gut, college boy? Painful . . . painful as hell. Sometimes you die."

I heard a tiny click, and I flinched. He laughed softly as he stepped back, giving me breathing room. My fist crashed against his ear and he spilled into the booth. I bolted past him toward Laura. "Call the police!"

She was staring at me with a startled expression. "My God, Candy, what—"

I heard the side door swish open and shut, and I whirled around. The booths were empty. I looked at the side door, the pounding of my heart heavy. Then I faced Laura. "Who was that man?" I rasped.

"The one with you?" She hesitated, frowned heavily. "I don't know. I really didn't pay much attention to him."

"He tried to stab me!"

"Wha-at?"

Grimly, I went past her to the front door and jerked it open.

"Candy!"

I stopped short and looked back at her. Her face was tight. She looked at me inquiringly.

"Later," I said.

The Pharm was on a corner. Across Seventh Avenue was the south line of the Riverside University campus. It was bitter cold when I walked out of the Pharm that night, too cold to snow. I squirmed deep into my jacket, crossed Seventh Avenue, and pounded north past the darkened, square-shaped Science building, wondering about the little man. Where had he come from? Why had he picked Riverside? Riverside University wasn't big time; it was a small school with 800 students enrolled if you counted some heads twice. It was no place for gamblers, no place for violence. Why had he picked me? Why not Sam Campbell, our six foot, eight inch center, leading scorer in the conference? The little man had said, "*I was told I could find you*

here." Who had told him?

All at once, I felt more desperately alone than I'd ever felt in my life. The trees creaked with cold. The packed snow under my shoes squeaked loudly. The street seemed unnaturally empty. And I had a sensation of being watched. I looked behind me. The street was dark and I could see no one. Accelerating my pace, I went past Sturard Hall, the girl's dormitory, and crossed an intersection, walking through the circle of light cast down by the solitary street lamp.

"College boy!"

Fear was an icy hand clutching my heart as I jerked to a halt. The voice had come from a dark sedan parked to my left, just out of the circle of light. The unexpectedness of it had stunned me. I stood perfectly still, listening to my heart trying to catch up with the moment already past.

The voice said, "This is Ham-mil's night, college boy." And then the sedan zoomed away from me with a terrific surge of speed. I stared after the twin taillights, unable to move, unable to pull my eyes from the red dots as they diminished up the dark street.

Suddenly, I wasn't quite rational, powerless to think, and I found myself running, pounding the last block toward the brightness of the field house lights ahead. Turning into the field house, I leaped up the steps to the double doors. The building, its walls, its warmth, its

lights, was safety. And inside I stood trembling and breathing raggedly, wiping perspiration from my forehead with one hand. The sense of relief that swept over me made me feel weak.

Coach Binkie Carl and Old Tom, the team trainer, found me standing there. Old Tom looked at me with concern wrinkling his face. "Boy, you sick?"

I wiped a wet palm on my jacket and told them about the little man.

"I'll be damned," Old Tom said.

Coach Carl fingered his ear, his face clouded. "Was he a screwball, Candy?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay. Get dressed. I'll handle it."

All the time we were on the floor warming up and the crowd was coming into the field house, I watched for the little man because I felt sure he would be there. Somewhere in the mass of faces I would find him. But it wasn't until half-time that I saw him. He was at the corner of the floor as we trailed off, going to the locker room. He didn't say anything. He just stood there, measuring me with his eyes. I reached for him, but he turned into the crowd.

Old Tom moved up beside me. "What's the matter, boy?"

"I saw him . . . the little guy."

"The hell!" Old Tom started toward a uniformed policeman.

I stopped him. "What's the use? It's too big a crowd."

"Yeah," he said hesitating. "Yeah, I suppose you're right, boy."

I was charged with my fifth foul early in the fourth quarter and went out of the game. I had made twenty-one points. But it wasn't all me that night. Riverside was on fire. Just like we had been all season. We won the game, 82-59.

Showering and dressing, I didn't talk much. I was tired and thinking about the little man. A sense of awareness made me uneasy. Would he be waiting for me when I walked out of the field house? Sam Campbell went out with me, and I was grateful for his presence. He said, "Old Tom told me you were offered three hundred to throw the game."

I answered slowly, "Yeah."

"Thanks for not taking it."

Outside, the cold air was sharp. There was a moon. A cluster of people huddled on the sidewalk in front of the field house. I saw the man detach himself from the cluster as Sam and I went down the steps, and I tensed.

But the man said, "My name is Jones. Police department. The next few hours I'm with you like a shoe. Understand?" But he didn't wait for an answer. He stood there, over six feet tall in a dark, heavy coat, and looked me straight in the eye. "You going someplace where it's warm? It's too damn cold to be outside."

