

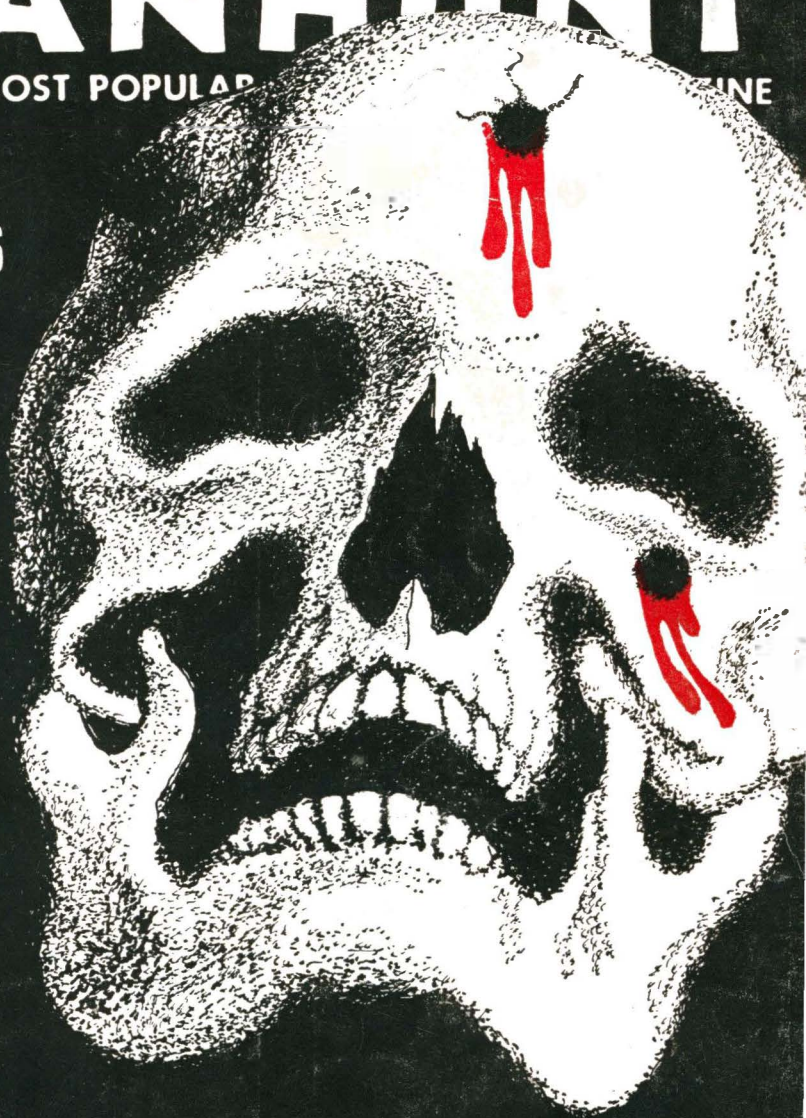
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CONTENTS

NOVEL

- THE MISPLACED STAR *by Nelson Adcock* 95

NOVELETTE

- THE PRISONER *by David Daheim* 16

SHORT STORIES

- FERNANDO'S RETURN *by Vic Hendrix* 2
- OBIE'S GIRL *by Fletcher Flora* 10
- A FRIEND OF A FRIEND *by Morris F. Baughman* 41
- BOMB SCARE *by Robert Slaughter* 46
- TWO WEEKS WITH PAY *by Ernest Chamberlain* 67
- SITTING DUCK *by Robert Turner* 76
- WILLFUL MURDER *by Harold Q. Masur* 83
- ALL THE LOOSE WOMEN *by Jonathan Craig* 147

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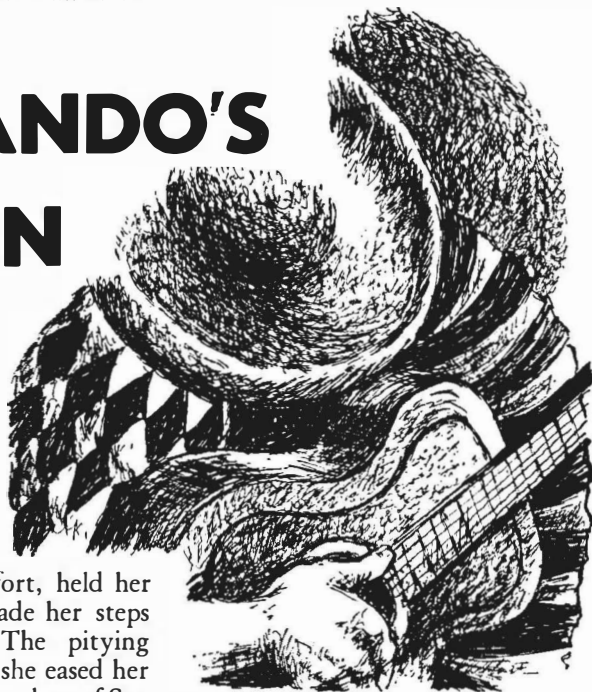
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Carmelita worked hard and saved her money. She knew that some day Fernando would need her . . . and then he would return.

FERNANDO'S RETURN

BY
VIC
HENDRIX



CARMELITA, with effort, held her head high and made her steps springy and quick. The pitying clucking of tongues as she eased her way through the market place of San Ramona brought an angry rapid beat to her heart. They are fools! I shall throw their pity at their feet! For all they know, today might be the day my Fernando comes to me pleading and weeping.

She patted the fat behind of her burro and took a bushel basket of tomatoes and squash from its back. She nodded curtly to the thick-lipped man behind the plank counter of a market stall and thrust the basket out to him. He weighed the vegetables on rusty scales and handed her two crumpled pesos from his

apron pocket. Her eyes narrowed: he had been generous. She turned and he caught her arm; she stepped away from him.

He said, "Are you going to the back door of the cantina to plead with your husband to come home so you can slave for him?"

Carmelita stiffened as if a hot pain shot through her body; wordlessly she walked away without looking back. The man chuckled with no humor and was at the same time sorry for it.

Later she was sitting on the

cement bench watching the doves as they fed on crumbs scattered by the country folk who had come to the plaza to eat their noon meal. They were campesinos like herself: the hardworking ones who brought their wares to town to sell so they could buy the meager sundries for their families. But in Carmelita's case there was no family. She was alone but a child was to come in five months—a wanted child but one that would also heap added burdens to her shoulders. Who would milk the goats? Who would tend the garden and do the dozen other chores at her little farm while she regained her strength after birthing. Then would follow two years of hard work with a fretting, squirming babe astraddle her shoulders or riding her hips. But Carmelita had to keep working. She had to do more and more; she had not even a few minutes to spare. Things were going well but they must be much better. The hoard of money was growing but not as fast as she desired.

First there would be one of the golden stallions from the stables of Senor Romero. A golden stallion for Fernando! A graceful animal of much beauty; truly a beast to compliment the handsome and, also, graceful Fernando.

Next would come a guitar. Not one of the tinny thin sound but a big expensive one that rang out loud and clear. And after Fernando had expressed much joy and contentment she would buy him a

fancy saddle adorned with much silver.

A smile made her almost beautiful as she sat on the bench dreaming: Fernando's fine delicate hands would move over the strings and the music would inspire her as she cooked his supper of tasty foods. None of the frijoles and tortillas for Fernando; but steaks and the cold American beer he loved so well. Always there would be a supply dangling in the deep cool well.

Then if he continued to enjoy the luxuries she provided for him and made a reasonable effort to be a faithful husband she would surprise him with a good used Chevrolet pickup and many fine norte-americano clothes. He would be the most dashing caballero for miles around.

Fernando would perhaps take her and her garden produce and chickens to the market in the truck. Another smile softened her dark face: By the time she had enough money for the truck the babe would be old enough to help her with the chores and make his father proud. Fernando would pat him on the head and say to all: "See this fine son my woman has given me?"

She soothed herself: be patient, Fernando is coming back. The child, alone, will be enough.

Carmelita was pulled from her thoughts as the fat man from the market place dropped down on the bench beside her. He put his hand on her thigh and she spat at his feet and started to move away. He pulled

her back with a firm hand. He said, "I do not like these cold shoulders you have been giving me."

She shrugged and said, "That is your problem Senor Vargas."

"No my little dove . . . it is *your* problem. You are waiting for the day Fernando tires of the lovely young Maria and comes back to you. That day will never come. You are not the only one that is overwhelmed with his pretty mouth and sparkling eyes. He is always with her and always smiling. They kiss right in front of the alcate in bright daylight. They laugh and make love at the cinema. They want the whole town to know of their passion."

"This Maria buys the tickets to the cinema . . . no doubt."

The man smiled. "Probably. Fernando still detests manual labor . . . and she makes much money at the cantina. They seem to have a very congenial arrangement."

"So! What has that to do with me? Fernando is not worth the time it takes me to listen to tales."

"You do not make a very good liar my little one." He loosened his grip. "You are making yourself old with the hard labor. Look at your hands. They are the hands of an ancient old woman . . ."

She jumped up and hurried away.

