

MANHUNT

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"TERRIFIC!"

"BESTIAL!"

THE PRISONERS

by Evans Harrington

JUNE, 1956

35 CENTS



"No holds barred! She claws for his eyes . . ."
(See Page 85)

Plus — PAT STADLEY • RICHARD DEMING
JACK RITCHIE • WENZELL BROWN

EVERY STORY
NEW!

Cover by Walter Popp

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It wasn't so much what they did to her, though that was bad enough. The thing was, she was a cop's wife.



Circle for Death

BY PAT STADLEY

THE KID'S drunk, Max thought, or doped. He watched warily while the boy half-danced, half-staggered in front of him. Beyond, he could see the rest of them—twenty or thirty—their faces shadowed in the street lamp light.

He kept his voice normal. "Come on, kid, let's have the knife."

"What's the matter, Fuzz?" the kid jeered. "Is the big copper scared

of a little shiv?" He moved a step forward, flashing the blade in a wide arc. There was a murmur behind him; the crowd stirred, flowed outward in a wider circle.

"Can't let them get behind me," Max thought. But the car was there with the radio on. If he could stall 'til the patrol came. He could use his gun, but—hell, they were just kids!

The boy hiccuped loudly, giggled. He planted his feet apart, threw his arms wide. "Why'nt you call some more fuzzies? Call all the damn coppers. Tell 'em Sid invites 'em all." He lost his balance, staggered.

Max moved in quickly. He shoved an open hand into the kid's face, clamped savagely on the arm holding the knife and twisted.

But the boy was like a cat. He squirmed, kicked, his voice shrieking curses. When he couldn't break Max's hold, he bit down savagely.

Max slapped him—hard. The kid's head snapped back. The crowd was a live thing. It surged inward on them. He knew he had to finish it quickly. He chopped his hand down and the boy slid like a loose sack at his feet. The knife slipped from his fingers, spun out into the night.

The crowd held back. Max wiped a hand across his mouth. "Which of you punks is next?" He sneered at them.

They looked at him from the shadows, pulling their leather jackets tighter around them. There were

other knives there, pieces of iron, lead pellets in stockings. There was fear and hatred and indecision, but for the moment he held the upper hand.

Then one of the boys moved forward. He walked slowly, almost swaggering, his shoulders hunched, his long, blond hair touching the edge of his upturned collar. When he reached Sid's body, he stopped, fingers hooked in his pockets, looking down, then over to Max. His young, hard face showed nothing.

"What's your beef, copper?" he asked. "You butted into this clambake. Sid's just a little stoned. Too much beer. You didn't have to maul him like that."

"Since when does a clambake include knives?" Max retorted.

"What knife?" the kid said. "I didn't see no knife." He turned to the crowd. "You guys see a knife?"

Max took a deep breath. "Cut it," he said, his voice hard. "There was a knife. Who do you think the captain will believe—you or me?"

The silence grew louder. In the distance a siren wailed. The boys edged away restlessly. Only the one stood his ground.

"You going to tell a story, fuzz? You going to send Sid up?" He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't do that. No, I wouldn't do that at all."

The siren was louder now but the boy's voice still came clearly. "Some night you're going home alone. Maybe you get there—maybe

you don't. Maybe there's a home. Maybe there ain't. Take your pick!"

The anger came rushing through Max like fire, roaring and eating away at him. And, yet, he had never felt so cold. Laugh, he told himself, sneer, show contempt some way. Instinctively, his hand dropped to his gun. The boy didn't move.

The siren was on them now and the lights, swinging in, flooded over them. "What's your name?" Max spoke slowly.

"Reed. Reed Belin. Wanna see my I.D.—copper?"

Max forced himself to relax. The boy at his feet, moved, moaned. He knelt beside him, ran his hands over the lank body, into the blue jean pockets, inside the jacket and all the time he could see the feet and legs of Reed, motionless before him.

"What's the trouble, Max?" Jeff Barrow had swung from the other car and was standing beside him.

"Just a drunk kid," Max said. "Pulled a knife on me. Let's put him in the car."

He could hear Tom Mallory's rough, graveled voice. "Okay, break it up, you guys. Anybody give you special trouble, Max?" he asked. "Or shall I send 'em home?"

Max nodded at Reed. "Bring him along," he said. "He's got a special interest in Sid here."

The boy's eyes flickered, but his face showed nothing. "You book-ing Sid, copper?" There was no anger in the tone, just a statement of fact.

Max nodded quietly. "I could book you too, Reed. But I'm going to let you off with a warning. I'm going to choose to interpret your threats as just the heat of the moment. We'll forget they were said. But I'd suggest you watch yourself. Because I'm going to keep an eye on you."

"You do that, copper. You keep a real good watch. Then you won't miss nothing!"

Max looked at him. How did you get through? This was a boy—seven-teen — with a boy's body, not yet grown, not yet a man. Yet speaking full grown words, throwing full blown challenges as if his insides already had matured and hardened. How did you get through to this one? He sighed.

"That's all, Reed," he said. "Beat it!"

He was glad when the night was over. He drove home faster than usual. Calm down, he told himself. It's just a night like all the others —drunks, fights, knifings, crying women, brawling men, punk kids. Hell, a man should get a job where he met some decent people.

It'd be nice to get home to Fran. Lovely, lovable Fran. Soft blonde hair, soft green eyes, soft slim curves. He grinned to himself as he went up the walk. And he didn't see it until he'd put his key in the lock.

They'd painted the circle carefully right in the middle of his door. A

big, round white line of paint that blazed against the brown wood. And he was cold again. And then a greater fear seized him and he threw the door open and went running through the house to the bedroom. She lay curled under the blanket, one arm tucked under the pillow and the other reaching out to where he usually lay.

He stood looking at her until the trembling inside him stopped and then he crept away. He would sleep later, but now he had to wash the paint from the door so that she wouldn't see it.

Idiot, he called himself. A kid's prank and you fall apart!

The next morning he bought a dog. A lean, sleek Doberman. Fran was delighted. "He's beautiful, Max," she said, hugging them both happily. "But why?"

"He'll be company," Max said. "His name is 'Skip' and he's already trained. And I—I won't worry."

"Silly," she said. But her eyes were softer than ever and her kiss lingered.

Sid's trial didn't take long. Max looked carefully for Reed among the few spectators in the courtroom. He didn't show.

Sid, sober and sullen, answered questions in monosyllables and he didn't watch Max as the latter testified. Only, when the judge sentenced him did he show emotion.

"Stinkin' fuzz," he spit at Max.

Jeff joined Max for coffee after-

wards. "Captain says for me to ride patrol with you tonight, Max. Maybe the rest of the week."

Max shrugged. "Thanks, Jeff, but there shouldn't be any trouble."

Jeff sipped his coffee slowly. "I've been nosing around, Max. That was a rumble between Reed Belin's gang and the Tankers you broke into. Guess we should have hauled them all in. Put a little holy fear into them." His spoon rattled against his cup. "Hell, what's got into kids these days?"

Max couldn't answer. The picture of his front door with the big, white circle on it lay before him. "I'm going to call home," he said. "See you in the locker room."

Fran didn't answer the phone. He looked at his watch. Maybe he'd have time to go home. No, he couldn't make it. Hey, what was the matter with him? She was probably at the store—or the neighbors. She had the dog.

He sighed, relieved. Nobody would bother her with that dog around. Should have gotten him a long time ago. He pictured Fran's happy face, her arms around the dog's neck. Nobody would touch Fran now. He went whistling to the locker room.

The call came over their radio at ten that night.

"Car 10," it was Kenny at the switchboard. "Disturbance at 412 Harding. Max, your house. Check into it. I'll have car 40 cover your beat."

Max felt the lurch inside himself. He switched the siren on and made a turn, tires screaming.

"My wife—?"

"She's okay. Made the call herself."

Fran was sitting on the lawn with Skip's head pillowed in her lap when Max came. She was sobbing quietly.

"I'd just let him out, Max. He was growling so and then I heard the shot and—and he was dead." Her voice broke.

"Come on, honey," Max lifted her up. "Jeff'll take care of him." He led her into the house and made her lie down on the couch.

"He was so sweet, Max. He followed me everywhere. Why—why would anyone want to kill him?"

Max tucked a blanket around her. "I'm not sure, darling. It must have been an accident."

"No." She shook her head. "Because when I heard the shot, I looked out the door and someone called out my name."

Fear bit again at Max. "I'll get you some coffee. Then, I'll take a look around."

Jeff was waiting for him in the kitchen. "Come here, Max." He led him outside to where Skip lay and lifted back the cover. "Look at this!"

Max could see the white collar around the big, dark throat. He touched it and part of it came off on his fingers.

"Somebody took time to paint

that on him," Jeff said. "Now, who would do a fool thing like that?"

"I'm not sure, Jeff. But I'm going to find out. Take care of him, will you?"

He went back into the house. "Fran, I want you to go to bed. I'll call headquarters and have them put a patrol on the neighborhood." He kissed her. "Don't worry, darling. Probably some crazy kids. Took a shot at the dog. Didn't mean to hit it."

He rechecked the doors and windows, moved the phone to her side of the bed. "Hear anything—*anything* at all, call Ken and he'll send the patrol right in." He kissed her again, lightly, grinned at her and left.

Jeff was talking to the patrol car when he got outside. He waved at them, there was no time for talk now. Jeff climbed quietly in beside him and they rolled out.

"Max—" Jeff said tentatively.

"They called her by name, Jeff. Even when she was standing in the doorway, they were putting that damn paint on the dog and then they called her."

"Who?" Jeff asked. "Who was it, Max?"

But he couldn't answer. The anger in him trembled like a live thing.

They were easy to find. They had picked the biggest, noisiest, splashiest drive-in restaurant to wait. There were eight of them and they were grouped outside their cars,

leaning against the fenders. Jeff swung the patrol car so its lights centered on them and Max was out of the car almost before it stopped. Easy, easy, he quieted himself.

The group parted for him, slowly, insolently. He brushed by them. It was Reed he wanted.

The boy waited for him, still leaning against the car, one foot resting against the hubcap.

Max spoke first. "Where have you been the last hour, Reed?"

The boy took the cigarette from his mouth, studied it a moment, then flicked the ashes deliberately.

"Here," he finally said, "right here."

"Who was with you?"

Reed looked at him, his face almost sneering. Then he moved a hand at the others. "Tell the copper, boys. Where ya been?"

"Right here, fuzz!" one of them answered. Someone laughed.

Max kept his tone level. "Move away from the car, Reed. Now, turn around. Hands on the roof."

"Gonna search me, fuzz?" The words came indolently. "Go ahead. Whatcha think you gonna find?"

Max searched rapidly. The boy was clean. But he hadn't expected it otherwise. He turned to the car. And here he moved more carefully. The boys crowded around.

"Try the seat, copper. Maybe it's in the trunk. Pick up the floorboards."

When he turned around, they were grinning widely. "Aw, don't

give up so easy, fuzz. Maybe it's in the roof, or the tires, or the cigar lighter." They howled at this. They shoved at each other. Max looked out over them. Jeff was moving closer.

The car-hop quieted them. She came pushing through, both arms loaded with trays. Max watched her fasten them to the car doors, then touched her arm.

"How long's this car been here?"

The silence came instantly. They stood frozen, tense, waiting. The girl looked at him for a moment, then away. He could see the muscles tighten in her face. She didn't look at him when she answered.

"An hour or more," she said, her voice low.

"And you're just getting around to serving them?"

"They didn't want anything at first."

He could see relief seep through them. Somebody shoved. The boy nearly hit him.

"Reed." Max snapped the word out. They quieted immediately.

Reed was peeling the paper from a hamburger. He didn't stop. "Yeah?"

Max moved slowly toward him. "Stay away from my house, Reed! Stay clear on the other side of the town."

Reed laid the sandwich down. He turned so that he faced Max. "You tellin' me what to do, copper? 'Cause I don't take that from nobody. Nobody!"

The muscles quivered along Max's shoulders. He kept his voice clear. "If I catch you anywhere near my house, I'll put you away Reed—just as far as I can."

He heard their shock—their quick suck of air. He turned slowly, memorizing each face. "That goes for all of you."

And then he walked through them, back toward the squad car. A cigarette flicked in front of him. It hit the pavement ahead and lay, its red eye sparking. He deliberately stepped on it as he passed.

A week went by—two. It's over, he told himself. He relaxed.

It was warmer Thursday night. One of those rare, brilliant nights when everything stood cleanly defined. Rare in its quietness, too. He was patrolling alone, again.

His route took him down his street and he slowed by his house. Fran had a light burning.

And then he saw the paint can. It lay, tipped crazily, on his porch. He could even see the spreading line where the paint spilled.

It took him forever to reach the door. It opened to his touch. He was crazy with fear now. And yet, training held him. He slipped along the hall, his gun in his hand, walking lightly, rapidly. Only the living room was lighted and Fran was there.

They had taped her to a hoop hanging from the ceiling, arms overhead, feet together so that she hung like some Barbary slave girl,

her cream white body outlined against the red tapestry curtain. He could see the marks of their fingers, the long angry gash, the thin white line they had painted.

He cut her down gently. She was alive.

Another man put her to bed, cleaned the paint from her, called the doctor. This wasn't him. He could feel nothing, neither anger nor fear, nor desperation. Somewhere outside Reed waited for him. He was alive only for that purpose.

The doctor brought a nurse with him. It took them forever, Max thought. Forever . . .

The doctor shook him. "She's all right, Max. She'll sleep now."

He went to the door and looked at her. And still there was no feeling.

The nurse rustled toward him. "I'll stay the night," she said.

And he could go!

Outside Jeff waited for him. "The Captain—" He looked at Max's face and didn't finish. They climbed into the squad car. Max drove.

They wouldn't expect him so soon. So they'd go somewhere to celebrate before they scattered. Not a drive-in. Not a joint. There would be too much excitement for that.

So he prowled the parks, the lonely sideroads, the clumps of trees, the flats, lover's lane and here he found them. Just one car, tucked under the trees, turned towards the road.

He hit the siren early, and the

lights. He wanted to flush them. And he did.

They came screaming out on the road towards him. He could see Reed behind the wheel. They laughed at him as they tore past; a bottle crashed against the car.

It was the way he wanted it. He turned and took out after them. Jeff touched a button. "Car 10. In pursuit of 502. Going north on Canyon Crest."

They were going up the first hill, now, their tires beginning to scream on the curves. He drove them faster, moving irrevocably behind them. They were no longer shouting at him, waving their arms.

It was real now. They knew it. They were settled to the task of losing him. The needle climbed upward. Fifty—sixty—seventy. He felt Jeff tense beside him. But he couldn't take his eyes from the road and the car ahead.

How about it, Reed, his mind taunted. How much faster can you go — ninety — one hundred? How much longer will your tires take these curves? Feel that, Reed—that sharp skid—the pull on the steering wheel? That was gravel. Arms getting tired, Reed? There's a trick to these curves—takes strong wrists. Do you have strong wrists, Reed?

There was a rock ahead—a big, massive hunk of granite that hung out into the road. He watched Reed take his car around it—skid sideways—straighten out.

Again the needle climbed.

"They'll roll," Jeff said. "Why don't they slow down. There's the pass ahead!"

He knew it. It was the reason he'd been coldly happy when they swung north when he'd flushed them. The pass where the road swings like a twisted ribbon out over the canyon and cuts back into the mountain side. The canyon, Reed. It's deep. You can't even see the bottom.

Max's foot pressed harder. The needle touched 100 — wavered — steadied. He was right on them.

"They've *got* to stop." Jeff's voice was strangled. "They've got to!" He raised his gun, sighted high and fired. The sound mushrooomed. "God, Max—. Slow it!"

He didn't feel his own brakes—he couldn't hear his own tires as he cut into the turn. There was only Reed ahead of him. He saw the car clearly, like some inflated toy, saw it lurch, slide, watched Reed struggling with the wheel. Then it was over the edge and he could hear it crashing its way downward.

He got out, walked to the edge, waited. There was no sound now. And still he stood motionless until the red flickered against the darkness, caught on and flamed its way up the canyon.

"They could have stopped," Jeff said. "They *could* have stopped."

But Max didn't hear him. "That was it, Reed," he was whispering. "I sent you as far as I could send you."

*She had no money to ride the pink cloud. But
there was one friend who would help . . .*



BY JACK Q. LYNN

THE DAY's no good. It's raining. Rain does something strange to me. Bugs hatch inside me, crawl down into my thighs and up into my chest, and I think if something don't happen soon, I'm gonna walk up a wall.

The class bell rings. Thank God! I walk past old Long-Nose Kelly, the flat-faced preacher who feeds the English crap. She looks at me like maybe she's feeling sorry for me. Only I know different. Nobody feels sorry for Jackie.

Anne is in the hall when I walk

A Helliwa Ball

out of the classroom. Anne is fifteen, my age. She's a cute cat and smart. She's got red hair and a figure the studs go for. You can hear stories about her if you wanna listen.

Me, I got a figure too. And I guess you could say I'm kinda cute. Only there ain't so many stories about me. Cause I got a deformity. No fingernails. I got the fingers, but no nails. I was born that way. It makes a difference with the studs.

The class bell rings.

I say to Anne, "Le's cop a walk."

We go down the hall. The other studs and cats are chicken. They're hurrying to the classrooms. Me'n Anne go out of the building and up the street. I don't have a jacket. The rain is a miserable mist against my face. It plasters my blouse against my skin. We stop at a corner drug. It is one of those run-of-the-mill drugs you find in every run-down neighborhood: a soda fountain up front, dust-coated junk cluttering the single aisle leading back to the booths. We flop in a booth and call for Cokes. I pull my blouse loose from my skin and look around, fidgeting uncomfortably. Sweet Jesus, I've got worms!

"The monkey on your back?" Anne says.

I look at her. "It's the rain. The stinkin', lousy rain."

She gives me a wise smile. "There's a cure, doll. Know what I mean?"

I know what she means. You

dance on a pink cloud and you thumb your nose at the world.

"It gets worse, doll," Anne says. "You get horrors inside. Ice and fire. Somethin' eatin' out your guts. Then you gotta get the fix, Jackie-baby. Skin-pop to the big pipe. Yeah."

Little red-head. Big talk. I bite my lip. "No H for Jackie. No stick. No nothin'. Me, I'm stoney."

"The Fixer," she says softly.

"Sweet Jesus, nol"

"He won't hurtcha."

• "Not him!"

"You gotta have a fix, dontcha?"

I gotta get a fix like I gotta go to the john bad. But the Fixer! I've never been to him, but I know him. I hear stories. Young cats don't need money with him. He likes young cats. Ugh!

"Soon somebody starts pullin' off your skin," Anne says.

I know. More bugs. The bite is deep and harsh. I itch.

Anne rolls out of the booth. She's grinning down at me. "The big fun. Le's go."

We go out of the drug. It's quit raining, but it's almost dark. The clouds are low. We go up the street fast. Anne knows where she is going. This is our territory, familiar turf. A short time later we turn off the street and step into a dim vestibule of a smelly fleabag. I follow Anne up the three flights of dirty steps. She stops at a door, puts an ear against the thin partition and then she beats on the wood.

"Yeah?" The voice on the other side of the door is harsh.

"Anne."

She looks at me over her shoulder and winks. I try on a smile. She opens the door and we go inside the flat. Light comes from a lamp. The flat is a garbage heap and it's got a stink like sweat.

The little guy facing us from a deep chair near the lamp is in his underwear. He has a walnut-shaped head with sharp, beady eyes and a face pitted like an army of bugs has been digging foxholes in his skin. His color is bad, a peculiar unhealthy sheen, and his scabbed arms are mute testimony to the needles.

He has been reading a newspaper. Now he regards us from behind an open mouth, the newspaper forgotten. I see the hungry look crawl into his eyes and I don't like the look.

"We're hot, Fixer," Anne tells him. "We wanna fix."

He doesn't move. His eyes don't move from me, either. And I know what he's staring at. I've got on a thin blouse. It's damp, almost like a wet veil. He can see my bra plain.

Anne walks across the room to a sagging couch and sits down with a bounce. "You wanna give us a fix, Fixer?"

"Your frien', yor frien'," he says impatiently.

"Her name's Jackie. She wants a stick."

"Jackie," he repeats. "That you?"

I nod my head.

"Jackie's a good girl," Anne says. "Me too. I'm a good girl. But right now I gotta get on. Please, Fixer?"

"Yeah, yeah. I fix you, kid. First, I talk to frien'." His eyes look me up and down again. "How old you?"

"Fifteen," I say and my voice cracks.

He grins. "You wanna stick?"

"I-I don't know."

"Sure, she wants one," Anne says from the couch.

"What you give Fixer?" he says, paying no attention to Anne. "You pay?"

"She'll pay," says Anne.

I don't say a word. Now I can't look him in the eye. Now I look around the room. Anywhere. And then suddenly he gets up and walks out of the room. He comes back almost immediately and walks up close to me and puts a stick in my mouth. He scratches a match against a matchbook and he fires up the stick. Then I feel his finger hooked in my bra strap.

I jerk away from him, half scared.

"Easy, doll, easy," Anne says. Then: "Goddamn you, Fixer, fix me!"

His eyes are hooded, his breathing fast and deep. Suddenly, he laughs in my face and turns away and walks over in front of Anne. He stands there a moment staring down at her. Then he says, "I cook for you, kid."

He picks up a pair of pants. The needle is in the double flap of the

fly. Slick. He goes out of the room and I hear water running and the hiss of a gas burner.

Anne is sprawled on the couch now, her body twitching around bad. What's going on inside her? Suddenly, she cries out, "Jesus, hurry, Fixer!"

After a while he comes back, holding a needle in his mitt. He is grinning wickedly. With one hand he pushes Anne's skirt up her leg.

"The big pipel!" she sobs.

I watch the Fixer. He ain't in no hurry. He baby-pats her thigh with his fingers and drools a little. "Sweet Annie," he says. And then he jams the needle into her leg.

"Ahhhhh, God!" Anne arches her back high in the air and stays that way a long time before she flops back on the couch, all relaxed. A silly grin spreads across her mouth and her eyes are closed. The Fixer hovers over her, breathing harshly, his fingers still exploring her leg.

It is a long time before Anne opens her eyes and sits up straight. She pushes the Fixer's hand away and gives a laugh and looks at me. "How you doin', doll?"

I shrug. "I don't feel nothin'."

It's the truth.

"You're too nervous to get high. Relax, doll." She looks up at the Fixer. "You give her another stick, huh?"

He goes out of the room again and comes back with the stick in his hand. He gives it to me.

Anne stands up. She unbuttons

her blouse and then she walks over to a closed door. She opens the door and I see the lumpy bed beyond her. She looks at me over her shoulder and grins. Then she says to the Fixer, "Le's get it done, man."

He follows her like a dog into the bedroom. They don't trouble to close the door.

I find the couch and smoke in silence. Ahead of me the bedroom is dimness. But I can see. Only I can't look too long. It makes me shake. I fire the new stick from the roach of the first and smoke slowly, clamping one hand against my mouth. I hold the smoke in my lungs like the studs say to do. The boom is beginning to take hold. I'm climbing.

I don't know how long it is before Anne and the Fixer come back into the front room. Anne is buttoning her blouse. Her mouth is a red smear. Some of the red is on the Fixer's mouth.

Anne says, "How you doin' now, doll?"

My breath is hard to get and I feel a tiny pulse beating in my throat. My head feels like it is drifting upward, stretching my neck. Something is funny. I throw back my head and laugh wildly. Then I struggle to my feet, almost fall. I'm reefed up good.

"Right now, I'm walkin' off a mountain."

"She's hit," Anne says to the Fixer.

"I'm hit, hit, hit. Daddio, get me —"

The Fixer's hand on my arm stops me. And I ain't hit no more. I'm cold turkey all over. He's steering me to the bedroom. I plant my feet hard. He wraps one arm around my waist and I feel his crawling fingers on my hip.

"You come," he says. "You pay."

"Goddamn you—" I jam one knee up between his legs. He doubles forward with a pain-filled oath. I reel away from him. Revulsion shakes me. I want to cry out, but nothing will come past the tightness in my throat.

"Doll," Anne says, "you gotta—" "No!"

She stares at me a moment. Then: "Okay, doll. Take it cool." She moves between me and the Fixer. "Forget her, Fixer."

He reaches out and shoves her aside. She comes back. They fight. No holds barred. She claws for his eyes. I see Anne's fingernails rake his face. Long, red lines go right down to the point of his chin. He slams a fist against her face, knocking her down hard. But she's up like a cat, clawing at him again.

"Run, doll, run!" she screams.

I spin around and go out of the flat fast. I hear the Fixer's insane cry behind me. I pound down the steps. I hear Anne coming.

"Run!" she screams.

I bang out the front door to the street and pull up, not sure just where I'm going or what I'm going

to do. It is dark now. Black. I look back at the front door. There's a light inside. Through the glass, I see the Fixer coming down.

Anne pulls on my arm. "In here."

I follow her into an alley beside the building. We find a ladder hanging from a fire escape.

"Up," she says.

Summoning all of my strength, I pull myself up until I'm standing on the bottom rung of the ladder. Then I move fast, scrambling up the three flights of steps until I reach the ladder that goes up to the roof of the building.

The roof is flat. The building wall extends about two feet above the tar surface. Anne scrambles over the wall behind me. Looking down into the alley, my breath stops in my throat. Light pouring in from a street lamp exposes the Fixer. He is standing at a point right below the ladder and he is looking up.

His voice comes up to me. "You gonna get yours, Jackie-kid."

I see him pull himself up on the ladder.

Frantically, I run across the flat roof. The next roof is two stories down. I race back to the fire escape. The shadowy figure is halfway up the ladder now. I wait for him. My heart is pounding wildly, a vice is pinching my stomach. I back across the roof slowly and bump into Anne. The Fixer's head appears over the wall. He stops when he sees us.

I can't say anything.

"Fixer," Anne says, "you go down."

He grunts and moves higher.

"Fixer!" Anne cries. "You hear? You go down! She don't wanna—"

He laughs softly.

"Goddamn you!" Anne screams.

She rushes him, her arms rigidly outstretched in front of her, her hands set to smash against his body and push him out into space. One moment he is there in front of her, his mouth open with surprise. The next moment he is gone.

Anne hits the wall hard. And horror rushes up inside me. I see her topple over the wall, her arms frantically clawing the air. Then her scream is a trail of anguish. I reach the wall in time to see her hit the railing at the first floor. She bounces into the alley. I hear the sickening plop as she splashes into the concrete.

For a long time, I hang over the wall, unable to move. And then I become conscious of the Fixer. He is scrambling down the fire escape fast. I watch him go over the side of the first floor landing. He hangs for a moment by his hands and then he drops into the alley. He runs out of the alley fast.

I go down slow. In the alley, I get down on one knee beside Anne. I'm sick inside. Scared. I try to lift her. She is a sack of wet-wash. And then I hear the heavy footsteps

moving toward me. I spin around. The bright light in my face blinds me. A deep voice behind the light says, "Hold it, girl."

The flash plays down on Anne. The left side of her head is caved in. Her eyes are wide, her mouth open. Some of her brains have spilled out.

"Keee-ris!" breathes the voice.

I know it's a nab.

He swings his flash up. And I see the Fixer still in his underwear. The uniformed nab is holding him. I stare at the long, red lines on the Fixer's face, and like a flash bulb going off I know what I'm gonna do. I know how I'm gonna fix it so I've got no worrying in the coming days, no being scared.

It's gonna be the fix for the Fixer. The slammer.

"The Fixer done it," I tell the nab quickly. "Me'n Anne are on the roof. You know, gettin' some fresh air. Then he comes up and rapes her. Afterward they fight and he pushes her off—"

"No, cop, no!" the Fixer cries out. "This crazy kid—"

"Not this chick," I say fast. "Look at his face. The scratches. Me, I can't scratch. Look."

I hold out my hands and extend my fingers. No nails.

The nab hangs on tight to the Fixer. And all of a sudden I'm getting a helluva kick. Cause this is getting to be a helluva ball.



Hitch-Hiker

BY ROLAND F. LEE

"Nothing like an automobile for it. Nobody can ever prove a thing." And he showed Baylor how.



BAYLOR COULD hear the beating rhythm of the jukebox music as he stood in the brilliant sunlight soaking in the heat. Like an oasis on the highway, the small restaurant, the bar and the filling station pulsed with life and normalcy.

Looking around, Baylor breathed in deeply, then shook himself like

a healthy animal brimming over with vitality and good spirits. A deep appreciation of things welled up in him and brought a smile to his lips as he sauntered toward the bar. A girl in a white frock flounced out of the restaurant and ahead of him into the bar, her hips swaying in time to the music. At the door

she glanced backward and Baylor's grin broadened.

The bar was dark, its air-conditioning modified and made fragrant by the smell of beer. The bartender was absently tapping his fingers on the red plastic to the rhythm of the "Jersey Bounce." Two couples were sitting at tables. The girl Baylor had seen was at the bar trying to look absorbed in thought. Baylor guessed she was about eighteen. The only other customer was a youth dressed in a sport shirt and slacks. Baylor ordered a glass of beer from the dreaming bartender and settled back into the cool darkness. From time to time the girl shot a glance at him, to his amusement. Completely relaxed, he was content to be a spectator.

"Going far?"

Baylor turned slowly and studied the youth two seats away. He saw a mop of brown hair, wide blue eyes, regular features and a mouth that seemed to pout slightly.

"At least to El Centro," said Baylor, turning back. He felt a twinge of uneasiness, but couldn't explain why.

"Want a lift? I saw the guy drop you off."

Baylor turned again, and again an off-chord spoiled the mood of the day. "Okay," he said and finished his beer.

The youth finished his in one gulp and slammed the glass down on the bar. They walked out into

a heat that hit them like a wave. The youth paused, blinking in the sun.

"Want to take her?" he asked, jerking his thumb back.

"Why?"

The pouting mouth broke into a sly grin, but the eyes remained blank. "Why ever? We could—" Then he stopped, sizing Baylor up. "She goes for you."

"No. I want to get on."

Baylor felt a mixture of repulsion and curiosity. As he walked toward the car, a scarlet and cream convertible of the latest make, he reflected enviously that this youth ten years his junior owned a car like this while he himself had to bum rides.

The youth appeared irritated by Baylor's refusal to take the girl. He spun the rear wheels on the gravel, kicking up a cloud of dust, and pulled out onto the highway ahead of a car going in their direction. The driver of the other car honked furiously, but the youth tromped down on the accelerator and the powerful engine pulled them forward.

"What are you trying to prove?" Baylor asked.

The youth grinned. "Didn't scare you, did I, Pop?"

"You didn't scare me."

"Nah, I didn't think you'd scare. That creep thought he could beat me out on the road." The youth giggled a bit and Baylor looked up sharply at the sound. But the

youth lapsed into silence. Watching him covertly, Baylor only gradually became aware that a cloud had passed over the sun. The brilliance was gone. Far ahead over the long, empty road he could see a hawk wheeling in the now gray sky, its black, ragged wings moving effortlessly. For a second he had the curious fancy that the hawk had cast the whole landscape into shadow.

They were all alone on the road now, going seventy-five Baylor saw. The engine droned. The sudden change in light, the loneliness, the hawk, all somehow gave him the feeling of being transported into a different world. He looked at the driver again, studying the clean-cut features, the slightly petulant mouth.

"This your car?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Buy it yourself?"

"Partly. The old man put up most of it. I had to work like hell on the old cheapskate before he'd do it, though."

Baylor fell to meditating on the probable story behind these words. Then he realized that the car was swinging very gradually over to the left-hand lane. He looked ahead and saw about three hundred yards away a dog trotting placidly in the left lane. The dog's back was to them.

"Watch out!" Baylor cried, but the driver seemed not to hear.

Baylor grabbed for the wheel,

but the youth knocked his hand off. He saw the dog turn just as they were on top of him. There was a sickening thud, a yowl, one wheel bounced over something and they were gone. Baylor whirled around to see something flop crazily in the road, then lie still.

Baylor was looking into the grinning face of the youth. "Yep," the youth was saying, "there's nothing like an automobile for it. Makes it perfectly safe. Nobody can ever prove a thing."

Baylor shook his head to clear his brain. "When you stop this car," he said, "I'm going to beat the hell out of you."

The youth seemed undisturbed. "No you won't, Pop. For one thing, you couldn't. For another, I'm a minor. They'd throw the book at you."

"And they've never thrown the book at you?" Baylor felt suddenly helpless and the youth, sensing his advantage, prepared to enjoy it. He giggled again, a giggle which made Baylor's neck crawl.

"Nah! Nothing but warnings, just warnings and take away your license. Some stuff! Then some boob'd give me a lecture—who the hell did he think *he* was, telling *me* what to do?"

Baylor began debating with himself. He could turn the youth in to the highway police, but what good would that do?

As though reading his mind, the driver said proudly, "Wouldn't

do any good to report me. I'd just deny it. Besides, they all try to *understand* me. I'm just a kid with problems." He looked to see if Baylor understood.

Baylor gripped the door hard. "But you understand them better than they understand you, eh?"

"You ain't so dumb, Pop," said the youth, pleased that his cleverness was appreciated. "You ain't so dumb at all." He appeared to weigh something in his mind. Then he continued. "But, hell, what's a dog anyway? A dog's nothing. Nothing at all. Now—" he estimated his rider quickly. "Now, the real sport is . . ." He turned and Baylor at last saw some expression in the eyes.

"Good God! You don't mean—people?"

The youth was exultant at the shocked attention he was getting. "Takes nerve, though, Pop. Takes real nerve."

Baylor was almost shaking. "Listen, you little misbegotten yellow bastard, you let me off at that next bar up there, you hear?"

"I hear you, Pop," snapped the youth. "But watch who you're calling names. I don't like it."

The convertible whipped into the gravel drive and skidded to a halt before the bar. The youth grinned at Baylor who felt himself damp with sweat. "Got any parting words of advice for me, Pop?"

Baylor stopped with the door

open. "I got one thing for you," he said. His right fist smashed into the driver's mouth. The youth gave a cry of pain, blood flowed, and Baylor barely saw the knife in time. He brought the edge of his hand down on the youth's wrist, knocking the knife to the floor. Baylor picked it up and hurled it away. To his amazement, the youth was sobbing.

"What'd you hit me for? I didn't do nothing to you! You had no call to do it!"

"You mean you don't *know*?" asked Baylor, incredulous.

The youth gunned the car, and Baylor made a mental note of the license as it sped away. For a full minute he stood quiet, then roused himself as he felt the hot rays of the sun again. The sunshine hurt his eyes.

Inside another jukebox was playing and a girl's laughter tinkled faintly. He turned and went into the bar, trying to recapture in the scent of the place that same quality he had sensed earlier. A blonde in a white uniform was leaning on the bar.

"What'll it be, mister?" she smiled. "You look like you're sick. Come on sudden?"

"Yeah, real sudden." Baylor sat down and grasped the girl's warm hand. "I just need something to hang onto," he said. "Give me a beer."



IT WAS EXACTLY nine-thirty when Jacoby walked quietly into the dark bedroom and strangled his wife. There had been no fuss or commotion. Earlier, she had complained of the heat and had gone

to bed and fallen into a deep sleep. Before she had been able to as much as let out a startled cry, his lean, hard fingers had closed firmly about her windpipe blocking out her nagging voice forever.



*Jacoby was carrying very important cargo.
Life-or-death cargo, you might say...*

One More Mile to Go

BY F. J. SMITH

Although he had planned the crime with painstaking attention to detail and figured every step of its progress from start to finish, it had required every ounce of his courage to see the first phase through. This was not surprising, for Jacoby was an obsequious, mild little man with a narrow, lined face and dull gray eyes that peered over sturdy, horn-rimmed glasses. He looked like, exactly what he was, an elderly small-town storekeeper.

After he had arranged the body and a box of iron weights in the luggage compartment of his car, he drove slowly along a series of dark, unpopulated streets to the highway, where he turned left in the general direction of New Orleans. He leaned back now and lit a cigarette. His gaze was divided between the yellow path of his headlights, the speedometer and the rear view mirror.

Jacoby was a cautious man who left nothing to chance. Even though he had a good ten mile drive ahead of him, he still kept well within the speed limit.

Lulled by the steady hum of the engine, he once more reviewed every step of the details that lay ahead. "Routine," he then told himself. "All routine." Any fool could handle the rest. The part that had required courage and determination was over and done with.