"I'm going to my room," I said.

"Good. I can sit in the car out

front." He turned away from us and walked to a car parked at the curbing. The car had a high rear aerial and a decal on the door said: RIVERSIDE POLICE DEPT. He opened the door, "Hop in."

A few minutes later he parked across Seventh Avenue from the Pharm. Sam went into the Pharm. I went into the house next door and up to the second floor and my room. I turned on a lamp, disrobed slowly, and got into bed. It was ten-thirty. I waited for Laura then. Like I did every night.

Laura was one of those people who get you quick. She was youthful at thirty-eight, a fullblown, deep-chested woman with a heavy look of softness, warm, friendly, casual. You could hear stories about her if you wanted to listen. I had become infatuated with her the first time I saw her. She got into my blood fast. In the beginning, it seemed incredible. Me, a twenty-year-old kid completely intoxicated by a woman almost twice my age. But what seemed more incredible was that Laura appeared to be as acutely aware of me as I was of her.

She was a widow. Her husband had been a student at Riverside University and later a Navy pilot in the Korean police action, a kid like me when he died a hero's death. She had used the insurance money to purchase the house next door to the Pharm and she rented rooms to students who couldn't afford to live on the campus.

My room was at the back of the house. It was a nice room, large, airy, with two south windows. And right outside my door was the back stairway that went downstairs to the kitchen of Laura's ground-floor apartment. Laura used the stairway frequently.

It was almost twelve o'clock when she came into the room without knocking. She sat on the edge of the bed without saying anything. Then she leaned over me and her mouth covered mine.

A long while later, I talked about the little man. Laura remained silent, staring at the ceiling, biting her lower lip as she listened. Suddenly, she threw her arms around me. I could feel the shaking of her body.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

She quivered and buried her face in my neck. "I'm scared . . . for you," she mumbled.

"Everything will be okay," I said, talking against her hair: "There's a police officer in a car out front. He's—"

"What?" she said, jerking back her head.

"It's all right," I said tightly. I kissed her mouth and lit two cigarettes. We smoked in silence, then Laura got up, opened one of my windows, leaned over me, kissed me once more, snapped off my lamp, and went downstairs to her apartment.

But sleep would not come to me that night. I turned and twisted in

the bed, thinking about Riverside and Laura and me, the little man, the police officer out front in the car. I smoked two more cigarettes, turned on the lamp and opened a book. It was no good. I snapped off the lamp and lay wide awake, staring at the shadowed ceiling.

The noise was my warning. It was a funny little thump right outside the opened window.

I drew a quick breath of alarm. Slowly, I eased out of the bed, wincing as the springs creaked, and padded barefooted across the black room, halting at one side of the window. With my hands braced against the wall, I inched my head over in front of the window until I could see outside. The ladder came right up beneath the sill and about halfway up the ladder was a dark blob moving stealthily higher. The dark blob was a man.

I stood immobile. No! I thought. This couldn't be happening!

The dark shadow, outlined against the snow-covered ground, was just under my window now. My mind worked frantically, but I wasn't conscious of stepping in front of the window or of my hands moving forward slowly, going through the opening between the window and the sill. My fingers found the top of the ladder. I held my breath for one frozen instant.

He saw me staring down at him then, and I think he realized. He muttered an oath and scrambled upward, his fingers clawing.

I pushed the ladder out with all my strength. For a moment, it hung in the cold, winter night, poised straight up in the air like it was fixed in the ground. And then it went over.

His scream died in a long rattle of anguish as he hit the ground. He didn't move.

It was the little man. They took him to Riverside Memorial hospital. He was broken up inside and in a coma. They said he might not live.

At police headquarters the next morning, a Captain Funk showed me the knife they had found in a special wrist sheath strapped to his arm. He said the man's name was Marvin Brandt and that he was a small time gambler. He didn't book me. Later, walking out of police headquarters, I kept seeing the ladder poised in mid-air, kept hearing the scream trail off in the anguished rattle. It wasn't good, knowing a man might die at my hand. There was a leaden feeling inside, and my mind didn't work right.

When I walked into the Pharm thirty minutes later, everyone jammed around me, asking questions. I couldn't take it. I had to get out of there. I wanted to stop thinking about everything: Marvin Brandt, the ladder, and the knife in the wrist sheath, and what the knife implied.

"Easy, Candy," Laura said as I walked out the front door.

"I'm going to catch my eleven

o'clock," I said. "Maybe that will help."

I made my way across Seventh Avenue and into the Science building, feeling her eyes on my back all the way. But listening to Dr. Keckling's lecture in Biology C-2 that morning didn't help me much. I kept telling myself I should be relieved. The episode was over.

Well, almost over. I didn't want Marvin Brandt to die.