The man shook his head sadly: "You proud foolish one. The entire village knows how you pleaded with Fernando for weeks after he left you and went to live with Maria in

the hovel behind the cantina. Stupid Carmelita who cares only for the handsome face and the light dancing feet. Fernando's only talents are drinking, losing at cards, and strumming the guitar . . . and making the love. Oh yes! *That* he must surely do well."

Carmelita walked quickly to the back of the cantina where the girl Maria was working. The sound of twanging guitars and the high-pitched voices of half-drunk vaqueros wafted out to her. She peeked through an opening in the window above the garbage can. A rat squealed and buried itself deeper in the filth.

Fernando was seated in a dingy booth; a bottle of pulque in his cupped hands. Maria was darting back and forth behind the bar, her large pointed breasts seemed to be getting in her way. Did Fernando bury his face in them! Carmelita's bowels gave a lurch. Puta! Puta! Yes, you make much money very easily—lying down. And you are spending it. Good! You have it on your back and on your feet in the form of red satiny dresses and high-heeled slippers. You spray your money on your body from the bottles of perfume that cost many pesos. Puta! Will you someday have money to buy Fernando a big golden horse? Will you someday have a television set in your little hovel? Can you go this minute and buy him a fine guitar?

When you are tired and can no more keep him happy he will come home . . . and *home* my cunning little puta is with me! Toss your money to the winds. Let Fernando gamble it away for you. Let him be important and purchase drinks for his friends with it. Yes, my stupid little husband-stealer, do all that because the months are passing and you are growing poorer and my mound of money is getting larger and larger. Have you heard the rumors that I am a rich woman? I am rich because I have spent many hours carrying and spreading burro and chicken caca on my garden and am being rewarded with lush fruit that brings me much money at the market. I make a fine goat cheese! I grow plump chickens for the tamale pie and my hens lay the finest eggs in the land!

When a tear dropped on her cheek she went away. As she stepped from the alley into the street she heard the smooth hot-honey voice of Fernando.

When Carmelita reached her house that night she pulled the copper box from its hiding place and added the few pesos she had gleaned that day. She smiled as her eyes caressed the wrinkled bills and coins. The child within her moved and she shoved the box back behind the heavy dresser than had been her grandmother's. She lay on the bed to fondle the movement of the babe she carried.

A knock on the door brought her to her feet. She pushed her hair back and relaxed her mouth. One night it would be Fernando there. She slipped the latch back and opened the door; her mouth twisted in disdain. "What do you want?" she asked the Senor Vargas.

He stepped inside and pulled a bottle of fine wine from a paper sack. "I have come with a peace-offering."

"Take it and leave . . . Fernando will kill you!"

He mimicked in falsetto: "'Fernando will kill you' . . ." He tried to suck in his paunch. "Fernando will not leave the belly or the lips of the dog-bitch long enough to kill anyone and I am tired of you being a stupid one!"

He set the sack on the table. "I will wait for you. With me you would never have to work . . . just care for my house and your child. Think about this while you are crying from the pains in your back."

Two days after her son was born Carmelita was back at work in her garden. The weeds had almost choked the vegetables. Some of the squash and cabbages were too ripe for the market; so the fat sow would have a feast. So pushed the loss of the centavos from her mind: The babe was such a fine one he was much worth the sacrifice of a few days.

Fernando would come to see the

child when word reached him Carmelita was sure. But the days passed; Carmelita shed bitter tears and was angry because of her swollen eyes. Fernando would come and he must not find her ugly. She kept her hair clean and shining and she ate too little so she would be back to her slimness when he came.

The weeks turned to months; the babe grew and began to follow Carmelita with his big black eyes as she went about her work. His infant sounds churned her heart. Soon Fernando would come see his son and then he would sweep his wife in his arms. That night the bed would bounce as he made love to her. It would be the puta's time to weep and moan. Carmelita trembled at the thought of Fernando's fine sideburns tickling her throat.

The night Fernando chose to come home was a stormy one. The wind whipped across the desert furiously. Carmelita could barely hear him as he called at the door. She jumped from her bed and held the door against the wind. He leaped inside and shook the rain from his sombrero. His face opened in a beautiful smile. The rain drops glistened like diamonds on his "woman's" eyelashes that fanned his lean cheeks as he blinked.

He stepped to the crib and gazed down at his sleeping son. "Mamacita he is a fine one . . . a pretty child and so fat." He let his eyes go to Carmelita's milk-proud breasts.

"Ahaaa . . . my mamacita is one fine little vaca."

Carmelita smiled strangely. Fernando noticed and felt smug. His thoughts were of pleasure and comfort. He took her in his arms and murmured, "I am home mamacita."

"I am aware of it." Her voice was toneless.

He stepped back as if slapped. "Is that the way to greet me?"

She had no words. Then his lips were on her. Her thoughts were in a turmoil. Is he here to stay? Perhaps to take his son? She pulled away from him; the strange smile returned. Fernando held her hands tightly and his eyes glistened as he absorbed her face and body.

She said, "Are you going back to your puta Maria?"

He groaned. "Do not speak of that one. When I told her I had forgiven you and was coming home she became fast friends with a hairy gringo." He brought an injured look to his face. "You are my pobrecita . . . my little mama."

That night his arms were as hard as steel and the thrill was as it had been on their wedding night. This was as it should be. Fernando had finally realized what a good wife he had. He had heard how wise she had been to work and save like all good Mexican wives should.

The next day he even carried one bucket of water from the well to the house. He also bounced the babe on his knees when it was dry

and not crying. He ate the food Carmelita prepared for him and patted her behind reassuringly when she apologized for the poor quality of it. She promised him, silently, to feed him like a king. The puta could probably not make even the lowly tortilla.

Then he began to cajole her for money. She was dismayed: she needed it for the stallion he had wanted since he was a small boy. And for the guitar he would enjoy so much. Finally she handed him two pesos from a jar in the cupboard. He cursed and flung it in her face. She had hot words for him and he struck her across the mouth for them. She spit at his feet and another blow brought a blue swelling above the eye. His gaze covered the room; he was trying to seek out the place where she had her money. Fernando was going to rob her!

When he left the house to appraise the fat sow Carmelita hurriedly took the money from the hiding place and sewed it in her clothes. Then she gathered her vegetables and loaded them on the burro to take to the village. Fernando forgivingly waved at her and the baby from the door. He smiled from a warm thought. When Maria saw all the money his wife had saved for him she would spit on the gringo.

He tore the house apart then set it right again.

When Carmelita returned home, late, he made up with her and

kissed the bruise he had made. Tonight, he mused, she will toss it all in my lap.

And that night, like he planned, Fernando made love to Carmelita and she swooned in his arms. Then he teased her and she thrilled to it. Tears filled her eyes and it was a strange reason she cried. Fernando was such a man as few women had the blessing to know. And she jumped from the bed to pull the light on so she could see him and ache from his handsomeness as he handled her with such expertness.

And she frowned as someone knocked at the door. Fernando, himself, pulled on his pants and flung it open with a hearty welcome on his lips.

The constable stepped in, looked about, and said, "I have come to place you under arrest Fernando Diaz!"

Fernando's head jerked. "You are loco . . . for what reason Senor?"

"Maria was murdered tonight, as you well know, and your horse is spent and lathered in the corral. And you were seen riding away in the darkness."

The young policeman standing behind the constable with gun drawn nodded vigorously.

The constable looked at Carmelita, he said, "You bought the horse this morning. I can prove it by Senor Romero."

Carmelita, still sitting primly in the middle of the bed, folded her hands on her lap and stared at

them. Her face was as still as death. Fernando grabbed her by the arm and shook her. "Tell this man you bought no horse!"

"It is a waste of time Senor Diaz . . ." the constable said, "a dozen people saw your wife buy the horse."

"Even so . . ." Fernando blurted, "I knew not of it . . . I did not ride it . . ."

"Some of the people were the same ones who heard you tell Maria Sanchez you were going to kill her that night in the cantina when she cast you aside for the gringo."

"Still I did not kill her. I can prove it. I have been home all night. Right in this bed with my wife. Tell him Carmelita."

"And who would believe a man's wife . . . especially when he has just . . ."

"Tell him Carmelita!" Fernando cried.

Carmelita hung her head. "He was home," she said simply.

The constable glared at her, then his eyes softened. He understood. Poor beaten woman . . . she had no choice.

The constable slapped the hand-

cuffs on Fernando and pulled him out the door. The policeman holstered his gun.

Fernando screamed at her. "Tell them the truth. Tell them I have been here with you all evening and night. Save me. You bitch you can save me!"

The door slammed and Carmelita gazed down at her sleeping son. "There will be no fine clothes and fancy guitars for you my muchacho. Instead there will be many fine fat *beefs*. You, my little one, will be rich and will take care of your mother in her old age. Si, you will grow up and be proud of your mother with the old worn hands and the white hair."

Within the hour Senor Vargas came calling with a bottle of wine tucked under his arm. "Did it go well?" he asked.

Carmelita nodded, smiled sadly and let the Senor pat her cheek. A peacefulness settled over her. This good but ugly man would help her make her son a fine caballero. Pobre Fernando . . . he was such a pretty sacrifice. Such a lover! A marriage is made only by man but one gets one's sons from Heaven.