The turnoff lay about two miles beyond Fischer's Service Station. It was marked by a yellow crossroads

sign so there would be no possibility of overshooting it. He would turn right at the sign and proceed along a seldom used dirt road for exactly one mile to a clearing that lay less than two hundred feet from a deep bayou. There he would park the car, carry Edna's body to the bayou's edge and return for the weights—one hundred pounds of iron sashweights, accumulated over the course of a month. After the weights had been fastened to the body with a quantity of wire he had brought—you couldn't trust rope in the water over a long period of time—he would dispose of the corpse. He knew from previous investigation that the murky water ran particularly deep in this location and that the bottom was composed of a slimy, grayish mud which would clutch and permanently hold any heavy object.

A thin smile of confidence turned to a scowl when his car hit a bad bump. Damn it, he thought irritably. The highway had been damaged by the heavy rain of a few days ago. Water had soaked under the road-bed, and the road had sunken in spots making deep depressions and sharp-edged holes. A man could break a spring or burst a tire. He wanted no mechanical trouble, tonight of all nights.

Jacoby slowed to thirty-five, and his closest-set gray eyes scrutinized the highway carefully while his thoughts moved to the next day.

In the morning he would go to work as though nothing had happened. He would eat lunch at the Traveller's Hotel, the way he usually did on Wednesday. Perhaps after he had closed the store at six, he would stop in the Monarch for a glass or two of beer and talk a while. He would arrive home about six-thirty or seven. About eight, he would start phoning neighbors and friends. After that, he would become very worried and call Sheriff Thompson. Let Thompson think what he wanted—if he was capable of thinking at all. For no matter what suspicions the Sheriff might have, he could prove nothing. There would be no clues: No poison to be traced; no blood stains to be analyzed; no blunt instruments to be discovered. Nor would there be any corpus delicti. And without a body there could, of course, be no crime. Edna had disappeared mysteriously. And that was all. Let them prove otherwise.

So deep in thought was Jacoby, that it required a moment or two for the deep-throated cry of the siren to reach him. With a start, he looked up at the rear view mirror and caught sight of the rapidly approaching patrol car with its flashing amber light. He eased over to the road's shoulder at once and stopped. The patrol car pulled up ahead of him. With a sinking heart, Jacoby watched the trooper climb out. Then the trooper sauntered over to Jacoby's car with a

slow, easy gait, as though he had all the time in the world, and placed his elbow on the window sill.

"I was only doing thirty-five, officer," Jacoby said quickly, defensively.

"Did I say you weren't?" the trooper replied and poked his head inside to inspect the dark interior. "You've got a tail light out, Mac."

Jacoby's tongue moved across his lips and his fingers worked at the wheel, opening and closing like pale, restless tentacles. "Why—I had no idea. It was all right when I left the house. I'm very careful about those things. I'm a law-abiding citizen."

"It's your left tail light," the trooper said. "One sure thing, you're violating the law with it out. Something like that can cause an accident."

Next he carefully inspected Jacoby's driver's license and registration paper under the glare of a flashlight. He handed them back. "So you're from Edgetown."

"Yes, officer. It's a little town, few miles down the road. I own a feed store there."

"I know where Edgetown is," the trooper said. "Where you heading to now?"

"Why—why I'm just taking a little drive." Jacoby smiled genially and blew at the perspiration beading his upper lip. "Just a little drive to cool off. Lord, it's hot! It does a man good to get out in the

air and take a drive once in a while. Now take my wife," he added, shaking his head, "she's home reading. She's a great one for reading. Once she gets a book in her hand, you can't budge her from the house. She'll read 'til she falls asleep. She's probably sleeping by now. But me, I like fresh air. A man needs it after he's been cooped up in a feed store all day."

"Sure, sure," the trooper said with an impatient gesture. "Now about that tail light. There's a gas station up the road. You'd stop there and get a bulb for that tail light. If I wanted to be tough, I could give you a ticket. You know that."

"Well, thanks," Jacoby said, fairly grovelling. "Thanks, officer. I'll see to it right away. Believe me, I will."

Swearing under his breath, he watched the trooper walk away.

Fischer's Service Station was small and neglected, attended by a lanky, freckle-faced youth who shuffled over to Jacoby's car and gaped in at him. "Fill 'er up?" he asked indifferently.

"I want a bulb for my left tail light," Jacoby said, drumming nervously on the wheel.

When the youthful attendant returned a few minutes later, Jacoby handed him a five dollar bill. It was the smallest thing he had. The boy studied it. Then asked, "Don't you want me to put that bulb in?"

Jacoby glanced into the rear view

mirror in time to see the patrol car easing into the driveway. "Yes. Yes. Certainly I do."

The attendant stuffed the bill into the pocket of his grimy, snug-fitting denims and walked around to the back of the car. Jacoby got out and watched him work clumsily removing screws and the glass which he placed on the concrete beside him. The young fellow then snapped out the old bulb and replaced it with the new one. Nothing happened.

"What do you make of that?" he asked jiggling the bulb with a greasy finger and looking up at Jacoby.

"Maybe the bulb you just put in is no good," Jacoby said and cast a sideways glance towards the trooper. The trooper's car was parked off to the side and he was working the coke machine. His back was turned to Jacoby.

"It's a brand new bulb," the attendant insisted loudly. "I just took it out of the wrapper. You seen me."

"It could be defective anyway."

"Nuts!" the boy exclaimed and removed the bulb.

He was holding it up to the light and squinting at the filament, when the trooper came over, smacking his lips and eyeing his coke bottle with satisfaction. "What's the matter, Red? What's all the noise about?" he asked good naturedly.

"Take a look at that bulb," Red

said and handed him the bulb. "Tell me what you think. It looks okay to me."

The trooper took the bulb and rolled it between his fingers and held it up to the light. He tilted his head from one side to the other, examining it carefully. "There's nothing wrong with that bulb," he said. "Stick her back in and try jiggling her a little. Sometimes the sockets get rusted up."

"That's what I done," Red replied. "I just jiggled the hell out of it and nothin' happened." He replaced the bulb and shook it with his finger. "See what I mean?"

The trooper frowned in silent meditation; and then he stepped over and gave the fender a thump with the heel of his hand. The bulb blinked on, flickered momentarily and went out again. "You've got a bad connection there," he said and took a swallow of coke. "You've either got a loose wire inside or a frayed wire that's rubbing and grounded." He gave the bumper a tap with the toe of a polished boot. "What's in the trunk? Looks like she's pretty loaded down."

Jacoby felt his heart slow down and stop beating. Sweat gathered more profusely on his forehead, and his tongue felt fuzzy and incapable of forming words. "Two bags of fertilizer," he said. "I'm supposed to drop them off on the way to work tomorrow. Like I told you, I own a feed store."

The trooper finished his coke, belched comfortably, and removed his large Ranger's hat and ran fingers around the damp sweat band. His hair was short and thick and the impression of the sweat band encircled his forehead like a pale-red ribbon. "Fertilizer, eh?"

"Yes."

"That's what probably done it. You hit one of those bumps back there and one of those fertilizer sacks bounced against a bad wire and grounded it. It happens sometimes. I know. My brother's a mechanic." He put his hat back on and held out his hand. "Let's have your key. We'll open her up and Red can take a look. Probably a little piece of tape will fix it."

Suddenly Jacoby felt as though he were about to fall or faint. His knees were shaking, and he was forced to lean on the fender to brace himself.

"What's the matter?" the trooper said eyeing him curiously. "You look sick."

"It's the heat," Jacoby said in a feeble voice. "I'm getting so I can't take this humid, hot weather any more."

The trooper looked up at the sky speculatively. "She's gonna rain again before the night's over. It's always like this before a rain." He blew out his breath and tugged at his breeches. "Okay. Let's have the key. We'll have a look."

"I don't have a key, officer,"

Jacoby said. "You see, I lost one of the keys. I left the other one home so my wife can have a duplicate made tomorrow."

"Didn't you say you had some fertilizer to deliver on the way to work?"

"I do. Yeah. Yeah. I'd forgotten all about that tonight when I removed the key from my ring." He laughed uneasily. A croaking sound. "This heat. Sometimes it gets a man so he can't think or remember things. What I need is a vacation, I guess."

The trooper thought about this a while as though trying to arrange things in his head. "That light should be fixed," he said. "There's been a lot of accidents along this highway and they're clamping down." He compressed his lips and stared down at the luggage compartment lock. Then, before Jacoby actually knew what was happening, the man's short, strong fingers closed over the handle and he gave a vigorous pull upward. The lid held firm and Jacoby was forced to cling even harder to the fender to support himself.

The trooper was too busy frowning down at the lock to notice him. "Sometimes you can spring 'em open on these old cars. A hard jerk is all it takes."

He was about to try again, when Jacoby found his voice. "Can't you just give me a ticket and be done with it?"

"Why?"

"Well, it would perhaps be cheaper in the long run than ruining the lock," he pleaded. "I carry merchandise in the luggage compartment and I need a good lock."

The trooper braced his foot on the bumper and rested his arm on his knee. "Sure I could give you a ticket. But that won't fix the light, will it? Suppose some fella comes along and hits you in the rear. He thinks you're a motorcycle or something. Or maybe he's half tanked. You both end up in the hospital. Is that cheaper than a new lock?"

"No, of course not," Jacoby said helplessly. "But—"

The trooper chuckled, mildly amused. "Some of you fellas give me a laugh. You treat these old cars like they were old ladies. You get a scratch on the fender and you lay awake all night worrying about it."

He removed his foot and stepped over to the light and gave the fender another resounding thump with the heel of his hand. Nothing happened. He tried again and the light flashed on and glowed steadily. Then he smiled with satisfaction. "That's one way of doing it."

"Why that's wonderful," Jacoby breathed. "Just wonderful, officer."

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," the trooper said. "I can't say how long she'll stay that way. You'd better get that light fixed tomorrow."

"I certainly will," Jacoby prom-

ised. "Believe me, I'll have it taken care of first thing in the morning."

The trooper flipped his coke bottle to his other hand and started to walk away. "Okay. You'd better make sure. Next time you'll get a ticket. No bones about it."

The instant the attendant finished replacing the glass and screws, Jacoby scurried in behind the wheel, started the engine and swung out into the highway. He was half crying, half laughing, trembling violently. However, once the lights of the gas station had disappeared behind a tangle of trees, he rapidly gained control of his emotions and assured himself that his remarkable deliverance from near calamity had been only the result of his own ingenuity. He complimented himself on his glib tongue, his presence of mind, his facility to think quickly and lie convincingly.

Smiling confidently, he treated himself to a cigarette. In a few minutes he would arrive at the crossroads sign. After that, there'd be a mile of dirt road. He would have to drive carefully and slowly on the rutted road, but it didn't matter for there wasn't a chance in ten thousand of meeting a car on that road at night. There were only several Cajun fishermen and trappers who used the road, and the nearest shack to the spot where he intended to park was a quarter of a mile away.

The smile remained on Jacoby's lips. He smoked tranquilly until his rear view mirror picked up the amber light of the patrol car once more. A sudden sinking sensation made him queasy as he lifted his foot off the accelerator and eased to a stop on the shoulder. Ahead, within range of his headlight beam, he could distinguish the bright-yellow crossroads sign.

The trooper pulled in ahead of him and climbed out and walked over to him shaking his head from side to side. Again he rested his arms on the window sill and looked in. "What's the big hurry?"

"I was only doing thirty, officer," Jacoby said meekly. "That's the speed limit, isn't it?"

"I didn't say you were speeding. Why is it people always think they're being stopped for speeding?" He fished in his pocket and removed some money. "The way you pulled out of Fischer's, any one would of thought you were on fire. Red tried to call you back. Here," he held out the money, "you gave Red a five-spot and forgot your change."

Jacoby took the money and without counting it stuck it in his pocket. "Why, thanks. Thanks a lot, officer. I'm certainly obliged. It completely slipped my mind."

"It would take a lot to make me forget five bucks."

Jacoby laughed uneasily. If only the fellow would stop talking and go, his mind cried out. His eyes

turned towards the crossroads sign.

The trooper rubbed finger tips across his smoothly shaven chin. "I got news for you. That tail light's out again. She went out just as you pulled off the road."

"What!"

"She's out like a light." He laughed at his joke. "But don't

worry about it. I happened to think of something. Headquarters is about a half mile up the road. We've got a mechanic up there and he's got master keys. He can open that trunk in ten seconds. He'll fix the light and it won't cost you anything." He straightened up. "Follow me. I'll lead the way."



They Tried

Mayor Samuel Roth, of Buffalo, N. Y., decided that the new suggestion box in the city hall was not a good idea after all. First day suggestions included tearing down the jail, legalizing gambling, establishing more poolrooms and removing age limits on the sale of alcoholic beverages.

Futility

Inmates of the Louisiana state penitentiary at Angola had no difficulty killing a rattlesnake, after the reptile went itself out striking the leg of a convict. The convict had a wooden leg.

Case of Identity

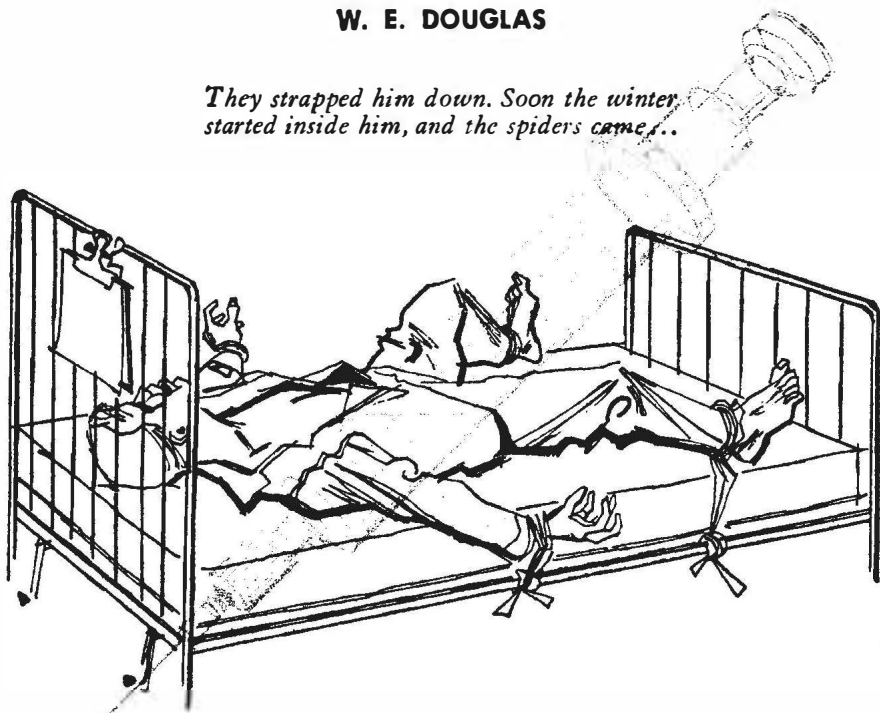
In New York three masked bandits encountered an unexpected problem before they could grab a \$20,000 Brooklyn pay roll. They had to prove they weren't TV comedians.

Forty employees of the Knomark Manufacturing Company stood around laughing at the gunmen for almost half an hour. They thought the holdup was a gag in connection with the Company's TV program "Masquerade Party." The bandits finally convinced them it was for real and fled with the money.

Addict

BY
W. E. DOUGLAS

*They strapped him down. Soon the winter
started inside him, and the spiders came...*



WITH THE prick of a needle, a rainbow exploded. Reds bassed into corals and corals to fuchsia. Yellows sopranoed with maize, then all harmonized with the alto blues into one exquisite rhapsody of joy. Then the whole swelled and thundered against his ear drums as the greens and browns, the silver and gold added their individual songs until, with

the pure power of beauty, the music drove out the hurt and forced the gnawing pains away. Then, and then only, was Henry Towridge happy.

Naturally, this was not known to the arresting officers who found him. To them, Henry Towridge was just another skinny, pimple-faced addict who lay, doped up on narcotics, in an alley.

"Look at his eyes," the first cop said, shining his light across the pupils.

"Yah—like pin heads," the second said. "He's gone but good—" Then, more to himself, "I wonder where he's at?"

"Don't know," answered the first. "But give me a hand. I know where he's going."

So, like farmers stacking grain, the cops swung Henry into the back seat of the prowl car and were on their way.

They didn't want Henry at the station. "He's under the influence," the Sergeant growled. "You know better'n to bring him here—take him to county." As The Law carried Henry out, the Sergeant shouted, "And place a hold on him, yuh hear!"

"Sure," the first answered, "I hear. I hear."

But Henry didn't hear. Henry was hopped up—far away in the never-never land of dope. Henry was splashing around in clouds of colors, with every fiber of his body aglow and tingling with the sounds of beauty. He didn't feel The Law carry him into the hospital. Nor did he feel the orderly undress him. Henry didn't know anything of the real world until the next morning, when he woke up in the high white bed, to the smell of disinfectant, his wrists and ankles locked in leather straps. Then he knew and started to cry. Henry had gone through the withdrawal from drugs before. He

knew what was coming. Henry had good reason to cry.

It started with breakfast. The ham and eggs, juice, toast and coffee started Henry's stomach splashing and tossing. "I don't want it," he said to the nurse. "Take it away."

"But it's good for you, Mr. Towridge," she persisted. "Just try—"

So Henry did. Maybe food would stave off the sickness. Maybe it would stop the sickness from coming at all, maybe it—but no. It filled his stomach after two bites. He pushed it away and the nurse left.

The dicks came around ten that morning.

"How many bangs a day were you taking, Sonny?" Big Belly asked.

"Wasn't taking any," Henry said. "I don't know what you're talking about. When am I going to get out of here? You got no right to hold me."

"We have a right," Cigar said. "And come off that 'you don't use the stuff' routine. Why, your eyes are bloodshot already. And your nose is starting to run. So how about it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Henry sniffed. "Leave me alone."

"Ok," Big Belly said. "Ok. Guess we were a little too soon. We'll be back later, Sonny."

And they left Henry to his unrest of legs and arms and to the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Out in the corridor, Cigar turned to Big Belly. "Well what do you think?"

"About five decks a day, I would judge, seeing he's starting the withdrawal so soon . . . Yep, a good five bangs a day."

A low whistle. Then, "That's a lot of dope. Wonder where he got it?"

"That," Big Belly said, "is what we want to find out. We'll give him a little time, then we'll come back."

The day went slowly for Henry. There was the unrest. He couldn't seem to get his legs in a comfortable position. His arms and hands felt leaden with a pressing, dull pain. His stomach was nauseated. Even his eyes, ears and head felt heavy, swollen and away from him.

Later the chills started, uncontrollable violent shivering. They cracked his teeth together until they sounded like a riveting gun and sent the winter racing up and down his thin frame. "It's part of the game," he thought, "just part of the game, but Lord bring on the spring."

And summer came suddenly into his head, like an unmerciful blast from a furnace. The fever—a roasting, consuming fire that poured the sweat from his body and parched his lips and released the fluids from his nose. Then a moment of fall and quickly winter once more, then spring, hell, fall and winter. Hours of changing seasons, days of grass and sun and devils with spears that

probed the leg muscles and punctured the arms. Then suddenly winter again, with its howling winds that beat against his ear drums and formed words like you would hear from a radio at the bottom of a well with its tone all fouled up.

"It's been twenty-four hours, Nurse. He's progressing normally so far, but watch him closely the next twenty-four hours. He's entering the final stage now."

"Is there anything we can do, Doctor?"

"No."

"Nothing at all? I mean, he's in such pain."

"The only relief for him is drugs, Nurse, and he's had too much of that already. No, just watch him. If he goes into shock, call me."

Then the summer with its boiling sun came once more to Henry, burning out the voices and leaving him in a sea of nausea. The volcano in his stomach started growling and snapping again, churning and erupting the nothingness up and past the constricted neck muscles, through the gags and chokes and finally emptying nothing on the white pillows, just another of a thousand other dry heaves. "I want to die," Henry gasped. "I want to die now, die, die, die. Please, before the worst comes." And the nurse left the room, biting her lip.

Down the hall she went, deep in thought, steered by habit, turned into the brightly lit room with table

and chairs and the aroma of coffee pungent on the air. "Isn't there anything we can do?" she asked the blonde that had her shoes off.

"About what, honey?"

"That boy in five, the one that's going through withdrawal. Isn't there something?"

"No," the blonde said. "Nothing, honey. Just relax and watch him."

"But it seems so cruel."

"I know," the blonde smiled, "but you'll get used to it. There's no other way. They have to kick it themselves. Besides, this isn't his first time and it won't be his last. They never quit, so relax and have some coffee."

"No, no thanks. What do you mean, 'kick it'?"

And as if in answer to her question, a grunting scream split the air. The blonde nodded her head at the cry and said, "There's your patient, honey. He's started. Go see for yourself."

Henry was into it now, really into it. Every drug-starved nerve in his body was screaming out its need. It was as if his fingers and toes were being ground off by an emery wheel, his arms and legs bitten by a million sharp-toothed insects and his chest and stomach eaten slowly by the rats. Even his ears were crawling with the scratching lice. Uncontrollable twitching twisted his face into hideous masks and the sounds of the insane growled out of his throat.

Now the spasms came. His arms

shot up, suddenly, as if pulled by a giant rope, trembling and straining against the leather straps. His eyes bulged and neck muscles corded with effort. Then his legs jerked up. The knees reaching for his chest, but stopped just short by the straps. And the grunts and the growls and the screams as he kicked his legs out flat. Again the same, and again and again, and again. While all the time the spiders are eating his eyes and filling his nose. Hour after hour of the jerking and twisting in this living hell until, with God-given mercy, exhaustion takes over and Henry passes out.

"He's not in shock," the doc says. "Let him rest, he'll be better tomorrow."

And he is better—very weak, but through with it. So the police are allowed in.

"Want to tell us now where you get the stuff, Sonny?" Big Belly asks.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Henry says.

"Get your clothes on," Cigar says. "You're up today for being under the influence."

So Henry is dressed and led to court. He enters a plea of "Not Guilty" to the charge and gets a bail bondsman to set him free. An hour later Henry is in his room heating up the white powder and spit solution in a spoon. A hypodermic sucks up the liquid through a piece of cotton. And with the prick of the needle, a rainbow explodes . . .

The coroner's verdict was accidental death, and no one questioned it. Except, apparently, this cat.

Dead Man's Cat

BY SYLVIE PASCHE

“THE THINGS that happen,” Stella used to remark as she went over her notes. Her desk was between Ed’s and mine, and we lapped up anything she cared to say. Actually, we had taught her how to be a reporter. “I tell you, fellas, half the facts you run across in your work you couldn’t use as fiction. They’re too unlikely.”

It was a fine conviction for a newspaperwoman to have, and we cheered her on. It didn’t occur to us—at least, not to me—that we could be involved in such facts ourselves. Before we were, however, a



couple of other things had to take place.

First, Stella married Ed and left the *Evening Record*. Then Ed, who was top rewrite man on the paper, arranged for a year's leave of absence, so that he and Stella could "explore the world." I was to act as his stand-in during that year. So far, there was nothing sensational.

But the morning after Ed left the paper, his body was found floating among the barges and fruit ships in the inlet under the Third Street Bridge.

Those on the paper were shocked to consternation. Ed had once been a waterfront reporter, and after becoming a desk man he had always been drawn back to his old pastures—the smoke-filled taverns, the formless blocks of freight warehouses, bustling by day, at night an eerie, dark, deserted world of vague shacks, railroad sidings, and motionless boxcars. Ed had last been seen in a bar not far from the bridge; he had left the bar around one A.M.

A number of us from the *Record* had been there with him, but the others had left earlier. I had gone only some fifteen minutes before Ed had; my home, a furnished apartment, lay in a different direction from his. I was the last of his friends to have seen him alive.

Ed, as we all knew, had been given to walking across the bridge at night, dropping down the three steel steps from the street to the narrow pedestrian walkway. Since

his marriage, he used to explain that it helped to dispel the fumes, and that he preferred getting to Stella in a fairly lucid condition. But he also liked to stand and look out over the inlet. He had always been fascinated by the dark water reflecting here and there a yellow light, and also the black shapes of the boats with their dimly-lit decks.

Late at night, the only traffic crossing the bridge was the Third Street bus, running every fifteen minutes, and an occasional car. Ed would catch the bus on the other side of the bridge, or a taxi on a more travelled street, and finally get to his stylish home in St. Francis Wood. This time he never reached the other side of the bridge.

Foul play was the first thing everyone thought of. But Ed had no enemies, as far as anyone knew. Nothing was missing from his pockets and there were no marks on him. His brain, the autopsy revealed, was saturated with alcohol. Death had been induced by drowning. The railing along the walkway was not very high, and it was easy to imagine a man, more or less drunk, possibly sick, leaning over too far and losing his balance. Ed couldn't swim. The coroner's verdict was accidental death, and no one questioned it.

The only thing I could do was see that the paper covered the story with decency and reticence. And, besides joining the staff in "flowers for Ed," I sent on my own an ar-

rangement, for Ed had been my best friend. Somehow, I was not particularly worried about Stella. I knew she had married Ed for his money.

I was jolted when I saw her at the funeral. Her black clothes and subdued make-up could account for her pallor, but there was something else contributing to it — something way below the surface. Standing on the sidewalk afterwards, with people practically offering condolences to me, too, I kept thinking about the way she looked.

I wonder how many hours on a psychoanalyst's couch I'd need to find out just how I feel about Stella now. But I don't want to go into that.

She had blown into the office of the paper one day, some five years or so ago, a tall, somewhat athletic girl who still managed to be cute. She was fresh out of college and she had romantic ideas about what it was to be a reporter. Very soon she was talking of her "hunches" and her "leads," and she played them to the hilt. She had a quick eye, and a dramatic sense that often spilled over into the melodramatic. And unflinchingly, she took on the goriest of murder cases.

Between Ed and me, we pretty well monopolized her. As soon as we could, we got her that desk between us. We gave her all the tips we knew and made sure she wasn't asking advice from anyone else or

going out with anyone else. She had one of those figures that every man takes note of, which means that our relationship couldn't stay on a high Platonic level, and after some hemming and hawing around, Ed and I began dating her separately. It didn't get us anywhere. I don't know which one of us first starting talking about getting married, but I know she gave the same answer to both of us, because she discussed it all at the office, sitting at the desk between us. Without mentioning names, of course.

"If I ever get married," she would say dreamily, leaning back in her chair and gazing at the ceiling, "it will have to be with a bang. It will have to be a life more interesting than I have now, not less. Why give up an exciting job like this for household chores? If I ever get married, I'll want us to be able to explore the world from the Paris night-cellars to the opium dens of Hong Kong. I surely won't want to be just a housewife."

I figured she talked like that to both of us together so we'd know she wasn't playing any favorites. She would never commit herself when I was alone with her, but she was very nice to me. Indeed she was. And since I was taller and better-looking than Ed, I was sure that at bottom she preferred me.

But then that uncle of Ed's died. If I were to live a thousand years, I'd never forget the day Ed came in and told us. He seemed stunned.

He was getting something like two hundred and fifty thousand, after taxes.

Stella's reaction was perfectly simple. You couldn't even find fault with her. After the to-do was over and Ed was finally alone at his desk again, she leaned sideways toward him and with a wide, downward sweep of her arm, said "And now do you still want *me*?"

So they got married. And they bought the house. But before they could start on that world tour, Ed went off the Third Street Bridge.

If Ed and Stella had expected me to fill the part of friend of the family, I disappointed them. At first Ed kept asking me out, and I went once, but it was more than I could take and I didn't go again.

But with Ed no longer there, it was another matter. There was no reason why I shouldn't see Stella, who, moreover, no longer needed to look for money in the man she married. I'd wait a decent period before asking her, of course. Meanwhile, it was natural that I should go out to see her. She went away for a while after the funeral—to her folks, I believe. During that time I was given Ed's job on a permanent basis.

When I heard Stella was back, I called her up.

"Oh yes, Bob" she said. "Sure. You must come out. I'll be glad to see you." But there was a listlessness in her voice that set me back. Did

she feel she had to play the part of the bereaved widow?

I found her looking listless, too. There was no denying it. Although she no longer wore black, she seemed to have the mark of someone who has gone through a shattering experience. She led me into a living room that gave the impression of an interior out of Harper's Bazaar, and we sat down in deep upholstered chairs.

"I'm so glad you came, Bob," she said. "I was afraid you might not. You've been keeping away pretty much, you know. But I do need all the friends I've got. And you were once one of the best."

I was trying to get used to the flatness in her voice, and I didn't know what to say. She made a gesture with the hand that held her cigarette. "It's all right, Bob, you don't have to answer. I know why you didn't come. Now will you fix us drinks."

I fixed her a drink the way I knew she liked it, and poured myself some rye. Bottles and mixers and ice were all ready on a low table, the way they have them on the stage.

Then I sat down again. And the cat came in.

It was not much more than half-grown, and an ordinary alley-cat, mostly white with black-and-grey striping on top. It walked in slowly and straight up to me and sat down on its tail in front of me and fixed me with its big, unblinking eyes.

"You have a cat," I said, to say something.

"I can't exactly say I have a cat," Stella said. "That's Mona. She belonged to Ed. He picked her up near—" she paused and then went on, "—that bridge on Third Street."

My glass nearly slipped out of my hand.

Stella went on in that flat, absent voice, "He brought her home one night inside his coat. She was tiny, and filthy, and starved, and he set about rehabilitating her. I was almost jealous of the amount of care she got. But she was devoted to him. I think she still looks for him nights."

The creature sat staring at me, never moving and never blinking, and Stella didn't seem to see anything odd in this behavior. I tossed down my rye and poured myself some more.

"I really never did know cats before," Stella was saying. "Mona is my first experience. I never thought a cat could dote on a person the way she doted on Ed. Besides, I sometimes think she's got second sight."

I almost asked what made her say that, but I didn't really want to hear about Ed's cat and her second sight. Then the phone rang and Stella went to answer it, and I made a lunge at the beast.

"Skat!" I said under my breath.

She took her eyes from my face long enough to follow the motion of my hand. It passed within an

inch of her, but she didn't even blink.

The cat's "second sight," I told myself was without a doubt only a figment of Stella's addiction to the dramatic. It was just the kind of thing she was always thinking up. But that the cat was sitting there staring at me, to all appearances challenging my right to be there, had nothing to do with Stella. I have always rather liked cats, but I could now feel myself breaking into a sweat.

The visit was definitely not shaping up the way I wanted it to. And I made the mistake of taking a third drink. Though this might relax me for a moment, it wouldn't help in keeping my mind cool.

Stella didn't help, either. I had decided simply to ignore the cat, when she came back and took up the conversation where she had left it. Somehow I got the impression that she was glad to have a safe subject of conversation.

"As I was saying," she said, as she sank back into her chair, "Mona has been quite an experience for me. I would never have thought of taking a cat seriously before."

I was then on the upswing of my drink, and I said with an amused smile, "Now what the hell do you mean, taking her seriously?"

"I mean just exactly that," she said, flicking an ash. I didn't care for what she was saying, and yet in a way it seemed good to hear her blazing away with some crazy idea,

'almost the way she used to do. "Mona never does anything without a reason. You may not see it right away, but it's always there, and if you wait long enough, and watch carefully, you'll find out what it is."

Was Stella going to dream up a reason for that animal sitting there staring at me? I didn't put it beyond her. Then it suddenly came to me that for something so marked there *must* be a reason. If there was, I didn't want to know it. At that instant I wanted to leave the house.

"Besides," Stella was saying, "I am convinced that she sees through people—"

I got to my feet. "Honey, let's go for a spin," I said.

She looked startled. "Spin? Why you only just got here."

"I know, but it's fine out. You've been pretty much cooped up lately. We can stop off some place for drinks. Do you good to get out."

"Oh, no, Bob," she said. "Not now. I thought *you* came to see *me*."

"That's right. I did. I wanted to drop in and see how you were making out. But if you won't come I'll have to run along." I was already moving toward the door, carefully not looking toward that confounded cat. I wanted to get away quickly, because I didn't know what I'd say if I got involved in further explanation. And it seemed to me that as I left Stella looked after me with an expression of bewilderment.

As soon as I was in my car, driving along, I started cursing myself. I didn't know what had gotten into me, but it was too late to go back.

I drank a great deal that night. The next morning it seemed that I must have been imagining things in a big way. I couldn't make sense out of anything that had happened, least of all my reaction to an attitude that a dumb animal had happened to take. I couldn't let myself be routed that easily. I called up Stella.

"Sorry I had to leave so soon last night," I said. "But you've got to come out with me one of these evenings. You set the day."

"I can't go out, Bob. Really I can't. It's impossible. For one thing, how would it look to be gallivanting around with you so soon after—so soon after—" It gave me a turn to hear that she didn't seem to be able to bring the words out. The thought that she might have cared for Ed now really began to possess and torment me. And it wasn't like Stella to give so much thought to what people would say. Was she merely playing a part?

The long and short of it was that I went back to see her. I didn't want to, but there wasn't any reason I could give her for not coming that made sense.

I was glad the cat wasn't in the room when I came in. Stella motioned me to the chair I had used the last time. But we hadn't been sitting more than five minutes, talk-

ing sensibly about the people on the *Record*, when there was a mew behind the door.

"Mona," Stella said, starting to her feet.

"Does that cat *have* to come in here?" The words were out before I knew it. I had intended not to show any objection to the cat. I had intended, so help me, to stroke it.

Stella stopped, her eyes wide. "Why, Bob! I thought you liked cats."

I couldn't say, "*But not this one.*" So Stella let the animal in. And I could feel my skin tighten as I watched it, because it did exactly what it had done the last time: swayed slowly across the rug, sat down in front of me, and gazed at me steadily.

I knew that what I should do was say, lightly, something like "What is she staring at me for?" or, "What does she want from me?" But I couldn't. The next best thing, I knew, would have been to go on talking calmly about the office. Instead, I found myself pleading with Stella.

"What you should do is go out. You're going to get morbid sitting around the house like this. You look quite peaked. It isn't like you to worry so much about what people will say."

Stella leaned back in her chair, her eyes on the wall opposite. "It isn't just what people will say." She still talked in that quiet, controlled voice, so unlike the one I was used

to. "I don't believe you understand, Bob." Her eyes moved and looked directly at me. "I cared a great deal about Ed."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"I know you think I didn't really care because of that money business. But I wouldn't have married him no matter how much money he had, if I hadn't liked him a great deal. As a matter of fact, he was the only man I ever would have married. I'm sorry, Bob, but that's the truth. And you don't really know a person until you have lived with him. Ed wore better than I ever dreamed he would. The money didn't change him one bit, and we could have been happy together to the end of our . . ." Her voice trailed off.

It was a great deal for a man to take at one blow. A very great deal. I couldn't look at her. I didn't know whether what was shaking me was jealousy, or something else. And Stella wasn't through with me. Not nearly.

We sat silent for a moment; then I felt her eyes on me again.

"You didn't like Ed, did you, Bob?" she said gently.

I gave a violent start of surprise and protest. This was something else. I felt danger about me as if I could touch it. I began to shout: "What makes you think—"

I broke off, stopped by the way she was looking at me. It was a look full of watchful speculation, compounded with horror and pain.

Then her glance left me, dropped to the still motionless, still staring cat.

"Do you know why she is looking at you like that?" she whispered.

Involuntarily, I threw myself back in my chair. "How should I know?" I managed to say.

"Do you really not know?" Stella's voice insisted.

What the hell are you driving at? Honey, are you crazy. The words I wanted to say hung in the air in front of me, but I couldn't say them. I knew what she was driving at and she wasn't crazy.

"It wasn't an accident that killed Ed, was it, Bob?"

I got to my feet and started toward the door. There I turned once more. Why I don't know. Perhaps to make sure that it was all really so. Stella's eyes were on me. The cat had jumped into my chair and was sniffing it. I backed out of the door, walked out of the house, forgetting my hat. I got into the car and drove off.

I drank even more that night. Before I finally passed out I kept repeating to myself that Stella really knew nothing, that Stella could prove nothing. And what did it matter what cats knew, since they couldn't tell anybody?