Sam Campbell joined me as I walked out of the classroom about noon. We went down the hall together. He didn't mention the little man or ask about the police. I was grateful. We went out of the building, and then we stood blinking against the glare of the sun reflecting off of the snow.

Sam said, "Meet you at the field house 'bout four this afternoon. Okay?"

"Yeah," I said. I turned away from him. The movement probably saved my life. The bullet smacked into the brick wall of the Science building beside my head.

It was simple reflex on my part. I plowed into the sidewalk, face down, and rolled fast into a snow-packed hedge. And then I looked through the hedge in time to see the large, red sedan leap away from the curbing and skid around the Pharm corner.

Reaction set in then. I froze. I was too paralyzed with fear to move. Although I was covered with snow, I felt perspiration on

my forehead and around my mouth. I closed my eyes. My breath came in ragged gasps. Terror crawled over me and I began to tremble.

A strange voice exclaimed, "Jeez!" and Sam was pulling me to my feet. The babble of excited voices was all around me. Other students crowded in close, asking crazy questions. Sam brushed snow off my coat. All the heart had gone out of me. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to hear the inane chatter. I just wanted to be alone. I elbowed through the circles of students fast, broke into a trot, went across Seventh Avenue and into Laura's house.

Jones was there, just inside the door. He grabbed my arm. "Easy, kid."

I stared at him, not remembering he was a police officer for a moment. "You!"

"I've got an ident on the car," he said.

I shook off his hand and went up the steps to my room. Laura brought up a lunch later. I picked at the food. I was too miserable to care much about eating. Finally, I shoved the tray away. She came to me then and wrapped her arms around my shoulders and pulled me tight against her.

"Someone is after you, Candy. Oh God! Someone is really after you! What are you going to do?"

"Right now," I said, "I'm too scared to do anything."

She stayed with me. We didn't talk much. When we did, we confined it to things that were idle and inconsequential.

Jones came in shortly before two o'clock. He sat on the edge of my bed. "We're looking for the car."

"Will you find it?"

"We might."

"And if you don't?"

Jones looked straight at me. "I'm with you until we do."

"What about Brandt—the guy in the hospital?" I asked.

Jones shrugged. "Still in a coma last I heard."

I turned to Laura. She bit her lower lip. There was silence and then she walked to the door.

Jones said, "Relax, lady. Everything will work out."

"Will it?" She looked at him over her shoulder, and she looked frightened.

I went to her. "I'm going to meet Sam at the field house later and work out. Maybe it will help me relax. I'll stop at the Pharm on my way back." I chucked her on the chin with my fist. "See you then. Okay?"

My attempt at bravado was weak. Her smile wasn't much, either. "Okay."

After she had closed the door behind her, Jones got up from the bed and took off his coat. Then he sat down at the table I used for a desk and picked up a newspaper.

I stood in the middle of the room, shaking my head.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's like something you read about. It can happen to the next guy. It can't happen to you. But with me, it's happening."

"With you, it's happening," he repeated.

I lay back on the bed. Picking up a magazine, I tried to read. But it was no good. The lines of type bunched together in waves and my mind wouldn't function right. I threw the magazine down and tried to sleep. I dozed, but deep sleep would not come. I sat straight up on the bed when Jones put down the newspaper and stood up.

He grinned down at me. "You're tight as a clock, kid." He put on his coat.

"Where are you going?"

"I gotta call the station. You stick tight until I get back."

When he returned about fifteen minutes later, I was standing at the south windows looking out on the back yard. He came in without knocking. "You gonna look at these four walls forever?" he asked.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost four o'clock. "I'd go nuts. Let's go over to the field house."

He nodded. "You need a change of scenery."

I shrugged into my jacket and we went out of the room together. Downstairs, he said, "Let me look."

He went outside, stood in front of the house looking east then went along Seventh Avenue before he waved me out.

The sun was shining brightly. It glistened off of the snow and made me squint. I looked around. Everything seemed calm and secure, but I was filled with a sense of dread and misgiving, almost a sense of impending doom. I sucked in a deep breath and walked past Jones.

His hand found my arm. "Whoa, kid. I'm with you."

We walked side by side past the Pharm. I saw Laura through the window in the cashier's slot and smiled at her. We turned and started across the intersection. We were in the middle of Seventh Avenue when I heard Laura scream.

I whirled halfway around and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the large, red sedan leap away from the curbing. I became mesmerized. I couldn't believe what I saw. The red sedan roared toward us, its wide fenders enormous, its grill bright and shiny.

Violently, I threw myself out of the car's path. Something tugged at my leg. Wind whipped against me. And then I was spinning, spinning. I slammed into the snow-packed street and skidded on my back into the gutter. Somewhere there was the sickening crunch of metal, the sound of shattering glass.