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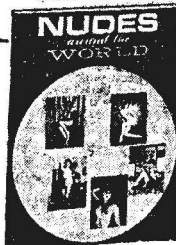
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A
MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY
FLETCHER FLORA

OBIE'S GIRL

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I SHOULDN'T have done it to Obie. I keep telling myself that he's really better off, that he might have come to even a worse end if it hadn't happened the way it did, but I know that isn't true, I know I played a dirty trick on the only guy who ever really loved me, and I know I'll remember it as long as I live and think about it the last thing before I die. I keep thinking about how he loved to work in the fields under the hot sun with the sweat seeping through his rough blue shirt in a great dark stain until the whole shirt was sopping wet, and

about how he used to take a dip afterward in the deep pool at the bend of the creek and then sit naked on the bank like a small, innocent boy and watch the shifting pattern of sunlight and shade and listen to the stirrings and splashings of small life along the bank and in the water. You can't do things like that where Obie is now. Not in a mad house.

He isn't really crazy, no matter what they said. It's just that he isn't bright. I don't know much about the technical gradations of intelligence, but I guess you'd call Obie an imbecile, maybe. He was a

good worker, but you always had to tell him exactly what to do. You'd tell him to get the ax, he'd get the ax. You'd tell him to chop some wood, he'd chop some wood. Then, unless you'd tell him to put the ax away, he'd leave it right out in the God-damn rain or anything else. The only time he ever went ahead and did something on his own, without being told just what, was the time I'm telling about, the time I played the dirty trick on him. It got pretty trying sometimes, telling him just every little thing to do that way, and I lost my temper and cursed him more times than I can count, but I regret it now, and wish I hadn't done it, and most of all I wish I hadn't done what I did in the end to get him put away. I miss Obie. It's lonely around here without him.

It happened the day I heard him singing *Two Little Hands* out behind the barn. *Two Little Hands* is a religious song, a kind of hymn, I guess, and it's all about someone having two little hands for Jesus, and it's supposed to be sung by kids in Sunday School and places like that. Someone had got hold of Obie early and taught him a few simple things about religion, and he was always singing this little song that he'd picked up somewhere. He only knew a few lines, because that was all he was capable of remembering, but he liked to sing what he knew, and he sang it every time he thought to, or someone asked him to, and it

was sort of funny and sad at the same time to hear the big lug do it, especially because his hands were really about the size of a brace of snow scoops.

I heard him singing this song behind the barn, and then I heard someone start to laugh as if it was the funniest God-damn thing that ever happened. There were two voices laughing, that is, a man's and a woman's, and I knew it was Ivy and Gunner Hoke back there with Obie. I began to feel sick then, partly because I didn't like anyone poking fun at Obie, but most because it was Ivy and Gunner doing it. Ivy was my step-sister, no blood relation, and Gunner was a tall lean guy from in town who came out to see her. He was doing more than seeing her, too. I knew that as well as anything, even though I couldn't actually prove it; and for a long time I kidded myself that I hated Gunner for that reason, because I didn't approve of such goings-on, but now that I'm making a clean breast of everything and telling the whole story, I may as well admit that it was really because I wanted to take Ivy for myself and never could.

She was enough to make anyone want to. Gunner and I weren't the only ones by any means, and so far as I know maybe Gunner wasn't the only one who managed it. She did everything she could to put it in a guy's mind, that was sure. She was certain to be sloppy fat some-

day, like her old lady, my step-mother, but now her body was just full and ready, like it had been tree-ripened in the hot summer sun for picking, and it had a way of projecting itself through the thin cottons she wore around the place. She knew the effect she had on me, all right, I wasn't fooling her any, and she got a hell of a bang out of it even though she never intended to give me any house. I guess I hated her in a way just as much as I hated Gunner, but I'm trying to be honest, and I can't be sure, because it was all mixed up with my wanting her the way I did.

I went around behind the barn, and there was Obie singing this little song about two little hands for Jesus, and he was standing like a kid speaking a piece for the parents on the last day of school, with his big feet together in the dust and his huge, bony hands hanging down at his sides below knobby wrists that looked like they'd been swollen and crippled by arthritis. He had a pained look on his face, just like he always got when he sang, his pale eyes staring straight in front of him and filled with a kind of misery, as if it hurt him to try to remember the words in the order they were supposed to come. Tears were rolling down his cheeks, and his slack mouth that was never quite closed, even when he wasn't talking or singing, leaked saliva at the corners, and the saliva ran down over his chin. He was a big, lank guy at

least three inches over six feet, and his bones were thick and knobby at all the joints just like at the wrists, and he looked like just what he was, a big boob without the brains to know when someone was making a damn fool of him, but I didn't think it was funny.

Ivy and Gunner did, though. They were leaning against the barn with their arms around each other, and they were laughing fit to kill, Ivy with an abandon that was almost hysteria and Gunner more quietly, in his own way, his bright red lips drawn back off white teeth in an expression that was somehow canine and cruel.

I went over and grabbed Obie by an arm and jerked him around. His song ended with a little squawk in his throat, and he stood looking down at me with his mouth hanging open and his pale eyes clouded and confused in the way they got when anything happened too suddenly or was a little different from anything that had happened to him before.

"What'd you do that for, Jake?" he said. "I was singing my song for Ivy. You oughtn't to stop me when I'm singing my song for Ivy."

"God damn it," I said, "can't you tell when someone's making a damn clown out of you? Haven't you even got that much brains?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side, laboring to understand what I'd said, taking each word one at a time in the darkness of his brain

and figuring it and then putting them all together at the end like a little kid just learning to read.

"You oughtn't to say that, Jake. Ivy's my girl. You know Ivy's my girl. Ivy wouldn't do anything like that to Obie."

"Don't be any more of a fool than God intended you to be, Obie. Ivy's just stringing you along. She's Gunner's girl, not yours. Why would she laugh at you if she wasn't? Why would she stand there laughing at you and letting Gunner laugh with her right in front of you if she wasn't?"

It was true that Ivy teased Obie. She was cruel by instinct, and it gave her a big bang to work him up to the point where he was leaking saliva through his loose lips and shaking like a bird dog evacuating peach seeds, and you'd have thought it was a dangerous game for her, that a big powerful guy with no brains to evaluate consequences might have just slapped her down and had what he wanted, but she knew it wouldn't happen because Obie had this simple religion in him and a rudimentary kind of morality that had been drilled into him for his own protection that said you never bothered anyone, least of all a woman, and that any kind of physical intimacy, no matter how bad you wanted it, was evil and strictly taboo. He'd never have touched Ivy, or Gunner, either, if it hadn't been for me. Never on earth.

He swung his head around and

looked at Ivy and Gunner by the barn. "Gunner oughtn't to do that to Ivy. Ivy doesn't like it. Ivy wouldn't even like Obie to do something like that."

Gunner let his hand slip off her and stepped forward, bending a little at the waist like a man ready to attack. He was looking at me, not Obie, and his eyes were as black and shiny as two chips of anthracite, and his face, though he had quit laughing, had the same expression as before, his red lips drawn back in the shape of cruel pleasure without sound. Ivy, in an unconscious gesture, lifted her hands to her armpits and ran them down the sidelines of her body as if she enjoyed the feel of herself.

She said softly, "Don't pay any attention to Jake, Obie. He's just jealous. He's jealous because I'm your girl instead of his."

Obie shook his head again, his sparse dry hair falling down over his eyes. "No. Jake's Obie's friend. Jake's Obie's friend, and Ivy's Obie's girl."

It was as simple as that to the big boob. He couldn't see any conflict. He couldn't see any reason at all why it shouldn't be that way.

Gunner laughed with a sound that was no more than a long breath hissing through his teeth. "Jake's a sneaky little mouse, that's what he is. Jake's a slimy, panting little jerk who can't get what he wants and doesn't want anyone else to get it."

My hate was too big for me then,

and I stepped forward and started to swing at him, but he was much too fast for me and hit me flush in the mouth, and I was suddenly on my back in the hot, dry dust with blood in my throat. After fifteen seconds or so, I got up to do the best I could, but it wasn't necessary, because Obie was standing between me and Gunner, and his huge hands were clenching and unclenching slowly.

"Don't hit Jake again," he said to Gunner. "Don't hit Jake and don't touch Ivy."

Gunner was lean and mean and fast as hell, but he didn't want any part of Obie. Obie would simply have waded into him and taken him in his big hands and crushed the life out of him, and Gunner knew it. In his eyes were fear and sudden withdrawal, but in Ivy's eyes there was nothing but the crazy, shining excitement that was always her reaction to violence or the sight of blood as the symbol of violence.

"Come on, Obie," I said. "Let's cut out. I want you to help me down in the fields."

I took him by an arm and led him down the cowpath into the pasture at the lower end and across the pasture toward the creek, and all the way he kept turning his head every few steps to look back toward Ivy and Gunner by the barn, and I could tell he was trying to figure it out, what had happened and why I had stopped him from finishing his song and why we had all said and done

the things we had. My lips were split and beginning to swell, and one tooth was so loose that I could push it around with my tongue, but that wasn't what hurt. A few cuts and bruises didn't matter a damn. What hurt was the festering hatred and humiliation inside me that made me want to vomit and was all the worse because I couldn't think of anything to do about it. At the edge of the timber along the creek I stopped and looked back myself, and I could see Ivy and Gunner walk across the barnyard and into the barn with their arms around each other, and I knew all of a sudden without any doubt at all just what they were going in there for. I think I knew because I understood that it would be necessary for Ivy to complete the cycle of intense physical excitement that the brief episode of violence and blood had aroused but hadn't satisfied.