I was in no shape to go to the paper the next day, and in the afternoon the police came for me at home. I learned later that Stella had called them and told them what

she suspected, but had asked them very particularly (she knew them all well down at the station) to do some investigating before they arrested me. This they had done. They had spent the morning going over the neighborhood near the bar, questioning people in specific reference to myself. They turned up a man who had seen me leave the tavern, fifteen minutes before Ed left, as I had said and as the bartender had confirmed. But I had said that I had gone toward Market Street and taken the bus home, and this man swore that I had gone in the other direction, which is the direction of the bridge.

I was incapable of thinking clearly or of making an attempt at denial. I seemed to be in the grip of occurrences against which I had no chance. Before the afternoon was over I had signed a full confession.

First degree murder, of course. I admitted I had planned it all. I even kept pointing out that I hadn't made a mistake anywhere, that my plans had worked out perfectly.

Long before I got to this row of steel-barred cubicles with the hopeless name, I was able to read, cold sober, the story in the papers.

This time the *Record* did not go in for reticence. They gave me the works, and, being on the inside, they stridently scooped every paper in town. Stella gave them her part of the story. When I saw her face, drawn and unsmiling, looking at

me out of the printed page, I was glad that by making no defense I would be sentenced without trial, and would not have to face her or anyone else again.

She had had no suspicions at all, she said, until I became so unnerved when Ed's cat kept looking at me. Then, playing one of her hunches, she maneuvered me back to the house so I would confront the cat again. The whole thing started with the cat.

And the cat was a fraud.

That's what I can't take. Every paper had the animal's picture on the front page, with an appropriate caption: "NEMESIS," "TRAPS MURDERER," and the like. The *Record* outdid the field. It ran an enlargement of the two staring eyes, under the title: "THE EYES OF CONSCIENCE."

But no matter what the picture, the copy under it told the same thing: the cat had a way of staring as it did at anyone who happened to sit in her chair.



Police in Miami, Fla., arrested Herman Larsen, 22, after they caught him breaking into a hardware store. "I went in the store so I could get caught," Larsen told the officers. "I want a divorce from my wife and I figured this would make her divorce me."

In Memphis, Tenn., a man picked up on a Saturday for questioning about a murder in Montana was annoyed. "The Federal Bureau of Investigation should work a forty hour week," he complained bitterly.

San Francisco police, checking a parking lot where a number of cars had been looted in recent weeks, found a youth loitering nearby. In his possession were a hammer, pliers, screwdriver, chisel, small hacksaw and a large knife. The youth explained that he was carrying the tools because "one of the heels on my shoes keeps working loose."

A "Sleeper"

Best-Seller?

MANHUNT...the magazine in your hands, is the largest-selling periodical in the crime-mystery-suspense field. MANHUNT sells more copies per month than *any* magazine of its type, anywhere. This record has been achieved because our success permits us to pay more to the important writer in our field, and permits us more editorial man power to search constantly for new, talented writers.

IN THIS ISSUE, in addition to 11 short stories and a Clancy Ross novelette, we are proud to present a full-length novel by a brand-new writer, Evans Harrington. *The Prisoners*, in our opinion, is a truly great story... one that we sincerely feel will receive laudatory reviews in the book columns, one that very possibly is a "sleeper" best-seller.

ALSO, from writers who have never sold us before, be sure to read *Addict* by W. E. Douglas and *Vigil* by James W. Phillips. In this issue, too, you will find Pat Stadley, author of fiction in all the best magazines; Wenzell Brown, who zoomed to prominence following publication of his book *Run, Chico, Run*; Jack Ritchie and Norman Struber, two of MANHUNT's most popular writers.

We'd like to hear from you about MANHUNT. And if you like the magazine, tell your friends about it.

Contest Winner: YOU, detective

No. 10 — THE MANY MOTIVES

*D. Jordan-Wilson
468 Eighth Avenue
New York 1, New York*

Hammond pulled a letter-size manila envelope from his pocket and dropped the keys inside. "This will be state's evidence," he said.

"I knew it, I knew it," exclaimed Mrs. Farrell. "That woman murdered my husband," she said, pointing at Gloria Lake. "She dropped her car keys when she killed him."

"No, Mrs. Farrell," Hammond said. "The way I see it, the real killer took the keys from her handbag and planted them near the body. Miss Lake didn't kill your husband. Had Mr. Farrell undergone a change of heart and so informed Miss Lake, there would have been a fight over that. And any murder committed at the height of fury is accompanied by enough noise for you,

Mrs. Farrell, to have been able to hear.

"Mr. Tyrell gave the alarm almost immediately after entering the study. He wouldn't have had time to make his request for money, get into an argument with Mr. Farrell and kill him.

"This was a premeditated murder, Mrs. Farrell, and only you had a motive. Your husband was about to leave you for a younger woman and to your way of thinking, as you pointed out, he is better dead.

"You took Miss Lake's keys from her purse and left them near the body, hoping to implicate your rival. That was a mistake. When I showed you the keys, you immediately said they belonged to a Pontiac because you obviously know Miss Lake owns a car of that make. Actually, you were too far away to read the tag which, incidentally, doesn't say anything about a Pontiac.

"You were just a little too eager, Mrs. Farrell, but then 'hell hath no fury...' Shall we go?"

One of Those Nights

Detroit police said Thomas J. Tiggett, 24, did everything wrong. First, he bungled a lumber yard burglary and was apprehended. Then at the police station, he took the wrong seat, for the detective questioning Tiggett looked up and saw Tiggett's picture on a circular describing him as a fugitive from Southern Michigan Prison.

Three, Four,

Out the

Door

THE two men walked into the diner. They wore two hundred dollar suits and they were very well groomed.

The man with the fat, round face was Joey, and he was about thirty years old. It was a pink face, and

BY

ROBERT S. SWENSON



*What made them think they could push people around,
cracking a man's skull open and everything?*

it was unhealthy pink, just a shade out of purple. He was overweight and he walked around with a sucked-in potbelly. Joey was sensitive about his weight.

The other man was Al. He was about five years younger than Joey a picture of rugged, good health. Tall and tanned and with a weight-lifter's build.

The two men stood just inside the door of the diner and they looked down the long line of occupied stools. There was only one stool open and that was down at the end of the counter. They strolled down to the end of the diner and Joey took the empty stool.

The person sitting next to Joey was a red-headed man, tall, but slightly built. He was sitting in front of a bowl of fish chowder, minding his own business. Al tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, friend, you made a mistake," he said. "You got my seat."

The man didn't hear what Al said, but he knew he had been spoken to. He turned to Al. "Huh?"

Al grabbed a fistful of coat and breathed in the man's face. "I said you got my seat. Now blow."

The man's mouth dropped open. He pulled away from Al and knocked Al's hand off his coat. "Well, who the hell are you?" he said.

Then Al grabbed the man by the back of his collar and pulled him backwards off the stool. The man fell on his head on the tile floor.

"Hey, don't forget your soup," Joey said. He reached over and grabbed the man's chowder and dumped the bowl of chowder on the man's head. Then he and Al exploded with laughter, as if they'd never seen anything so funny. Three people left the diner, plainly apprehensive. The man just sat on the floor with his head hanging limp, covered with fish chowder.

Al took the empty stool and then the man behind the counter came up to them and started wiping the counter with a damp rag. Without looking at them, he told them to take it easy because he didn't want any trouble. He said it nicely. Both Al and Joey ordered hamburgers.

Then the man with the chowder on his head got off the floor and stood up. He was groggy and he had to hold onto a booth behind him to steady himself. He wiped some of the chowder off his face and then he wiped his fingers across the front of his coat.

Al and Joey seemed to have forgotten him. They were talking and laughing and then the man shook his head clear and he got mad. "You cheap hoods! You dirty bastards!" he yelled at them. "I'll get the cops. You can't do that to me."

The man behind the counter served the hamburgers. Joey picked up his hamburger and started eating. Al turned around.

"You think you can push me around?" the man yelled at Al. "You cheap crook!"

Al sat there looking at the man and Joey didn't pay any attention to him at all, just kept on eating his hamburger.

The man took a step toward Al. "You cheap, dirty—" But that was all he had time to say. He was close enough then and Al slammed a fist into his ribs. It was the kind of blow that would have smashed a plaster wall. The man made a loud, funny sound and then he dropped onto the floor again. He started groaning and rolling on the floor.

Al watched him for a few seconds and then he turned to Joey. "Well, he ain't doing no good on the floor," he said. "If he's going to call the cops, he can't do it there."

Al slid off the stool and grabbed the man by his ankles, and then Joey hopped down and took the man's wrists. They began bouncing the man toward the door, slamming his head on the floor at each step. The man groaned loudly each time his head hit the tile floor.

They started a little chant to liven up their play. "One, two, button his shoe; three, four, out the door." They pitched him out the door onto the asphalt yard. And then they went back to their hamburgers. Four more people left the diner, and except for Al and Joey and the counter man, only two other people remained. They were sitting at the other end of the counter.

They were a young couple, in their early twenties, and they were dressed in old, paint-spattered

clothes. They were watching Al and Joey.

Al took a bite of his hamburger. He chewed a couple of times and then he made a face and spit it out. It went all over the counter and some of it splattered against the coffee urn four feet away. "What the hell do you call this?" he said. "This stuff's rotten."

Joey threw down the rest of his hamburger on the counter. "That's what I was thinking," he said. "It's filthy. Who wants to eat in a filthy dump like this?" He pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket, peeled one off, and dropped it onto the counter.

"My dog eats better," Al said. He slapped his hand on the bill on the counter and crumpled the bill up in his fist. Then he threw it on the floor in front of the man behind the counter. "Bend down, friend," he said.

This time the counter man was mildly defiant. He put his fists on the counter and glared at Al. Al didn't like it.

"I said bend down," Al said, and he reached over the counter and shoved the man. The man went backwards and up against a stack of dishes. The dishes went crashing onto the floor and the man grabbed at a shelf to keep his balance.

And then the young girl at the end of the counter said something. She seemed very angry and she started to stand up, but the young man held her arm and pulled her

back down onto the seat. He spoke to her in a low voice.

"I don't care," she said out loud. "Somebody should do something or say something. Who do they think they are? They can't treat people that way."

"You talking to me, lady?" Al yelled down at her.

She hopped off the stool and again the young man said something to her and tried to hold her back. She shrugged him off.

"Yes, I *am* talking to you!" she said loudly. "Just who do you think you are? What makes you think you can push people around like you're—you're God or something?"

Al looked at Joey and smiled faintly and then he began walking down to the other end of the counter. He walked right up to the girl and stood in front of her with his feet wide apart. He was still smiling faintly. "You mind saying that again, lady," he said. "I don't think I heard you right."

The young man slid off his stool and put his arms around the girl's waist. He started walking her to the door. "Come on, Dot," he said quietly. "This is none of our business. Let's go home."

With only a little resistance, she let him take her to the door, and then Al laughed and said in a loud voice, "That's right, lady, take your boy friend out of here before he gets hurt."

Immediately, she spun away from the young man and marched

back to Al. "You're nothing but a —a cheap, vicious gangster!" Almost before the words were out of her mouth, Al smashed her across the face with the flat of his hand. She twisted around and fell into a heap on the floor in front of the young man.

The young man didn't move. He went rigid. He took a deep breath and doubled up his fists and he stared at Al. Al and Joey stepped up to him.

"You got any ideas?" Al said to him.

The young man just held his breath.

"That's what I thought," Al said.

"He ain't got no ideas," Joey said. "He just wants to mind his own business and go on home. Right, kid?"

The young man began breathing again.

"All right. Pick up your girl friend," Al said.

The young man didn't move. His tongue licked his dry lips. His fists were balled in tight lumps inside his pockets.

"Do like he says," Joey said. "Pick her up!"

The young man bent toward the girl. A shoe hit his buttocks and knocked him sprawling over the girl. The closing of the diner door as they left shut out their laughter.

The young man helped the girl to her feet. Through the door-window, only a few yards away, the red-headed man was lying on his

back on the asphalt. He had a jacket bundled up under his head and another man was kneeling down beside him blotting the injured head with a handkerchief. Joey and Al had paused to gaze unconcernedly down at the man.

The counter man came over and looked through the window, too. He said, "I called the police. But by the time they get here . . ."

The young man sucked in his breath and nodded.

In silent outrage, people bunched up closer to where the red-headed man lay. Al and Joey stood there and looked at them. Maybe eight or ten of them, maybe twelve. Then Al and Joey walked away. They got into a long black car and drove off.

The young man watched the car go, kept looking after it.

"There was nothing you could do, Phil. Nothing."

"Right," the counter man said. "Hell, you don't fool around with monkeys like that. You just do what they say."

The girl and the young man went down the steps. His eyes saw the scarlet of the red-headed man's blood. The hot sunshine was getting into the blood now, thickening it. The young man could still hear the crack, crack, crack of the skull against the tile floor. "*He just wants to mind his own business and go on home. Right, kid?*" He felt suddenly sick.

"Come on, Phil," the girl said, leading him away.

Everything was set, undisturbed, as before: the wedding, the honeymoon spot, where they'd live when they came back, his new and better job . . .

"Stop it," the girl said. "Stop looking that way, Phil. There was nothing you could do. Nothing anyone could do."

"That's right," he agreed.

He walked along, her hand on his arm, and he wondered how other guys became heroes. He wasn't one, he knew. He hoped he'd be able to forget all of it, soon.



I LAY ON the top bunk and listened to the canary in the second gallery and thought about the time when I had one in our cell.

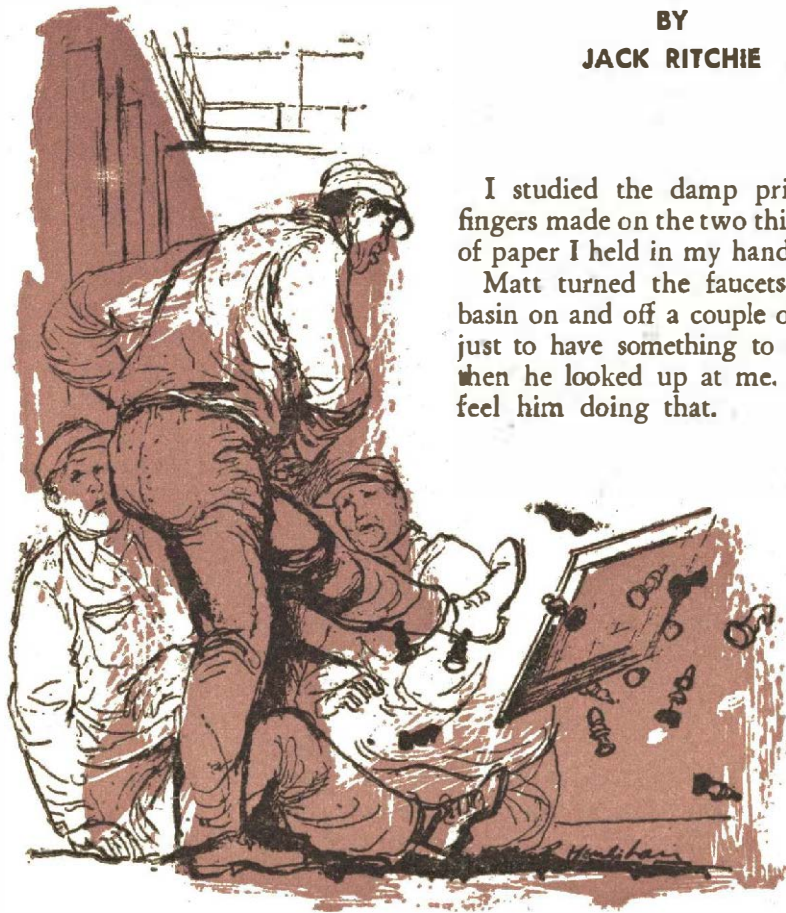
Matt was listening too and he began to swear. He got off his bunk and spit into the toilet bowl.

The Canary

BY
JACK RITCHIE

I studied the damp prints my fingers made on the two thin sheets of paper I held in my hands.

Matt turned the faucets in the basin on and off a couple of times, just to have something to do, and when he looked up at me. I could feel him doing that.



*He had it made. The Big Wall lay behind him.
All he had to do was keep walking...*

"Too bad we ain't got a canary any more," he said.

I began to fold the papers slowly.

"I said it's too bad we ain't got a canary any more," Matt said. "Old man, when I'm talking, you look at me."

I looked at him.

He let himself get the smile that never went to his eyes. "Now why did you have to go and kill the poor little bastard?"

"Because I'm mean," I said.

He nodded. "That's right." And he waited.

"I'm a ratty weasel," I said.

He nodded again. Then his eyes went to the papers I was putting in my pocket. He came over and took them out.

I put my hands behind my head and looked at the ceiling. I thought about the canary and how I'd held it in my hand and then crushed it.

After a while, Matt said, "All right, runt. What are these?"

"Nothing," I said. I could feel my stomach tightening.

He reached up and pulled me off the bunk. I bumped my knee coming down and closed my eyes against the pain.

"Don't tell me it's nothing," Matt said.

I opened my eyes and blinked away the water. "They're tracings of some plans," I said.

He let go of my shirt and looked at the sheets again.

"They're tracings of some plans I found in the warden's files," I

said. "One sheet shows a section of the old sewage system. The other one shows what part of it's being used today."

I took the sheets out of his hands and tracked with my forefinger. "This sewer pipe isn't being used today. It leads out of here down to the river."

Matt looked at me and then he smiled and sat down on his bunk.

"It goes under the carpenter shop," I said. "You got to get through four inches of concrete and five feet of dirt to get to it." I licked my lips. "It's two feet in diameter. And from where it ends, it's about two hundred yards to the river."

Matt kept his grin. "Anything more?"

"There's a grating at the end of it," I said. "You'd need a hacksaw."

He leaned back against the wall. "You been dreaming about this?"

"Just dreaming," I said. "I don't like tunnels."

Matt put his hands over one knee. "You got a job now. Get me into the carpenter shop."

I climbed back up on my bunk and lay down. I thought about crawling in a little tube with five feet of ground between you and the fresh air.

In the morning, after breakfast in the mess hall, I went to my job in the warden's office. I dusted his desk, the files, the window sills, and then I began sorting the mail.

The warden came into the office at nine and I stood up until he took his chair. Then I brought the mail to his desk and sat down with my pad of paper and a pencil.

He went through the stack and as he did he dictated answers to me. When he finished he lit a cigar.

"Morgan," he said. "I been hearing things. You want me to get you another cellmate?"

"No, sir," I said. "Not now." I closed my notebook. "Sir," I said. "Bronson would like to get a transfer to the carpenter shop."

He rolled the cigar in his mouth a couple of times and studied me. "Did he figure you got the influence to get him there? Nobody gets out of the laundry until he's put in a full year there."

"I was just asking, sir," I said.

He took the cigar out of his mouth. "How long have you been in here, Morgan?"

"Thirty-four years, sir," I said.

His grin showed the gold fillings in his teeth. "This is your home, boy. You wouldn't know what to do if I opened the gates for you."

I looked down at my notebook and didn't say anything.

"You got a nice warm and comfortable little cell," he said. "I hear you even put curtains on the windows."

"I took them down, sir," I said.

Out in the exercise yard during the free hour, I went to the sunny wall where Jim Wallace was sit-

ting on the ground with the chess board already set up.

I sat down on the ground and rolled a cigarette.

"Nice day," Jim said. "Won't be many more like this."

"Right, Jim," I said. "Guess I'm getting old. I can't stand cold weather any more. I get twinges like rheumatism."

Jim started a Casablanca opening. "Drop in at the dispensary and have the doc look you over."

"I don't know, Jim," I said. "If you're not bleeding, the doc don't think you're sick."

"Try it anyway," Jim said. "If he don't give you nothing for the pain, I'll see if I can get you something." Jim studied the board. "My canaries are three weeks old now. Would you care to have one?"

"I'll think about it, Jim."

"I know how you feel," he said. "I never thought I'd want another after Alfie died. But you get over it. They're good company."

We were down to the end game when Matt walked up to us and looked down. "What's going about getting me into the carpenter shop?"

"I talked to the warden this morning," I said. "But it's not that easy, Matt. Nobody gets out of his time in the laundry."

"I don't like the laundry," Matt said. "My hands get chapped."

"All I can do is talk to the warden," I said. "That's all I can do."

Matt studied us for a while and then he hooked a toe under the chessboard and flipped it over.

Jim kept his eyes on the ground. I looked up at Matt for a few seconds and then I looked at the ground too.

Matt stood there laughing softly to himself and when he got tired of that he walked away.

I turned the board back over and we picked up the pieces.

"That's the sixth time he's done that," Jim said. "I'm keeping track."

"I know, Jim," I said. "So am I."

"We never bother nobody," Jim said. "I don't like other people to bother me either." He looked up from the board. "Your move."

Matt had to finish his two months in the laundry, but at the end of that time the warden transferred him to the carpenter shop.

After the first day there, Matt sat on his bunk and pointed to his shoes. I got down on my knees and began unlacing them.

"It's a cinch," he said. "We'll break into the pipe where it goes under the tool room. We got some privacy there."

I put his shoes under the bunk.

"I had to let the tool-room boys in on it," Matt said. "But they're not taking the trip. They don't like tunnels either. Just you and me go." He stretched his legs. "It'll take at least a week. It's got to be done slow and easy."

It took almost two, but when it was done, Matt came back to our cell grinning. "Pack your valise," he said. "We leave at two tomorrow afternoon."

"Matt," I said. "I can't just leave the warden's office when I feel like it."

"The hell you can't. You been here so long you practically got the run of the place. You're trotting all over on errands for him the whole day."

"Matt," I said. "Why do you want me to come along? I'll just slow you."

His grin came back. "You're my insurance. I don't read plans so good and if everything's not right, I want you to share it with me."

Around one-thirty the next afternoon, I let the warden notice that I wasn't feeling so good and he let me go to the dispensary.

Jim was at the typewriter in the empty waiting room pecking away on some medical records. He stopped when I closed the door behind me.

"I leave in about fifteen minutes, Jim," I said.

He looked around to make sure that we were alone and then he opened a desk drawer and took out a small flat bottle.

"A half pint," he said. "About fifty percent alcohol and flavored with orange juice."

"Thanks, Jim," I said. I put it inside my shirt, under my belt, and we shook hands.

"Good luck," Jim said.

I went outside to the carpenter shop and nodded to the guard lounging against a work bench.

"The warden wants me to do a check on the tool records," I said. "I'll be messing around here all afternoon."

He was considering a yawn. "Go ahead," he said. "Help yourself."

I went to the far end of the long room and into the tool cage by the side door. Matt was inside with a con I knew as Eddie and they were trying to look busy.

Matt glanced out of the wire cage to make sure that the guard wasn't interested and then he squatted down under the counter. He shoved aside a big cardboard box, switched on a flashlight, and we looked down into the hole.

I felt the color leaving my face as I smelled the sick air coming from it. I looked at Matt and I could see that he was beginning to sweat.

"Once you're down, I'll slide over the box," Eddie said. "I don't think anybody's going to miss you until the five o'clock check."

"Who goes first, Matt?" I asked. But I knew.

"You do," he said.

I reached under my shirt and brought out the bottle and unscrewed the cap.

"What's that?" Matt asked.

"I'll need a little something, Matt," I said. "My nerves aren't so good."

Matt looked down into the hole again and then he took the bottle away from me.

He took a big swallow and while he stood there trying to keep the stuff down, I reached for the bottle.

He slapped my hand away. "I'm not through yet," he said. He took a couple more swallows, waited a half minute, and then finished the bottle.

"Don't brood about it," he said, looking into my eyes. He handed me the hacksaw and a flashlight. "Get down there and start crawling. You know how to do that."

I lowered myself into the hole cut into the pipe. I began inching myself forward on my stomach, holding the flashlight and hacksaw in front of me.

After ten yards I stopped and waited for Matt to follow me. It was a long minute before I heard him behind me.

The pipe was foul with dead air and the stench of the dirt that covered the bottom of it. I would have tried to back up, but Matt was behind me and there was only one direction for me to go.

I went forward about twenty-five yards and then I stopped to rest. But Matt slapped at my heels and I had to go on.

The small stones at the bottom of the pipe began digging into my knees and elbows. I crawled fifty yards more and then I had to stop.

Matt began slapping at my heels again and he even scratched my

legs with his fingernails. "For God's sake," he said, his voice high. "Keep moving!"

"I got to rest," I said, over my shoulder. "You got to let me rest or I'll die here and you'll never get out."

At the end of five minutes I started forward again and the next time I stopped to rest Matt didn't bother me.

I lay there waiting for my heart to stop racing. When I began moving forward, I tried not to stop for rest again. But I had to stop twice more before I got to the grating.

I found that I had to remove the blade from the hacksaw in order to get at the ironwork and it took me about forty-five minutes to cut my way through.

I crawled out into the fresh air and looked back up the riverbank to where the prison walls were only fifteen yards away.

I thought about the canary I'd called Betty and I thought about how Matt had taken her out of the cage and put her in my hand.

I remembered how he'd put his big hands over mine and made me squeeze until she was dead.

I put up the collar of my jacket. It was cold out here. Too cold for a man who was in his sixties.

I started walking along the wall toward the front gate. I'd probably spend some time in solitary, but when they let me have my cell again, I could put up curtains. Matt wouldn't be there to laugh at them and make me take them down.

Nobody would bother to crawl through the pipe. I was pretty sure of that. They'd just seal it up and figure that Matt had got away.

Anyway, I'd tell them that he did.

It must have been about the halfway point when the barbiturates Jim had gotten for me caught up with Matt. There was enough in that bottle to kill him three times over.

Maybe he was dead now, or maybe he was still breathing.

I wondered if the rats would wait.



CARLO TUGGED at the cracked celluloid visor of his black canvas cap. He took another sip of the lukewarm coffee on the restaurant table before him, but his eyes never left the sagging door beneath the narrow fan-light across the street. The kid, Freddie, would



They didn't know what a good time was—a real thrill. Only Carlo knew...

Lipstick

BY WENZEL BROWN

LIPSTICK

have to come out soon or he'd be late for school.

Carlo's eyes moved to the window three stories up. Something stirred there—brown cloth, the movement of a hand. Involuntarily Carlo shrank back and put his arm up as though to shield his face. He

gave a start at a sudden blast of sound. Someone had shoved a nickel in the juke-box and the dingy place was flooded with shrill, raucous Latin-American music.

Carlo swung about to glare at the boy and girl who leaned against the green plastic and chrome side of the juke-box. The girl wore saddle shoes, bobby-sox, a bright red skirt with an uneven hem line, a tight fitting white sweater. The boy was only a year or two younger than Carlo, but tall and blond, whereas Carlo was short and dark. Carlo watched them laughing, touching hands, and hate coursed through his body. They thought they were smooth, easy going—the kind of kids who were popular, who always had a good time and left guys like Carlo out in the cold. Carlo snickered a little to himself. They didn't know what a good time was—a real thrill. He wondered what they'd say if they knew about him—Carlo.

The bitterness that had sprung up within him was tinged with a sense of victory. He looked around and saw that fat man behind the counter watching him. He'd better leave and come back another time. Mooching around in a greasy spoon like this wasn't so good, but it attracted less attention than hanging around on the street.

Carlo ordered another cup of coffee. It was his third and the fat jerk behind the counter was giving him the eye. Carlo wanted to make

some crack, but he knew that wasn't the smart thing to do. He didn't dare let some wise guy get under his skin. Not now, when he was so close to the end.

The counter man slid the coffee onto the table, letting the dirty brown fluid slop over into the saucer. Carlo started to dig a dime out of his pocket and that was when he saw Freddie. The kid came running down the steps and onto the sidewalk. He darted across the street, yelling to some friend Carlo couldn't see.

The counter man was saying, "Come on, I ain't got all day. Cough up the dime."

Carlo thrust the dime across the table. He didn't dare look up. His hands were trembling and he could feel a nerve twitch in his cheek. He wanted to get up and run, the way Freddie was doing. Run far away. Into the past. Into nothingness.

Carlo forced himself to be quiet. Freddie was gone and Mrs. Cortele was up in the apartment all alone. He had time. Loads of time. An afternoon that stretched into eternity.

Carlo sank back in his chair. Suddenly he felt quiet, at ease, with just the slightest tremor of pleasurable excitement to warm him. This time everything was going to be smooth. He couldn't fail. This was what he'd been looking for all day.

In the streaked mirror on the wall, Carlo could see his own re-

flection. He studied the narrow, small-boned face. The skin was swarthy, the hair jet black, the eyes brown, almond-shaped, giving a slightly Oriental cast to his features. He looked at his hands. The tapering fingers looked fragile, but he knew their strength. It was the same with his body. He only weighed a hundred and thirty pounds; his shoulders were narrow, his chest flat, but there was a wiry tauntness to him that no one suspected until they felt his strength.

He spooned more sugar into his coffee and stirred it slowly. This was a good time, a time when he could savor what was to come. He'd muffed it twice before, making stupid mistakes, but this time everything was set, planned for, taken care of.

He smiled to himself, thinking how it had all begun. He'd found the badge in a trash can. It had been rusted a little, but he'd polished it up. It was like a cop's badge, but the big raised letters read Standard Gas Company, then below the single word, inspector, and beneath that, serial number 4411. Maybe the badge was a fake or maybe the real thing. Carlo didn't know and didn't care. It had given him the idea.

Carlo felt that he had been alone for a long time, while life swirled all about him. People lived, laughed, wept, made love in the apartments that crowded together

in the streets, in turbulent slums, in the huge apartment houses along the Drive. But Carlo had been cut off—with just his mother's thin, nagging voice, her constant complaints and demands. The badge had changed all that. He had bought half a dozen yellow pencils and stuck them in the outside breast pocket of his jacket, a black leather notebook in which he'd jotted numbers and the black canvas hat with its celluloid visor. He kept the badge attached to the inside of his coat where he could flash it quick and then cover it up.

The badge was a magic wand, letting him in wherever he wished. At first he hadn't known what he was seeking. He was content to go into strange places, feel the comfort, the warmth, the intimacies of homes such as he had never known. Then he realized that it wasn't enough to be a mere observer; he had to be God, changing the lives of these people, punishing those who would never accept him.

Feverish desires pricked at him. He knew there was something he had to do, but for a long time he didn't know what it was. Then he'd been in an apartment on the Drive. The woman had let him in grudgingly, saying she was just about to leave. He'd gone to the kitchen and pretended to read the meter and jot the figures down. But all the time he'd been listening. He had heard the woman's high heels in the corridor. Then she had

gone into a room and he had heard nothing more. He had moved quietly along the hall to the open door. The woman had been sitting before a mirror, leaning close to it. Her lips had been flattened back against her teeth, drawn thin so that she could daub them with the crimson lipstick she held in her hand.

Carlo had stood silent, watching her, and she had been too absorbed in her task to notice him. She had been a small woman, plump, dark with olive skin and black hair. She hadn't been young and she looked petty and mean. And yet there had been something about her that had made Carlo want to touch her.

He had taken a step toward her and then another. Then he had seen her eyes in the mirror. She had known he was there and was frightened. Carlo had stopped, but one of his hands had stretched out toward her. The woman's red, smeared mouth had opened in a scream. Carlo had turned and fled. He had lept down the stairs and run along the park, just the way he had seen Freddie running a few minutes before.

The thought of Freddie forced his mind back to the present. The greasy spoon was filling up. Half a dozen people had come in and two men stood talking in the doorway. Carlo knew he mustn't stay here too long, but there was a luxury to waiting, taking his time. When the thing happened, it

would be quick. The joy came now when he knew nothing could stop him.

Just the same he'd better shove before the fat counter man got any more suspicious. Carlo rose and went to the sidewalk, but he still waited, looking up at the third story window, thinking over his plans to see if there was any weak spot.

This was a slum neighborhood, rickety tenements, cold-water flats, rubble-strewn lots where condemned buildings had been ripped down and never rebuilt. It had been two weeks since Carlo had first come here, watching, waiting, sauntering along the streets and through the crowded markets.

It was in the open air fruit market that he had first seen Maria Cortele. He had known in an instant that she was the person for whom he was seeking. He had followed her home, watching the movement of her rounded hips beneath the cheap fabric of her short black dress. When she had turned to enter the tenement, he had caught another glimpse of her profile. The face was thin, the nose sharp, the jaw pointed. She wasn't beautiful or young, but she was the woman. Carlo had had no doubt about it.

He had tip-toed up the stairs behind her and peeked through the rail, watching her while she took the key from her sleazy black bag and opened the door.

The first week he had been content to watch her the way he had watched other women. He had waited in the streets, sauntering back and forth, smoking, glancing up at the window now and then. Even when she did not leave her flat all day he felt happy, like a hunter waiting in a blind, warm with a sense of anticipation.

On Monday of the second week he had known it was time to act. He had worn his black canvas hat, thrust his yellow pencils in his pocket and rubbed his badge on his sleeve until it shone. When he had come to the tenement, he had walked up the stairs slowly, but without hesitation and knocked on the door. He had shown his badge and the woman had let him in. She had taken him back to the kitchen where the meter was.

He came to a stop as he entered the kitchen and his mouth flew open in surprise. There was a boy seated at the kitchen table, a plate of spaghetti, a glass of milk before him. The boy was eleven or twelve, dark and slight. Carlo watched the boy twist the spaghetti in his spoon, his face serious, his eyes on his task. For a moment, Carlo confused himself with the boy. He had eaten at a table like that in the kitchen of his home, keeping his eyes on his plate to avoid his mother's gaze.

While Carlo scribbled figures in his notebook, the woman went to the boy and put an arm about him.

She called him Freddie and urged him in Italian to drink the milk. The boy gulped at the milk, still without looking up.

The woman turned to Carlo. She said sharply, "Well, what is it?"

Carlo wrinkled his forehead. "There's something wrong. Can I see your last month's bill?"

The woman went to a table and jerked out a drawer. There were a dozen bills with a blue elastic band about them. She said, "Here" and lay them on the table. As Carlo picked them up, she turned back to the boy.

The receipted bill was second in the file. Carlo crumpled it in his palm, then making sure the woman was not watching him, slipped it in his pocket. He thumbed through the other bills, noticing her name on the top of one.

After a while she turned again. "What are you waiting for?"

"The bill isn't here."

"It must be." She took the pile from him and ruffled through it, rapidly the first time, then slowly. When she had finished, she pulled out other drawers, searched a cabinet and then disappeared into the room beyond. Carlo could hear the sounds of her moving about. He wanted to go to her, but now the boy's solemn gaze was upon him and he dared not move.

The woman came back and he could see the panic in her eyes. She was afraid. Not of him, but because of the missing bill. The few

dollars would mean a lot to her. She couldn't have much.

He spoke soothingly. He would come back on the next day or maybe the one after that. She would have found the bill by then and everything would be all right.

He had forced himself to stay away on Tuesday, but on Wednesday he could wait no longer. He climbed the stairs quickly, breathing hard, and knocked on the door. Mrs. Cortele had opened the door, but put her hand across the entry to bar his passage. She had not found the bill she told him, with a hint of defiance, and her son had a cold and was sleeping. Couldn't Carlo come back another day?

Carlo returned on Thursday and knocked on the door. There was no answer and he knocked again and again. The door opposite opened and a frowsy woman told him Mrs. Cortele had gone away for the day. She would not be back until late in the afternoon.

Carlo sensed defeat. She was suspicious and maybe she had called the gas company or even the police. Caution told him to give up his plan, but he knew he couldn't. No matter what the chances, he'd have to see this thing through. He lounged around the neighborhood all day. At four he saw Freddie on the street, but it was dark before Mrs. Cortele came home. He saw the light flick on in the third floor window and the woman's arm as she pulled the shade down. He

started toward the entrance of the tenement, but a figure darted in front of him—Freddie. Carlo's face grew dark with anger, but he turned away.

Now it was Friday and he knew today was the day. If anything went wrong, he'd have to wait over the weekend. Saturday and Sunday stretched ahead of him like endless things. But there wouldn't be a slip-up. Maria Cortele was alone in the flat upstairs and Freddie was at school.

He started to walk across the street. Some strange trick of vision made the strip of asphalt into a vast black plain. He walked on and on and finally the door topped by its narrow, dirt encrusted fan light loomed ahead. He lurched across the sill and now the stairs had to be climbed. They were tall, much narrower than he remembered. He was breathing hard by the time he had reached the first hallway and he had to rest, leaning heavily against the bannister, before he could mount the second flight.