Twisting my head, I saw Jones leap to his feet and race toward the red sedan. It was smashed against a light signal. Numbly, I watched him reach inside the wrecked car

and drag a man out by his feet. The man flopped like he was dead.

A stranger in a long coat and bright green scarf reached down and fastened one hand on my arm. "Are you all right?"

I got up from the gutter slowly and brushed his hand off my sleeve. It was a rude gesture, but I had no time for politeness at that moment. Because suddenly several events had fallen sharply into place.

I went back across Seventh Avenue to the Pharm. Laura was standing out front, hugging her body with her arms, shivering against the cold. Her face was tight, and her color was bad. Behind her, a handful of clamoring students crowded the front door and windows.

I measured her with my eyes, then walked toward her house and pounded upstairs to my room. I was on the edge of the bed, breathing harshly, when she came in.

She looked frightened. She came forward woodenly. I reached up and pulled her down beside me. Her eyes were veiled, a tic pulled the side of her red mouth. I reached up with one hand and lightly stroked the warm skin of her neck. She twisted her head from side to side.

"D-don't . . . don't do that," she whispered.

"Does it frighten you, Laura?"

She stiffened and something seemed to choke her. Her mouth popped open but nothing came out.

Nothing had to come out.

I laughed softly and tightened my fingers against her windpipe. "*There is no pillow so soft as a clear conscience.*" I moved my fingers to her jaw and held her head rigid. "Someone," I hissed, "knew where to find me before the game last night. Someone knew where I lived. Someone opened a window in my room. Someone knew what building I'd come out of this noon. This afternoon someone knew I might go over to the field house. Someone screamed *before* a car tried to run me down. Who, Laura? Who?"

Her mouth worked. "I—I . . . don't know!" She cried out sharply as my fingers bit into her jaw. "You're hurting me! Oh God, you're—" She sat without moving, eyes closed, her breath raging in and out of her.

"Tell me!" I rasped.

"Don't, Candy," she whimpered.

It was a nightmare then. I fastened my hands on the front of her dress and jerked her off the bed. She sagged and I shoved her across the room. She crashed into a table and slumped over it, sobbing. A lamp on the table rocked crazily and toppled on her.

The door behind me crashed open and a voice rasped, "What's going on here?"

I whirled around and stared at Jones.

He went past me fast and knelt down on one knee beside Laura.

"Ask her," I hissed. "Ask her how she set me up!"

He screwed his head around and looked up at me. He stared at me a long time, and then he stood up. His face was not a good thing to see. He came toward me slowly, his eyes boring into mine, and I was filled with a sudden sense of apprehension. I saw his hand go across his chest and inside his coat. When it came out, he was holding a gun.

"You cost me, kid," he said harshly. "You cost me everything I had."

I shook my head mutely from side to side. Then: "You . . ."

His laughter was soft. And I was suddenly alone with an ugly truth: a gone-bad police officer standing tall in front of me, too tall, with a gun in his hand.

Behind him, I saw Laura get to her feet slowly. She held the lamp in one hand, high above her head. My breath caught in my throat as she moved stealthily toward Jones. He misinterpreted the sound. He laughed softly again. "Are you scared, kid?"

Laura crashed the lamp against his head and the gun roared. I felt the hot streak of pain sear my thigh as he pitched toward me, but I had enough presence of mind to bring my fist down hard on the back of his neck and pound him into the floor.

The young nurse hushed into my room and stopped at the foot of

the bed, smiled down on me. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," I said. My leg felt bulky. I couldn't move it.

"You have another visitor."

Captain Funk from police headquarters appeared beside her. "Hello, Kane. They tell me your leg is going to be okay." His eyes shifted to my left and I turned my head and smiled at Laura. She reached out and patted my arm.

"Thought you might want to know Brandt came out of his coma okay," Captain Funk said. "His brother—the one driving the car—is going to take some mending, but he'll survive too. They gave us a written statement."

I shook my head. "Jones. I don't understand—"

Captain Funk scratched his chin. "The only way they could be sure of the Hammil game was to get a

Riverside boy to throw it. But they were unfamiliar with you boys. They didn't know which one among you might be tempted. So they approached Jones. He's been on the force over ten years and around the campus. They offered to cut him in if he got them the right guy. He picked you."

I stared up at Captain Funk. "Why me?"

"Only Jones can answer that," he said flatly.

I thought about it for a long time before I turned to Laura. She hadn't moved. She sat silent with a half smile set firmly. The leaden feeling inside pulled at me sharply. "Laura, how can you ever forgive —"

Her fingers found my arm, stopped the words. "It's all right, Candy," she said softly. "It's all right . . ."



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