"What we stopping for, Jake?" Obie said. "I thought we were going to the fields."

If he hadn't said that, maybe I wouldn't have done it. Maybe just a little thing like his saying something at the wrong time was the difference between doing it and not doing it.

"I just remembered that we'll need a pitch fork, Obie," I said. "Go back to the barn and get one."

"What we need a pitch fork for?"

"Never mind that. Just go get it. It's sticking in the hay in the loft."

He started back the way we had come, and when he'd gone a few

steps, I said, "Wait a minute, Obie. Listen to me. You be real quiet going the barn. Don't let anyone see you or hear you. You understand?"

His eyes got clouded and confused from the effort of trying to understand why I was telling him to get the fork different from the way I had always told him before.

"Why, Jake? Why don't you want anyone to see me?"

"Never mind. I've got my reason. Will you do it the way I say?"

"Sure, Jake. If you say so."

"Don't forget, now. Promise?"

"Sure, Jake. I promise."

He turned and started again, and I stood and watched him, watched his long, loping gait eat up the distance to Ivy and Gunner in the barn, and then I went on through the trees to the bank of the creek and sat down. I gathered a handful of pebbles and threw them one at a time into the dark green water, watching the little concentric circles move outward from the place where the pebble went in, and then, after the water had smoothed out, I lay back on the bank and closed my eyes and began to count, and I had

counted a long way, I don't remember how far except that it was a long way, when I heard Obie's big clod-hoppers thumping the ground, and he came through the trees and sat beside me. He was breathing very hard. His breath was like a whinny in his nostrils.

Without opening my eyes, I said, "You get the fork, Obie?"

"Fork?"

"What's the matter, Obie?"

He didn't answer, and I guess he didn't even hear me, but after a while he said more to himself than to me, "He oughtn't to have done it. She oughtn't to have let him."

I knew then that it was both of them. I knew that he had seen what I'd sent him to see and that he'd done what I'd thought he might do. I couldn't stand the sight of him sitting there crying, so I rolled over and buried my face in my arms, but I could still see him just the same, and I can still see him now, and I only wish they had, in the place where he is, a field where he could work under the hot sun with his big hands, and a creek where he could go when the work was finished.

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THE PRISONER

A NOVELETTE

BY

DAVID DAHEIM

Their faces were painted with disbelief and shock. What had happened? Where had all those Krauts come from? There were no answers.

IT WAS early morning, December 18, 1944, in a small town named Romain not far from Malmedy in Belgium. A detail of American soldiers had been working all night by the light of some kerosene lamps erecting four heavy stakes, each as tall as a man, in front of a bare brick wall surrounding the courtyard of the school. The ground was frozen, so the men had poured some of the kerosene on the dirt and had lit fire to it; when it was soft enough, they dug. They worked silently.

When the stakes had been erected, the soldiers picked up their shovels and hurriedly left the courtyard. The less they saw of this business, the better.

Outside the walls of the courtyard in the narrow streets of Romain, the battered, broken remains of an American Army regiment, huddled over small fires and crouched in the shelter of burnt out buildings, waited for the dawn and the warmth

of the sun they hoped would appear.

For the last forty eight hours these first witnesses of the "Battle of the Bulge," had straggled into the already overcrowded streets of Romain leaving behind them their broken units, some of their blood, and many that exalted feeling of hard won victory which had been theirs again and again since they had landed on the beaches of Normandy. Their faces were painted with disbelief and shock. What happened? Where did all those Krauts come from? There were no answers. There was only confusion and chaos in the streets of Romain while the German Army supported by heavy artillery fire, advanced closer with every hour.

At the first gray light of a winter dawn, the courtyard of the school house once more came to life. Some officers stepped into the courtyard to inspect the arrangements. One of them paced off a distance of fifteen yards from the stakes to the

middle of the courtyard, marking this point by dragging his heel across the frozen surface of the ground. Two war correspondents appeared and they were followed shortly by ten Military Policemen who were marched into a position facing the stakes at the line marked by their officer. They stood at Parade Rest while the Lieutenant gave them their instructions. "Now remember, at my command everyone *will* fire. You have only one round in your rifles and it had better not be there when this is all over."

Some of the men in the firing squad thought, I wish somebody else was pulling this duty, anybody else, but not me.

While others thought, there won't be any round left in my piece, you can bet your life on that.

The door to the school house opened and a Captain emerged followed by a squad of MPs leading four men dressed in American uniforms between them. The prisoners were quickly, but clumsily tied to the stakes. Blindfolds were offered; three of the prisoners accepted, one of them refused shaking his head violently from side to side. The Captain and his squad withdrew to the side of the courtyard.

In his office facing the school house courtyard, Major Heil could hear the sobbing of one of the prisoners. Instead of closing the window he opened it wider, then he turned to face the officers which he had assembled before him. He was a

tall, athletic looking man in his late thirties. His whole bearing was one of supreme self confidence, but as his sharp brown eyes fixed steadily on the men standing before his desk he wondered if his own determination was enough to get this job done.

Without any preliminaries he came right to the point. "There'll be more of these German spies, we have to be prepared for that," he said, snapping his head briefly in the direction of the window.

"Ready!" The commands to the firing squad in the courtyard below could be heard easily through the open window.

"As Regimental S-2 officer intelligence is my responsibility—yours too, on the battalion level. The Germans are calling this stunt Operation Greif—oh we've known about it for a long time, now we have a chance to stop it dead before it has a chance to hurt us."

"Aim!" A fanatical scream in German followed which visibly shook the subordinate officers facing Major Heil, but he stood rooted solidly behind his desk, erect and unmoved, as if he were giving another class back at West Point.

"Special SS troops have been trained and formed into the 150th Kommando Brigade. They have been given American and British uniforms and weapons, separated into two units each with its own mission. The first . . ."

"Fire!" The tremendous report of the rifle fire reverberated from

the walls enclosing the courtyard shaking the glass windows in the school house. Major Heil watched the reactions of his officers closely, his eyes moving quickly from one face to another. He was looking for any sign of shock or weakness and the officers knew it; they deliberately hid their feelings.

The Major seemed satisfied. With a flick of his wrist he slammed the window shut and continued. "Their first objective is to advance to the Meuse and capture the bridges. The second, operate behind enemy lines disturbing Allied leadership, accomplish strategic demolition work, and create confusion whenever and however the opportunity presents itself. In our sector their mission is of course obvious." Heil turned to a young officer standing close to his desk, "Lieutenant, will you tell us what you believe that objective to be?"

"The bridge Sir," the man replied promptly.

"That's right, the bridge. We found explosives on one of the spies you just heard executed. We have set up emergency roadblocks from this headquarters. It will be your duty to inspect and maintain them, each in his own sector. The guards must be cautioned not to use the ordinary methods of identification. Dog tags are useless, so are passwords. They have come well prepared for just such minimum security checks."

The Major looked at the faces of

his officers trying to determine if they had understood the importance of what he was saying. Did they know that maintaining this security meant the lives of hundreds of men and possible capture of the rest, he thought? Did the shots of the execution arouse them emotionally to the seriousness of this duty? This wasn't just another routine job in a routine war—the Germans were once more on the offensive, the Americans were fighting for their lives, did they understand that?

"All suspects should be questioned about civilian life in America, common everyday things that only an American would know. It is imperative that strict security be maintained until 2300 hours this evening when the Regiment withdraws across the bridge from Romain. That is if the Regiment hasn't been entirely surrounded by that time," Heil concluded bitterly, as if there would have been no trouble if he were in command of the regiment. "That's all gentlemen, dismissed."

When they were outside of the school house one of the officers said, "Did you notice, Heil never even flinched when the spies were shot. He's got no heart for anything except getting a job done. He'll probably shoot *us* if any Germans get through to the bridge."

It was several hours later on a road opposite the town of Romain

and the river. Barbed wire had been nailed to two wooden struts and stretched across the narrow country road. The sky was still heavily overcast and the ground was covered with snow. Sergeant Love, a young regular army soldier, his rifle slung over his shoulder, was walking up and down behind the wire, stamping his feet and clapping his gloved hands together for warmth, glancing every other minute down the road in the opposite direction of the town.

Off to one side of the road Privates Mendoza and Lebeuf were crouched over a small fire. Mendoza caught Lebeuf's eye, winked, then shouted, "There's nobody watchin us Lovely, what's the sense of playin soldier?"

Sergeant Love walked slowly over to the side of the road and said, "I told you not to call me that again Mendoza, now I meant that boy."

Mendoza looked up from the fire at Love with a confident, satisfied smile, "This time you're in it up to your neck with all of us aren't you Sergeant?" Lebeuf thought it was going to be just another argument, but Mendoza's reply was a curious one—this time he was on to something else.

"What do you mean Private," snapped Love.

"I mean that attackin that gasoline dump was a lousey idea. It's what got us this stinkin job and might give us a little more too be-

fore all that big brass gets done chewin us up one side and down the other."

Love's voice became angry, "I was against that idea all along and you know it. It was that crazy Lieutenant Thomas's idea, not mine."

"Hey, easy there Regular Army, you never talked about officers that way before."