He was almost sobbing by the time he reached the door of the flat. This wouldn't do. He had to be calm. He had to play it cool. What was the matter with him? He forced himself straight, pulled at his cap, touched the pencils in his pocket. He meant to tap lightly on the door, but the sound of his knuckles seemed to thunder through the dingy halls.

She was standing in front of him

now. She was talking, but he had not heard the words. He could only see the moving lips and the veins, twisting in her thin throat.

His own words were mechanical—the little speech he'd practiced over and over again. "I think we've found the error, Mrs. Cortele. If I can just check the meter once more, I'm sure I can put everything to rights."

He was in the kitchen again with the little black notebook out. He looked up and saw her staring at him. Her face seemed to swim in front of him, huge and bloated. Then the face became hatchet-sharp, tiny and far away.

Her voice, thin and strained, came to him. "What's the matter with you? Who are you anyway? I don't believe. . . ."

Her words trailed off and her open hand flew to her throat. She took a step backward, bumped against the side of the door and stood still.

He choked over the words. "You mustn't go. You mustn't."

She screamed at him. "Get out of here. Get out, I say."

The shrill voice seemed to cut through him. He was across the room and before she could turn, he had swept her hand from her throat and imbedded his fingers in the loose skin. He felt the veins writhing beneath the pressure of his tightening grasp.

Her eyes popped and her face turned gray, but still he dared not

let her go. He shook her back and forth. "Listen to me," he shouted. "You've got to help. Can't you understand?"

Her body was slack now and when he loosened his grip, she sagged against him. He picked her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom and threw her face down on the bed. Her black skirt rucked up against her thin legs and stretched tight across her thick hips.

Carlo went back to the kitchen. A heavy bread knife lay on the sloping shelf by the sink. He picked it up and took it into the bedroom. The woman was moaning softly. He seized her by the hair and twisted her around. Her eyes were wild with fear and her lipstick was an ugly smear across her thin mouth.

He raised the knife. He said, "Be quiet, damn you! Be quiet."

The distorted mouth twisted obscenely in a wordless, animal cry.

He clutched her hair more tightly, drawing her to him. There was something more that he had to know; something he had to understand.

Maria Cortele's face blurred and her fingers clawed at his wrists. He thrust her back on the bed and crouched over her.

But now the features were no longer Maria Cortele's. The woman lying here was familiar, yet he could not place her. The hair was no longer black, but flecked with

gray. The face was flabbier and there were pouches beneath the eyes. The cheek-bones were a little higher, more peaked.

Carlo pulled back, as though startled. He knew now what he had been seeking and what he had to do. The face was his mother's face and, as he watched, it grew younger, bolder, smiling up at him as at a lover. He remembered now what he had buried deep within his memory. It had happened long ago, when he was a little boy. He had stood in his mother's bedroom door and watched as she looked up in this way at the man who was her lover. They had kissed and then drawn away. His mother had

turned and seen Carlo. She had given a cry and sat rigid. Carlo had seen the white face, the lipstick smeared across the mouth. Hate had held him motionless while she crossed the room to him, then he had whirled and fled. . . .

Now the woman whom he held stirred and whimpered. He saw the lipstick smeared across her mouth, her white face. Suddenly she cried out. He prodded her with his left hand, for his right hand held the knife. Her cry grew higher, shriller, mingling with his hate, drawing it to a crescendo.

Then all was abruptly quiet. And Carlo, as he went down the stairs, quickly, silently, felt at peace.



August Greenlund, of Vancouver, Wash., had to break into his own grocery store every morning for two weeks. He told police that some joker had been putting padlocks over his own on the front door each night.

Mrs. Katsuo Muto, a clerk in a Tokyo wine shop, told police that a bandit entered the shop, bound and gagged her, and fled with \$20,000 yen (\$55). She managed to free herself soon after the robbery, but said she thought about the matter "a long time" before notifying authorities.

"You see," she added, "the robber's mask slipped while he was tying me. He was my son, Mitsuo Muto, who left home a year ago."

Gone With the Wind

George Jacob, a Detroit grocery owner, was robbed of \$250 by a man armed with a knife. As the robber ran from the store, Jacob gave chase. Outside, a sudden gust of wind whipped about \$80 in bills from the thief's hand.

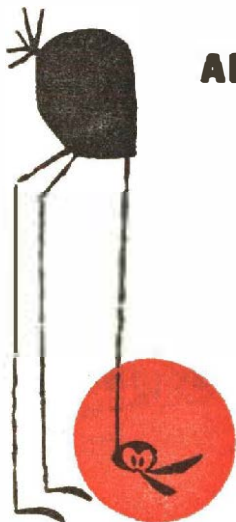
Jacob stopped to recover some of his wind-blown money. So did the thief. Passersby joined in the scramble for currency. Jacob retrieved \$38. The robber escaped with an estimated \$180. Passersby disappeared with the rest.

Disqualified

It happened in Honolulu, T. H. Isau Isosaki, 28, had his driver's license revoked by police after tests disclosed that he was blind in one eye and nearly blind in the other. Isosaki gave his occupation as driving instructor.

The \$1 Question

In Meriden, Conn., an angry motorist came to police headquarters to pay a \$1 overtime parking fine. He handed Lt. Louis V. Aloia a \$100 bill. Aloia slowly counted out 99 singles in change.



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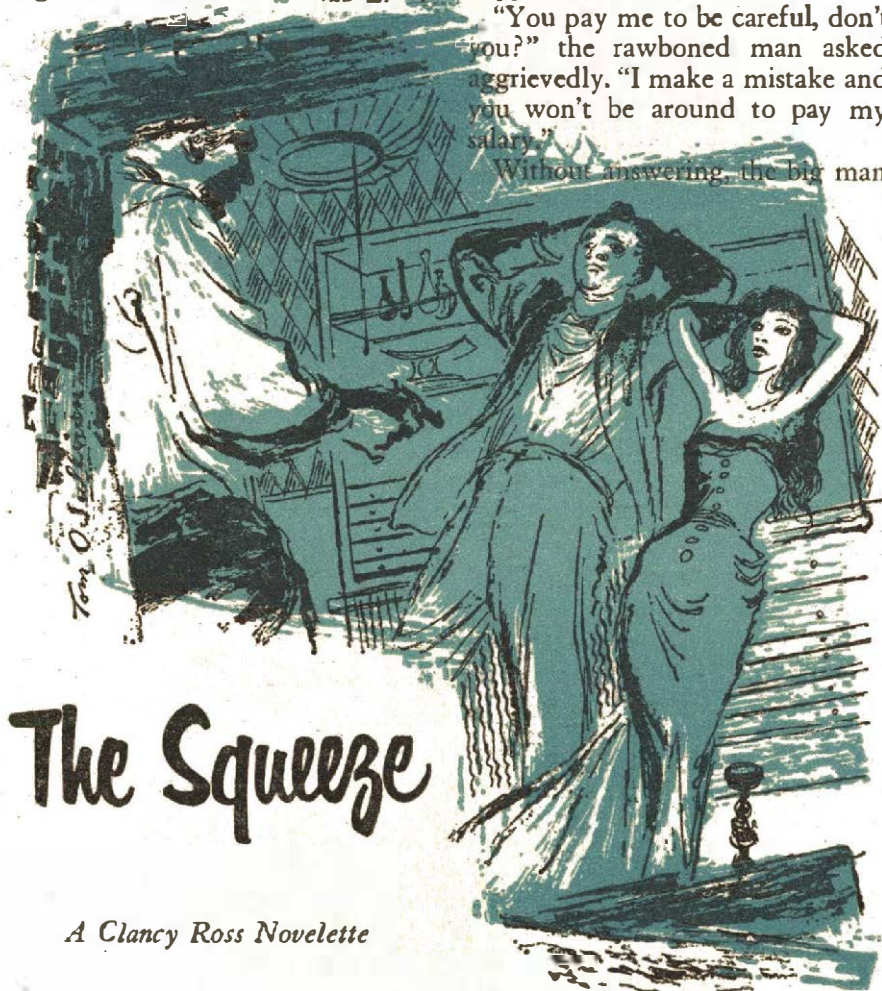
WHEN THE elevator stopped at the second floor of Club Rotunda, the big man started to get off first. But when his rawboned companion raised a cautioning hand, he waited impatiently

until the man stepped out before him, checked the small lobby and signalled that all was clear.

Then he strode from the car and growled, "What the devil could happen here, meathead?"

"You pay me to be careful, don't you?" the rawboned man asked aggrievedly. "I make a mistake and you won't be around to pay my salary."

Without answering, the big man



The Squeeze

A Clancy Ross Novelette

It's not polite to lug a gun when a girl invites you to her apartment. However, Clancy wasn't sure Audrey wanted him — alive.

BY RICHARD DEMING

strode ahead into the club's gaming room, the rawboned man scurrying after him in an attempt to pass him and enter the room first. Failing, he had to content himself with following a pace behind and suspiciously examining the casino patrons as his charge crossed the room.

The big man was about forty-five, with prominent features and slightly bulging eyes. His close-cropped hair came to a widow's peak in the center of a wide forehead. He was well over six feet tall, and with the exception of a slight paunch most of his two hundred and forty pounds was muscle.

He made straight for a round table at which eight men sat playing five-card stud. One of the players, a slim man of about thirty, with prematurely gray hair and jet-black eyebrows, glanced up at him fleetingly, gave a distant nod and tossed a blue chip into the pot.

"Got a minute, Clancy?" the big man asked.

Nodding without again looking up, the silver-haired man waited for the bet to come back to him. When the player to his right pushed forward two blue chips, Clancy Ross made a grimace and folded over his hand. Rising from his seat, he signalled a nearby houseman to take his place.

Without looking at either the big man or his bodyguard, he moved toward the small lobby from which the two had just come, turned right

when he reached it and led the way down a hall to his private office. Inside, he vaguely waved at chairs, seated himself on the edge of a huge desk, one foot on the floor and one idly swinging.

Clancy Ross was not a large man, about five-eleven and a hundred and seventy pounds, but his slim body moved with the controlled grace of a fencing master.

The big man chose an expensively-upholstered easy chair and the rawboned man leaned his back against the door. Ignoring the latter, the slim gambler turned his attention to Bix Lawson.

"Something, Bix?" he asked.

The prominent eyes of St. Stephen's political boss and gang overlord studied Ross before replying.

Finally, he said, "I hear Tony Armanda's trouble shooter, Louie Book, dropped by to see you last night."

Clancy Ross fingered the knife-thin scar which ran along the left edge of his jaw from the earlobe to the slight cleft in his chin. "He and some four hundred other customers," he admitted.

"He just come to roll the dice, or for a little business talk?"

"Some of both. But he settled for rolling the dice."

Lawson nodded his head. "Yeah, I figured that."

"Then why the checkup? You weren't really worried that I'd tie in with a mug like Armanda, were you?"

This time Lawson shook his head. "I wasn't worried that you had—yet. But you don't think you can sit this one out as a neutral, do you? This time you're going to have to jump one way or the other. You know what Tony Armanda's after, don't you?"

"Sure. Control of the town. Which means running you out." Ross grinned. "I hear he stopped your expansion into Blair City cold, after you went to all the trouble of exterminating the Shelly mob. And now he's getting ready to move into your territory. Maybe he'd never have gotten the idea if you hadn't tried to muscle in on Blair City."

Bix Lawson waved a large hand dismissively. "That's water over the dam. The point is, he's getting ready for an all-out fight. It's going to be tough. He's organized big. Maybe bigger than I am, though I got the advantage of already being in the saddle."

Ross shrugged. "It's no skin off my nose. You and he kill each other off. Between battles you can drop into the Club Rotunda for relaxation—as paying customers."

"It ain't that simple, Clancy," Lawson said heavily. "Tony Armanda figures your place here as an opening wedge, because you're the only independent in town." He paused, then inserted querulously, "Why the devil do you want to stay independent? If you came in the system, your protec-

tion payoff would drop in half and you'd have a couple of dozen guns to back you up when somebody like Armanda tried to push you around."

"We've been over the subject before," Ross said. "Nobody's pushing me around."

"No? Well the grapevine says Armanda's not going to take a no from you. You're either jumping his way, or he's going to move in and take over Club Rotunda himself. He needs it for a beachhead. And I'm not going to sit still while he establishes one. You're going to *have* to throw in with me."

Ross said mildly, "That sounds like an ultimatum."

The big man's lower jaw thrust out pugnaciously. "Call it what you want, Clancy. A war's shaping up, and you're the key to it. I'm not risking a setup I been twenty years organizing just to keep from hurting your feelings. You're either with me or against me. You either fall in line, or I'm going to have to take over the club."

Clancy Ross flashed his teeth in a bright smile. "You actually declaring war, Bix?"

The big man glowered at him for a long time. Eventually, he said, "I'm just telling you the setup. Take it or leave it."

"Then you're declaring war," the gambler decided. Smoothly he came erect and moved toward the bigger man. "We may as well start it right now."

Bix Lawson looked startled. Holding up one hand, he said, "Hey, why you always have to have such a short fuse?"

The rawboned bodyguard took a step forward, his fingers fiddling with the lapel of his coat. Lawson turned to look at him.

"Back off and get that look off your face," he said in a peevish tone. "You're outclassed."

The rawboned man blinked and, with reluctant obedience, backed against the door again. Bix Lawson heaved himself to his feet.

"Okay, you called my bluff," he said to Ross. "But it was only part bluff. If you really think you can stay neutral, I'll go along. I got enough trouble with Tony Armanda without tangling with you. I'll leave you alone as long as he does. But I'm not sitting on the sidelines while he takes the Rotunda right from under my nose. The minute Armanda moves in on you, I'm hitting you from the other side. Think it over and get smart."

"I have," Ross said pleasantly. "You can both go to hell."

2.

Fifteen minutes later Clancy Ross was standing near one of the dice tables idly watching the play when Sam Black, his first assistant, tapped him on the shoulder.

Sam Black was a barrel-chested man with an air of stupidity which

camouflaged an unusually astute mind. His function was to manage the legitimate night-club portion of Club Rotunda on the first floor, and he seldom ventured up to the gaming room unless he had important business with his employer.

When Ross raised an inquiring eyebrow, the stocky assistant manager drew him aside out of earshot of nearby patrons.

He asked, "What's all this parade of competitive hoods into the club, Clancy?"

"Parade?" Ross asked.

"Last night it was Louie Book, Tony Armanda's right hand. A few minutes ago Bix Lawton. And now Tony Armanda himself is sitting in your office. I put him in there and gave him a stall until I had a chance to talk to you."

"Why? I don't mind talking to him."

He started to move away, but Black grasped one arm. "Some kind of squeeze is on, isn't it, Clancy?"

"Don't worry about it, Sam. I'll handle it."

He tried to disengage his arm, but Black held on tight. In a faintly exasperated tone the assistant manager said, "Yeah. You'll handle it clear up to your neck. I got an idea of what's going on. You're not the only one with an ear to the grapevine. Armanda and Lawson are fixing to clash, and probably they both want you on their side. They're bringing some pressure?"

"I said I'd handle it."

"Sure you will. You'll spit in their eyes. And catch us right in the middle. Why don't you get some sense?"

Ross grinned at him. "About what?"

"About this damn-fool independence of yours. Just because you won't work through Lawson's machine, we shell out double the protection any other joint in town pays. And we're sitting ducks when some goon like Armanda decides to muscle in. For what?" Black paused, then answered himself. "Just so you don't have to take orders from anybody."

"That's a pretty good reason," the gambler said mildly.

"Let's get smart, Clancy. If you can't stomach Lawson, let's jump on Armanda's band wagon. We can't fight both of them."

"Why not?"

Sam Black looked at him speechlessly for a long time, then expelled his breath and said in the patient tone of a teacher explaining something to the class dunce, "You've got a gun permit and I've got a gun permit. There's not another employe in the club who packs a rod, and you wouldn't let them mix in the fight even if they had rods. Lawson and Armanda must have fifty goons between them. What's your plan? For you to take on one mob single-handed and for me to take on the other?"

The slim gambler shrugged. "I haven't any plans. Nobody's called

for a showdown yet. And I won't make the first pass."

"Now that's reasonable of you," Black said with exaggerated admiration. "You're not going to attack half a hundred mobsters unless they make you mad. What's the matter? Mellowing in your old age?"

Gently Ross pried loose the fingers gripping his arm and turned toward the lobby. Sam Black fell in at his side.

"I won't need you," Ross said.

"Hah!" Black said in a tone indicating he was coming along as a restraining influence whether his employer liked it or not.

Then, just as they reached the lobby, he said in afterthought, "There's a couple of people with Armanda."

Tony Armanda's two companions turned out to be a man and a woman. The man was in his late twenties, thin and pale with barroom pallor, and with the exaggerated expressionlessness of a hired killer who knows he is tough and wants the world to know it. Ross glanced at him once and dismissed him.

The woman got more of his attention. About twenty-five, she was slim and dark and languorous-looking, with huge black eyes and sensually heavy lips. She wore a brilliant red evening gown, and black hair fell nearly to her naked shoulders. The low-cut gown exposed a considerable amount of

bare flesh, and the gambler noted that it was the flawlessly-smooth texture of coffee with cream.

The woman was seated and the pale bodyguard leaned comfortably against the left wall. Tony Armanda stood at the opposite side of the room studying the labels of bottles on Ross's private bar. When Ross and Black entered, he turned abruptly and looked Ross up and down.

About forty, Armanda was a tall, muscularly-built man with hawk-like features and oily black hair just beginning to gray. There was an air of brisk arrogance about him, as though he were used to giving commands, enjoyed doing it, and expected instant obedience.

Armanda said, "You're Clancy Ross," making it a statement rather than a question, then swung his attention to his companions without even awaiting verification.

Drawing a thick clip of bills from his pocket, he tossed two fifties in the woman's lap and said, "Go play some games until I'm through here, honey."

To the man he said, "You wait in the hall, Slit."

The pale bodyguard obeyed instantly. The woman reacted more slowly, leisurely rising with the bills loosely held in her hand, then pausing with her gaze on Ross.

When Armanda ignored this obvious hint for an introduction, the gambler bowed slightly and said, "Clancy Ross, ma'am."

"How do you do?" she said and smiled. "I'm Audrey Livingston."

Tony Armanda frowned at her, but when she lifted her chin and looked at him in cool rebuke for failing to introduce her, his normally arrogant expression dissolved into a pacifying smile.

"Run along and win some money, baby," he said with none of the element of command he had used in addressing his bodyguard. "I'll try not to be long."

The woman obeyed this time, moving through the doorway with a sensual sway of hips which seemed to be deliberately assumed for Clancy Ross's benefit.

When the door closed behind her, Armanda ignored Black and said to Ross, "I sent my boy Louie Book to see you last night, but he didn't seem to get across my message."

"Oh, he got it across all right," Ross said with a pleasant smile as he sat on the edge of his desk. "It's just that the answer was no."

The dark man's eyes glittered as he gave his head a slight but definite shake. "He couldn't have gotten it across then. It isn't a yes-or-no proposition. The only right answer is yes."

"Oh?" Ross said, raising an eyebrow.

"You must know the situation, Ross," Armanda said with cold impatience. "The Rotunda's the key spot in St. Stephen. It's the fulcrum I need for my lever to pry loose

Bix Lawson. I'm not accustomed to wasting time, so I'll make it short and sweet. Fall in line and you stay in charge of the club, only as part of my organization. Keep saying no and I'll take over anyway and put one of my boys in your place."

"That wouldn't work," Ross said reasonably. "It takes somebody alive to run a gambling casino. Your boy would be dead before he got comfortably seated behind my desk."

Tony Armanda's lips compressed to a thin line and his expression turned faintly unbelieving. "You know who you're talking to, Ross?" He tapped his own chest with a forefinger. "This is Tony Armanda. I run half the towns in the state, and in another month I'll run this one. That means everybody in it, including you. Who do you think you are? I've got two dozen guns in town right now, and you've got none."

"One," the gambler corrected. "My own."

Armanda snorted. "That much I can handle without even my boys' help. Come off it, punk. Let's get down to business before I lose my patience."

"Did you say punk?" Ross inquired.

The dark man stared at him. "You have some objection? I call anybody at all anything I damn please. You may as well get used to it right now."

Clancy Ross's expression became one of pleasurable anticipation. As he slid from the edge of the desk, Sam Black came erect from his chair and stepped in front of him.

"Now just a minute, Clancy," Black said. "Let's not go off half-cocked."

"You'd better hold him back, buster," Tony Armanda said, "unless you want to scrape him off the walls."

Ross's expression gained in brightness. He started to step around Black, and his assistant's look turned slightly desperate. Suddenly Black placed a hand against the gambler's chest and pushed. The movement caught Ross unprepared, and he staggered backward to seat himself abruptly in the chair Black had just left.

With incredible speed Sam Black was across the room. Armanda didn't even realize he was being attacked until it was too late to block the six-inch jab which whistled at his chin. The blow landed with a dull *splat*, rocking the man hard against the wall.

Slowly Armanda slid to a seated position, rolled sidewise and lay still.

3.

Ross had bounced from his chair and was glaring at Black in exasperation.

"You can't afford to tangle with this guy," Black said rapidly. "You

can still talk your way out. When he wakes up, tell him I'm a demented cousin parolled to your keeping. Say you called the men with the nets, and they took me back to the asylum while he was still asleep. I'll drop out of sight for a couple of years until he forgets."

"Shut up," Ross said irritably.

Walking over to the unconscious man, he grasped him by the collar and the seat of the pants.

"Open the door," he ordered Black.

Resignedly Sam Black pulled the door wide. Ross made a short run forward and hurled Armanda a dozen feet down the hall on his face.

The astonished bodyguard next to the door sprang away from the wall, glanced from his unconscious employer to the gambler and fell into a crouch. Ross looked at him coolly, waiting. The man's features were set in a snarl and his right hand hovered near his coat opening.

"Go ahead," Ross invited. "I haven't killed anybody as stupid-looking as you for a long time."

The bodyguard remained rigid, tensed to start a draw, yet deterred by the gambler's seeming indifference. Ross stood without strain, his arms loosely at his sides.

The pale man's expression turned uncertain. Looking at the recumbent Armanda, he asked, "What happened?" in a tone suggesting he was inquiring about some accident in which Ross had had no part.

"He bumped his jaw and knocked himself out," Ross said. "He'll be all right in a minute. When he comes to, get him out of here."

Turning to Sam Black, he said curtly, "Better run out to the game room and tell Miss Livingston her escort is leaving."

Then he re-entered his office, closing the door behind him.

Deciding he deserved a drink before returning to his over-seeing duties in the casino, Ross mixed himself a weak Scotch and water at his private bar. He was halfway through it when a gentle knock came at the door.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened and Audrey Livingston entered.

"Tony and Slit are gone," she told him. "I decided to stay awhile."

He studied her for a moment, finally asked, "Why?"

"Partly curiosity. I figure a man crazy enough to throw Tony out of his place like a common bum is worth knowing. Partly boredom."

The gambler shrugged. Indicating his glass, he asked, "Drink?"

"Bourbon and ginger, please." She moved over to join him at the bar.

When he had mixed her drink, they silently toasted each other, Ross eyeing her speculatively over the rim of his glass and the woman smiling at him challengingly.

"You an old friend of Armanda's?" Ross asked.

She shrugged. "Not very. He's been in town less than a month."

"You didn't know him before that?"

"No. Why? Do we have to talk about Tony?"

"I'm just trying to figure your relationship," Ross said. "He acted as though he thought he had some proprietary interest in you."

She shrugged again, without resentment. "He's been paying my rent for a couple of weeks," she conceded. "It was his suggestion, not mine, though I didn't object to being taken out of the chorus line at Club Silhouette. A girl has to live. But he doesn't own me. I made that clear from the beginning, and he accepted it."

"Why? Armanda doesn't strike me as a man who would take much pushing around, even from a woman as beautiful as you."

She gave him a brilliant smile. "Thank you, sir. Am I beautiful?"

"You know you are. That was a statement of fact, not flattery. Why's Armanda put up with you?"

"I suppose he loves me," she said indifferently. "There's only one way to handle a man like Tony. If a woman didn't get the upper hand right at the beginning, he'd walk all over her. The only alternative is to walk on him. So I do, and he takes it."

Finishing his drink, Ross set his glass down. "You're a big girl and should know what you're doing,

but I think you're playing with fire."

"I like playing with fire," she said.

"If only other people get burnt, eh?" Ross said dryly. "Like now. If your boy friend gets jealous, he'll probably turn his fire on me, not you."

"That bother you?"

"Not particularly. But if I'm going to have the name, I may as well have the game. If Tony Armanda's going to send jealous bullets my way, I want to deserve them."

Taking the half-empty glass from her hand, he set it on the bar next to his own. Then he laid a hand on each of her bare shoulders and roughly pulled her against his chest.

She didn't put up even a token struggle. Her arms went about his neck and her full-lipped mouth closed over his eagerly. She strained against him, her grip about his neck tightening with uncontrolled passion until Ross had to break the hold.

"Whew!" he said, pushing her away. "Did you say you worked in a chorus line, or were a lady wrestler?"

Pouting at him, she tossed her head. "I've never had any complaints before."

"I'm not complaining," he assured her, as he reached for her again.

When he gently pushed her

away the second time, she stood with shoulders slumped, staring at him dazedly.

"This is no place for love making," he said. "Some customer may come in to cash a check at any moment."

"We could lock the door," she suggested in a far-away voice.

He smiled at her. "During business hours? I'm supposed to be working now, you know. Let's table it."

Wiping the lipstick from his mouth, he crossed to the door and held it open for her to precede him. She looked at him reproachfully, then straightened her shoulders and marched through the door.

The girl accompanied Ross back to the gaming room and trailed along while he made a supervisory check of the various games. It was obviously her intention to spend the rest of the evening with him, but the gambler wasn't in the habit of neglecting business for pleasure. Though Audrey Livingston was a provocative woman, he hadn't invited her to stick with him, and he felt no responsibility for her entertainment. After making his inspection tour, he gave her a pleasant smile and, without even offering an excuse, seated himself at the poker table.

She was still present when the club closed at four A.M. As Ross accompanied the last departing patron to the elevator, he found

her patiently waiting in a chair in the small lobby. When the elevator doors had closed, he looked at her inquiringly.

"I thought you might like to buy me a nightcap," she said.

He glanced through the archway into the second-floor barroom just off the lobby. "Ben's cleaning up. But there's a bar in my apartment upstairs."

The girl gave him a slow smile. Rising languorously, she said, "That's what I had in mind."

4.

At noon Clancy Ross came into the bedroom of his third-floor apartment carrying a tray containing orange juice for two, a pot of coffee, toast and a platter of golden eggs and bacon. Setting it on the bedside stand, he prodded the sheet-covered figure in the bed.

Opening one eye, Audrey Livingston looked up at the fully-clothed gambler, sat erect and pulled the sheet up across her full breasts. She stretched like a kitten, glanced at the tray and gave Ross a sleepy smile.

"You can cook too," she said. "You'd make some lucky girl a fine wife."

"I had it sent up from the club kitchen," Ross said mildly.

Pulling a chair up to the bedside, he fixed a plate of eggs and bacon for the girl and set it in her lap. Preparing another for himself, he

drained one of the glasses of orange juice and began to eat. The girl also started eating.

"Is this just a casual interlude?" she asked after a time. "Or do you want me to send Tony Armada on his way?"

Ross hiked an eyebrow at her. "I thought he was paying your rent."

"Well, it would involve a change in that arrangement."

The gambler shook his head. "Afraid I'm the bachelor type."

The girl exhibited no disappointment. "Well, it was worth a try," she said philosophically. "But I didn't suppose you went in for buying your women. So I just say thanks for the momentary diversion and good-by, huh?"

"That's up to you," Ross told her. "We can get together again, if you want, but I've no intention of assuming the obligation for your support."

She made a face at him. "You're certainly blunt. I don't know what women see in you."

"They admire my cooking."

In the front room the phone rang. Setting down his plate, the gambler went to answer it. At his hello a husky voice said, "Mr. Ross?"

"Yeah, Whisper," Ross said, recognizing the voice. "What's up?"

"I hear Tony Armada's kind of mad at you."

"I know," Ross said. "But I'm a little surprised the news hit the grapevine so soon."

"It wasn't a leak, Mr. Ross. He put the word out deliberately. He's not just turning his own guns on you. Maybe he wants to save them for his clash with Bix Lawson. I dunno about that. But anyway you got a price on your head for any free lancer who wants to make a try."

"Oh? How much?"

"Five hundred bucks."

"Five hundred" Ross said, outraged. "Is that all the cheapskate's offering?"

"Well," the stool pigeon said in a reasonable tone, "if the price was on some guy like Bix Lawson, a gunnie would have to figure the chance of getting it back from some other member of Bix's gang after he pulled the kill. With you he wouldn't have to worry so much once he got the job done. Everybody knows you got no gang except Sam Black."

Ross thought this over, finally asked, "The finger on Sam too?"

"Not that I heard. You can't tell, though. Maybe some free lancer would figure it was safer to take him along too. I would, if I was crazy enough to make a try. I wouldn't want Black gunning for me afterward."

Ross thought a moment more, then grinned sourly. "You can pick up your fee from Oscar the head-waiter any time after he comes on duty at four, Whisper. Meantime, here's an item to drop into the grapevine yourself. The gun who

delivers me Tony Armanda's head earns two grand C.O.D."

The informer whistled. "Four times Armanda's price! Wow! That's pricing him right out of the market."

"That's my intention," Ross said dryly, and hung up.

Immediately, he phoned Sam Black at his home to alert him against possible attack.

"My counter offer probably won't have any effect on Armanda's own men," Ross told the assistant manager. "But once it gets around, it ought to stall off any free lancers. Some hopped-up gunnie might try his luck before he hears of the counter offer, though. So watch yourself."

"You're offering two grand, huh?"

"Right."

"Hell, I think I'll go after it myself. Why should you give two grand to some stranger?"

"I doubt that I will. Don't worry about it."

"You mean it's a phony offer?"

"I mean probably nobody will take it. I just threw it out to create a stalemate. Naturally Armanda will raise my bet as soon as he hears about it. By the time I raise his again, every free lance gun in town will start sitting it out to see what the final top offer is. Which should leave the situation right back where it was, with only Armanda's regular guns to worry about."

"Only?" Black repeated. "That's the understatement of the year."

"See you at three," Ross said, and hung up.

When he re-entered the bedroom, Audrey Livingston had finished breakfast and was in the bathroom dressing. Ross glanced at his now cold eggs, made a face and lit a cigarette.

When the girl finally came from the bathroom, he asked, "Want me to call you a cab?"

"If you want to get rid of me," she said. "I haven't anything in particular to do."

"I have," the gambler told her. "I have two hours of book work to do before opening time."

Returning to the front room, he phoned for a taxi. Then he accompanied the girl down to the first floor to let her out of the building, for the club was not as yet open for business.

At the door she asked, "When will I see you again?"

Ross told her he would call her.

A few minutes after he entered his second-floor office and began working on his books, he got another phone call, this time from Bix Lawson.

Bix said, "Clancy, the information is all over town that Tony Armanda's out to get you. Why don't you wise up and throw in with me? It would save you a lot of trouble."

Ross asked, "From Armanda or from you?"

The local political boss was silent for a time. Presently he said, "Let's quit sparring, Clancy. This is the last offer. Want to fall in line?"

"No," Ross said.

"Okay," Lawson said in a quiet voice. "See you around."

The phone went dead.

After replacing the receiver, Ross frowned at it for some time. Then he shrugged and returned to his book work.

5.

During the next two days there was no sign of action from either Tony Armanda or Bix Lawson. Probably this was more the result of lack of opportunity than because of patience on the parts of the rival gang leaders.

During the hours the club was open, Ross was surrounded by too many innocent bystanders to make assassination practicable. And he could hardly be reached after closing hours unless he went outside, because for all practicable purposes his third-floor apartment was as impregnable as a fortress. The only means of access to it was by the same elevator which took customers to the second-floor casino, and Ross customarily cut the power and left the car on the third floor when he retired so there was literally no way to reach him as long as he remained in the building.

Often, even when no one was gunning for him, he didn't leave

the building for as long as a week at a time. And it just so happened that he had no occasion to leave the sanctuary of the club during the two days in question.

The gambler's indifference to personal danger didn't extend to disregard for others' safety, however. On his instruction Sam Black temporarily moved into the third-floor guest room, so that the assistant manager presented as poor a target as Ross.

There was not even a call from Whisper during the two days, which led Ross to believe Tony Armanda had not yet reacted to Ross's boost in price. The gambler was not a particularly patient man, and he was beginning to contemplate making the next move himself when, on the third night after he had tossed Armanda out of his club, Audrey Livingston phoned.

"I've been sitting by the phone," she said. "I thought you were going to call."

"I just hadn't gotten to it yet," he told her. "My odd work hours don't leave much time for social life. What's up?"

"Nothing in particular. I'm just lonely tonight and thought you might drop over for a couple of drinks."

Though the girl's voice was gay, something in her tone struck a jarring note. Attempting to analyze what it was, Ross decided her words sounded as though they had been carefully rehearsed.

Probably the off-note would have escaped him under ordinary circumstances. But with Tony Armanda on his mind, and knowing that the girl was Armanda's mistress, he wondered if the gang leader had somehow induced her to act as bait to lure him from the safety of the club.

He asked casually, "No Tony tonight?"

"He's catching a plane for Blair City tonight," Audrey said. "He won't be back till tomorrow night."

Possibly he had merely been overimaginative in reading some sinister meaning into the girl's tone, Ross thought. Glancing at his watch, he saw it was only nine P.M. "Things are a little slow tonight," he said. "And I haven't taken an evening off in some time. See you in about an hour."

Placing the casino in charge of his number-one houseman, Ross went upstairs to change from the dinner jacket which was his work uniform into less formal clothes. In the act of selecting a fresh shirt, he paused to consider possible measures he might take in the event Audrey Livingston's invitation was some kind of trap.

Alone with a beautiful woman in her apartment, the evening's early routine was fairly predictable, he reflected. She would suggest he remove his suit coat in order to be more comfortable. As this would leave the shoulder harness for his .38 automatic in full view, it would

be logical for him to remove it and hang it up somewhere. As a matter of fact it would be illogical not to, as it would look rather silly to sit around wearing a gun when the girl would probably be in a housecoat or negligee.

From the top drawer of his dresser he removed an odd-looking rig. It consisted of a leather strap about three inches wide and just long enough to buckle about a man's forearm. Sewed to the inside of it was a thick piece of elastic tape, the other end of which was attached to the butt of an old-fashioned double-barrelled derringer. After strapping the rig about his right forearm, halfway between the elbow and wrist, so that the tiny pistol rested against the inner side of his arm, he selected a shirt with wide French cuffs.

When he had buttoned the shirt, he tested the contrivance by suddenly snapping his arm forward. As if by sleight-of-hand the derringer appeared in his fist. When he released it, it slithered out of sight up his sleeve again.

When he had tested it several times, he took a box of .44 caliber rim-fire shells from the same drawer which had contained the gun, loaded the pistol and dropped six extra shells in his left pants pocket. Then he strapped on his regular shoulder rig and pulled his coat over it.

He reached the parking lot and his Lincoln without seeing any sign

of lurking gunmen, unlocked his car and took a flashlight from the glove compartment. Lifting the car's hood, he carefully studied the wiring, satisfied himself there were no bombs attached to the ignition or starter systems, and closed the hood again.

All the way across town to Audrey Livingston's apartment on Wood Street, he kept one eye on the rear-view mirror, but there was no indication of a tail. Perversely, he felt a touch of disappointment.

He parked a half block away and approached the apartment building with equal caution. But still he spotted nothing suspicious.

The building in which Audrey Livingston lived was a four-family place with individual outside entrances to each apartment. Audrey's was the lower right one.

She answered his ring immediately and showed him into a broad living room expensively furnished with ultra-modern furniture.

Audrey wore an ankle-length hostess gown with a black skirt and a flaming red top. A broad V at the throat extending from the cleft between her full breasts to the tips of her shoulders left the upper swell of her bosom bare. The thin, close-fitting material was unmarked by the lines of any underclothing beneath it.

She gave Ross an enthusiastic kiss and said, "Let me take your suit coat so you can be comfortable."