The Sergeant knew he was being made a fool of but he wanted to go on record with the truth. "I followed orders just like every man in the platoon did. Thomas has got no sense of responsibility for his men, there was nothing I could *do*."

Mendoza laughed and spat into the fire, "Maybe so Sergeant, the question is, does the big brass know that. This roadblock duty answers that question. Yea, Thomas gets himself burned, Love is goin to get busted and us poor peons, nothin happens to us."

Suddenly, Lebeuf grabbed his rifle and jumped to his feet. In his thick French accent he yelled, "Zumone ez coming—a zheep, luk!"

As one, Love and Mendoza turned away from each other and looked up the road on the opposite side of the barricade. It was true, there was a jeep and it was coming on fast. The last vehicle they had seen was the jeep that had brought them, and that was over six hours ago. The quarrel was forgotten. Sergeant Love jumped off the side of the road into the ditch and kicked snow over

the fire. "Get down, keep low," he cautioned. They crouched next to the embankment of the road, their eyes pinned to the jeep which was approaching fast, their weapons cocked and ready.

When it got closer they saw it was an American jeep with one lone occupant. When it was less than seventy five yards away Love said to Lebeuf, "Cover us," then he tapped Mendoza on the shoulder, "Up on the road boy." Both he and Mendoza leaped up on the embankment their weapons aimed directly at the speeding jeep.

"He ain't stoppin!" yelled Mendoza.

Love fired two rounds over the head of the driver and the jeep abruptly skidded to a halt just a few yards in front of the barricade. The three men approached the jeep slowly, their weapons pointed at the driver.

He was an American Army Corporal in his early thirties, tall but very thin. He looked nervous and frightened. "What the hells a matter with you," Mendoza screamed in the man's face, "You'd have to be blind not to see us here."

"I em zorry, I vaz nod lukin where I vaz going," the man pleaded with a pronounced German accent. Mendoza looked up quickly at Love to see if he had heard the man too. He had.

As Lebeuf approached the jeep he sensed something was wrong. "Wat ez ze matter Sarzhen?"

Without taking his eyes off the driver Love replied, "Our friend here has a little trouble with the English language."

The driver smiled nervously and motioning towards Lebeuf he said, "Zo duz he."

"That's right Corporal, but his accent is French not German," Love replied.

"Put I em en Ahmerigan zoltcher, pelief me." The driver pulled a chain of dog tags up from under his shirt, "Zee."

"That doesn't mean anything to us," barked Love. "What's your unit soldier and how did you get through the German lines?"

The driver put his hands on the steering wheel and stared at the dashboard. "Rekonahzenz Kumpany, attachged do ze zeeventsh ahmored divizhen." Mendoza burst out laughing.

Love replied quickly, "Who you trying to kid boy. That company was wiped out yesterday." The Sergeant looked over to Mendoza, "What do you think?"

"Are you kiddin," was the answer.

Love nodded and turned back towards the driver, "Who's Betty Grable's husband," he asked, "How many home runs did Babe Ruth hit in his career?"

The driver asked them if they were joking but Love assured him they were not. "I do nod know ze huzbandt. Peb Rud vaz e bezbahl bleyahr."

There were more questions, a few he answered, most he did not. Sergeant Love ordered the man to get out of the jeep. He did not obey immediately so Mendoza reached into the front seat and dragged him out. Whirling suddenly, the driver smashed Mendoza in the face with his elbow knocking him off balance. He reached for Mendoza's rifle but Love stopped him with a vicious chop on the back of his neck with the butt of his carbine and the driver fell to the ground.

Recovering himself, Mendoza snatched up his rifle and aimed it at the crumpled figure of the driver, but Love pushed his rifle aside. "What's the matter with you," screamed Mendoza, "Hes a Kraut isn't he!"

Before Love could answer the driver pushed himself up on his knees, the blood streaming down his neck soaking his jacket and sobbed, "Led him gill me, led him. I dondt vandt du lif, *I dondt vand du lif!*" Lebeuf, Love and Mendoza exchanged puzzled glances. This was not the way they expected a German spy to act under the circumstances, and certainly not an American soldier.

The Headquarters Medical Aid Station had been set up in a large house on the outskirts of Romain. The town was still under artillery fire, lately increasing, and the street in front of the house had become a scene of activity and confusion. An

ambulance pulled up to the door, discharged its cargo of wounded, then raced off to pick up a new load. Stretcher bearers hurried in and out of the front door. Stragglers and men with only slight wounds stood or sat leaning against the wall, or moving up and down the street aimlessly.

Inside the house, the activity and noise was trapped within the walls and sounded even greater. In a room off the main hall which once had been a library, the walking wounded (men with only slight wounds) were being treated. There were bunks along the walls and in the center of the room several desks had been shoved together to be used as dressing tables.

Lieutenant Thomas was seated on one of these desks as a Medic put the finishing touches to a bandage which covered the entire length of his left arm. The doors at the far end of the room opened and Mendoza, Lebeuf and Love, supporting their prisoner between them, came down the aisle to the dressing tables. Thomas was surprised to see them. He had lost consciousness during the attack on the gasoline dump because of an explosion. The attack had been successful, his men should have been up there holding their positions.

Love and his men pushed their way through to the dressing table looking for a Medic to treat their prisoner. "Why aren't you men at the dump holding your positions?"

asked Thomas, jumping down off the table.

Mendoza smiled as he waited and watched for Love's reply. The Sergeant ignored Thomas; he found himself a Medic and pulled him over to the table.

Neither Lieutenant Thomas nor Sergeant Love gave any indication that they knew each other. Love was trying to avoid the Lieutenant who in turn was mystified by his Sergeant's seeming indifference. "What's the matter with you Sergeant, don't you recognize me?" Thomas asked.

Finally the two men confronted each other. They were both of about the same age, their late twenties, and they both stood six feet tall. Love's face was red and rough looking but Thomas looked smooth and well fed, and he had a "ready for anything" look about him that marked him as no less a man than anyone in his company.

It was Thomas who spoke first. "I don't understand. Why aren't you men holding your positions back at the gas dump?"

"Tell him Lovely," cracked Mendoza.

"Shat oop," Lebeuf snapped.

"Better answer Sergeant," continued Mendoza, despite Lebeuf's warning, "That's an officer talking to ya."

Love darted a fierce glare in Mendoza's direction then he whirled on Lieutenant Thomas. "I told you Lieutenant, I told you not

to pull off that crazy stunt. There was no *use* to capturing that gas dump. But you wouldn't listen to an Enlisted man. You don't trust anybody, you don't listen. Now we've all had it."

Mendoza grinned at Thomas, "What he's tryin to say Lieutenant is that you got Love here, a thirty year man, into a lot of trouble and . . ."

"At ease Private!" Love barked. Turning back towards Thomas he said, "Sure I'm worried about my record, why shouldn't I be? This is my job for life and when something like this happens they don't let you forget about it."

Love expected Thomas to call him on his insubordination, but the Lieutenant said nothing about it. He began pulling his shirt sleeve down over his bandaged arm. "I had a reason for doing it. It was no irresponsible order on my part."

Lebeuf, who had been watching the proceedings helplessly, now recognized an opportunity to change the subject, save a more angry scene and possibly Love's stripes to boot. "We ave been on ze road-block zinz midnaht Lieutenant; luk, we capschered a Kraut."

Suddenly the room grew quiet. A group of the wounded men began forming around the dressing table where the prisoner was being treated. Their attitude was aggressively threatening, hatred for all the pounding they had received in the last few days and all the personal

tragedies they had experienced, now became focused on the prisoner—the enemy. Lebeuf hadn't realized what a reaction his revelation would bring and he looked at Love apologetically.

One of the wounded men shoved the Medic away from the prisoner who was now alarmed and turned his head quickly one way then another, wide eyed and alert for danger. Thomas knew he had to do something right away before anything happened the men would be sorry for later. He stepped up next to the prisoner and said, "This man is a prisoner of war and deserves to be treated as one."

"A German in an American uniform spells spy to me—you treat spies any way you want to," said one of the men putting an exclamation point to this sentence with a hard slap across the prisoner's face.

Calmly then, but with an attitude of determination, Thomas ordered Love and his men to shoot the first person who next touched the prisoner. It was the gas dump situation all over again. Once again Love instinctively rebelled against the order. But there was no time to think, no time to argue. He either obeyed the order or suffered the consequences. The Sergeant pushed the wounded men back away from the prisoner, the muzzle of his rifle passing slowly, stomach level, in a semi-circle around the table.

The tense situation was broken by a command from one of the men

at the rear of the crowd, "At ease!"

The men looked around. Colonel Simms, the Regimental Commander and Major Heil who had been inspecting the Aid Station, were now standing in the doorway of the library. Simms was a small, tired looking man in his fifties. The events of the last forty eight hours had exhausted him. "What's going on in here?" he asked in a whisper, just barely audible.

None of the men spoke but almost without exception their eyes traveled to the prisoner. Understanding this unspoken admission Heil marched briskly into the center of the room, pushing his way through the men who were clustered around the dressing table. "Who is this man?"

Love stepped forward and saluted. "Sergeant Love, Item Company, Third Battalion Sir."

"Yes Sergeant," the Major snapped impatiently.

"This man was apprehended by my detail at roadblock number four about an hour ago. We suspected he may be a German soldier."

"What made you suspect that Sergeant?"

Love repeated what had happened at the roadblock and as he did so, Simms walked slowly up to the table and stood to one side of Heil looking like a little boy beside his father. Half way through Love's report, Simms removed his glasses and wearily began to massage his eyes and forehead.

"Very good Sergeant," said Heil, as Love finished his report, then he reached over the table and began examining the prisoner's clothes, starting by unbuttoning his shirt.

Love felt better now. Apparently the prisoner meant a great deal to the Major. The Sergeant needed all the goodwill he could get to erase his responsibility as senior NCO during the attack on the gas dump.

As Heil examined the prisoner, Simms, in a whispered, halting voice, began asking questions. The prisoner repeated the same story he had told at the roadblock. When Simms told the prisoner that the Company he claimed was his own had been destroyed which of course made it impossible to check on his story, the man offered no protest and no further explanation. He seemed to sense that nothing he could say would be believed anyway.

Simms sensed the same thing. The belligerent attitude of the men in the room intimidated him. He became gruff with the prisoner, "How did you get your German accent?"

The prisoner replied that he had gone to America when he was fourteen, lived in a German community in New York and had never been able to get rid of it. Some of the men in the room laughed at this apparently weak explanation. When the prisoner was asked how he escaped the slaughter of his company he remained silent.

Heil finished his brief examination of the prisoner. He turned to Simms and was about to speak when suddenly he stopped himself. He stood there for a moment as if he were reading the Colonel's mind by looking through his skull. Whatever he saw there made him come to some decision. "He isn't wearing a German uniform under his fatigues Colonel. The spies we shot this morning did."

Simms wasn't listening. He had already made up his mind. The only way he could still maintain control of himself and his Regiment, was to make his decisions quickly and stand by them no matter what happened.

Heil persisted, "These commandos have been coming through our lines in groups of four. The Sergeant says this one was alone."

"That's an insignificant point Major."

Heil was growing impatient. He pulled the chain hanging around the prisoner's neck up out of his shirt revealing a medal the size of a silver dollar. He read the inscription; "First place, Speech Department, Columbia University, 1923."

"He could have picked that up from any one of our dead soldiers Major, you know that. This man is a spy and his court martial will convene in one hour." The wounded men in the room accepted this information with enthusiasm and Simms turned and started to walk away. Major Heil started after him.

Lieutenant Thomas stopped the

two officers midway up the aisle of bunks. "Lieutenant Thomas, Item Company, Third Battalion Sir," he began. "With the Colonel's permission I would like to be returned to duty with my platoon."

"Lieutenant Thomas? I've heard that name before, recently, why?"

Heil injected, "Lieutenant Thomas led the attack on the gas dump Colonel. The report was placed on your desk this morning."

With a flash of angry recognition Simms said, "Now I remember! Lieutenant, you have been removed from command indefinitely. The only thing that prevents more drastic action is the unfortunate situation we are now involved in. You were ordered to make a routine recon patrol, instead you launched a personal bid for glory endangering the lives of every man in your platoon *needlessly*."

"That isn't true Sir," pleaded Thomas. "I wanted to keep the spirit of my men up, help the morale of the Regiment. We've got to *do* something Sir, before our men give up their will to fight."

Heil listened with interest, but Simms remained unmoved. "Lieutenant, none of the men in this room, let alone the Regiment, give a damn about one insignificant action," said Simms. He turned and started once more for the door. Heil paused a moment giving Thomas a long serious look, then he followed the Colonel.

Simms was already waiting in the

jeep in front of the Aid Station when Heil came out the front door. The Major walked up next to the jeep on the Colonel's side but he did not get in. "Let's go Heil, get in," said Simms.

The Major did not obey. "Colonel, a court martial for the prisoner at this time is impossible. Yesterday we were not preparing for a withdrawal—now we are. We need every one of our officers right where he is." Heil indicated the confusion of the soldiers in the street with a nod of his head. "It will take hours for these men to be formed into units again."

Simms looked towards the Aid Station. "You can choose your officers for the court martial from the walking wounded. They won't be able to function in their normal capacities."

Heil was shocked. "That's *murder*! Those men will vote him guilty without thinking."

Simms stared straight ahead through the windshield for a moment without answering, then he ordered his driver to get out of the jeep. When the driver was a safe distance away Simms said, "Why are you fighting me on this Heil. You know how difficult all this has been for me."

As a last resort and with a great deal of reluctance, Heil replied, "How can you do it Colonel. How can you allow an important decision like this to be influenced by the emotions of frightened men.

Those men in the Aid Station want revenge on the prisoner and you want to give it to them."

For a moment Simms couldn't speak. When he finally did it was with the trembling restraint of a man who is aware that at any moment he may lose control of himself. "It is my duty to get this Regiment withdrawn in good order and if the execution of a spy will help matters, so much the better."

"It's not an execution Colonel, it's murder."

"The man has a German accent doesn't he? He appears out of nowhere at one of our roadblocks and says, listen to this, says he was assigned to a unit that was most conveniently destroyed. He has been unable to answer the simplest questions any American soldier would know. What more do you *want* Major?"

"Time, Sir. Time to prove it."

"If the man isn't a spy he's a deserter and deserves to be shot regardless. There is no good reason for delay, it will only provoke my men and add to the undisciplined situation that already exists." Simms turned away and motioned to the driver to return to the jeep.

Heil wasn't finished yet. "If this prisoner is an American soldier he deserves more consideration than this and you know it Sir."

Once more Simms faced Heil. "We've known each other for a long time Heil, I thought I could always rely on you."

"You won't be sorry for agreeing to this Colonel, I promise you."

"Neither one of us has a minute to spare, what purpose will a delay be for. We have no contact with any other unit, it will be impossible to verify the man's story under these conditions."

"I think I know someone who can be trusted to question the prisoner more closely and at least prepare a defense."

Simms smiled weakly and shook his head. "You always get what you want don't you Major. If you can find a volunteer to act as an impartial defense counsel, I will delay the court martial until 2100 hours, no longer. The Regiment withdraws at 2300 and I want this business done with by then."

Simms turned to his driver, "Quartermaster Company," he ordered. Then to Heil, "You've picked a loser this time Major."

Major Heil did not wait for the jeep to pull away. He hurried back into the Aid Station and ordered Sergeant Love and his men to deliver the prisoner to Regimental Headquarters just as soon as he had received treatment. Then he ordered Lieutenant Thomas to report there too, immediately.

Maybe they've changed their minds, Thomas thought as Heil marched back out of the room. The Medic announced that he was finished with the prisoner and so Thomas and his men left the Aid Station together.

Regimental Headquarters was located in a one story brick school house in the middle of town. The courtyard in which the execution of that morning had taken place was behind the building. The Regimental battle flag was tied to a lamp post by the front door and next to it a Military Policeman stood guard.

The information that a German spy had been caught had circulated like wildfire through the town and a small gang of undisciplined GIs, stragglers who had been separated from their units and wanted to stay that way, had taken up a position in front of the school house, waiting for the arrival of the prisoner.

Their leader was a small, tough looking Private named Jack Monroe and as Thomas, Love and his men came around the corner into the main street with their prisoner, Jack told his men to get ready. "This is it. They've got a prisoner with them."

"But there's an officer," protested one of the gang.

"If you want to quit go ahead," sneered Jack. "My buddy was killed in the shelling this morning and this Kraut is going to pay for that." The rest of the gang murmured their agreement.

As Thomas and his men approached the school house, Jack's gang began spreading themselves in a wide semi-circle around the front door of the Headquarters facing in Thomas's direction.

Thomas warned his men, "Trouble coming up, get ready." This time Love obeyed willingly. The Major thought the prisoner was important—he would see to it that nothing happened to him. The Sergeant unslung his carbine and held it waist high. Lebeuf and Mendoza did the same.

Jack's gang advanced threateningly on Thomas and his men gradually surrounding them.

"Get out of the way," Thomas ordered. The men didn't move. "Why aren't you with your units?"

"We haven't got any units Lieutenant," Jack replied.

"Then report for reassignment like the rest, you know that."

"Are you calling us deserters," cracked Jack. At the same moment two of his men pushed forward between Mendoza and Lebeuf to get at the prisoner. Love's carbine flashed through the air, the barrel catching one of the men on the knuckles. He screamed with pain and the two of them quickly withdrew.

Jack yelled, "What do you want to help a Kraut for and bust up your own buddies. Look, we don't want no trouble with you." Turning towards his gang he told them to throw down their weapons and they obeyed. "See, all we want is the Kraut, we don't want to hurt any GIs doing it either." Thomas looked up at the door of the school house but the MP was doing his best to ignore what was happening.

"He's right," Mendoza said suddenly, "Why should we care what happens to a German. I'm not going to fight GIs over a Kraut. He moved away from the prisoner and joined Jack's gang.

"Coward, yallow," Lebeuf shouted.

"You see," said Jack triumphantly, "There's a man who knows what's right and what isn't. Now come on you guys, let us have the spy."

One of Jack's gang didn't want to wait for a decision. He threw a punch at Sergeant Love who deflected the man's fist with the stock of his carbine, bringing the butt up into his stomach with a neat one two rhythm and a savage force. The man fell to his knees holding his stomach and gasping for air.