He smiled slightly at the accuracy with which he had predicted the routine. "Sure," he said, slipping out of the coat.

Holding it, she looked with apparent surprise at the gun beneath his arm.

"I have a permit," Ross said. "I usually carry one."

"Do you have to keep it on here?" she asked. "Guns make me uncomfortable."

Ross smiled again, pleased with the way his mental predictions were working out. Obliging he unbuckled the harness and laid it on top of the fireplace mantel.

Audrey immediately picked it up and carried it into the bedroom along with his coat.

Up to that moment the likelihood that he was deliberately walking into a trap had been nothing but a remote possibility to the gambler. But Audrey's entry into the bedroom instantly convinced him that he was in one. Ordinarily she would have moved languorously, employing the opportunity to give him the benefit of her seductive hip movement. But she practically grabbed up the gun harness, and she moved toward the bedroom in a straight and rapid line, as though impelled to get out of sight as soon as possible.

6.

Five minutes passed with no sign from the darkened bedroom. Then,

finally, Ross heard the cautious opening of some door beyond the bedroom. At the same moment a key rasped in the front door lock.

His attention divided, the gambler attempted to keep one eye on each door. But he shifted full attention to the front door when it suddenly swung open.

Tony Armanda stepped into the room, followed by his pale bodyguard, Slit. The gang leader's eyes narrowed when he saw Ross, and the bodyguard instantly stepped in front of his employer, his right hand out of sight beneath his coat.

No one said anything for a moment. After studying the shirt-sleeved Ross and deciding he was unarmed, Slit's pinched expression relaxed and he took a step toward the gambler. His right hand was still buried beneath his arm.

"Thought you were on your way to Blair City, Armanda," Ross remarked.

Tony Armanda's face darkened. "So did Audrey. I would have been if I hadn't had a tip she was entertaining you."

Ross looked surprised. "You mean she isn't in on this setup?"

Instead of answering, Armanda said to Slit, "What you waiting for? Get it done."

The sallow gunman's hand came from beneath his arm with unhurried confidence. At the same instant Ross's right hand snapped upward. Slit, in the act of leisurely cocking a short-barreled .38, allowed his

eyes to bulge at the derringer which miraculously appeared in the gambler's hand. An instant too late he centered his pistol on Ross, only to slam back against the wall with a bullet in his chest when the derringer boomed.

Slowly the pale bodyguard slid to the floor, attempting without success to bring up his gun for a retaliatory shot. Reaching a seated position, he toppled over on his side.

A movement in the bedroom doorway swung Ross's attention that way. The rawboned bodyguard who had accompanied Bix Lawson to Club Rotunda crouched there, a .45 automatic leveled.

Ross dropped sidewise just as it roared, recocking and firing the derringer as he fell. The bullet from the .45 whispered past his head, striking the stone mantelpiece and ricocheting into the ceiling. His own slug caught the rawboned man in the stomach, doubling him over, causing him to fall into the room on his face.

Tony Armanda for so many years had depended on hired guns, he was out of practice in the use of them himself. Instead of reaching for his own the moment the shooting started, he merely stood in the role of observer. It wasn't until the rawboned man's gun skittered across the room and caromed off Armanda's foot that he decided to go into action.

But by then it was too late.

Bouncing to one knee, Ross broke the derringer, thumbed out the spent cartridges and reloaded so rapidly that he had snapped the gun closed again and had Tony Armanda covered before the gang leader could complete his belated draw. Armanda froze, his hand out of sight beneath his arm.

"Easy does it," Ross said quietly. "Hands on top of head."

Carefully Armanda removed his hand from beneath his arm, placed it atop his head and joined it with his other hand. Ross rose from his kneeling position and looked at the dark bedroom doorway.

"Come out with your hands on your head too, Audrey," he called. "If you think I'm too much of a gentleman to shoot a woman, just try using the gun I gave you."

The sound of a long-held breath being expelled came from the bedroom. Then, her face pale and her hands firmly clasped on top of her head, Audrey Livingston appeared in the doorway. Her gaze moved fascinatedly from the dead Slit to the recumbent rawboned man, who picked that moment to make a final gurgling sound. The girl raised sick eyes to Clancy Ross.

Ross said to Armanda, "How'd you get the tip that I was here?"

"An anonymous phone call," Armanda said huskily. "About an hour ago, just as I was getting ready to leave for my plane."

"That's interesting," Ross said. "Until an hour and a half ago, I

didn't know myself I was going to be here."

He looked at the girl, who said in a shaky voice, "I didn't have anything to do with it. Honest to God, Clancy."

"No," Ross said. "You just planted Lawson's stooge in the other room and got my gun away from me so I couldn't shoot back. You thought you were just setting me up for a kill. You didn't know Bix intended to ring Tony in on the act and make a clean sweep of things, did you?"

When both Armanda and the girl stared at him uncomprehendingly, Ross said, "Didn't you know Bix Lawson owns half interest in Club Silhouette, Armanda? Audrey was working for Bix when you met her. She still is. Bix planted her as a spy in your camp. I suspected that the moment she told me you'd lifted her from the chorus at Club Silhouette. Bix instructed her to set this thing up tonight. Only apparently he didn't let her in on his complete plans. You were supposed to eliminate me, then Lawson's goon was supposed to knock you off. If my suspicious nature hadn't made me bring along a second gun, probably it would have worked."

Tony Armanda looked at the trembling girl with murder in his eyes. Then he said to Ross, "What you going to do with us?"

"Depends," Ross said. "Want to continue this war?"

Armanda shook his head. "I'd be dead if you hadn't figured this right. We're quits if you're willing to leave it that way. I won't crowd you again."

The gambler also shook his head. "That's not good enough. As long as you and Lawson continue to clash, I'm in the middle. With you out of the picture, Bix will leave me alone. I'll give you a choice. Pull out of town and go back to Blair City within twenty-four hours, or I'll kill you on sight. And I won't wait for an accidental encounter. I'll look you up."

When Armanda licked his lips and stared at him, Ross added, "Think it's worth chancing you can get me first?"

Tony Armanda came to a decision. "I'll pull out," he said.

Ross allowed the derringer to slip back up his sleeve. Unconcernedly he entered the bedroom, clicked on the light, lifted his shoulder harness from the bed, buckled it on and slipped into his coat. Through the open doorway he could see that both Armanda and the girl had allowed their hands to drop from their clasped positions on top of their heads.

When he re-entered the front room, Audrey Livingston said fearfully, "You going to leave me here alone with Tony, Clancy?"

He smiled at her without humor. "Think I owe you something?"

"He'll kill me," she whispered.

When Ross unconcernedly

headed for the door, she said in a panic-stricken voice, "Clancy!"

Turning, the gambler hiked an eyebrow at her.

"I'd have stuck with you all the way if you'd wanted me," she said rapidly. "Against Tony and Bix both. You can't blame a girl for siding with the man who's paying her way."

"I'm not blaming you," he said. "I just don't feel any responsibility for bailing out a woman who set me up for a kill."

He opened the door and her voice rose to hysterical pitch. "Clancy! You can't leave me here alone with Tony!"

"Maybe the cops will save you," he suggested. "After all that shooting, the neighbors probably called in."

He cocked his head at the sound of a distant siren. "That's probably them on the way now. You can hope they get here before Tony pulls the trigger." He listened again and said regretfully, "They sound pretty far away."

"Please," she whispered. "Can't you give me a break?"

Ross considered her question, finally smiled and said, "Sure. I'll give you some advice." He nodded toward the .45 automatic the raw-boned man had dropped, which lay halfway between Audrey and Armanda. "Try for that while Tony's reaching for his gun."

Stepping through the door, he began to pull it shut behind him.

His last sight of the girl, just before the door closed, was of her frantically diving toward the gun on the floor.

Halfway down the steps to the street he heard a single shot. He wondered which one of them had gotten it off.



Easy Arrests

A patrolman in Vicksburg, Miss., noticed an unusually lifelike mannequin in a store window as he was making his night rounds. He returned shortly later to take another look, but the mannequin was gone. Calling for assistance, the store was searched and the burglar was found hiding under a counter.

In Jacksonville, Fla., Detective T. S. Beaudrot said it was easy to locate two men accused of robbing an ice cream shop. He found the pair in a nearby night club "wearing dirty dungarees, no socks, but drinking champagne."

Nothing's Safe

A large safe containing \$2,500 was stolen from a grocery store in Washington, Ind. Later the safe, battered open and empty, was found along railroad tracks near the town. Police went to the station to get a camera to photograph the scene. When they returned, they found someone had stolen the safe.

And in Decatur, Ill., Patrolman Virgil Carr was on traffic duty only a block from the police station, when a thief stole his car parked nearby.

Double Jeopardy

After being sentenced to 30 days on two counts of public intoxication, one Friday night and one Saturday, a man in Asheville, N. C., felt he was justified in making a complaint to the judge. "I was drunk Friday, your Honor," he explained, "but Saturday — that was the same drunk."

Parking Problems

A phantom traffic cop roamed the streets of Salisbury, R. I., recently. The police station was flooded with citizens waving tickets signed by the mysterious officer. It seems a traffic policeman lost a book of tickets, and the book's finder had a lot of fun filling out the tickets and distributing them.

In Oklahoma City a glim swindler sold parking spaces at 50 cents per hour in the police public parking lot.

Vigil by Night

Undressed, she pirouetted before her mirror in complete abandon. Suss watched, knowing he had to get to her.

BY
JAMES W. PHILLIPS



HE GLANCED at the darkened window, then at the luminous dial on his watch. Only 9:50—ten more minutes to wait before she makes her appearance, he muttered to himself. Yet to be on the safe side—just in case she altered the up-to-now unvarying routine that

had governed his life the past six nights—he eased his bulk farther down amid the shadowy camouflage of the shrubs flanking the apartment window.

Slowly, ever conscious that a sudden move or rustle of the bushes might reveal his presence, he pulled

his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his balding head. His lips mouthed words that carried no sound as he talked to himself.

"Christ, it's hot. Get's hotter every night." And then the thought struck him that perhaps it wasn't really the heat. Perhaps it was nerves . . . the waiting . . . the bed-time routine . . . the constant hope that she would leave the apartment.

He looked at his watch again—9:53. Seven more minutes. No more, no less. He had the routine down pat. She'd walk into the bedroom at ten o'clock sharp, flick on the nightstand light and lay the sleeping baby in the bassinet. She'd walk to the window, raise it four inches in hopes a cooling breeze might stir. Next she would slip the burglar wedges—her security against unwelcomed visitors—between the window frame and the sash and then she'd pull the shade down to the bottom edge of the windows, leaving him the four inches of unobstructed view.

For an hour, maybe two, she'd slowly undress, posing and cavorting before her mirror with the abandon of a beauty right out of an Arabian harem. Finally, she'd lay back on the bed and smoke three cigarettes chain style before switching off the lamp. He turned over in his mind the details of the spectacle that had thus far been the only reward of his vigil, but he knew that one of the nights—

sooner or later—she'd have to leave the apartment. And then . . .

A motorcycle's exhaust sounded across the vacant lot behind the apartment house breaking his train of thought. His mind groped to regain the trend and finally settled on "Arabian beauty." That fitted Mrs. Karen Slane to perfection—a raven-haired beauty closeted within the safety of a brick palace. A strange, sultry woman with a babe in her arms protected by Twentieth Century knights of steel: burglar wedges and door chains.

Door chains—"damn them." He had thrown caution to the winds one afternoon and knocked on the apartment door hoping he might push his way in. A heavy door chain ended his hopes to catch her by surprise. Admittedly, he should have known the plan was foolish. His casual questioning of the delivery boy from the little Mom-and-Dad grocery on the next street had told him she never took the chain off the door. She even made the boy pass the groceries through the slot.

He wiped his handkerchief across his sweating face and felt it catch on the stubble of his beard. He could almost hear himself stammering his apologies that afternoon, "Sorry, mam, I guess . . . Well this must be the wrong flat . . ."

In the fleeting moment he had caught a glimpse of her eyes—strange eyes that set a man to think—

ing, and he'd noticed that she held the baby. That was the problem. She not only never left the apartment but all day long she cradled the baby in her left arm. Always the baby. Never for a second during the day did she put him down. Always the baby.

Light flared through the window just above his head, casting an eerie pattern through the sheltering bushes. He held his breath and counted silently. "One, now she's putting the baby down . . . Two, she's walking to the window . . . Three, window up, wedges in . . . Four, shade down . . . Five, she's turning away from the window." On the count of six he raised himself slowly erect, pressing against the building, easing forward until he could see into the room.

Right on schedule. She was just stepping out of her house coat, kicking off her mules, apparently the only garments she ever wore. "The show's on," he said, almost aloud, as he watched her move to the mirror.

In desperation he thought of forcing the window, but passed the idea. Even if he managed to out-muscle the locking wedges, it would do no good as she'd grab the baby and lock herself in the other room. No, he reasoned, it's better to wait. Sooner or later she'll have to leave the apartment and if it's night I'll be waiting. If she'd only leave the apartment . . . and if she'd only leave the baby when

she did, everything would work out his way.

Waiting. That was the answer, he thought, as he watched her posing before the mirror, half dancing, half primping like a Saturday night pick-up prancing along tavern row. A manless woman—prim and cool by day, wanton and lustful at night.

She flopped on the bed and reached for a cigarette. She studied the pack for a moment, crumpled it and flung it across the room. She jumped from the bed and prowled through the drawers—the nightstand, the dresser, even the bureau where she kept the baby's things. She passed from his sight into the next room, returning moments later still without a cigarette.

He laughed quietly inside himself. "Now you're like me. Can't smoke."

She crawled onto the bed and flicked off the light—her routine broken, his solitary vigil unrewarding. He heard a noise and slitted his eyes to see in the darkness. He could barely make out her outline; she was standing at the window right above him.

Noises. Faint but distinctive. The snerk of a zipper, then the shuffle of feet searching their way into slippers. No light. Just a quick trip out the apartment's back door, across the alley and through the vacant lot to the little store on the next street.

His patience, his nights of waiting were going to pay off. He

rose to his feet, straightening his cramped muscles, his pulse beating fast, his breath still. He was right. There she was on the back steps, and without the baby. Like a fleeting shadow she was across the court to the alley, hurrying as if she knew he lurked in the dark.

"Damn! She'll get to the street if I don't move," he gasped as he lumbered through the bushes. She was half way through the lot when the sound of his heavy stride caused her to look over her shoulder. Her face twisted with fear, with the horror known only to the pursued. She leapt ahead like a fawn and he hurled himself forward in a clumsy tackle. The only sound in the night was a hoarse grunt of satisfaction as his fingers closed on cloth . . .

It was nearly dawn when he wandered into the diner and eased himself into a booth. He was hungry, tired and his face pained where her fingers had raked across his cheek. The sunrise edition of Globe-News was on the table. He hated this part worst of all—hated reading about it, but he always did.

He was right, the story was on the front page. He passed over the headline and scanned the lead paragraph: A flying tackle by Police Sergeant Tomas Suss last night ended a week-long, round-the-clock surveillance of Mrs. Karen Slane, convicted baby murderess, who since her escape from the insanity ward of State Prison has literally and actually held the life of six-month-old Tommy Blake in her arms.



Name Dept.

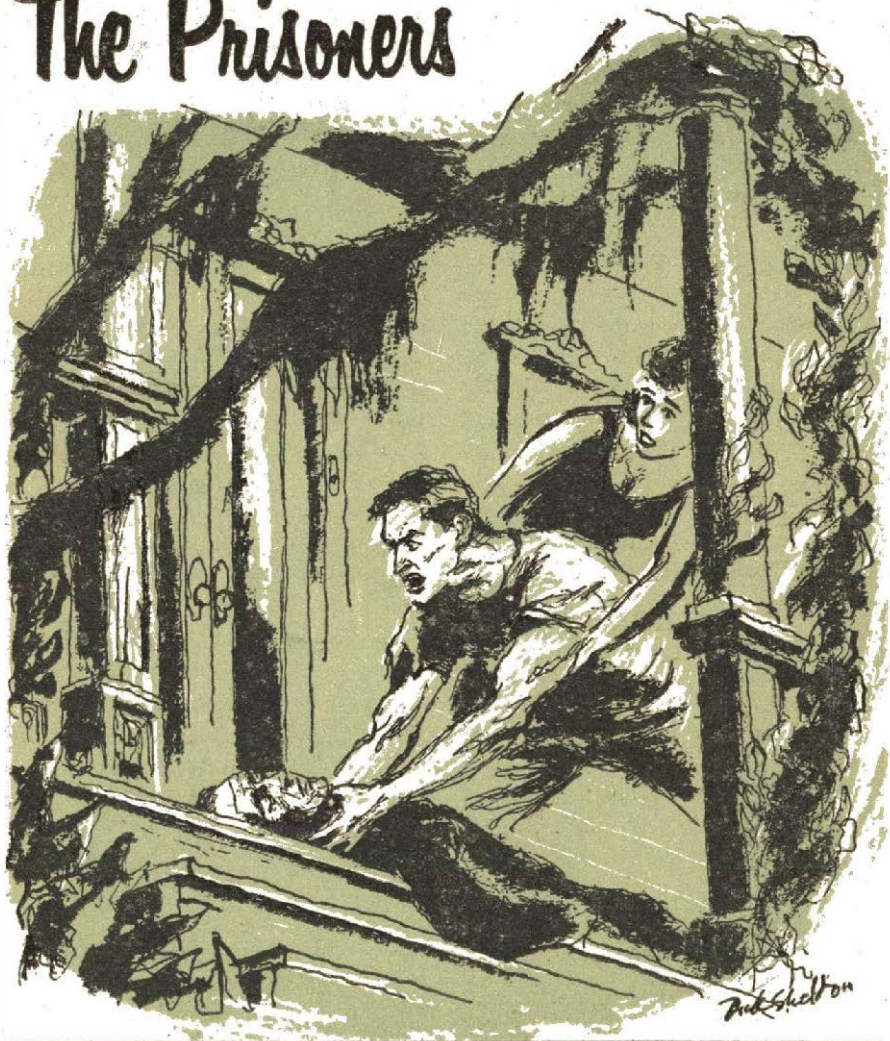
A 28 year old man in Jasper, Ala., was charged with forgery after police said he passed a worthless check for \$95 at a local clothing store. The accused man's name was Billy Swindle.

In Henryetta, Okla., an American Indian was sentenced to 10 days in jail after he pleaded guilty of drunken driving. State police testified that 23 year old March Wind was "considerably under the weather."

Getaway

Sheriff Joe Divis in Wahoo, Neb., gave chase when he saw a youth run out of a dance hall, jump into his car and speed away. A mile away he succeeded in stopping the young man. The youth told the officer that he had been dancing with a girl when "a big guy tapped me on the shoulder and told me to leave in a hurry. So I did." No charges.

The Prisoners



The editors of Manhunt predict that this novel, because of its bestial realism, its brutality of man toward man ... and its literary excellence ... is a story you will never forget.

*Lucille screamed as the man's head hit the floor.
Johnny grabbed her arm. "You're going with me," he said.*

A Full-Length Novel
BY EVANS HARRINGTON

THIS MORNING he would do it. This morning he would take Johnny's parole request in to Carl Hoffman, the new warden. For the past three weeks, ever since Hoffman had taken over, Walker had intended to do it, but always when he thought of it Hoffman would be in conference, or Walker himself would be snowed under with the red tape involved in his own shift from educational director to assistant warden. But things had begun to settle now, and Walker didn't want to wait any longer. Of course, he had warned Johnny Graves that it was not a sure thing; nothing at Larkin was a sure thing. But the new warden was going to be a far cry from old Henry Myers, with his bay stallion and his nineteenth-century plantation system of camps and iron-handed sergeants. And Johnny's case was clear-cut, not to speak of being eighteen months overdue. Howard Walker didn't see how he could miss.

He parked the Ford pickup in the loose asphalt drive. Cold, con-

ditioned air came out like an odor when he opened the heavy glass door of the administration building, but it mingled quickly with the already sultry heat of the morning and lost its body. Inside the dark lobby several sergeants, bosses of the twenty-three camps on the farm, were grouped around the long mahogany conference table. It was the morning scuttlebutt session while they waited for the mail of their various camps to be sorted out.

Walker recognized Thompson from Camp Six and Stubbs from Twelve; he had thought to drop by and speak to them, but then he saw Hiram Gwin and decided against it. His enmity with Gwin, Sergeant of Camp Eight, was notorious on the farm, and in a group like that Gwin would feel obligated to live up to expectations. Walker was not in the mood for a scene this morning; besides, it wouldn't be wise to antagonize Gwin, particularly now when Walker was putting up Johnny Grave's parole

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request. Gwin was Johnny's sergeant. Briefly it occurred to Walker that it was strange Hiram Gwin was still here, considering all those who had been fired from the old Myer's regime.

Carl Hoffman had just come out to his secretary's office when Walker entered. He had some correspondence in his hands.

"Well!" he said brightly, "good morning, Mr. Walker!" It was one of the things about Carl Hoffman, one of the few things that Walker had discovered he didn't like. Carl was a boomer, a bit too brisk, a bit too jovial, a bit tiresome after a time. But it was a minor fault, almost a virtue compared to old Myer's sullenness, and Walker had determined to get used to it.

He grinned back at Hoffman's radiant smile. "Good morning," he said. "Are you busy?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" Hoffman said, beaming at his assistant.

Hoffman was not a big man, was probably several inches under Walker's six-two, but he walked and stood very erectly, giving the impression of height. He was in his early forties, Walker judged, from the slight flaccid paunchiness of his body and the scattering of gray in his fine brown hair. But his face, with its bright smile, good blue eyes and full mouth, was much more youthful than forty.

"Well!" he said. "What's on Mr. Walker's mind this morning?"

Walker returned his smile. "A little hangover from the Myers' regime," he said, lifting the folder and handing it across the desk.

Hoffman's brown, arched brows shot up. "Oh?" he said. "Let me see." He took the folder and, leaning back in his chair, opened it.

"I can tell you most of it," Walker said, "if you want to save time. Then you can check me later."

Hoffman nodded, scanning the report; he flicked rapidly to the second page. Walker didn't think he was listening, but started in anyway.

"It's really fairly simple," he said. "Except for two minor fights right after he got here, the boy's record is spotless. He was a little sensitive at first and covered up for it by arrogance. It got him into trouble. But I was working with him on some correspondence courses, and managed to get to him, talk him out of it, mainly by reminding him of this parole. Hiram Gwin was his sergeant, though, and he took a dislike to him. You know Gwin, of course. He . . ."

Hoffman's face was definitely clouded now, whether in displeasure or confusion Walker wasn't sure, but Walker broke off. Hoffman flipped back to the first page of the record and looked at it, frowning slightly. "This is a parole request, isn't it?" he said.

Walker wasn't sure for a moment that he was serious. The report was

on the standard form for paroles, with the phrase, "Request for parole of ————" and so on lettered in caps across the top of the first page. But Hoffman seemed genuinely surprised, and Walker supposed it was possible. "I'm sorry," he said "I thought you would see it. It is a request, yes, for a long-overdue parole."

"Yes," Hoffman said, smiling a bit thinly. "I see that now. But why are you showing it to me? This is Kurt's department, isn't it?"

Again Walker was puzzled. Surely, he thought, John Kurt and Chaplain Thompson and he had explained this to Hoffman. During some of the day-long conferences they had held, he felt they had said everything twice. "We must have overlooked this item," he said. "Here at Larkin even paroles are your business. Myers always insisted on the right to approve or reject them. The law is still on the books in the legislature."

"I see," Hoffman said. "But it's still Kurt's department, isn't it?" He continued to smile thinly. "Does he know about it?"

He was concerned with that point, Walker noticed, and of course he would be, not only to keep the chain of command straight, and maybe not for that reason at all, but chiefly because John Kurt was responsible for his appointment as well as Walker's. It was John, after all, who had met Hoffman at a prison convention,

had talked him into coming to Beauregard for an interview with Governor Hollis Graham, and persuaded Graham, through influential friends, to appoint Hoffman to the position. Walker realized that he would have done better to bring John with him this morning.

"John prepared this himself," he said. "He and I took it to Myers together, twice in fact. And as parole officer, he'll have to put it through officially, of course, if you approve. But I was sure how he felt and I didn't think it would be necessary to bring him with me. I just remembered the case this morning, and I wanted to get it through as soon as possible."

"Oh," Hoffman said. "Oh, I see. The prisoner is a friend of yours, is he?"

Something about the way he said it, some implication of favoritism, needled Walker. He had begun to feel dissatisfied with the whole conversation, in fact.

"No," Walker said, "not especially."

This was not precisely true. But it was not like Hoffman implied, not simply a matter of having let the boy, in the prison slang for it, "get on his hip."

Of course he did like him, had from that first day Johnny came into his office, not much over twenty then, his beard not even fully patterned, and stood looking at him across the desk with his clear, proud, not quite defiant but

completely self-sufficient gray gaze. He had reminded Walker of himself at that age, too large physically, too sure of himself; and the similarity had been more real when Walker discovered that Johnny was actually from Tucker County, his own home section. There were other things too: the way the boy told his story simply, unashamedly, not pleading innocence or apologizing for his guilt, admitting it as a matter of fact, willing to take whatever penalty was coming for it but at the same time fighting desperately against a general humiliation, the humiliation of simply being there, of having been herded into the office by two guards, of having been thrust into the stiff black and white striped denim jacket and pants with their timeless, universal stigma. It was that, his sensitiveness to the humiliation and his stubborn attempt to conceal it, which aroused Walker's sympathy more than anything else.

Moreover, Johnny and Walker had seemed to grow together on the farm; circumstances seemed to throw them in each other's way, from that first interview when they had both been so sensitive to the strange, alien environment, to the correspondence courses which Johnny took and which enabled Walker to talk to him, get to know him and dissuade him from the seeming arrogance which was getting him into trouble; finally to the long-sustained fight during the last

eighteen months for the parole. And it was the parole which aroused Walker most of all. Johnny had been wronged, completely and callously wronged; no special favoritism was required to see that, which was why he was so irritated by Carl Hoffman's insinuation now.

But Hoffman had seen Walker's irritation; his blue eyes had swept coolly and rapidly over Walker's face, gauging it with a smooth canniness which Walker would never have guessed was in him. "Of course, of course, Howard," he said. "I simply meant that you were interested; nothing unpleasant intended." He smiled again, evasively. "Well, tell me more about it," he said, leaning forward on the desk. "What are the real issues involved?"

It was the natural thing to say, but there was something wrong, Walker felt. "What kind of issues do you mean?" Walker said. "I've told you the setup; you've read the request."

"Yes, but Howard," Hoffman said, smiling reluctantly, "you say the only reason the boy was held up was Hiram Gwin's prejudice—that Hiram just didn't like him."

"That's right," Walker said.

"But, Howard," Hoffman said, raising his shoulders and lifting his hands slightly, "surely it was more than that. Surely not even Myers would have held the boy eighteen months on no more than that."

Now Walker became really angry, and even more puzzled. "Look," he said, holding his voice down carefully, "I said you could check me later. You don't have to take my word for it. All I want to know is will you grant the parole if you find the facts back me up?"

Hoffman's blue eyes, clouded now and vague, met Walker's and bounced off quickly to the side. "Well, of course I want to do the right thing, Howard," he said, "and if the case were clear-cut I'd certainly free the boy immediately. But these things are sometimes involved. I'd want to talk to Gwin, get his reaction. If he objects strongly I—"

Walker stared at him incredulously. "If he *objects!*" he said. "If Gwin objects? Of course he'll object. That's the whole point."

Hoffman's face was pink now; he avoided Walker's eyes. "Well, if he does, Howard," he said, "I'm sure he must have a reason. And I wouldn't want to parole an inmate about whom there was still some question."

"Some question!" Walker said. "Gwin's question?" Because Hoffman surely knew Gwin by now; you only had to see Hiram Gwin once to know him—ignorant, bigoted, autocratic.

"Well, after all, Howard, Gwin could be right," Hoffman said. "He's closer to him; he should know him better than we."

This simply wasn't happening!

This couldn't be the Hoffman who had turned Larkin upside down the first day he was there; who had begun his official duties by issuing a list of unprecedented directives, including one absolutely prohibiting the use of the leather lash, the sergeants' favorite and almost sole disciplinary method, and another forbidding any sergeant to force an inmate who complained of illness to work in the fields without first being checked by a doctor; who had assembled the entire staff the first night and served unequivocal notice that Larkin was now a rehabilitative institution instead of simply a farm, and that the sergeants were no longer mere farm bosses, responsible only for crop quotas; and who in the first five days of his administration had summoned and fired eight officials, including five sergeants, who refused to follow the directives.

And yet it *was* happening, like a blurred, bewildering nightmare. There was something, Walker thought, he still hadn't grasped.

"Look, Carl," he said finally, controlling himself carefully, "this kid we're talking about is real, flesh and blood, breath and hope, and you ought to know as well as I do that the parole can make all the difference to him. He's been due it a year and a half, a whole year and a half, and for almost three years before that he was sweating it out, holding himself in and taking crap off of Hiram Gwin—every

form of petty sadism you can imagine, even down to humiliating nicknames. What's more, he has to have this parole, has to get out of here. He's married and his wife has quit coming, quit writing too, I think. And she's the kind of girl—I saw her once, a little blonde, soft blue eyes; I don't think he can forget her."

He stopped but Hoffman didn't look up. "Howard," he said, "I'm sorry. I know you like this boy, and I'd like to help you—"

"Not me," Walker said, "not help me." There was the insinuation of favoritism again, too, though not accusingly this time.

"All right," Hoffman said, "help the boy. But Gwin is, after all, the boy's sergeant, and if he says he isn't ready—" he spread his hands, very clean, very slender hands, Walker noticed—"I'd hate to interfere; I don't think we should go over our sergeants' heads."

"Over their *heads!*" Walker said. "Over our *sergeants'* heads?"

The implications of the warden's words astounded him. Practically the whole purpose of bringing Hoffman here was to break the long-entrenched power of the sergeants. Under Myers, Larkin had been operated solely as an extremely lucrative business, a huge plantation operated by slave labor and paying into the state treasury almost half a million dollars every year. Myers himself had been oblivious to rehabilitation, had run the

prison for his own convenience, and he found it most convenient to produce high revenue for the constantly watching legislature.

"Howard," Hoffman said finally, "I wish you would understand. I can go too far with this shake-up. And there's Gwin's brother . . ."

Walker stared at him, speechless; now shocked partly at least by his own naiveté.

"Carl," he said, "surely you haven't let Gwin bluff you just because his brother's a member of the legislature. You knew about Frank Gwin before you took over."

"It's more than that, Howard," Hoffman said. "There's been considerable grumbling from all the camps, I find. I—I could lose right off all the—all I've started. I... don't want to go too far."

And then Walker did understand. Sitting across the long mahogany desk (and there was a picture of the wife—very young wife, really, and very pretty—and two blond grinning kids), looking at Hoffman's clean, slender, energetic fingers, and well-groomed half-averted face, he thought of bread-winners and successful husbands, and careers and triumphs; he thought of his own wife and children and his recent promotion, and of the pleasure it had given to them both. And he understood then that Carl Hoffman might be a rehabilitation expert, and he might be an ardent reformer, and he might be a penitentiary warden;

but that before and beneath all of these he was something else, something quite different.

For a long time he stared at Hoffman who avoided his eyes, tracing the pattern of the grain in his desk.

"You . . . understand, don't you, Howard?" Hoffman said finally.

"Yes," Walker said, "I think I do. But I don't like it."

"I know how you feel, Howard," Hoffman said. "But you know how the legislature is watching us. You know how skeptical they were of our program. And our crop production is bound to fall off with all this turnover in personnel. All we need now is to have Frank Gwin accusing us of pampering the prisoners, of paroling trouble-makers and overruling long-experienced sergeants."

"Would it really be so bad?" Walker said. "Could it hurt all that much? Myers was attacked for fifteen years before he had to go."

Hoffman dropped his eyes again. "We . . . I don't want to take that risk," he said. "I don't want to weaken our position, endanger the program."

"But you *are* willing to sacrifice this kid," Walker said, his anger almost uncontrollable.

Hoffman's face grew suddenly tight. His eyes were pale blue and angry meeting Walker's. "I think we'd best stop the discussion, Howard."

"Then you're turning it down?"

You're actually turning it down?"

"I'm afraid so," Hoffman said, crisp again now, the contained executive. "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

Walker got slowly to his feet. "Yes," he said, "I'm sorry too, and I imagine Johnny Graves will be even sorrier."

He turned and went back into the outer office. He opened the door and stood for a moment looking blankly at the wall of the corridor. Had it actually happened? Could this be Larkin's new administration?

Moving down the corridor he passed John Kurt's office, and he suddenly wondered if Kurt had discovered the unexpected side of Carl Hoffman. He decided to drop in and see. Kurt had been behind the parole before and, with his political backing, he should be able to do a little persuading if he were willing to. Walker didn't like that sort of thing, but he thought again of Johnny. He was frightened at what this might do to Johnny, of what Johnny might do about it. He couldn't take the boy another refusal if there was any way around it. He retraced his steps to Kurt's office.

But Kurt was not in. Mrs. Williams, his secretary, was sorry but he was out of town. He was investigating a parole case in Alabama, she believed. No, she didn't know when he would be back, she believed it would be several days.

Walker thanked her and went back down the corridor toward his own office. It was all his. He couldn't keep Johnny waiting, of course; it had already been more than three weeks. Besides, there was not only no assurance as to when Kurt would get back, but none that he could, or would, do anything once he did. No, Walker thought, he would have to go tell the kid something.

2.

He waited until nearly dusk before he drove out to Camp Eight. There was no need to go earlier; he knew that Johnny would be with the Long Line in the fields, hoeing cotton.

Larkin was a huge, twenty-thousand-acre ellipse set in a deep bend of the Mississippi River. On its west side was the long swelling green line of the levee, like a gigantic caterpillar which had burrowed in a semi-circle under the thick river grass and the cypresses. On its east was the narrow-gauged, special railroad and the straight flat ribbon of black-topped highway, a state road which bordered the river a safe distance inside the flood area for the entire length of the state. On its north and south were huge ditches which marked the boundary between the prison, or Inside World, and the civilian plantations, or Free World, which extended in long rows of cotton or

corn to the edges of the ditches.

There were twenty-three camps spread over the area of Larkin, each a separate, virtually self-sustaining unit. The heart of the camps were what was known as the cage buildings, where the prisoners stayed when not in the fields. These buildings, usually big, one-story edifices, contained the actual cages, long barracks-like twin wings where the prisoners were kept behind bars and padlocks during the night.

The prisoners worked during the day in the fields or in the dairies and hog units, or in various capacities around the buildings. Their work day extended from sunrise until sunset every day except Saturday, when they were let off at mid-afternoon, and Sunday, when they were allowed to rest and have visitors. At night they were locked in the cages, but on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and on some rainy days when they weren't able to work, they were allowed to move about freely within the fenced enclosure. There were over twenty-seven hundred prisoners in all, from a hundred to a hundred and fifty in each camp.

Bugger, a trusty, opened the big padlocked gate. "Evening, Mr. Walker," he said, removing his cap and ducking his head quickly, his big round face vacantly eager.

"Evening, Bugger," Walker said. "It it hot enough for you?"

Bugger chuckled quick apprecia-

tion of the standard question. "Just about, Mr. Walker," he crooned. The fawning and servility was something Walker had rebelled against when he first came to Larkin. It made him wince every time a prisoner snatched for his cap in the fearful, automatic gesture. It was one of the saddest problems of Larkin, Walker thought, that most of the men so quickly accepted the standards of the camps—the brutality, the coarseness, not to speak of the downright corruption: the perversion and graft. So he had accepted the custom of caps-off along with a hundred other little "traditions," like that of "taking five," a means of settling disputes between prisoners by removing weapons from them and giving them five minutes to fight with no holds barred. It was a neat system, a sergeant had explained to Walker; in five minutes they hardly had time to kill each other, but they could come so close to it that neither of them would want to fight again soon.

Hiram Gwin sat tilted against the wall in a straight-backed chair. He was a tall, painfully thin man with narrow, sloping, high shoulders. His neck protruded forward, long and drooping, giving him with his hooked nose the look of a vulture. Walker wondered if his irascible nature might not be largely due to some illness, or glandular defect. His skin was an unhealthy sallow color even with

his heavy tan, and his pale blue eyes were invariably yellow-whited. But illness, Walker thought, could never completely account for Hiram Gwin, or excuse him.