"Ok, we ain't waitin any more," Jack yelled angrily, "Get 'em."

Unnoticed, Mendoza had worked his way around through the gang and had come up behind Jack. He put the muzzle of his rifle next to Jack's neck and before any of the gang had time to move forward, he ordered them to open up a path to the door of the school house. "Quick now, I mean it."

"You heard him," yelled Jack, "Open up, let 'em through, we'll get the German later."

"I'm just praying you try that pal," Mendoza said smoothly.

Thomas, his men and the prisoner moved cautiously through the path which had been opened for them

up to the door of the school house. Mendoza, pulling Jack along in front of him, followed the same way. Thomas glared at the uncooperative MP then pushed his way through the front door.

When Mendoza backed up to the steps he released the prisoner Jack, and leaping up to the top flight of steps he fired several rounds over their heads laughing as they dove to the ground for safety. Then he jumped quickly through the door and slammed it shut.

Inside the school house they were met by a Sergeant First Class and two Military Policemen who took the prisoner and locked him in a room next to the street which ran along the side of the building. The two MPs stood guard at the door, and Thomas warned them that if anything happened to the prisoner they would be held responsible.

In a corner by the door, Mendoza turned towards Lebeuf and said, "Hold my rifle a minute buddy." Lebeuf took it without suspicion. When both of his hands were occupied, Mendoza delivered a swift accurate punch to the jaw of Lebeuf knocking him to the floor. "That's for calling me yallow," said Mendoza, leaning over to pick up his rifle.

Thomas helped Lebeuf to his feet. "All right, no more of that!" Thomas asked the SFC where Major Heil's office was and the Sergeant started to lead him down the hall. The Lieutenant turned back to

Love, "You might as well report back to the company." He continued down the hall without waiting for Sergeant Love to acknowledge his suggestion.

The winter gray day offered little light and Heil was reading an intelligence report with the aid of a desk lamp when Lieutenant Thomas entered the room. There were several seconds of silence in which Heil continued to read the report without looking up from his desk. Thomas was unable to stop himself. He wanted his platoon back and he wanted to make his position clear. "I'm sorry about that gas dump Sir, but you must believe me. It wasn't for anything the Colonel said. I did it for my men."

Heil finished his reading, slammed the report shut and threw it to the side of his desk. "You were not asked here in connection with that Lieutenant. I have something far more important to discuss with you." Thomas had thought about nothing else since the Aid Station, what could be more important?

The Major continued, "Colonel Simms has agreed to postpone the court martial of the prisoner until 2100 hours if a man can be found to volunteer as defense counsel. Are you that man Lieutenant?"

The idea was so unexpected that Thomas frowned a minute as if he couldn't understand such an irrelevant question being asked of him. "No Sir," he murmured, "No, I'm not a, I'm not trained for that. My

job is fighting—with my platoon."

"*Forget* about that platoon!" Heil had lost control of himself momentarily but like a machine he clicked back into gear. "Every officer is familiarized with court martial procedure during his training. I assume you were no exception to the rule."

"Sir, I can hardly remember what was said in those classes. I can't do it."

"You mean you won't do it. I could give you an order Lieutenant but I would prefer not doing that. Do you realize what will happen to the prisoner if he doesn't have a sympathetic defense counsel?" Before Thomas could answer he went on. "I saw what you did in the Aid Station, you protected the prisoner against your own fellow officers."

"That was because he was a prisoner, not because I believed his story."

"Exactly," Heil banged a clenched fist on the desk, "The rest of those men wouldn't even recognize *that* fact. I believe that man is a deserter, but I need someone like you to prove it. He doesn't have a chance any other way."

Remembering the incident in the street, Thomas nodded with understanding. Yet, he wondered if he could believe Major Heil. Was this job really important or was this his way of getting rid of a dirty job nobody else wanted.

Major Heil tried a new approach. "That was a valuable thing you did

at the gas dump Lieutenant. I understand that even though the Colonel doesn't. Keeping up the morale of your men is important—you can do the same thing now. Show the men of this Regiment that justice acts independently of all this," he said, waving his hand towards the window and the chaos in the streets outside. I can assure you, Colonel Simms will think differently about you once I've explained to him what kind of person you really are."

Everything was perfectly clear to Lieutenant Thomas; if he cooperated he might get his platoon back. The Major needed him and he needed the Major. "All right, I'll try it Sir."

There was a knock on the door and the SFC entered. "Colonel Simms has asked me to tell you that American tanks have been seen approaching the town from the opposite side of the river. With the tanks we will be able to move out at 2100 instead of 2300."

"Why didn't the Colonel tell me this himself!" Heil barked.

The SFC had never heard the Major lose his temper before. "I don't know Sir," he said defensively. "He went out to inspect the bridge a few minutes ago. He said the court martial would take place at 1900 hours." The Sergeant quickly left the room.

Major Heil jumped up from his desk and began buckling on his equipment. He was no longer aware Thomas was in the room.

"What is it I'm supposed to do Sir, question the prisoner?" Thomas asked, wondering the reason behind Heil's sudden loss of interest in what before seemed so important.

"What," Heil looked up at Thomas as if he were annoyed with the question. "Yes, yes, question him. Not much time now. He's all yours, I have to go, check up on our security."

"I would like the guards on the prisoner changed—we need more of them too," said Thomas.

"Impossible. Nobody to spare." Heil put his helmet on. "You can trust those men, good luck." He was gone.

Jack Monroe and his gang of stragglers had taken up a position in the doorway of an almost demolished butcher shop across the street from the front door of the school house. The shop itself offered little protection from the cold, so they built a fire on the stone steps and the men stood and crouched around it for warmth. The thump, thump of artillery fire could still be heard in the distance.

When the front door of the school house opened and Lieutenant Thomas emerged, Jack looked up quickly from the fire. Thomas was not surprised when he saw Jack was still there; he had expected that. But when he started down the street towards the warehouse section of town in search of his men, he found that they had never gone back to

the company at all. They were bent over a small fire warming up some C rations not fifty yards away from the school house.

Lebeuf stood up when Thomas approached them, but Mendoza and Love sat on their haunches their eyes fixed on the opened cans of greasy meat patties and beans which were beginning to bubble.

"I thought you men were on your way back to the company."

"We're not going anywhere until that prisoner has had his trial," said Love without looking up. He motioned a gloved hand towards Jack and his gang down the street, "We'll stick around, just in case."

That's all Thomas wanted to know. "All right Sergeant, keep your eyes open." He started back for the school house feeling a little more secure.

"What do you think they're up to?" asked one of Jack's men. "Do you think they'll try and move the Kraut?"

Jack watched Thomas closely as he crossed the street and entered the school house. "They'll move him, but not now. They'll wait an hour till it's dark." He thought for a moment then, "I want you boys to spread out around here, in back of the school house, all around it, just in case they try another way out."

As the men began to break up and move off in all directions around the school house, Jack cornered two of them and said, "Find out where

the MP Company is camped and grab some arm bands, enough for three or four men. The Headquarters guards are due to be relieved before long—we'll relieve them. Now move, and don't get caught!"

Sergeant Love watched this exodus suspiciously but he was not alarmed. Lebeuf was. "Wat weel we do Sarzhen?" he asked, as he stood up from the fire and unslung his rifle.

"Sit down Lebeuf, the beans are almost done," answered Love.

"Makes it easier for us, right Sergeant? We can pick 'em off by twos and threes now," said Mendoza.

"We do nothing. They think we're going to move the prisoner that's why they're surrounding the building. We wait, we do nothing till they do."

Inside the school house Thomas handed his pistol to one of the MPs guarding the prisoner's door and was then admitted. It was a small, high ceilinged room with four rows of school desks and along the wall on his right next to the street there were four narrow windows with inside shutters. The shutters were open and the wind blowing through the broken panes of glass swayed them gently back and forth. It was already beginning to get dark outside and a candle had been lit on one of the desks in the rear of the room, for the electricity in the building had long ceased to function.

When the door had been bolted shut behind him, Thomas felt strange. What he had to do now was entirely different from anything he had ever done before. He knew how to lead men in battle, but would he be able to win the confidence of the prisoner and help him, make him, fight for his life? Sergeant Love had said that he never trusted anybody enough to believe in them.

Then he saw the prisoner slumped in the far corner of the room, barely visible in the dim, flickering light of the candle. Everything depended on this. He had to make the prisoner trust him. Thomas wanted more than his platoon back now, he wanted to prove to himself and to Sergeant Love, that he was a human being.

Thomas started down the aisle towards the back of the room rapping his knuckles along the desks as he went. The prisoner looked up with an alarmed expression on his face—was it time already?

"Do you want a cigarette?" asked the Lieutenant.

The prisoner sensed that there was no immediate cause for alarm and he dropped his head back on his knees.

"They sent me in here to help you Corporal, I'm your defense counsel."

The prisoner made a noise that sounded like both a sob and laughter.

"I can't help you unless you co-

operate. I want the whole story of what happened up there from beginning to end." Thomas realized that this was going to be more difficult than he thought. "There were more stragglers this afternoon, some men from your own company turned up. We'll find out from them who you are." It was a deception that didn't work.