Gwin did not speak immediately. He sat, still propped in the chair and stared past Walker as though he wasn't there. Finally he said, "Hello, Walker."

"How are you?" Walker said. He was not disturbed by the coolness; this was standard procedure.

Gwin let him stand for a moment; then he said, "What for you?"

"Just dropping by," Walker said. "Want to see one of the men."

"Which one?" Gwin said. "I got a lot of men here."

"Johnny Graves," Walker said.

Gwin didn't answer. He might not even have heard, Walker took out a cigarette and lit it. Behind the building the drivers, civilian guards in charge of the Long Lines, were shouting formation orders. The prisoners would come before the long porch to be checked in.

When Gwin finally spoke he did not look at Walker; his face was turned down the porch toward the men. "Did you get that parole for the purty boy?" he said.

Walker drew on the cigarette, drew hard until the smoke became hot. He should have remembered that Gwin would undoubtedly know about his session with Hoffman, would know something about it if not the details. The grapevine

was one of the sergeant's most important weapons on Larkin.

"What happened to your man?" Gwin said. "What happened to them new ideas?"

Walker drew again on the cigarette; it burned his fingers and he snapped it irritably out into the yard.

Gwin was grinning and shaking his head elaborately. "That boy's no good," he said. "No good! There's a mean streak running clear through him." He swung quickly around and went out to the walk. The prisoners were marching up in double files. "All right," he said. "Step it up! Goddamn! Yall wanta take all night?"

The drivers lined them in two's and counted them.

"A hundred and three," McCrory said; he was the lead driver. "How many in the kitchen?"

"I've got that," Gwin said. "There's nine. Where's Graves? Where's Purty Boy?"

There was a moment's silence, with murmuring from the line.

"Graves!" McCrory bellowed. "Goddamn it, where are you?"

Johnny stepped out from the end of the line and stood before Gwin. He had a baseball cap on his head and, when Gwin continued to look at him, he removed it slowly with his big brown, oversized hands. He had thick hair, dark brown and matted low on his short, square forehead. His eyes were wide and gray in a square, high-cheeked face.

He was not heavily built, but his chest and shoulders in a tight sweat-stained T-shirt were broad and muscular. He held the cap in those big hands before him and looked at Gwin. He did not smile.

"Since when," Gwin said, "did you forget your name?"

Johnny didn't answer; he just looked at him.

"Didn't you hear me call Purty Boy?" Gwin said.

"Your name's Purty Boy! why didn't you answer?"

McCrory was grinning broadly now, and Gwin grinned too.

"My name is Graves," Johnny said. "Johnny Graves."

Gwin put his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth. He opened his thin mouth wide, laughing. McCrory laughed too, even louder. Finally Gwin controlled himself with an effort, and bent again to face Johnny.

"Your name's Purty Boy," he said, still having trouble with his mirth, "just plain Purty Boy."

He turned and started toward the door. "Mr. Walker wants to advise with you," he said. "You won't mind, will you, Mr. Walker, if I send a trusty out to watch this boy? I'll tell him to stand way off."

So here it was, and it wasn't the best possible time for it, Walker thought. He got up as Johnny moved toward him, his big hands dangling awkwardly. He saw the something in Johnny that antagonized Gwin: a composure, a self-

containment, that made him stand a little too straight, that made him forget to remove his cap and do it a little too slowly when he did, that made him always a little too erect and a little too level of eye.

So he stood before Walker now, expressionless, waiting, in the faint light from the hall, and Walker thought of several ways to put it off, to hedge a little until the memory of Gwin's stupid laughter was less keen, but he gave them up before the level eyes and said it flat.

"I'm sorry, Johnny, not this time either."

Still there was no expression except a quick widening of the gray eyes in the shadow and a tightness that came about the mouth.

"But I'm not through yet," Walker said quickly. "I'm going to see Mr. Kurt. I—think maybe he can help us." Still the boy did not speak, and a hardness was growing now in his face.

Walker said, "I think I can still get it; I know I can get it somehow. But it will take time." And then he realized that those were the words he had used a year before, a year and a half before—and they sounded stale even to him.

"Look, Johnny," he said. "You're not a kid any longer. You're twenty-five, and you've been here a while. Suppose I can't get it. It's one of those things. You got off to a bad start; you were unlucky maybe in drawing Gwin, but you made things worse by—by your at-

titude. Oh, I know you had to take a lot of . . . things, but that's something else: you're old enough now to understand that just being right, just deserving something doesn't give it to you. A lot of right people have come out short."

He stopped but the boy didn't answer. One big hand raised and pushed at his cheek.

"And that's the point," Walker said; "that's what I'm trying to say. You've served five years, and that doesn't seem right; that *isn't* right. But it's still a fact, and if you get into trouble now, with just two years left—just two years now, less than half of five!—that wouldn't make sense, would it?"

He waited but still there was nothing except the white, expressionless hardness of Johnny's impassive face.

"Would it?" he said, wondering to himself if Johnny had even heard anything he had said.

"I don't know," Johnny said. His big hands shifted and grappled on his cap. "I don't know any more what makes sense. Is that all?" he said. "Are you through?"

Walker took out a cigarette and tapped it slowly on his thumb. He had begun to sweat in the thick June night, and his shirt was sticking to his arms. He lit the cigarette and drew on it deeply.

"Yes," he said finally, looking up at the boy, at his white, still face. "Yes, I guess that's all. But, Johnny, don't do anything foolish."

Johnny didn't decide; it was like he had decided a long time before and was just waiting for Mr. Walker to tell him he hadn't gotten the parole. And he didn't hear the words at first, just the voice, the tight reluctant sound in the voice. By then the coldness had already started in his fingers and he was thinking, or not thinking, just feeling, knowing, *"I've got to plan it, plan it! Without ever really thinking, I'll escape."*

But he couldn't plan it. He would see the road and the spot where he had thought before, *You could go in there; you could hit Miller with a shoulder block and if you were fast enough you could be in the corn before they could shoot.* But it was not really planning; it was just seeing it, seeing exactly as he had seen it so many times, with the tall Johnson grass on the bank and the ragged little gully in the middle that might trip you if you didn't pace it right, and with the others there too, behind him and beside him and in front of him, and Miller, the shooter, with the .30-30 in both hands like he was required to have it.

And it was like that, just seeing it, feeling it almost, but then jumping to another place, and Mr. Walker's voice coming in too, reluctant still, but arguing now, and his steady blue eyes looking at Johnny like it was him that didn't

get a pardon, like he knew what it meant. And Johnny wanted to tell him, *You'd do something else; there's something else you could do if it was you. Even the governor—you would even see him if it was you; and if he is crooked, there's the president.* But he didn't say it because it didn't matter now; he had already decided now, so it didn't matter.

Then Mr. Walker was winding up his little speech. He was a good man; he tried to help and he always gave it to you straight. But Walker—anybody—had to go through it to understand. And anyway that didn't matter either. All that mattered was getting Mr. Walker to stop talking now so he could plan.

And finally he did; finally he left. But then it was even worse because, standing there in the dusk by himself, Johnny began to get Lucille into it too. Twice! Twice was all she came, and for over three years she hadn't even written!

The trusty was standing at the door. Johnny had forgotten him until he said, "You coming?" He was holding the door open.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Yeah."

He stepped into the yellow light of the hall, and Gwin was looking at him. He told himself he'd better watch it, better put it away till later, when he was safe in the cage, but the coldness stayed in his fingers and it was hard to breathe.

He walked across the concrete

floor of the wide lobby office, feeling Gwin's eyes still on him. He went into the long chow hall at the back and took his seat, telling himself to eat, to take the spoon and keep it moving, but he couldn't remember; his hand kept stopping and he would be sitting there staring, and suddenly he would look up and Gwin would be watching.

When they started to count in—shuffling in single-file into the long barred cage, chanting their numbers—Gwin called him out.

"You didn't get it," he said, "the parole."

"No," Johnny said, "I didn't get it."

Gwin looked at him thoughtfully. And after a moment his thin lips twisted. "Don't try any crap," he said softly. "You hear me?"

Johnny waited a moment, watching him. "Is that all?" he said.

"That's all," Gwin said. "Just remember."

But it was not all, and it was just as well that, back on his bunk in the far end of the long barracks cage, with the sound of the guitars tinny and mournful in the thick yellow light, Johnny couldn't plan. And later too, when the lights flickered, reminding him that he hadn't showered or even undressed, flickered three times warningly and after a minute went out—he could have saved the long black sleepless hours when he could see her, was with her again . . . And he would tremble until he pulled himself

away frantically, sweating cold in the darkness and telling himself that he never would get there, never would find out—why! why! had she stopped coming?

5

Walker heard how disastrously Johnny's attempt at a break had failed shortly after it happened. But he did not go over immediately. He knew Bob Johnson, the prison doctor, would be working on Johnny and even after Bob finished, the kid would still be under anesthetic. Besides, Walker was in no mood then to face anyone, especially the kid. He decided to wait until that night. By then, maybe Johnny would be feeling better, and maybe he himself could straighten out his thoughts.

After supper, though, nothing had changed. He ate gloomily, trying to keep up the chatter with Susan, their three-year-old, and Billy, who was going on twelve. He always tried to keep from bringing the prison in on Nita and the children. But this time he failed miserably, he knew, and it was a relief when they finished at last and Billy and Susan hurried away to the TV. Nita sat watching him across the table; he was dimly aware of it, and he knew she wanted to talk, but he couldn't shake himself loose from the empty anger and depression that seemed to be pushing him down. He kept

thinking of Johnny running and running, that the kid had no more alternative than the man who had shot him down.

Finally Ledrew, the colored trusty houseboy, brought their coffee, and Nita said, "Darling, Ledrew is late, and I'm going to help him with the dishes. Why don't you take your coffee to the porch?"

He got up gratefully and went through the living room to the front porch. He pulled a small table close to him, put his coffee on it and lit a cigarette. Ledrew had mowed the lawn that afternoon, and the sharp odor of wild onions mingled with the wisteria which bordered the porch.

A boy who should have been gone eighteen months before, he thought, had had his leg shattered by a steel-jacket slug in a cotton field. He had to accept it, Walker supposed, as he had come to accept many things that four years before would have appalled him.

It was the war, he thought, that had brought him here. But for the war, he might now be a football coach and history teacher in some high school, or perhaps the principal of a grammar school. His life had been laid out that way.

Before the war, he had been attending a small denominational college near his home. He was majoring in history and education, according to his parents' plan (his father was the superintendent of

schools in Olive, county seat of Tucker County), he was making his grades without studying, and he was regular left-half on the football squad. Also, he had met Nita. There was little else that he desired. When he came back from the war, though, everything had been changed; or rather, nothing had changed at all except himself. He did not care to finish his preparation to teach. What would he teach? He asked his parents when they mentioned it to him. He even found himself talking in grandiloquent terms of "truth." A teacher was supposed to know the truth, and he didn't know anything.

But he had gone on with his original program because he did not want to hurt his parents. And there was Nita who had waited. They were married four months after his return.

Actually that had been another big reason for his coming to Larkin, Walker thought. And he was not only a husband, but a father when the Larkin offer came. In that situation, one had to be somewhat practical.

He had been at the university, then, on a graduate scholarship. He had already taught four years in one high school and one in another; he had even tried one year as an adjustor with an insurance company. He had just completed his thesis for his masters in school administration and was waiting for his orals, when the head of the

university's placement bureau called him in and told him that the job was open. It was a good salary, he said, \$4,800 with home and most of the food and incidentals furnished. His friend and former colleague, John Kurt, had asked him to recommend a young man who could set up a modern program (though that part of it must be kept quiet until he had the job) and he would be happy to recommend Walker, who, he thought, had done a fine job in the graduate school there.

Walker remembered, wryly, that he almost hadn't applied for the job. The very name of Larkin had always oppressed him, although he had never been there then. He recalled now the ridiculous mental image he had had of the place—high stone walls, pallid men with clanking balls and chains.

Where would he be now, Walker wondered, if he had followed his first impulse that day and told Dr. Gholson he wasn't interested. He might possibly even have his—

Nita came out and sat down on a small stool beside him. "Do you know," he said, finishing his thought aloud, "that I'll probably never get a doctorate now?"

She looked at him, startled for only a moment; they had long since passed the need for preliminary explanations. Then she dismissed the statement with a slight, deprecating movement of her head, at the same time leaning over to take a cigarette from his shirt.

"Do you have to go to see him?" she asked. "These things are always so bad for you."

"This time especially I have to," he said. "This kid seems to have been dealt to me."

"But what about the others?" Nita asked. "The chaplain and Mr. Hoffman and John Kurt?"

"Kurt's still gone," he said. "Hoffman and Chaplain Thompson went over this afternoon, but I don't think they did much good. Hoffman is too new here and of course he had turned the parole down. And you know Chaplain Thompson: he just has God to offer, and he's lined Him up with the administration—"

"Howard!" Nita said sharply.

"I'm sorry," he said. He knew it frightened her for him to speak bluntly about religion. But it was the truth, he thought bitterly.

"How do you think the boy will be?" Nita asked.

Remembering Johnny's face the night before, when he had told him about the parole, Walker dreaded to think how he probably would be. "This thing has been growing on him," he said, "and the way he's natured, the way he sees things, he'll be bad, I think."

"Then he really is bad, like they say?" Nita asked.

"What is bad?" he said savagely. "I guess he is. I guess any real man is 'bad' now; if he doesn't 'adjust' and give up, he's bad. A man with courage is outdated; we don't un-

derstand that kind of 'extreme behavior' these days."

Nita shook her head slowly. "You're just upset," she said. "You just feel bad for the boy."

"All right," Walker said, "take Hoffman. I saw him this afternoon just after he had been to see Johnny. We couldn't even talk. I tried to explain it to him. And when I talked about manhood, he just laughed, as though he couldn't believe me. 'Manhood?' he said. 'When a prisoner goes wild and attacks his sergeant with a stick so that he can run off. Howard, you don't really mean you think that is manhood!' I told him, 'Yes, when a kid fights to get what he's due. When the whole world he knows has turned crooked on him, it's manhood to stand up and fight it!'"

He saw by the sudden slight wrinkle between her brows that he shouldn't have told her. The family was her first, and almost her last consideration, and endangering his job was the same as endangering her family. Walker understood that, and did not really blame her. But, watching her eyes cloud now and the protest start on her lips, he became angry anyway.

"I know," he said. "I know. You don't think I should have said that. You think I should have been more careful. You don't think there was any need for me to make Mr. Hoffman mad."

"I don't want you to yes him," she said, "and lick his boots. I was

just thinking of the children," she said. "After all—"

"I know that," he said. "I knew it even when I said it. I don't know why I said it. I—I just . . ."

She reached over and took his hand, pressing it tightly, smiled at him. "You were worried," she said, "and frustrated. I know how helpless you feel, darling. I hope you can help the boy."

"I hope so too," he said. "God, I hope so too."

Walker paused at the hospital desk, inquired of the trusty on duty where Johnny was, and went down the long west corridor.

Johnny was in the west ward, a huge rectangle with a terrace behind sliding doors at the far end. It was nearly empty, though Walker glimpsed several men in wheel chairs on the terrace. Johnny was at the near end; Walker had heard that he asked to be bunked away from the others. Even before he entered the ward Walker saw him, the leg first, slung above the bed in a huge white cast, then the pale motionless face turned toward the wall. He moved slowly across towards the bunk.

Johnny didn't turn his head, even when Walker went around the bed and stood beside it.

Finally the boy turned his head slowly and glanced at him, reluctantly, for just an instant. Then he lay motionless as before, looking at his wide square hands.

Hesitantly Walker cleared his

throat. "Well," he said, "I . . . hoped you wouldn't do it."

For a moment Johnny ignored him, but then he shifted slightly under the sheet and one big hand moved awkwardly and restlessly over his chest, smoothing at his bed-gown. It was a form of reply at least, Walker thought, and more than he had hoped for at that.

"It . . . was a good try," Walker said lamely. "It took guts." It *had* been a good try, and he was a little ashamed at his feeling of regret that it hadn't worked. One trusty, Reece, not even from Johnny's own camp, had seen him crossing the cotton field and dropped him from a kneeling free-arm position at almost a quarter of a mile—an outrageously lucky shot.

Johnny stirred quickly for the first time, his big right hand coming up to his cheek in the familiar gesture, pushing at it, pawing it. "No," he said tightly, his voice hardly audible. "Mr. Hoffman and the chaplain have already told me about it. It was a criminal act and mighty close to a sin. Now you tell me how it didn't make sense."

What was there to say? That he understood? That he sympathized? That the boy was right, and the prison wrong? Walker had never gotten his own consent to risk that. There was too much possibility of being misinterpreted, of affording some desperate and confused boy a justification. Besides, he himself was confused on that point.

Finally he said, "No, I didn't come for that. I guess it made sense to you; I'm sure it did, or you wouldn't have done it. I think I do understand this, your situation now. That's why I've come. We need to discuss it."

Johnny's big right hand rose slowly and pushed at his cheek. "We've been discussing it," he said. "Almost four years now. I'm getting tired of discussing."

For a moment Walker stared at the sheet, neat and white and meaningless over the boy's good leg. His anger was now a kind of exasperation, cumulative and crucial. Myers was gone, but nothing was really changed at Larkin. And he wouldn't just stand by and look on.

"Johnny," he said, moving closer to the bunk, meeting the boy's gray eyes directly now for the first time, "I didn't mean to get started like this. I didn't come over to argue with you, or criticize you. What I should have said, what I mean, is this: I'm sorry as hell this happened; the whole thing is a damned mess and you know it and I know it, and now it's even worse."

Johnny had dropped his eyes, and he didn't look up or even appear to be listening.

"But there's another thing you ought to know too," Walker said. "You aren't going to help yourself by getting ugly now, by hating and snarling and snapping at everything that comes in your way. I

think you've started that now."

Johnny still didn't look up, but after a moment he spoke, almost inaudibly. "I'm not trying to get ugly. I've just had enough."

"Is that it, Johnny?" Walker said quietly. "Have you had enough? Or have you gotten sorry for yourself? I didn't think you were the kind to want pity—not even your own."

Johnny's face was uncertain for a brief moment; then it hardened scornfully. "You're talking again, Mr. Walker," he said, "twisting the words around."

"Am I?" Walker said. "Am I really? Think about it a minute, Johnny, because self-pity is dangerous; it's like a disease. It will twist you and poison you until you're like an animal, a stark, savage animal, unable to think or understand or control yourself, meeting every threat with teeth bared."

Johnny was looking at the sheet now; he heaved himself restlessly onto his side, wrenching the big cast. "I don't want to hear it, Mr. Walker," he said. "It's just words, just talk. I'm tired of it!"

"Look, Johnny," Walker said, "I'm going to tell you some truth, all the truth I know. I don't give a damn whether it makes sense or not, whether you like it or not."

The taut face was still turned from him rigidly. Walker stared at the back of the boy's neck, feeling hesitant, helpless. But he took a deep breath and continued.

"In the first place, Johnny," he said, "let's look at your situation. You broke a law and you were sent to prison because that's the customary way to deal with law-breakers. Now maybe you don't think you did wrong. I know your brother broke the same law before you, and you thought your brother was fine; and people in Tucker County, most of them, didn't treat bootlegging as though it was a crime. Maybe you still want to argue that." He paused.

"I did wrong," Johnny said. "I never said I didn't."

"Good," Walker said. "All right, so you were sent to Larkin to serve a penalty for a crime, and you were ready to serve it and according to the rules you should have been allowed to serve it and go back home. But that's just according to the rules; that leaves out the way things are."

The side of Johnny's face twisted, and he laughed shortly in his throat. "That's right," he muttered. "That much is right."

"Which brings us to what Larkin really is," Walker said. "Has it ever occurred to you that Larkin may not be at all what it seems to a prisoner, that Gwin, McCrory, Camp Eight, Mr. Hoffman, the chaplain, myself—all of it, all of us—may not be at all what we seem?"

Johnny didn't respond. It had begun to seem words to him again, Walker suspected, and he tried to grasp something more concrete.

"What is Larkin really, Johnny?" he said. "It's a place the people of this state set up in a desperate attempt to take care of problems they couldn't cope with in any other way. Men and women did things that couldn't be allowed, and the only way the people knew to stop them was to close them up somewhere. By then they ran into another problem. If there was to be Larkin, there had to be officials to run it, and the people had to choose those officials."

Walker broke off suddenly and paused. "How would you choose prison officials, Johnny?" he asked. "If it were left up to you?"

Johnny didn't answer for a moment; then, "I wouldn't choose them," he said. "I'd do without."

Walker grinned in spite of himself, and he was glad the boy's face was averted. "Maybe you have a point," he said, "but seriously, how would you choose them? The best way you knew how, wouldn't you? And would you know how, very well? That's the important point."

Johnny didn't answer and Walker went on quickly. "I don't think you would. I certainly know I wouldn't. And the people of the state don't either. They just close their eyes for the most part, listen to friends, read newspaper articles by people they don't even know, and then make a choice—not, you understand, choosing the people who will run the penitentiary, but the people to *choose* the people."

He stopped again, and looked at the averted, expressionless face. "You see what we have?" he said. "Poorly chosen people to choose other people to run a penitentiary."

He paused. Johnny was following him, he thought. The taut, high-cheeked face was half-turned now, staring at the ceiling.

"So what do we have at Larkin?" Walker said. "I'm going to tell you, Johnny; maybe it will help. We have Mr. Hoffman, a nice man, and even a trained man—which is rare—but just a man after all, who wants to hold his job or get a better job, who wants to impress his superiors and control his subordinates, a man who believes in leniency and sympathy and understanding for prisoners, I think, but who has to work with too many people who don't. Or we have me—I can tell you more about me. Howard Walker who has stayed on at Larkin four years, almost five, without ever understanding anything completely, except that maybe I never will understand. Of course, I can argue for myself—I want to argue for myself—that at least I do some good, that occasionally I can reach someone like you, help him to understand—what? Himself? The situation here? Something—a little better and save himself. But that's pleading my case, and that's not what I want to do now."

Johnny had turned his head. His square Indian face was still stiff,

expressionless, but he was listening. There wasn't the mockery in his eyes any more.

Walker shrugged his shoulders. "Is that enough, Johnny?" he said. "Do you see what I mean?"

Walker started to reach for a cigarette and discovered that he was still holding the one he had taken out when he first came in.

Johnny watched him steadily, his face still unyielding. "And what does it mean?" he said finally. "Where does all that leave me?"

Walker lit his cigarette slowly, then met the boy's eyes. "I don't know, Johnny," he said. "I guess it just leaves you with all the rest of us, confused and trying and failing and suffering for it."

"But is that all?" Johnny said. "It doesn't mean anything?"

"The rest seems to be up to each man," Walker said. "I'll leave that up to you. Personally, I prefer it like I told you at the start: that a man doesn't sit down and cry over himself, and he doesn't go ugly either just because the rest of the world seems to be. It just seems to me that it's better to keep on trying; that a real man *will* keep on trying."

For a moment, then, he stood and watched. He was almost ready to turn away, but the boy pushed himself up on one elbow, meeting his eyes directly.

"I . . . are you coming back?"

"If you want me to, Johnny, I will," Walker said.

"I . . ." the big right hand came up clumsily to the cheek. "Yes sir," Johnny said. "I wish you would."

Walker walked briskly up the hospital hall, relieved for the first time in two days. It wasn't a complete victory, of course; he would have to follow it up to make it stick. He decided he would talk to Hoffman the next morning, see if under the circumstances he would go light on extending the kid's time. If Kurt was back, maybe he would go in too. Together they should be able to swing it. If he could take Johnny a promise of leniency, he thought, he should have a chance with him even yet.

It was a fine, bright morning. A still better one when in the parking lane before the administration building he saw John Kurt's gray Ford. That would be in his favor. He wondered again what John would think of Hoffman's giving over to Gwin. There could be some trouble over that, he thought. John had opposed the sergeants even longer and more bitterly than Walker had (John had been at Larkin eight years), and with his new power and his almost fanatical determination to reform Larkin, he could be a bitter adversary; he had demonstrated that in scalping Myers. Even Walker had almost felt sorry for old Myers before that business had been finished. Kurt had overlooked nothing.

Mrs. Williams, Kurt's secretary, smiled apologetically when he

stopped by and looked inquiringly toward Kurt's office. "I'm sorry, Mr. Walker," she said. "He is back, but he's gone down to see Mr. Hoffman right now."

He should have tried to see Kurt before he talked to Hoffman, he thought, hurrying down the hall. If Hoffman presented it first, he might be able to twist it, swing Kurt over. But somehow Walker couldn't imagine anyone persuading Kurt to something he was against. He decided he needn't worry about that.

The door to Hoffman's inner office was closed when he entered the suite. Hoffman's secretary, Miss Higgins, smiled at him warmly.

"He's talking to Mr. Kurt," she said. "I think they'll be through in a minute."

"Will you tell him I'm here," Walker said, "and that when they are through I want to see Mr. Kurt with him?"

"Of course, Mr. Walker," she said rising. She knocked timidly on the door, opened it. "Mr. Walker is here and says he'll wait. But he wants to see Mr. Kurt too, when you are through."

"Oh," he could hear Hoffman say. "Oh. Yes. Of course. We're finishing up right away. Tell him we won't be a minute."

He wasn't kept waiting long before he heard Hoffman's brisk steps crossing the room, and the door was swung open beside him. Hoffman stepped halfway through and

turned to beam at him. "Well!" he said. "And how is Mr. Walker this morning!" He clapped Walker on the shoulder, pushing him into the office. "What can we do for you? You wanted to see us both?"

Kurt was standing in front of his chair before the long desk. He too looked questioningly at Walker. "Hello, Howard," he said.

Kurt was a little man, slightly stooped. His face was soft and white against jet-black hair, and he wore a thin, clipped mustache. His voice was mild, almost apologetic, and his general stooped smallness gave the impression of insignificance.

"Hello, John," Walker said. "Good trip?"

John lifted his shoulders, sinking again into his chair. "A trip," he said. "It served its purpose."

Hoffman had skidded a chair briskly toward Walker. "Sit down, and tell us what's on your mind." He went back around to his desk.

"Well," Walker said, moving the chair to face them both, "it's about Johnny Graves again."

He paused deliberately, looking at Kurt, who sat sideways in his chair, one small leg draped loosely over the other. "Oh, yes," Kurt said. "Carl was just telling me about it."

"Oh?" Walker said. He waited but Kurt didn't go on.

It was Hoffman who explained, breaking in a little nervously, Walker thought. "Yes," he said, "we were just talking about

Johnny. I was telling John of his . . . misfortune."

Walker looked from one to the other. There was another brief awkward silence. "Did you tell him what caused it?"

"I'm not sure that we know just what caused it."

"Did you tell him about the parole?" Walker said, "about turning it down?"

Kurt moved slightly, shifting his chin in his hand. "Yes, Howard," he said, "he told me. It was a very unfortunate thing."

"Yes?" Walker said. "Go on."

Kurt shrugged very slightly. "There's little else to say, Howard," he said. "It seems that the thing has been done."

"John agrees with me," Hoffman said, "that under the circumstances there was nothing else I could have done. I explained to him how I saw it, that we had taken things as far as we could at the moment, and that we might simply lose ground, maybe defeat our purpose altogether if we tried to ram the entire program through at once. We both are very sorry, of course, that the Graves boy had to be . . . involved."

Walker was not looking at him; he was watching John Kurt. "Is that right, John?" he said. "Is that your reaction?"

John gestured helplessly with one small hand. "Yes, Howard," he said, "I think Carl's right. He's hit everybody pretty hard in these first few weeks, and he's already being

criticized harshly. I was through Beauregard yesterday, and Hollis tells me the legislature is in a turmoil: they're predicting—Frank Gwin is predicting—that we'll go in the hole this year, that we'll do well to get a crop out at all."

Walker stared at him. "Get a crop out?" he said. "John, are we still talking crops? *You* are worrying about crops? I thought we were through with that. I thought that went out with Myers. What was it Carl told us in his speech the first night? 'Larkin is no longer primarily a farm, and its officials no longer simply farm bosses.' I did hear that, didn't I? I didn't just dream it!"

"Of course, Howard," Kurt said, "and he meant every word of it. But we have to go slowly, don't you see? I'm sure if you'd calm down you'd see that."

Walker tried to calm down.

"All right," he said, after a moment. "All right, let the crop issue go. But don't you see, John, that this is more than the crop issue, that it's old Myers again, everything we thought we got rid of: the sergeant's right back in the saddle, tying your hands and mine?"

John moved his large head impatiently. "Oh really, Howard," he said. "Aren't you generalizing rather hastily? We have to make concessions, of course. But we three are still in charge here." He included them both in an expansive, self-confident glance. "I think he's

insulting all three of us, don't you, Carl?" he smiled. "Implying we can't run this prison?"

Hoffman laughed, but became quickly sober again, looking at Walker. "No, I understand how Howard feels," he said. "This boy meant a lot to him, as he should, of course. And he hated to see him suffer. Isn't that right, Howard?"

He might as well compromise too, Walker thought bitterly, and try at least to get Johnny's time shortened. He raised his shoulders yieldingly. "I guess so," he said. "I frankly don't quite see it, but I guess you're right. It's not just the boy; it's . . . I don't want to argue."

Hoffman seemed genuinely, even childishly, pleased. Walker was amazed and unpleasantly puzzled at the contradictions in the man—blustering, callous career man, and simple, almost transparent human being. Kurt, of course, was impassive. It was, after all, such a small thing, just one boy out of so many, and boys, in fact people, as far as Walker could tell, didn't interest Kurt—except in a *general* sense.

But Hoffman was speaking, his brisk self again. "Howard, believe me, I'm as sorry for that boy as you are. We both are, aren't we, John?"

"Of course," John said. "And I think Howard is to be commended for his attitude, for his genuine interest and effort on the boy's behalf. It's one of the things I've always admired in Howard."

"Thanks," Walker said. "I appreciate it. Now I have something else to bring up.

It's simply this: The penalty for trying a break is usually an added two years, and I suppose that's what you plan for Johnny Graves."

Hoffman held up his hand, his pink face stricken, clouding. "Wait, Howard," he said. "Is this another request for that boy?"

"Not the same kind," Walker said. "I told you, I'll forget the parole. But I went to see the boy last night. You know how he was; you saw him yourself. But after talking to him I managed, I think, to bring him around a little."

Hoffman wasn't listening. He was looking at Kurt, and his face had become very uncertain.

"What is it?" Walker said. "What's happened now?" He looked from one to the other.

"I think you'd better tell him, Carl," Kurt said.

"What? Tell me that?" Walker said.

Hoffman lifted a sheet of lined tablet paper from the file box at his left. He leaned over and handed it to Walker. "I got this yesterday afternoon," he said, "right after I talked with you."

For a moment Walker stared bewildered at the cheap pulp paper with the thick clumsy pencil scrawl. "Mr. Hoffman, this is to officially request permission to whip the inmate John Graves for his assault on me and trying to break

April 22. I and a lot of other sergeants feel that if this is not done you will have a lot more of that on your hands soon . . ."

Walker stopped reading and sat staring at the limp yellowed paper. He didn't need to glance to the end to see Hiram Gwin's heavily flourished signature.

"I'm waiting now to see him," Hoffman said slowly. "I asked him to come in and discuss it."

Walker stared at him incredulously. "Discuss it!" he said.

"Of course, Howard," Kurt said, "he has to discuss it with him. He can't just ignore him."

"Why not?" Walker said. "Why not, in the name of God! The lash has been permanently abolished. The order has been issued three weeks!" He too was rising. "And a request like this!" he said, hurling the letter on the desk. "My God, Carl!"

"Howard," Hoffman said, "we'll discuss it later. I know how you feel, of course, and I agree; but Gwin will be here any minute, and I'd rather he didn't see you and John with me."

"But you are going to turn it down?" Walker said.

"Of course, of course, Howard," Hoffman said. "Please go now; use the side door."

"He's right, Howard," Kurt said. "Let's go." He was already crossing the room. Walker followed him reluctantly.

Kurt had opened the door and

Walker was preceding him through it, when Hoffman spoke again. "By the way, John, will you explain to Howard about the committee?"

Walker turned in the door. "Committee?" he said. "What committee? Carl, I'd like to be taken in on these discussions." He was losing the last of his control.

"John will explain it to you, Howard," Hoffman said. "I'm sorry I don't have time."

Kurt was nudging Walker gently through the door. "Yes, Howard," he said. "Come on."

The door opened on the east lawn of the building. Walker stepped off the walk onto the grass and took out a cigarette. He found that his hands were shaking, and this made him angrier. "Goddam it, John, what is this?" he said, turning to face the little man. "What's this committee about?"

"Carl thought we might appoint one," Kurt said, "if Gwin gave him trouble this morning."

Walker stared at him. "If Gwin gave him trouble!" he said.

"If he protested too strongly," Kurt said. "Carl thought we might use a committee to decide. It would seem less dictatorial, of course, and take some of the burden off Carl."

For a moment Walker was unable to find words. "Well, I'll be damned," he said finally, under his breath. "Well, I'll be damned. By the way, John, who's going to be on this committee? Did you and Carl decide that?"

John pursed his small lips in irritation. "That wasn't definite," he said. "You and I, of course, and the chaplain perhaps—one or two others. We—"

"What others?" Walker said. "Exactly what others?"

"I told you that wasn't definite, Howard!" Kurt said sharply. Then his face relaxed again. "Of course Gwin will have to be on it, I suppose, and one or two other sergeants," he smiled thinly.

But Walker ignored it; he was in no mood for sarcasm. "I see," he said, "a representative group. And what will be the group's decision? Did you decide that too?"

He thought Kurt was genuinely angry then. His pale eyes widened momentarily, and his thin little mustache flattened and twitched. But in a moment he was composed again, avoiding Walker's eyes. "Of course we didn't, Howard," he said. "But Carl will appoint the committee, naturally, and we will be in the majority; we should be able to control the decision."

Five weeks passed before the committee meeting was finally called. Johnny had made rapid strides; Walker visited him when his own crowded schedule permitted and soon had him reading magazines and books. Johnny even mentioned his wife once or twice, though he never talked about her at length since, as Walker knew, he still hadn't heard from her.

The committee consisted of eight:

Hoffman, Kurt, Walker, the Chaplain, Gwin and two other sergeants named Eugene Ball and Clyde Parker, (whom Kurt had contemptuously called "Gwin's peers") and Mims Corley who had become Walker's replacement as education director—Howard insisted Mims could not be left out. Mims and he had taken courses together at the university; and come to know and like each other. It had been on Walker's recommendation that Kurt had asked Hollis Graham to appoint Mims to the position.

The way Howard saw it, Hoffman was question-mark; also Eugene Ball. Ball, however, for all his squat, frog-like appearance, the assistant warden knew to be a fair man, and fearless. Fearless enough not to be dominated by Gwin, or anyone. Kurt, the Chaplain, himself and either Ball or Mims—that would do it. The three sergeants were at the one table when he entered the board room, a large rectangle with white-plaster walls and long venetian-shaded windows around the right side and the back. As Walker greeted them he heard Hoffman and Kurt and Mims Corley entering the lobby.

Old Chaplain Thompson—bald head tilted and glistening in the light, teeth clamped on his ever-present cigar—was he opposed to the whipping? Walker had assumed that the chaplain would be opposed to the lash on general principle; it occurred to him now

that he had never heard the old man express himself on this. Suddenly anxious, he decided to ask.

Except for the incongruous cigar, Chaplain Thompson looked like a chaplain should. His lined, full-jawed ivory face was calmly thoughtful, almost serene; his small faded gray eyes were direct and kindly. He sat and carried himself with the ease and authority of one accustomed for forty years or more to being not only admired and respected but actually set apart. "Hello, Chaplain," how are you tonight," he said, as Walker slid into a chair beside him.

"Hello, Howard," he said. "Isn't this a ridiculous bunch of nonsense, getting us all up here for a thing like this?"

"How do you mean, Chaplain?"

"I mean this whole thing is unnecessary," the old man said. "Asking us up here to decide a thing like this. It's an administrative problem; Mr. Hoffman should have decided it the minute it came up."

"I guess so," Walker said, smiling. "By the way, how do you feel about the question?"

"About Gwin's request?" the old man said. "About whipping this boy? I'm for it! I'm absolutely for it!"

Even though he half-expected it, Walker was stunned. "You're for it?" he said finally. "Do you mean that, Chaplain?"

The old man was smiling at him cheerfully, kindly, from his keen

but faded gray eyes. "Why, yes, Howard," he said. "Of course I'm for it. Aren't you?"

Walker avoided his eyes. "But why, Chaplain? This thing is wrong. This boy doesn't deserve to be whipped."

The old man was still smiling knowingly, even with pleasure, it seemed to Walker. "No, Howard," he said, "it isn't wrong. I know it may seem that way; often things are confused on the surface. It may seem that Hiram Gwin and the others are vindictive and cruel, and sometimes I think they are; but God works in mysterious ways. Sometimes he can even use evil to bring about his will."

"Yes, Chaplain," Walker said, seized with impatience, "that may be so. I wouldn't know about that. But in this case, how is any evil going to bring about God's will?"

The chaplain lifted the fat brown cigar in his thin ivory hands, stroking it lovingly into his lips. "Howard," he said, "it's like I told Mr. Hoffman. This boy has got the devil in him . . ."

But Walker had stopped listening. "Like you told Hoffman?" he said abruptly. "You've talked to Hoffman?"

The chaplain looked at him, puzzled. "Of course, Howard," he said. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I'm sorry, Chaplain," Walker said. "I don't mean to be rude, but this is pretty important to me."

Would you mind telling me when you talked to Hoffman?"

The chaplain eyed him uncertainly. "Why, right after the boy tried to run off."

"Then Hoffman knows how you feel about this?" he said.

"Why, yes," the old man said. "He asked me specifically."

Walker saw Hoffman and Mims sliding into the chairs; Kurt had not as yet come in. He got abruptly to his feet; caught Kurt at the door.

Walker turned him out into the hall. "What is it, Howard?" Kurt said. "Can't it wait?"

"Not this," Walker said. "Not any longer. John," he faced the little man squarely, "what are you and Carl trying to pull?" His voice quivered, almost out of control.

John Kurt looked at him, startled, irritated. "What do you mean 'trying to pull'?"

"I've just talked to the chaplain," Walker told him. "I know which way he's voting."

"Oh?" Kurt said levelly. "Is that right?"

"I also know," Walker said, "that Hoffman knew it five weeks ago. I'm guessing that you did too."

"Yes," Kurt said smoothly, "didn't you?"

"Then you're really going to do it, John?" Walker said. "You're actually going to sell the boy to Gwin?"

Kurt's eyes widened, anger touching him just enough to sharpen the soft, burring voice. "No," he said

evenly, "we're doing nothing even faintly resembling that. That lurid description is purely your own concoction, Howard. You seem to have a weakness for melodrama."

"But you *are* letting Gwin whip Johnny Graves," Walker said, "whatever description you give it."

"We're fighting a very close battle, Howard," Kurt said, "for important stakes. Unfortunately, but wholly incidentally, the boy is involved."

"For what stakes?" Walker said. "What are these stakes exactly?"

Kurt drew in his breath deeply. "The program, Howard," he said. "Our rehabilitation program."

10.

"Afternoon, Mr. Walker," the trusty said as he met Walker at the hospital gate. "Going to see Johnny Graves?"

"Yes, Jack," Walker said. "I thought I'd look in on him."

In the building, as Walker was turning down the hall toward the ward, Bob Johnson, the medical officer, called him. His broad, fleshy shoulders stooped in the white short-sleeved jacket. Johnson said, when he was facing Walker, "Howard, he isn't in the ward. Something's happened." His long hands, with shiny black hairs glistening on the olive skin, caressed a clipboard nervously.

"Happened?" Walker said, "What do you mean?"

"He jumped a trusty, one of the ward boys."

Walker heard it and at the same time saw it—Johnny leaping, his big brown hands extended. "No, Bob," he heard himself pleading. "No, Bob, he didn't."

Johnson nodded his big head heavily. "It was terrible, Howard," he said. "It happened on the terrace. He knocked the trusty over the wall, down into the shrubbery, and went over after him. I was out there," Johnson went on, still looking back at the scene, reliving it. "We had taken off the cast, and I was out there, so of course I had to try to stop it. And the way he looked at me—I believe he was going for me too, but the others got there in time." He sighed. "I hate these things," he said.

"But what happened? What caused it?" Walker said. "Surely the trusty did something."

"It was one of those things, Howard," Johnson said. "I had thought of warning Johnny, but I honestly believed we had fixed it. There was plenty of bone."

"Fixed it?" Walker said. "The leg? What's the matter with it? Didn't it heal?"

"Oh yes, it healed," Johnson said. "I don't understand it myself. As I said, there was plenty of bone. I didn't have the slightest doubt—"

"It's short!" Walker said. "It healed short!" And even before Johnson nodded sorrowfully he knew it was so.

Johnson went on explaining, his weary, outraged voice remembering the scene. "It was the leg that caused it, of course," he said. "The trusty mentioned it, you see. We all knew it. We took the cast off at the bed, and we knew the leg was short the instant he stood up. I did anyway, and Johnny did. I wish you could have seen his eyes when he looked up—"

Walker was shaking his head. "No, Bob," he said woodenly, "no."

"He was watching the leg, you see," Johnson said, "watching it as he slid it down from the bed to the floor. He wasn't smiling—you know how he is: he never smiles—but you could tell how much it meant; you knew that if he was the kind to smile he would have been smiling. And then he stood up slowly and it gave—just a little; it's not more than half an inch—and he had to catch himself, balance himself with his arm; and he looked up at me—I wish you could have seen it, just for a second there before he caught it, the surprise and the—"

"Damn!" Walker said. "Damn, damn, damn!"

Johnson nodded. "I guess I should have expected what happened," he said, "but I never dreamed the trusty would be stupid enough to say it. And yet it was the most natural thing in the world, watching him limp down the corridor—not used to the jerk yet, of course, and trying to hide it, trying to hold himself up just by will,

and so awkward and stiff—it was the uppermost thing in our minds. But he didn't say anything, just went on out to the terrace and stood there leaning on the wall, and I guess the trusty thought he hadn't cared much; he was so quiet, you know, and still. And the trusty probably thought he could help. Anyway, he went up behind the kid and slapped him on the back and said, "That's all right, boy. You'll get used to it. It's just awkward right at first. The thing to do is let go, lean with it. It won't hardly be noticeable, no shorter than it is—"

Johnson broke off and raised his big fleshy shoulders in the white jacket. "I think it was that word—shorter—that did it," he said. "Anyway, that was when he whirled around. You should have seen his face; it was just flat; white and flat, and his eyes—"

"Where is he?" Walker said. "You said he isn't in the ward. Where is he?" He turned and started back up the hall.

"He's in one of the quiet rooms," Johnson said. "I had them move him. He's—he's dangerous, Howard."

"Which room is he in?"

"The last one on the left," Johnson said, "and I don't know, Howard, if you ought to see him now."

The door was closed. Walker knocked softly. The voice that answered, too quickly, a little too loud and high-pitched, startled him.

"Come in!" it said.

Johnny sat on the bed with one hand braced behind him and his legs hanging down from the side.

"Hello, Johnny," Walker said. His own voice in his shock was husky and unfamiliar to him. He moved to the foot of the bed.

"Hello, Mr. Walker," Johnny said. "How are you today? You feeling good?"

It wasn't a question; it was a mockery, and Walker did not reply.

"Have you heard any news?" Johnny said. "Anything that shocked you? Disappointed you?"

Walker hesitated a moment before he answered. "Yes," he said finally, "I have."

There was a quick movement in the glittering gray eyes. "Well, that's too bad," Johnny said. "I'm sorry to make you feel bad."

It was mockery too, and Walker did not answer.

"Have you heard anything else?" he asked Walker. "Anything from those 'pretty nice men' who run this place?"

Walker took a step forward, raising his hand pleading. "Johnny—"

"What about the committee meeting?" Johnny said, refusing to acknowledge the movement. "Isn't there something you can tell me about that? Y'all did the best you could, didn't you? Y'all 'pretty nice men' who the 'pretty nice' people picked to run this place?" Walker dropped his hands and stared at

the bed, at the oddly raised right foot hanging down from it. "You've heard," he said finally.

"Oh, yes," Johnny said. "You know the grapevine. But don't worry, Mr. Walker. You did your part. You've been real nice, real sympathetic. And you're sorry for me now, aren't you? You're real sorry for me now."

"Johnny—"

"Oh no," he broke in, "I'm wrong, ain't I? It's me that's sorry, ain't it? I'm sorry for myself."

"Johnny," Walker said, "I wish you'd stop this. I wish you'd let me—"

"Talk?" The big right hand came up, twitching, and jabbed against his cheek. He jerked it down again impatiently. "You wish I'd let you talk, Mr. Walker?"

Unable to speak or to look at the boy, Walker moved slowly toward the door.

"Don't hurry," Johnny said. "They don't come after me till tomorrow. There's plenty of time to talk. I want to hear what a 'real man' would do at a time like this."

Walker turned to him. "Johnny, you don't have much left. You don't even know how little you have left. Don't turn on me too."

He stood hopefully for a moment, waiting. "All right," Walker said. "But I'll . . . be seeing you, Johnny."

"Sure," Johnny said. "I'll be around."

"Yes . . ." Walker said lamely.

He stepped into the hall and closed the door. This was just the beginning, he thought. After the whipping, after he was in Gwin's hands, what would he be like?

II.

Sometimes, when the throbbing stopped and he lay motionless on the bed with his eyes shut and his mind emptied for a moment, he could almost believe that it hadn't happened, that he had simply dreamed it, and that he was as whole as ever, the ugly ham-colored gash not there, the bone smooth and white and unshattered. And he would think of the times before, of high school and the football shoes fitting smooth and strong about his ankles, of the white wool socks coming up snug just below his calves—and running then, with the cleats under him, his feet light, almost feelingless, picking their way, his knees rising evenly.

But soon the throbbing would come back, dull and constant and sickening, and it was not just a dream, of course: he would feel the numbing lurch as he put the foot to the floor.

And, of course, Lucille. Always, there was the thought of her—in the hotel that night, on their honeymoon, lying in the faint light from the window, her legs silver-slender beside his, her hands moving over his body and her breath

(not even a whisper, just breath): "So smooth, so smooth. I'm glad you have a nice body, Johnny . . ."

And it was like that all day until dinner and then supper had passed, and Buchanan and the two trusties came. Johnny heard their steps and got to the bed before they opened the door.

Buchanan was the Long-chain sergeant who transported inmates from camp to camp. He was tall and sad-faced; his shoulders were wide and stooped as though too heavy to hold erect. He stood in the door a minute, looking at Johnny. The trusties were behind him, looking too.

"All right," Buchanan said, "let's go." He moved aside and motioned toward the door.

Johnny didn't move.

"Come on, kid," he said. "We got no fight. They sent me to get you. That's all."

Johnny slid from the bed and walked beside him up the long hall, hearing the rhythm of his stride bouncing back to him from the high white walls—long step, short step; long step, short step; crip, crip, crip!

At the camp Gwin sat in his straight chair, tilted against the wall of the cage building. Johnny and Buchanan went up the long brick walk and stopped at the edge of the porch. The hall inside was empty. One bare bulb spread yellow light silently out to them.

Gwin kept his chair tilted. "Well,

well, well!" he said. "So you decided to come back, Purty Boy?"

Johnny didn't answer.

Gwin cracked the front legs of his chair down sharply on the concrete and stood up. "Let's get it started," he said. "Bring him in, Buck." He opened the screen and stood aside, holding it. Buchanan nudged Johnny forward.

The cages on either side were silent. The men sat on their bunks or stood in the aisles, watching. In the thick yellow silence, the odor of greasy cabbage drifted up from the kitchen. The shuffling sound of footsteps on the concrete floor echoed in the high-ceilinged hall as Gwin and McCrory followed them in.

McCrory went over to the cages and called the men up to watch. They lined up three deep along the bars that separated the cages from the hall. Gwin called for trusties and four of them came out of the bunkroom.

The lash was seven feet long and ten inches across. It had a reinforced handgrip at one end; the other was square. Gwin crossed the hall and took it from a cabinet that stood against the back wall. It slithered from the shelf of the cabinet and fell heavily to the floor. It was thick and black and glistening in the yellow light.

Gwin smiled thinly and, lifting it over his shoulders, moved back to the center of the hall. The trusties—Bugger and Willis and

Eddie and Harvey—moved forward to flank him.

Gwin stopped and looked at the cages again. He was still smiling a little. "Tonight," he said, "we got a little treat for you men. I guess all of y'all remember Purty Boy here, and remember how he got a little restless a couple of months ago. Well, Purty Boy has come back to us; seems he decided he might have been wrong after all. But just in case he ain't sure and just in case some of the rest of you are getting restless too, we're gonna put on a little show here, with Purty Boy playing the main part. It's a mighty fine little show, one of my favorites."

He smiled again and looked around at the white still faces. Then he turned to Johnny, his thin face sobering slowly. "All right, Purty Boy. I believe we're ready."

Johnny didn't move and Gwin looked at him. "All right," he said again, "come on and get it."

Still Johnny didn't move and Gwin glanced at the trusties. "I guess you'll have to bring him, boys. I don't believe he's so tough after all."

The trusties came forward slowly; Johnny stepped out and fell in beside them, two on each side, as he moved across the room.

Directly in front of Gwin he stopped and stood waiting. "That's better," Gwin said, smiling at him. "Now drop your pants."

"What?" Johnny said, before he

could catch it back. He had forgotten that part of it.

Gwin grinned more broadly. "Drop your pants," he said clearly. "Undo your pants and drop 'em."

Johnny looked at him; he didn't move or answer.

"Did you hear me?" Gwin said. "Drop those goddamn pants."

Still Johnny stared at him.

Gwin looked at the trusties. "All right, boys, drop 'em for him."

Willis and Bugger were the closest, one on each side. They looked at Johnny hesitantly.

"Drop 'em, goddamn it!" Gwin said. "All four of you scared of him?"

Johnny saw the nod, but he didn't resist when they grabbed his arms; he gave them up limply.

They pulled his pants and shorts down to his ankles. Two of them knelt there holding his feet. They stretched his arms out to his sides, one of them holding each wrist. His buttocks were white in the yellow light. The scar below his knee was long and jagged.

Gwin stepped back to the length of the lash. He did not smile. The lash swung out behind him and rose over his head. At the top of its arc it caught the air and cut down through it, whistling.

When it landed, Johnny's buttocks spread and flattened. His hips and stomach flattened too, against the concrete. When the lash lifted, the buttocks stuck to it and the hips rose and bounced on the concrete.

Gwin swung rhythmically. As the lash landed he let out his breath in a little whispered, "Hah!" Red paralleled welts appeared on Johnny's buttocks. Then the skin on them broke and blood came through.

Gwin was not smiling, but his eyes were very bright. He continued to swing rhythmically; the lash whistled in the echoing lobby.

12.

The paper work began to pile up on Walker and, with a slight feeling of guilt, he was glad for it. When he was busy, he had no time to think; and when he had no time to think, he did not remember Johnny Graves.

During the first few days after Johnny's whipping, Walker was constantly occupied with supply requests and representatives. The monthly meeting of the board of commissioners was scheduled for the following Monday, and at that meeting Walker would have to present requisitions for the entire camp's supplies and equipment for the following quarter.

The days passed, and it was only at night that Walker had time to try to see Johnny. On a Wednesday night he drove into the double garage at the back of his house and saw the kitchen darkened. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was nearly eight o'clock, which made this the third time in the

week - and - a - half since Johnny's whipping that he had overlooked the hour and come in after supper was already cold. He knew Nita would be irritated, and he didn't blame her. She would say that it wasn't necessary for him to keep going back, and she would be right, he supposed. Certainly he hadn't accomplished anything.

When he entered the kitchen he heard the TV in the living room and knew that Nita and the kids would be there. He was tempted to get his plate, which he knew would be in the oven, and eat before going in; but he thought he should try to make amends to Nita, and he knew that Susan would be going to bed before he finished. So he went through the kitchen and dining room.

Susan, according to their custom, made a flying run at him when she saw him, and he caught her up, swinging her high in his arms. Billy, galvanized on belly and elbows before the TV, rolled sideways and smiled sheepishly as Walker bent and tousled his head.

"I'm sorry," he said when Nita didn't look at him.

"That's all right," she said, still keeping her eyes straight ahead. "Your supper is cold, that's all. You'll find it in the oven."

"I'm really not very hungry," he said.

He swung Susan to his shoulder and took her with him to the kitchen.

As he had known she would, Nita came before he had Susan well settled on the high metal stool.

"It's Susan's bedtime," she said, looking at Susan to avoid his eyes. "Why don't you get her ready and I'll warm your supper."

When he had put Susan's nightgown on her and finally bedded her down, he went back to the kitchen to find Nita sitting across from the place she had prepared for him at the small white table.

"Did you get to see him?" she asked.

He hadn't told her that he had been to Camp Eight again, but of course she knew. Twice before he had gone and sent in for Johnny, but Johnny had refused even to see him, even to come out. Now Walker nodded wearily. "Yes. I hardly knew him; his cheek was bruised and his mouth was swollen, and standing there one-legged like he does, not even putting the short one all the way down . . ."

He heard himself pleading, trying to keep Gwin and the others from hearing. "It's happening, Johnny. Isn't it happening like I told you? Is this what you want? Every day going further and further down? More and more a reputation that they have to challenge so that you have to fight them." . . . Then grasping desperately at anything that might break through, even using the girl—his wife—for the first time, asking how she

would feel about a thug, a criminal tough—which was too strong even in desperation and he wished he hadn't said it, not only because he knew it hurt but because it angered the boy, turned him away abruptly, limping stiffly across the lobby to the cage . . .

"Howard," Nita said, "eat. You're going to make yourself sick." And he brought himself back to the food on his plate, discovering that he really wasn't hungry.

"He did have another fight today?" Nita asked.

He nodded.

"But can't they stop it?" Nita said. "Can't they isolate him like they do sometimes?"

"They'll stop him," Walker said grimly, "when they're ready. But Gwin doesn't care right now. It's sport to him, he's waiting for Johnny to meet his match. He would gladly referee that one."

"But what is Mr. Hoffman doing?" Nita said. "Have you talked to him about it?" she asked. "He might actually not know what's going on."

"He knows about it, darling," he told Nita, "he and Kurt both know about it. But unofficially."

"Howard," she said, "I have never really understood why you've been so upset about Mr. Hoffman. After all, he's certainly no worse than Mr. Myers, and after the first while here, you never got mad with him, not really mad, I mean, not like you've been lately.

There've been boys here who were treated even worse than this one, boys that you knew and worked for. I know this one is special to you, but even so—"

"Yes, he's special," Walker said. "I'll admit it. But you're wrong about my blaming Carl. I *don't* like him, and he *did* disappoint me—I'll admit that. I was disappointed like a kid, because I had expected him to be different. But I don't really blame him, any more than I blame myself, I suppose, because I was here; I let it happen."

She set the coffee pot down. "You did not, Howard!" she said. "You did everything you possibly could to save that boy. You argued, you pled, you've worried until I think you're getting sick, and I'm tired of hearing you repeat yourself by saying you let it happen."

"I argued," Walker said, "I talked. But still I let it happen. I didn't do anything to stop it. And that's the real trouble. It's much safer just to string along, to 'adjust.' But what I wonder is where do you draw the line? Isn't there somewhere that a man *should* get upset? Aren't there some things he shouldn't tolerate?" Nita poured the coffee. Then she sat down across from him again, leaning forward on the table. "Howard," she said, "do you really think you should do more than you've done for this boy? Do you honestly think you owe it to him?"

"In the everyday sense, I don't

guess so. In terms of my job, my pay check, I guess I've done more than I needed to."

"But you do think you ought to do something else," she persisted. "I don't understand all your reasons for the way you feel. I sometimes think you're just stubborn. But if you really think you have to do something, if you really believe you'd be dishonest not to, I want you to go on and do it. I'm talking about your going on to Hollis Graham, or the Eddlemans, or whoever you're thinking of; and I'm saying if you must, do it. I don't want you miserable because of me."

"Honey," he said, "I haven't been miserable because of you. You came into it, of course, but not because of anything you've ever said, not because of you personally. I'm a married man! I have a responsibility, that's all."

She looked at him uncertainly. He had given her cause, he knew, to feel this way; he had actually accused her of being selfish, of clinging to security at any price in the old days when they had argued hotly about Myers.

"I mean it, Howard. I don't understand all of it, and I'll admit that I wish you wouldn't. This is a good job for you; it's almost twice as much salary as you can probably get teaching, and we're just beginning to be able to save." She was frightened, he saw, because she meant every word of it, and she

believed almost without doubt that he had been holding back only because of her. "But if you can't be happy at it," she said, "if you can't feel right, honest, I want you to resign, or make them fire you, or whatever you need to do."

"Honey," he said, getting up and going around the table to her. "You're getting way ahead of me. I don't even know yet if I can do anything, if anything I might try would do any good—for Johnny or anybody else. If I went to Hollis Graham, the first thing he would do probably would be to call Kurt, and everything, including me, would stop right there. If I went to the Eddlemans it would doubtless be the same process. Even a public appeal—speeches, independent article—would seem like nothing more than a disgruntled employee who had lost his job."

He had reached for her hands to pull her up to him, but she moved them impatiently. "But if you know that, Howard," she said, "if you *see* there's nothing you can do, why can't you just . . . forget it and be . . . normal again?"

That was a good question too, he thought, and one he had not answered for himself. Deliberate, futile self-destruction was stupid, wasn't it?

"I don't know, Nita," he said. "I honestly don't know. All I know is I can't give this thing up. I've waited so long—ever since I've been here, sometimes I feel all my life—

to do something all the way, the right way! with no compromise, with no reservations, and feel cleanly and wholly behind it. Is that wrong, is that asking too much?"

"I don't know. Just hurry up and do *something*, so we can start living again." There was a sob in her voice as she rose abruptly and ran from the kitchen. He got up and started after her, but at the door he stopped and turned back. What could he say? What comfort could he possibly give her?

13.

For three weeks they picked cotton. At first Johnny had tried to plan again, to think out a way, and watch for a chance. The heat gave him an idea, the heat and the men falling out with sunstroke. You could fake a sunstroke, he thought; you could watch those who had them and study how they looked, what the symptoms were. And when it happened in the fields, you were sent in with a trusty; it was at least a way of getting off from the others. But what to do then? He couldn't even run now, and he couldn't try that again anyway. Because even if you got free from your own camp there was still eight miles any way you went, and camps spread out all the way. And even if you got off the farm, what then? There was the whole state, and you couldn't steal that many cars; they would put the dragnet out, and

even if you outguessed one or two—or even four or five—there were too many. Maybe the river; you could get a boat and travel at night . . .

But he soon quit watching or even trying to think. They were in the fields at five o'clock and by six the sun was hot and coppery above the cypress trees. At noon the long flat V's of the rows were dancing in a white, blinding light and the fumes from the earth came up dry and suffocating under his cap . . .

Besides, things weren't clear any more. Even before he had left the hospital, it had all begun to run together—day, night, the heat, the fighting, his dreams, all of it, even Lucille. He wasn't even sure sometimes that he was Johnny Graves, that he was part of Camp Eight; and then sometimes he could see it, could get it straight.

There was Puddin Welch and Arnold Foley. Then there was Tommy Wilson, and two nights ago Don Harrison. Four fights in less than three weeks, and if he hadn't picked all of them, he had at least done his part; he had wanted them. And why? (what was it Walker had asked: "A thug, a criminal tough; how will she feel about a criminal tough?")

He didn't know why, really. It was just with everything running together like it did, the heat and the pain and Lucille, wondering about her, getting it confused and wondering if she was still out there

even, wondering if she had ever been out there, or if he had just dreamed her too. Because sometimes it seemed that there wasn't any outside at all, that the bunk and the cage and the camp and the cotton fields were all there ever was. He would shut his eyes and try to remember her, how she had looked, and he couldn't see her. Except when she wasn't with him. He could see her then. He had thought of every boy in town, everyone he could remember to decide who it was with her, but whoever it was had his hands on her shoulders, and she was leaning forward to him, her mouth half-parted and smiling strangely, her mysterious, slanted eyes laughing . . .

14.

It was convenient for Walker that Salena was scarcely a half-day's drive from Larkin, and that he could be sure, after talking by phone with her father, of finding her at the school. He decided to go down on Monday.

Walker arrived in the afternoon, just before school was out. The secretary in the school's office directed him to room twenty-three.

Lucille Tinsley-Graves was what he half-expected, half-remembered from her visits to Larkin two years before, except that now she was no longer the pretty soft-eyed girl; she was the lovely, soft-eyed woman, whose slender arms and legs and

faintly thin cheeks had rounded, firmed, without seeming heavier at all. He watched her for a moment through the small glass window in the door before he knocked.

She was probably, he decided, a fine teacher, patient, energetic, quite happily at home in that third grade classroom. She should be single now; she should be planning her wedding to a well-appointed young doctor or lawyer whom she had met at Baylor. She should have remained with her middle-class sisters in Olive, driving downtown in the late afternoons, fresh and groomed and beautifully poised in their pastel Pontiacs and Buicks. But her middle-class pattern had twisted in one early mistake. And whose mistake was it? Hers? Johnny's? Her parents'? The blood?

He shut his mind to the questions and knocked reluctantly. When she came she didn't recognize him at first, and she stood there framed in the door, smiling.

"Yes?" she said softly. "Can I help you?"

Her eyes were a clear, deep blue, almost violet, very direct and guileless under thick dark lashes. Her blond hair, which had been long and heavy over her shoulders when she came to Larkin, was pulled back now in a sleek pony tail. She wore a white short-sleeved blouse and a blue, tailored skirt.

"I'm Howard Walker. I . . . met you some time ago. You may not remember me, but . . ."

Then she did remember him. Her eyes flickered suddenly, darkening and widening. "Oh," she said faintly. "Oh yes. I remember . . ."

Walker waited but she did not go on. Her eyes searched vaguely past him in the hall.

"I . . . wanted to see you," Walker said, "talk to you. I—"

Her face came up quickly, her eyes almost black in her strained white face. "Is there anything wrong?" she said. "Has there been any trouble?"

"No," Walker said. "There hasn't been any trouble, no . . . accident, I mean."

"Thank goodness," she breathed.

"He needs help. He's been growing bitter lately, and we—somebody has to help him."

Again she glanced up quickly, her eyes frightened. "Help him? What has he done? How does he need help?"

There wasn't time and this corridor was not the place. "May I see you?" he said. "Could we talk somewhere? I can wait. Your school will be out soon, won't it?"

She glanced at her watch, rather slowly, he thought. "Three-thirty," she said. "In about five minutes."

"Can we meet then?" he said. "I have my car. Could I take you home?"

"Yes—"

"My car's in the drive out front. I'll wait for you there."

"We can drive out of town," he

said when she arrived, guessing that she would prefer it, "and then I can bring you back."

"Yes," she said faintly, "that would be fine."

Walker swung the car north on the highway and pushed it up to sixty, so that the wind came whipping the heat away. He did not talk or look at her. He leaned his face forward, into the windstream from his vent, and watched the white concrete float toward him. He could not think of a beginning, was not sure yet where she stood.

"Is he . . . how is he?" she said at last. Her voice was small, almost inaudible in the whipping wind.

"He's miserable and confused and bitter."

There was a little roadside park up ahead, under a grove of pines. Walker slowed the car and pulled off the highway into it. He switched the engine off and turned to her.

She dropped her eyes. "He may not think of me at all. He—he's stopped writing. He may have forgotten me."

"Do you want him to forget you?" he said.

"I . . . no, I don't want that," she said. "But I—it may be that he has. He . . . hasn't written."

Walker was tempted to ask if she had written to him, but he knew the answer, and that wasn't important now. "He hasn't forgotten you," he said. "And I think I can guess why you didn't come. I don't blame you. It isn't . . . pleasant."

She looked up. The tears were real—very, very real. "It was awful," she said. "All those ugly staring men with their shaved heads and their nasty grinning faces. He looked like them," she dropped her head, "that same look, staring at me with his face so pale and still and his eyes . . ."

She continued to cry, and Walker let her. He took out a cigarette and lit it. Finally when her shoulders had stopped shaking and she sat back against the seat, she said, "I want to forget it." Her voice was almost fierce. "I want to forget it forever!"

"And maybe you can," Walker said, "maybe you can forget *it*—but not him! He needs you, and you are his—"

"How does he need me?" she said. "You never have said how he needs me."

"He's had a bad time," Walker said. "When his parole fell through, he got excited—tried to escape. He was shot, in his right leg, and the bone was shattered." Her face twisted for a moment. "It healed short," Walker said, "and he went bitter. He's sullen and beligerent—fighting everybody who crosses him—and he's getting steadily worse."

"Poor Johnny," she said dully, "poor Johnny."

"But it doesn't have to be," Walker said. "I think if you would come, if you'd talk to him, tell him you're waiting—"

She put her hands up over her face, rocking her head back and forth slowly. "No, no, no!" she moaned, her voice thickly muffled under her hands. "I'll never go back. I can't! Don't you see? I *can't* talk to him; I *can't* write to him: I don't *love* him!"

Walker sat back. Now, Scholar, he thought, what is Love? Because she honestly believed it; he didn't doubt that. And her grief was genuine too. She had "loved" the boy, and now she no longer did. She couldn't help it if she simply no longer "loved" Johnny. And if she later started "loving" someone else, she probably wouldn't be able to help that either.

"I'll take you home," he said gently. "Tell me where to turn."

So this left it completely up to him, he reflected, and now there was even less time. He would see Kurt and Hoffman tomorrow. He had to make his own play.

At the administration building the sergeants were gathered in the lobby as usual when Walker entered. The morning mail sessions were the old riotous confabs of the Myers' regime. And Walker had even begun to hear the familiar, grumbling objections against the music school (which took men out of the fields on Tuesday afternoon) and the chaplain's Bible study courses (which met at night and kept sergeants and drivers on duty too late). Gwin himself had become almost patronizing toward

Walker, pushing his old insolence even further.

Walker nodded in the general direction of the group and went hurriedly past, toward Hoffman's office. If both Hoffman and Kurt were in, he wanted to get the thing over immediately, not only to settle his anxiety but so that he could start for Beauregard immediately if necessary.

Miss Higgins was not around, so Walker knocked on Hoffman's door.

Hoffman's voice, muffled but very brisk and pleasant, sang out, "Come!" Walker came.

Glancing up from his desk, Carl Hoffman was clearly surprised and clearly a bit concerned, but also quite glad to see him. It occurred to Walker suddenly that the man was probably very lonely. Could he ever relax completely with anyone? he wondered.

"Howard!" he said. "How are you today?"

"Hello, Carl," Walker said. He smiled, too thinly he felt, still standing in the door. "I'd like to see you."

"Of course," Hoffman said. "Come in."

"I'd like to get John in too, May I send for him?"

Hoffman nodded but his smile was strained, uncertain.

Walker addressed Miss Higgins who was seated beside the desk. "Would you mind very much?" he asked, as he walked in.

"Well, how are you?" Hoffman asked. "How have things been?"

"All right, I guess," Walker said.

There was a brief, awkward pause, during which Hoffman frowned at his desk. Finally he looked at Walker again, his face bland, almost but not quite casual.

"Ah, you sent for John. Is it . . . is it something important?"

"It's about Johnny Graves," Walker said. "I imagine you guessed."

Hoffman's face contracted slightly. "Why, no," he said slowly, "that hadn't occurred to me . . ." He hesitated a moment, then resumed in another sentence. "But as a matter of fact," looking up again, "I'm glad you've brought it up. I've wanted to talk to you about Johnny."

Walker looked at him. "Really?" he said.

"Yes," Hoffman said, smiling, "I've never felt quite right about our decision concerning Johnny's . . . punishment. I've felt that you were . . . dissatisfied with it, perhaps even a little angry at us." He frowned anxiously.

"Is that the only reason you felt wrong?" Walker asked. "You weren't dissatisfied too?"

Hoffman cleared his throat. "Oh, well of course, Howard!" he said. "I regretted it terribly. But I . . . I somehow felt that you resented *us*—me personally, that is, and I certainly wouldn't want that to happen." He looked up at Walker.

"I was angry, Carl," Walker said finally, "and I still am. But that's not what I'm here for."

"What are you here for?" John Kurt said burringly, smilingly. He nodded at them and turned to close the door.

"Hello, John," Walker said. "Carl and I were talking about Johnny Graves."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. "Again?" he said.

"Yes," Walker said, "he is still here."

"Howard—" Hoffman began remonstratingly.

"No, wait," Walker said. "I know all that, and I'm not here to accuse you and argue with you. I'm here to ask you one more time to help me save this boy."

John Kurt had taken a seat, crossing one small knee over the other. "Howard," he said, "I'm afraid Johnny Graves has gone too far to be helped now, that is, with the facilities we have."

"Facilities?" Walker said. "We don't need facilities, John, and you know it as well as I—unless you consider honesty a facility."

Both Kurt and Hoffman were very still for a moment. Finally Kurt said, "What do you mean, Howard?"

"You know what I mean," Walker said. "A gesture of some sort, a guarantee of shortened time, of even an eventual parole. I think he would respond to that. He understands honesty; he always has;

and I think that now he will probably understand people making mistakes, even prison officials. If you would get him out of the camp, bring him to The Front, make him a trusty—an office boy, or a shooter: the position wouldn't matter too much, as long as it—"

Kurt raised his hand beseechingly. "Wait, Howard, wait," he said. "Are we to understand," he said, "that you're asking us to make this boy a trusty, to remove him from the camps, and grant him a parole? Don't you realize, Howard, that you're asking special privileges for one of the worst prisoners on the farm at this time? Surely you must know—"

"Yes, I know. You and I know—John, you and Carl and I—that we drove this boy into his blind alley, that we set up every act of violence he's committed. I'm asking you to help me stop him before he is killed or commits a murder which we'll have to execute him for."

"But, Howard—" John started.

"I know, John, that most of the sergeants would howl that every man who wanted a parole or even just to get out of field work would simply start raising holy hell. All right, think of some other way. I don't care about the way as long as it's something definite, which will work and save one inmate bent on his own destruction."

Kurt turned and looked at Hoffman. The warden was very quiet, very white and tense. He avoided

Kurt's glance quickly.

Kurt turned back to Walker. "Howard," he said, "Larkin is a large and very complex situation, a practical, and even a grim situation. It isn't pleasant, and it can frequently be very upsetting, especially if a man is sensitive, if he has trouble controlling his emotions . . ."

This was it; it was actually happening, and it seemed so incredibly, so outrageously natural. For a moment Walker felt a panic, an actual fear—the holdover, he thought, of the long years of caution—and a deep pang of regret for Nita, who would be crushed, humiliated. But then he was relieved, almost amused at Kurt's smooth approach. "Is that right, John?" he said evenly.

"Yes," Kurt said, "and Carl and I have been thinking about you, Howard, wondering if you wouldn't be—"

"Happier somewhere else?" Walker said. "If you hadn't better fire me so that I can find peace and contentment in a happier 'adjustment'?"

Kurt smiled thinly, inclining his large head. "You always put things so bluntly, Howard," he said.

"Forgive me," Walker said. "I suppose it's my primitive coarseness. But there's one thing I wonder if you and Carl considered when you were thinking. I might not be able to forget Johnny Graves, or Larkin either, just by leaving

here. My emotional condition might continue, and it might be necessary, in order to cure it completely, for me to expiate my conscience. That's an unfortunate weakness, I guess, of sensitive people."

Hoffman moved quickly, leaning forward across the desk. "Howard—" he began, but Kurt interrupted, chuckling.

"Oh, I'm sure Howard doesn't mean that, Carl," he said. "I know that he isn't vindictive, that in spite of any disagreements he wouldn't harbor a grudge."

"No," Walker said. "I'd hate to think I was vindictive. But the thing is so complicated, John. In spite of my reluctance to hurt you, I feel I would have to do something. It's somewhat like the case of Johnny Graves, you see: one can't always be guided by sentiment."

Kurt still smiled, white-faced. "But what would you do, Howard?" he said. "What could you do? Hollis Graham wouldn't be disposed to take action for a confirmed troublemaker, I'm sure, and short of his help, I don't see how you could gain anything."

"Possibly not," Walker said, much more confidently than he felt, of course, because this actually was the big question in his own mind, "but it will be interesting to find out, and as I said, a relief to my conscience. Also, who knows? There are others in Beauregard besides Hollis: the Eddlemans, for in-

stance, and even Lucius Mills."

He had deliberately dropped in the name of Lucius Mills, the rival editor with the Eddlemans in Beauregard. Old Lucius, the publisher of a notoriously irresponsible paper, was linked with Myers and the Gwins, and he had fought Kurt and the Eddlemans viciously when they were campaigning to elect Hollis Graham and oust Myers. Walker knew that Mills would snap at the chance to discredit Hoffman's administration, and he was sure that Kurt and Hoffman knew it too.

Now Kurt stopped smiling altogether, and his face was a motionless, questioning mask. "Howard," he said, after a long tense silence, "you couldn't consider such a thing; you wouldn't think of—of betraying us."

"Now you're being blunt, John, and melodramatic. I wouldn't consider it as 'betraying,' but more as 'coping with a practical situation as best I could.' As I said, this thing is so complex."

Kurt stared at him, his face completely blank, his large pale eyes a study in calculation. "Howard," he said quietly, "if you want your job, don't betray us to Lucius Mills."

"My job," Walker said. "Keep it." He turned and went out of the office.

Johnny realized that this after-

noon he was actually going to do it, and he knew he wasn't ready. There were so many details he still wasn't sure of, and he didn't even have a watch. He had been checking the sun and listening when the others mentioned the time, so maybe he could guess closely, but he really needed a watch.

It was after the fight with Myrick, three days ago, that he knew he had to try it, and try it right away if he was going to see her like he wanted to, or maybe even see her at all. Because he knew then that Walker had been right, maybe righter than even he knew. He'd kill somebody or he would be like Walker said: a thug, just a thug, and with the leg that way too, how could she stand him?

So he had already started planning it, had even thought of using Corley, the new man that had taken Walker's place; and when they put him on Front Bunk again Monday morning he knew he couldn't stand it another week, so it would have to be Tuesday because Corley only came on Tuesday afternoons. That was when he started setting it up, slowly at first, just a couple of times yesterday afternoon and three times, spaced out, this morning. He had to be careful, to keep from making it too bad and having them keep him at the camp at dinner.

They took their rows again. The sun was almost overhead still, and the gumbo earth between the

purple stalks was blue-white and shimmering. The shooters slouched outside the group, seeming to doze under their wide straw hats; and Delo, the imbecile water boy, sat in the small shade cast by the little wagon.

Johnny waited until they came back on their second row, when he guessed it was about one o'clock; then he got up and went slowly to the water wagon. It was a small hooded cart, with a barrel of water on its bed. A donkey-like mule dozed in its shafts, now and then dropping his head to crop at the long thin grass which grew on the turn row. Delo grinned at Johnny. Delo always grinned. His face was a greasy copper, and his eyes seemed to be all pupil. "You back?" he said cheerfully. "This is the fourth time already."

Johnny leaned against the wheel of the cart, resting his forehead on his arms. "I don't feel good," he said. "How about some salt."

"Already?" Delo said, grinning. "You gonna eat all my salt. You took four pills yesterday afternoon."

"I don't feel good," Johnny said. He put his hand to his stomach. "My stomach feels like something hit me."

McCrory came to the door of the cotton house. "Purty Boy!" he bel-lowed. "You camping out there or something?"

Johnny raised his head slowly. "I don't feel good," he said. He still held his hand at his stomach. "I

feel kind of sick at my stomach."

McCrory looked at him a moment, his hands in the hip pockets of his low-slung khaki trousers. Then he snorted. "Get back to your row," he said. "Feel sick when we go in to supper."

Johnny went slowly back to his row. He figured that was about one o'clock.

Two rows later, at probably one-thirty, he went back again. He was bent over then, with both hands holding his stomach.

Delo grinned at him pleasantly. "You ain't no better?" he asked. "It still hurtchu?"

Johnny sank to one knee and rested his head on his arm. "I feel funny," he said. "I don't know how I feel."

McCrory came out of the cotton house and strode to the wagon. "I told you to stay on your row," he said. "What the hell you trying to do?"

"He says he feels funny," Delo said. "He says he feels sick at his stomach."

"I heard what he said," McCrory roared. "You tend to your own goddamn business." He watched Johnny for a moment. "It's just your stomach?" he asked. "You ain't feeling cold or anything?"

"That's right," Johnny said, "but it makes me weak. It feels like—"

"All right," McCrory said. "Get out there. You just ate something wrong, that's all."

Johnny hesitated, then went

slowly back to his row. And that was about one-thirty.

Two rows later, twenty yards or so out from the turn row, Johnny got up unsteadily and started for the wagon. He bent low, holding his stomach tightly, and he weaved and stumbled as he walked. At the edge of the turn row he bent sharply, groaning between clenched teeth, and fell on his face in the grass. Delo saw it and started toward him. He called to McCrory as he ran, but McCrory was already out of the cotton house.

Johnny continued to writhe, lying on his side and holding his stomach. Delo stood over him, hesitant. "He fell," he told McCrory as McCrory came up to them. "He was coming to the wagon and he—"

"I saw him!" McCrory said. "I saw him! Move over; get out of the way." He pushed Delo aside and knelt above Johnny.

Johnny breathed heavily; he shook his shoulders violently.

"You crapping out?" McCrory said. "You trying to crap out on me?"

Johnny didn't open his eyes. He fumbled his lips when he spoke. "It's my stomach," he said "I—I don't know what it is—" He broke off in a sudden convulsion, making a choking sound in his throat.

McCrory sat back on his heels and looked at him.

"What you gonna do, Cap?" Delo said. "You're gonna send him in, ain't you?"

McCrory still stared at Johnny. He didn't answer.

"Ain't that what the sergeant said?" Delo asked him. "To send 'em in if they started falling out? It's the sunstroke, ain't it, Cap?"

McCrory still didn't answer. He leaned over and looked at Johnny. "Is he crapping out on me, Delo?" he said. "Do you know if he's trying to rat?" He turned and looked at Delo.

"I—I don't think so, Cap," Delo said. "He don't look to me like he's ratting. He started acting funny yesterday. It looks like to me he's real sick."

McCrory continued to stare at Johnny, then got slowly to his feet. "All right, get up, Purty Boy," he said finally. "Get up and I'll let you go in."

Johnny didn't move for a moment; then he began slowly to push himself up. He got almost to his feet, then grabbed his stomach again and sank forward. "I—don't know if I can, Mr. Mac," he said. "It hurts my stomach to walk."

"You can't walk?" McCrory said. "You can't walk? Then how the hell am I gonna send you in?"

Johnny didn't answer for a moment; he continued to crouch on his knees, his forehead in the grass.

"You could let a shooter carry him, Cap," Delo said. "I don't think he could do anything. He looks too sick to me to try any—"

"I don't care what you think,"

McCrory said. "It's a rule. A shooter don't touch a convict in the field. Pick him up and take him to the wagon."

Johnny pushed himself slowly up again, standing there crouching. "I'll make it, Mr. Mac," he said. "I may have to go slow, but I'll make it." He hoped he hadn't played it too far.

Through slitted eyes he saw McCrory staring at him; Delo, beside him, was grinning his curious concern.

"That's better," McCrory said finally, turning around to the field. "All right," he bellowed, "a shooter! Beaumont, you'll do. Get in here."

Beaumont, large and lumbering, broke grudgingly into a trot toward the turn row.

"All right," McCrory said, when he reached them. "Take Purty Boy in to bed."

"Yes, sir," Beaumont said, looking at Johnny and jerking the 30-30 toward the camp. "Okay, let's go."

So it had worked, or at least that much of it had worked; and, stumbling past McCrory and Delo, trying to remember to crouch staggering like all the others had done, sensing McCrory's eyes still on him as he passed the water wagon and moved on toward the cotton house, he felt the coldness in his hands. Beaumont was big, and they said he was strong. Johnny had never seen him fight, but they said he could pick a plow up with one

hand. Johnny had hoped he would get Geiger or Jones, but it was Beaumont and he'd just have to risk it with him.

A hundred yards or so down the turn row, the corn began on each side. It was dying already, a thick yellow-green forest on either side of them. Johnny had counted on it; it had made the whole plan possible. Over the tops of the stalks he could see the road far away toward the east, but nothing was on it yet. What time was it? he wondered frantically, feeling the coldness growing moist now on his fingertips. Was he too late already, or had they changed the schedule maybe? Sometimes they did.

He suddenly wanted to see Beaumont, where he was, how he looked. He tried to get a glimpse of him out of the corner of his eyes, but he couldn't. Finally, he made an excuse of another convulsion. He needed to do it anyway, to set up the big one. But Beaumont still didn't show, and finally Johnny half-turned, pretending to look behind them.

Beaumont was about five yards back, the gun swung loosely over one heavy, black-haired forearm. He *was* big, Johnny thought, not fat but thickset. His face was brown, large-boned, and his forehead sloped square from black, coarse eyebrows. He looked at Johnny disinterestedly, lazily, with his large hazel eyes. Behind him there were only the corn stalks; the

curve in the turn row had already hidden McCrory.

"You feeling worse?" Beaumont said. His voice didn't sound as if he cared.

"I think I can make it," Johnny said, gasping. "I wondered how far we had come."

Beaumont had stopped, just looking at him. If he did that when the time came! Johnny thought. And that was just what he might do: stand back and look at him and wait for him to get up.

"The road's just ahead," he said. "You want to rest?"

Johnny turned forward again, moving on slowly. "No," he said, "I think I can make it."

But the brightness was worse, now, thick, almost smothering. Looking at Beaumont, at the sure, easy way he carried the gun, at the big thickset hands, he didn't believe he could do it. But in a moment now, somewhere here, he would have to do it. They had rounded the curve completely, and the road was in sight, growing larger with every step, its white shimmering belly flat and drowsing in the sun. It was empty still; above the corn stalks he saw its long lazy curve between the thin telephone poles away to the east. But already Corley might be on it; at any moment the dust might boil off the horizon, pushing the pickup small and black and soundless too quickly before it. So it had to be done . . .

The road grew larger and larger,

and suddenly he knew he would have to do it, that he was going to do it. His mouth was dry, coppery, and his neck was clamped rigidly forward, aching against the impulse to turn. Then, stopping suddenly in the middle of the turn row, seeing the sunlight shafted in dry, yellow pools between the thin blades of grass, he clutched his stomach again, knifing forward violently, tightening his throat and letting the breath rasp out savagely, and tumbled forward on his face.

For a moment Beaumont was silent, and Johnny continued to writhe, setting his shoulders to shaking violently, hardly having to force them now because of the excitement. Then he heard Beaumont's voice gruff, mumbled, seemingly very distant, "*Now* what the hell!" and his steps too, moving slowly forward.

At first Johnny couldn't see him. Then one leg came into view, slowly, heavily, and he writhed again, pulling his body up tightly. The other leg swung forward too, nearer to Johnny, as Beaumont came angling across the row, and Johnny noticed that his pants were old; the perpendicular trusty stripes were almost bleached out so that the legs seemed nearly white.

"You all right?" Beaumont said. "What is it?" calmly, lazily, stopping a full step away. Johnny almost expected that he would poke him over with the barrel of the rifle, like something he had shot

and wasn't sure he wanted. Johnny writhed again, twisting his throat tighter, making the rasping sound even harsher, as he doubled back closer to his feet. He expected to see the bleached white legs move away then, or even feel the gun crack down on his head. But there was nothing: the legs continued to stand there, slightly bowed and wrinkled and bagged at the knees, and Beaumont's voice came again, too, still lazy, though a bit more concerned: "Come on now. What are you doing?" Johnny thought *Now! Now while he's talking.* And he charged, ramming his head into Beaumont's middle, Beaumont bent suddenly, bent and said, "Hoo!" His huge hands were extended, slipping from the gun. And he reeled backwards before sitting down, his big hands crossed now on his stomach, his head sunk low between his shoulders. He pulled at his stomach, his mouth open and distended, and made a low, crowing sound in his throat.

Johnny slipped the safety off the rifle and lowered it at Beaumont even as he reeled backward. When he was sure that the big man wouldn't be moving, he glanced quickly over the corn at the road and saw that it was still empty. Then he checked the chamber of the gun, just to be sure, and went over and patted through Beaumont's pockets. There was a switchblade pocket knife and he took it, forcing Beaumont to hand it to

him. He also took Beaumont's wrist watch, and when Beaumont shook his head in protest, told him, "I'll send it back to you, or you can claim it off my body."

Beaumont still hadn't got his breath fully, but it was a quarter till three, and they still had more than a hundred yards to go; besides, the turn row was open to the road and anybody passing could see them. Johnny jerked the gun at Beaumont. "Come on," he said.

Beaumont shook his head and pointed to his stomach, scowling. Johnny cocked the rifle and Beaumont pushed himself to his feet. "You're crazy," he gasped. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know," Johnny said. "Into the corn; go on." He motioned the general direction with his head.

Beaumont looked at him hesitantly, then started for the corn.

"Take a row and stay on it," Johnny said. "I'll tell you when to change." They would be angling across the rows, and he didn't want Beaumont to get an idea about running.

The corn was thick and over their heads. The drying leaves cut and stung, so he had to carry the gun in one hand and push a path for his face with the other. After they had gone a few yards he told Beaumont to step over two rows and stop.

Beaumont was getting his wind

back, and he turned around to argue. "Graves," he said. "You can't do this. Where can you get from here?"

"Don't talk," Johnny said. "I haven't got time to talk. Just cross over two rows and stop."

When he had done it, Johnny moved down until he was directly behind him, so that the evenly spaced corn made an alley at right angles to the rows. "Go straight ahead," he told Beaumont then, "and don't talk." He followed two rows behind.

At last they came to the edge of the corn, to the corner made by the crossroads. "Move up to the point," he told Beaumont, "and stop." He himself moved up close behind him and crouched, peering up the road. Still it lay dancing and white and empty in the sunlight, and he thought, *If Corley doesn't come I'll take anybody; there'll have to be somebody soon.*

17.

Walker's first news of the break was a maddening radio warning which gave only Johnny's name and description and warned residents in the area southwest of Larkin that he was believed to be in that vicinity. It was at eight o'clock Tuesday night, and Walker was driving back from Beauregard. He was listless and morose because his visit to Beauregard had been merely an extension of the talk

with Hoffman and Kurt: Hollis Graham was very agreeable. He assured Walker that he would do all that was possible for the unfortunate boy. Which meant, Walker knew, that he would call John Kurt. So Walker had gone to the Eddlemans. He drew a disappointing blank there. In anger, he had started out for Lucius' *Chronicle*, but uncertainty as to what good he could do by this means, especially for Johnny, made him back down. So he started for Larkin to face Nita with his complete, bungling failure.

It was after ten o'clock when he saw the floodlights picking out the white front of the administration building. He swung recklessly over the railroad tracks, and cut straight around to the back entrance where the communications office was located.

Ernest Beard, the operator, was propped before the long table of receivers, a set of headphones held loosely to one ear. He was munching a sandwich, and he grinned at Walker as Walker came in.

"When did he break?" Walker said. "Where?"

"About three this afternoon. He jumped Mims Corley in his truck."

"He jumped Mims! Where is Mims? Have you found him?"

"A couple of hours ago," Beard said. At the hospital he found Peg Corley, Mim's wife, and Nita and Hoffman. They were talking with Bob Johnson in the waiting room

of the civilian wing. From all of them he gathered that Mims had been tied up by Johnny, left in a swamp, and it had been the mosquitoes that had done the damage.

Walker said to Johnson, "Can I talk to him?"

"Well, he's got a bit of fever from the bites," Johnson said. "But I don't think it would hurt him, if you didn't stay too long."

"I won't," Walker said.

As he stood in the doorway and looked at Mims Corley swathed in gauze, his fat baby-soft flesh showing tight and burningly inflamed, he himself felt almost guilty and apologetic. Mims had always sympathized with Johnny, had even tried to help defend him.

"I just got back, Mims," Walker said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," Mims said. "Bob has me doped, and I'm beginning to float. The pain wasn't so bad. It was just the idea of those mosquitoes swarming over me."

"Do you feel like talking about it, Mims?" Walker said. "How did it happen? What was he like?"

Mim's red-rimmed eyes moved expressively. "You can guess, Howard; I think you can guess. He was waiting for me at the crossroads near Eight. I was bound for the music school, and I slowed down to check the left road—the corn is high there, you know, and you can't see. He stepped out just as I turned, and stood there with the gun half-raised to his shoulder and

his head back looking at me. He looked like he was wild again, Howard, like he had gone back unconsciously to the jungle, where it was just running and thinking and dodging fast that would save him, and violence—maybe even killing—would be just incidental, something he'd do without thinking and only to help him run again, because by himself, of course, he couldn't kill enough to do any good."

"But where did he get the gun? And how did he get out there?"

"Jumped a shooter," Mims said. "Knocked Beaumont out."

"Knocked Beaumont out?" Walker said. "Is he hurt?"

"I don't think so," Mims said. "Howard, give it up now. You've not only done more than you should, but I . . . doubt if we'll see him again—not alive, I mean."

Walker looked up at him slowly, unwillingly, sensing the confirmation of the dread he had suppressed. "You mean he . . . won't be taken?"

Mims moved his big head in a nod. "I got the idea that this was for keeps," he said, "and with Gwin heading the entire posse . . ."

"You'll be all right, Mims," he said. "I'll check in again tomorrow. I'm—sorry as hell this happened."

And as he went down the hospital hall, he knew what he was going to do. He'd take Nita home. Then he'd go out with the posse.

It was a blur. The whole thing was a blur.

When Johnny was sure, after

hiding out there most of one night, that she was not at her parents' home, he found Ves. Ves who had been a part in some of Benny's moonshine deals. Only when he'd taken Ves' throat in his hands did the man tell him she was in Salena. He'd ripped out the phone in Ves' store and taken the stubby man's new tan Plymouth.

Vaguely Johnny remembered now, as he lay here in Mims Corley's baggy trousers, that Ves would get his car back unharmed, just as he'd promised. He'd stopped two miles outside of Salena and left it there; touching together the ignition wires of a black Buick, he was off again, pausing only at a filling station broiling under the sun. Leaving the engine running he'd slid out on the far side of the car. The directory was chained to the phone booth, so he took chain and all and slid back into the car. Three blocks down he took a side road, pulled off on it to look for her name.

It wasn't under Graves, but when he looked for Tinsley, feeling the ugliness pushing up in his chest, there it was: "Tinsley Lucille . . . 310 Oak Drive."

Oak Drive was a large street. Finally, though, he saw 314 on a corner at the right, and almost at the same time saw the police Pontiac. It was parked under a liveoak, at the corner of the next block, about half the block down from the big white frame house which

Johnny figured would have to be 310. He swung immediately to his right, onto the graveled side street, forcing himself to make it smooth and leisurely.

Less than a block behind Oak Drive, actually just the distance of the nice back yards and gardens of the Oak Drive homes, there was a little trail, hardly a road, not even paved, just two sand ruts paralleling Oak Drive and bordering the woods that began immediately to the right of it. Johnny turned down it, switching to parking lights.

Counting from 314 on the corner, he decided that the big house which must be 310 was the third one down, and there was a garden with a big broad gate to let the mules and plows in. He slipped off the loop of barbed wire holding it, squeezed through and closed it again, then made his way carefully across the uneven rows, smelling of cabbage and the familiar damp red clay of Tucker County.

There were no lights and he moved cautiously forward to the hydrangea bush at the corner of the porch. By the luminous hands of Beaumont's watch he saw that it was ten-fifteen. Could Lucille already have gone to bed? He wasn't even sure which was her room. Maybe she was out somewhere, and he could locate the room as she came in. The Pontiac was still there . . .

But, waiting then, with nothing to do but think, and with the fuzziness

that had started in his head (from hunger, he thought; he had to get something to eat, should have gotten something at Ves's) he felt the ugliness and the fear . . . yes, fear; not of the Pontiac and the posse he knew was behind him, of the bloodhounds which had run men down flatfooted and strung them like a fox; he had gotten used to that now, and he no longer cared. But Lucille! If she was out now, where was she? With whom? Didn't she know he was trying to reach her, and didn't she care?

And then he wondered if it were fear or anger he felt; he couldn't tell any longer. So he waited, trying to remember that he had to be careful even yet. But then a car swung onto the street below him, picking out for a moment two black, visored heads in the Pontiac under the liveoak, swinging slowly up to the house—and he forgot everything. It was her! And some man!

He couldn't see their faces when they saw him, but he could tell how she looked by the tight choked sound in her own voice. "Johnny!" she said, almost whispering, "Johnny, you—no, Johnny, you—"

He didn't know what he intended to do, moving toward them and saying, "Lucille, who is he? What are you doing with him?" And the man talking too, all of it blurring because it was so dark and his ears were roaring and the mimosas were stifling him.

"Has he got a gun?" the man was saying. "Stay back, you," he said. "Have you got a gun?"

"No," he heard his voice saying, feeling his hands fumbling against the man's chest, missing the throat the first time and tearing at the shirt as the man reeled backward, "no, I don't have a gun!" finding the throat then and twisting the man to his knees, not feeling the fists on his face.

Until he heard Lucille screaming. He didn't know how long it had been. She was standing over him, pulling at his shoulder. And suddenly he heard other shouts and a spotlight went on up the street.

Johnny turned and groped for Lucille as the man's head hit the floor and he lay still. He grabbed her arm, warm and soft in the darkness. "You're going with me," he said. "Stop screaming."

"No, Johnny!" she said. "No!"

"Yes!" he said. "Yes! Stop screaming." He put his hand on her mouth and shoved her forward.

The spotlight from the Pontiac found the moonvines on the porch trellis and played about them.

In the darkness they stumbled on the rows and Lucille pulled her mouth free. "No, Johnny," she said, as he fumbled to cover it. "You're choking me. Don't. I won't scream. I promise."

"You're good at promises," Johnny said. "You've made a lot of promises." He dropped his hand, pulling her after him.

He could hear shouts at the side of the house. The spotlight flashed occasionally toward the garden. They reached the car and he pulled her around to the driver's side and shoved her under the wheel.

At a crossroads he turned right on a larger road. Further on, he took a left fork. It had been automatic, but it wasn't until they reached the Goodhope road that he realized where he was going. Then he knew he'd been going there all along; that was where he could stop for a while—and maybe even think.

19.

The Old Place, his mother had called it, a little two-room, shotgun shack on a hill at the back of the farm. His father had built it when he bought the place, and Johnny himself had been born there. He had known it would be empty still just as he had known that the New Place would have a tenant in it; and now he stood in the kitchen door, staring across the bottom, strange and removed in the first gray clearing of the morning.

He went into the front room. She was sitting on the floor beside the window, looking out.

"Lucille!" he heard his voice grating, thick and savage so that her shoulders jerked, though she didn't turn around. "Who is he, Lucille? Who was he?"

Finally, she turned slowly. Even

swollen with the crying and not sleeping, her eyes were clear and as blue as the flowers on her white dress. Briefly her eyes met his, then went quickly to the floor. "Johnny," she said woodenly, "I've told you. I told you in the car."

"Then why are you afraid?"

"I—I'm not afraid, Johnny," she lied. "I—he was just Mr. Boise, my principal; he brought me home—Mr. Boise's forty-six. He's married and has three children!"

"Then why didn't you come?" he said, feeling the hope, tingling fuzzily, breathless in his chest. "Why didn't you come, or write?"

"I—wanted to, Johnny," she said, "I—tried to."

"Who stopped you?" he said. "Four years. Who kept you from coming four years?"

"I . . . did *write* you," she said, "several times."

"After the first month?" he said. "After Wednesday night of the fourth week?"

"Johnny," she said, "Johnny, I . . ." Her throat choked the words out thickly, and she put her face down on her hands.

"There's somebody else," he said. "Admit it: there's somebody else. Maybe not that one last night, but there is one. Tell me! Admit it!"

She was afraid of him, trembling and afraid of him! And repulsed by him—the thug, the crippled convict. But she was still his wife . . .

She tried to move out of the corner as he knelt to her, and her

head shook from side to side.

"Johnny," she breathed. "No, Johnny!"

"You're my wife," he said. "Lucille, you're my wife."

For a moment she twisted frantically, her hands pushing at him, her head bent, her breath savage gasps in the silence. Then suddenly her arms went limp. "All right, Johnny," not looking at him, the tears welling silently in her eyes, "all right, but I don't want you to. I'm sorry, but I don't want you to."

Her whole body was limp, and her face was bloodless, frightening, in the pallid light from the window. He hesitated. "But you're my wife," he said brusquely, "and you love me. You said yourself there's no one else."

Her body began to shake then with racking, animal sobs. She gave herself up to them, lying limply, her eyes still open. "I know it, Johnny," she said, "and I'll—if you want to, I'll . . ." Her voice choked, broke in an anguished wail, "but I can't help it, Johnny; I don't *love* you."

She wrenched over on her side then, covering her face with her arms, and he rose numbly and stood for a moment watching her. Then he turned slowly and moved across the room. He went into the kitchen and stood at the window. The sun was burnished gold now, and above the pines on the hill-sides. He stared at it blankly, until his eyes began to smart and he

closed them.

When he no longer heard her sobs, he turned and went back into the front room.

She was lying as he had left her, unmoving, even unbreathing, it seemed. Her shoulders and the back of the flowered dress were smudged with the dust from the floor. Her arms were still over her face, and the sun struck the top of her head. He touched her arm.

"Lucille," he said. "Lucille, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it. I didn't mean to do it—not any of it, last night with that man either. I—I really am sorry."

He looked at the top of her head, reddish instead of white in the light from the sun. She didn't move.

"Lucille," he said then. "You . . . you've just forgotten. Don't you remember how it used to be, how we were? Couldn't you—couldn't it be like that again? I'm still the same, Lucille, except for . . . a few things, and I . . ."

Her voice rose sharply, hysterically. "Johnny," she said, sobbing. "I don't love you. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

He felt the emptiness cold in his stomach. He again crossed to the kitchen. He opened the door and looked out.

After a long time she came and stood in the door behind him.

He turned and looked at her. Her face was swollen. She was still barefooted. "Go get your shoes and stockings," he said.

She looked at him. "I—where are we going? I thought you—"

"Get your shoes," he said, "and go on back."

"But . . ." she said; he had already turned around, though.

When she returned, she came down the steps and stood beside him, holding the shoes, with the stockings hanging out of them, in her arms. "I . . . aren't you going with me?" she said lamely.

He laughed, just a dry sound in his throat. She dropped her eyes.

"What are you going to do?" she said slowly. "Are you really just going to stay here?"

"I don't know," he said. "I might. I don't know any place else to go. Besides, I'm tired."

"Go on. Go on," he said. "We'll just say you meant well."

She turned slowly and started across the yard.

"Take the car," he said. "I don't think I'll need it."

She didn't look back.

20.

Gwin and the trustees piled out ahead of Walker and went hurriedly up the trail.

"He's gone crazy," Hugh Roland the sheriff, said. "He's holed up in that shack, and he ain't coming out. He wants a one-man pitched battle with us all."

"Won't come out?" Walker said. "How do you know? Has he said so? Have you talked to him?"

"Talked hell! He's shot one of my men already. He ain't in the mood to talk."

An electric shock tingled in Walker's fingers. "Shot one?" he said. "Where? Is he badly hurt?"

"Just his leg," Roland said. "It looks like it's just the flesh of his leg. But we can't be sure."

Gwin came up. "You gonna start it?" he asked Roland. "What the hell you waiting for?"

"All right!" Roland shouted, rising and cupping his fat hands around his mouth, looking out across the woods, "everybody ready? I'm giving him one more chance, and if he don't come out—"

"No!" Walker said. "Wait! He isn't—you can't do that. He's under pressure. You can't expect him just to walk out immediately."

"Under pressure!" Gwin snorted. "We'll put his ass under some pressure."

"I can't wait, Howard," Roland said. "Jim Otis may bleed to death. And it's been half an hour already. If he dies lying because we don't . . ." He didn't finish the sentence, turning toward the clearing. "Johnny!" he shouted. "You're making it hard on yourself. Come on now. We're home folks; we don't want to hurt you."

There was a brief unreal silence, then Johnny's voice, flatly, tonelessly, "Is that right?"

"We've got the house surrounded," Roland shouted. "There's forty-five men out here with guns.

We'll have to start shooting; we can't wait any longer."

There was another silence, then Johnny's voice: "Go ahead."

Hugh Roland stood for a moment with his white hands still cupped to his mouth. His little eyes went over the cabin and around him to the pines on either side. Walker watched him. This was it, the end, the ultimate and irrevocable chance; and still he had not tried everything, still he had held back, playing it cautiously like the others. The sense of guilt and equivocation gnawed in him stronger than ever. He had thrown up a job, yes, and bearded a governor and several other influential people who had promised to look into prisoner Grave's case "considerately." But what had he really risked?

Hugh Roland took his breath in shakily. "All right," he began, "let's go get—"

"No," Walker said thickly, "no, wait! I—let me—Give me a minute. One minute." And then he felt himself moving forward, toward the shack. He tried to fill his lungs, tried to stop the loose, empty feeling in his chest. He reached the last big pine and put his hand on it. There were huge cracks in the silver-brown bark.

"Johnny?" he called. "Johnny? Do you hear me? I want to talk to you."

Nothing. "Johnny—what are you trying to do?" Walker said. "What

will this help?"

"I'm not trying to do anything," the voice finally answered. "Does it make any difference?"

"Yes!" Walker said. "It does make some difference. It has to! Because . . . you're a man, Johnny, a human being."

He looked at the bush before him outside the cover of the big pine. What was he doing? he thought. Why was he there, anyway?

And as he stood there, knowing all the while that he would do it, not for the doubtful good that it might do Johnny or the world; but simply for himself, for the knowledge that he had of himself, the private knowledge that he had believed he could and would do it. So that now he owed a debt—to the belief and the pride and the confidence, to the pleasure and happiness it had let him have, in short, to his life, his manhood.

He moved away from the tree, past the bush, leaned himself forward and lifted his legs, feeling them numb and uncertain a great distance below him.

"Johnny?" Walker said. His voice cracked and he had to swallow. "Johnny, I'm coming in."

"No, *Howard!*" Roland cried from deep behind him, but Walker was already in the clearing then, in front of the bushes.

For a time there was no sound from the house, no sound anywhere as he paused there for a moment. The Jimson weeds danced

endlessly before him in the white sunlight.

"Mr. Walker!" Johnny said. "Stop now! You . . . I don't want to shoot you."

Walker didn't look at the shack; he narrowed his eyes against the bright dancing glare and pushed himself forward. The explosion in the silence seemed to come from inside his head, deafening him, jarring him. Then he heard Johnny's voice, small and thin in the roaring, "I missed on purpose, Mr. Walker. Go back now; next time I won't."

Walker heard the breach of the shotgun broken, the click as it snapped into place again, but he didn't stop; and he was almost there: in a few steps he would reach the porch.

It was a badly rotted porch; one of the steps was completely gone and the other two sagged dangerously. Walker climbed them carefully and crossed the swaying boards to the door. It was locked.

"Johnny," he said, his voice coming hoarse, as though he had been running, "Johnny, let me in."

"Go on back, Mr. Walker. You—you weren't like the rest of them. I know you tried to help, wanted to, and I—I don't want to hurt you."

Walker had left the door and crossed to the little window. It was paneless and through it he could see the inside of the shack. Johnny stood with his legs widespread, the shotgun leveled chest-high at the window. His gray eyes, wide, hag-

gard, bloodshot, met Walker's.

Walker leaned against the window, watching him. His breath was coming back then, and he suddenly felt a tremendous weariness. "Johnny," he said, "put it down. You don't want it this way, do you?"

Johnny held the gun steady. "Does it matter," he said fiercely, "what I want?"

Walker knelt on one knee before the window. "Johnny!" he said wearily. "Johnny! Johnny!" He leaned his forehead on his hand and stared at the warped, splintered porch. "It isn't like you think," he said. "None of it. Even the girl; it wasn't her fault."

"I know that," Johnny said, "I know that. I haven't said it was."

"And Hoffman," Walker said, "and even Gwin, stupid, cruel old Gwin. Don't you see that it really isn't their fault either—any more than hers, or yours last night with John Boise? You almost killed Mr. Boise, Johnny. By mistake, by confusion and blindness—just like Gwin and Hoffman's."

"I'm not blaming them. I'm not blaming them any more. I know all that."

"And as to your record," Walker said quickly, "if you're worrying about that, it won't be so bad. You're still clear of anything major. Five years added, ten at the most, and you—"

"Five more years," Johnny said, "ten—and then what? The cotton

and the heat and the cages. I could stand that. But what would I have when they're over? Thirty years—'free' years—to do what with?"

"You . . . could study," Walker said slowly, "learn a trade—"

Johnny's twisted face stopped him. "A trade!" he said. "Yes, and earn a living, make a place for myself in society, maybe even find a woman who would marry me, sleep and eat and raise children with me—for thirty whole years. But I don't want to, Mr. Walker. I'm through. I've had enough!"

Walker stared heavily at the window frame before him for a long moment; then he pulled himself slowly to his feet. There was an answer; there must be an answer. But it wouldn't come to him. All he could see was the desperate half-crazy kid in front of him, with the problem he himself had never faced.

"I—don't know, Johnny," Walker said. "I'd like to tell you there's something more. I thought I was proving something about integrity and manhood. But I don't know now. I guess all I proved was that I wanted to and . . . I did it."

"Why did you do it?" Johnny said after a long hesitation. "I might have killed you."

Walker looked at him. "I guess I should say just for you," Walker said. "But it was just as much for myself. Maybe more, I think, for myself now that it's over. And now that it's over I can't promise you

anything at all, Johnny, any reward, any happiness. All I can do is tell you what I've said before: I believe a man will keep trying even when there's nothing to try with or from or for. I think it takes more courage than the other."

He paused and stared through the window at the kid; he was still standing in the kitchen doorway, his white cheeks glistening above the stubbled beard, his eyes wide, dazed, frantic.

"And Johnny," he said. "You might consider that you've just begun now, that you've just found yourself, that you aren't a man until you can see that it's ugly and face it."

Walker turned and went slowly down the steps to where Hugh Roland and Gwin and one of the patrolmen were waiting.

"I think he'll come out," Walker said. "Let's give him some time."

Gwin's yellow face was guardedly curious, and suspicious. "How'd you know he wouldn't shoot you?" he said.

Walker returned his stare for a moment. "I bluffed him, Hiram," he said finally. "I threatened to put the lash on him."

Walker went on down the hill to his car. He climbed in and closed his eyes.

Later—he didn't know how long—he heard feet on the trail and opened his eyes. They were all there, in a congested mob on the narrow trail. Johnny was walking

ahead of them, and Gwin and Hugh Roland were close behind.

When they were almost to the car, Walker got out and stood by the door, leaving it open. "I'll take him," he said, when they came up. "Get in, Johnny."

"He's my prisoner," Gwin said. "From my camp, and I'm heading the search. He's going back in the patrol car."

"I'll take him," Walker said. "Get in, Johnny." Walker half-expected Gwin to pull the authority which he in fact did have, but he simply glared at Walker, and after a moment Johnny stepped into the car. Walker went around and got in on the other side, cranking quickly and backing across the little bridge before turning in the cotton field.

They didn't talk; they simply rode.

And what would they find at Larkin? Walker wondered. What would he himself find? A job? Dismissal papers? The events of the past week—the final interview with Kurt and Hoffman, the aborted trip to Beauregard—seemed vaguely incredible to him now, as though they had hardly happened. For Nita's sake he found himself hoping that Hoffman and Kurt had not actually taken his last angry retort as final. And what would Johnny find? For him it was even vaguer.

But for now, it didn't matter. Now, they were just going back.

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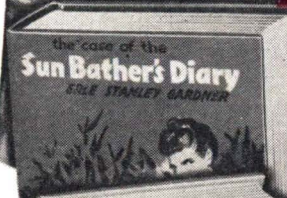
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—Continued on Inside Cover

MANHUNT

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