"Liar!" the prisoner screamed, jumping to his feet. "Nopody lifet, nopody, only me. You ahr lige dzhem oud dzer," he yelled, waving his hand in the direction of the street outside. "Enimahlz, blut, you vant my blut, you, ze Chermens, my own comrahz."

Thomas realized he had made a mistake but he had no time to correct it. He started to mumble a few clumsy words of apology when *crack*, a shot was fired outside, the bullet smashed through the window, missing the prisoner by an inch. In one swift movement, just as a second shot was being fired, Thomas blew out the candle and dove to the floor pulling the prisoner along with him.

The second bullet smashed into the wall opposite the window just inches to the left of where the first landed. There was a few moments silence, then five more shots were heard, none of which hit the school house. After another half minute of silence passed, Thomas reached up slowly from the floor and closed the inside shutters on the window with his finger tips. He felt around the

floor in the darkness for the stub of candle and finding it, he crawled into a corner away from the windows and relit it. Once more the rear of the school room became illuminated and crouched under the last row of desks in a heap, the prisoner was sobbing hysterically.

When they heard the shots, Sergeant Love, Mendoza and Lebeuf jumped into action. They moved quickly, but with the careful attention of combat veterans they stayed close to the walls of the unoccupied buildings as they rushed down the street opposite the prisoner's windows.

Love was in front and he was the first to see one of Jack's men stepping out of a doorway halfway down the street. The man looked up towards the second floor windows. "Drop that rifle!" Love shouted. The man looked surprised. "Drop it!" repeated Love. The man did as he was told. Love moved out of the protection of the wall towards the man with Mendoza and Lebeuf bringing up his rear, all of them watching the street for the slightest hint of life or movement.

"It wasn't me, honest to God," the man pleaded as Mendoza roughly shook him down for concealed weapons. "Look at my rifle if you want, I didn't fire a shot." Lebeuf checked the rifle and found a full clip of ammunition in the weapon.

"He could have reloaded by now," said Mendoza.

The man pointed towards the second story windows. "The shots came from up there, honest to God, I swear it."

"Could be," said Love. "Lebeuf, you stay here with him; Mendoza, c'mon."

When Love and Mendoza entered the doorway of the building, Lebeuf spotted three Military Policemen coming around the corner down at the end of the block. They started up the street towards him and when they were near, Lebeuf stopped them. "We av trouble here, you better take zis man," he said. The MPs paid no attention to him. They pushed him roughly aside and continued up the street towards the school house.

When Love and Mendoza arrived on the second floor landing, they heard a man groaning on one of the rooms facing the street outside. Love motioned Mendoza over to the opposite side of the open doorway leading into the room. When they were set, Love dove into the room, his rifle cocked and ready for trouble. But he wasn't ready for what he found. On the table next to the door one of Jack's gang lay dead, the blood dripping from his torn stomach onto the helmet of another GI, also dead, on the floor beneath the table. Jack himself, with his throat half blown away, lay in the middle of the floor; he had stopped groaning.

"Jesus," exclaimed Mendoza, as he moved from one body to the

next, checking for any signs of life. Sergeant Love stood up and took off his helmet. "Hey look," said Mendoza from the far side of the room. Love snapped his helmet back on and stepped over Jack's body. Mendoza had found a GI field pack and had unstrapped the flap expecting to find something he could use. "Looks like explosives of some kind. What's this thing?" he asked, fingering a small, compact mechanism.

"I don't know, timing device maybe," answered Love.

"Jesus, what *happened* here," Mendoza asked, giving the room another quick once over.

Love shook his head. "Can't figure it, I just don't know."

They heard a jeep stop outside the building and the noise shook Love out of his momentary confusion. "C'mon, pick that pack up, let's go."

When they got back down into the street they found Lebeuf talking to Major Heil. The Major was seated in his jeep with a driver and one other GI in the back seat who kept his hand on the handle of a 50 caliber machinegun mounted on the floor of the vehicle. Heil paid close attention to their stories. Over the protests of innocence from Jack's man, Lebeuf had told the Major about the shooting. Sergeant Love gave a report on what they had found on the second floor.

When they were finished, Heil nodded several times, as if to him

the entire puzzle made instant sense, even as if he knew it was going to happen. "Get into the jeep," he said. "We've got a job to do and you may be able to help me."

Inside the school house Lieutenant Thomas had finally succeeded in calming the prisoner down. A few minutes after the gunfire had stopped, he had wanted to go to the door and order the guard to check the street outside, but he had thought better of it. He couldn't leave the prisoner in his present condition and if there was going to be more trouble he wanted the guard right where he was. Thomas still had a job to do and he wanted to finish it.

Thomas had pulled the prisoner up from the floor and sat him on a bench behind one of the school desks. He looked like a teacher who had kept one of his delinquent pupils after class and was about to administer a lecture. "I want to help you Corporal, believe me I do. But I've got nothing to help you with. We haven't got much time. Give me something to go on, the facts. Just one fact will build into another and another until we've got the whole story, the true one."

The prisoner put his head down on the desk as Thomas continued. "Don't be afraid to admit that you ran, if that's what you did. Other men ran too, but they came back. We're going to win this war soldier with men just like you."

There was a noise of shuffling feet

just outside the prisoner's door and they both heard it. The prisoner jerked his head up from the desk—he was tense and frightened again. "It's all right Corporal, it's all right," said Thomas, patting the prisoner on the shoulder. "They're only changing the guard."

The prisoner relaxed a little and once more dropped his head down on the desk. Thomas was pleased, for apparently the prisoner trusted him again.

"Vad iz ze uze. I talg bud nopudty beleevz me. Zey hav trietd do gill me. Zey vill do id yed."

"Not while I'm here they won't. They're the real cowards, just a handful of men afraid and they think they can make up for their fear, to get rid of it, by getting you."

The prisoner looked up at Thomas. "Zey zding I em a Cherman."

"I don't," Thomas said firmly.

The candle light flickered in the wind which blew through the slats of the closed shutters. The shadows darted across the faces of the two men as each searched the eyes of the other for something different. "O gay, I tahg," said the prisoner.

He had been on a water detail when the attack started, the prisoner told Thomas, and he had seen what was happening from a hill in the rear of their positions. There were two other men with him to help with water cans and when they saw the German troops advancing they had wanted to go back and

fight. But the prisoner had panicked. He had fought before, but this was different. It seemed to him that unlike his previous experience he now had a choice of whether he wanted to fight or run and seeing in one glance the overwhelming number of the enemy and the hopelessness of his unit's position, he elected to run. So he jumped from the truck while they were returning and the other two men did not stop to look for him.

When it was all over he had a strange compulsion to go down to his unit's positions to see what happened. The Germans had already moved out when he got there, but he didn't stay long. There was nobody left alive—they must have been too surprised to even think of surrendering. It would have done them no good if they did, for the attacking force was a battalion of SS and they took no prisoners.

He found a jeep that could still run and he drove as fast as he could towards the American lines. He thought that in the confusion of the attack his desertion would go unnoticed.

When he had finished his story, Thomas thought for a moment then he began asking questions about the details of the prisoner's company, their positions, the identity of the attacking force. The Corporal gave him quick, confident answers.

All at once, Thomas changed the subject. "What was it like when you were a boy in New York, how

did you feel when you arrived in America?"

Instantly, the prisoner became alarmed. "You hef nod relieved me, hav you?"

"I believe you all right," said Thomas bitterly. "At least the part about the attack. It was a perfect story, complete with size and identity of the enemy forces, a complete knowledge of your unit's positions, in fact far too perfect a story for an American army Corporal, particularly if he was in the shocked state of mind you claimed you were in."

The prisoner tried to protest but Thomas grabbed him by the front of his shirt and jerked him viciously to his feet. "A German officer would know those details wouldn't he. I ought to kill you for making a fool out of me, but the firing squad will take care of that!" What a fool he had been—he would never trust anyone again.

Thomas threw the prisoner back down on the bench then he marched over to the door and knocked. When it was unlocked and opened from the outside he told the two new MPs to give him back his pistol, he would guard the prisoner while they went to find Major Heil; the court martial could begin at once.

Instead of obeying the order the MP pointed his rifle at Thomas and forced him back into the room. Jack's men had managed to get in after all, thought Thomas. "You

won't need to finish the prisoner," he told the MP. "You're going to get your execution just as soon as we can arrange it." But the MP didn't budge. Thomas glanced at the prisoner who seemed to recognize the MP."

"Led me indroduz myzelf. Ez ez Kapiten Froelich," said the prisoner with a totally new attitude of confidence and authority. Thomas looked towards the MP for help. "Id vond to you eny goot Loy-nent," said Froelich indicating the MP. "He iz vun ov my men end he duz nod unterstant Englezch."

Thomas was too amazed to speak or move. Froelich asked his man in German why he was there; the remainder of the Kommando team should have gone on to the bridge. The man evaded this question but did say that they had some trouble and must leave at once. Froelich asked him what kind of trouble and reluctantly, the man explained. They had lost one pack of explosives and had been forced to shoot three GIs who had discovered them across the street. Froelich began to laugh and his man looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

"Too bad those GIs missed you through the window Froelich," said Thomas.

"Zey ver nod you men, zey ver mine," laughed Froelich. "Zey zink I mighd tahg doo mugh—only zey mizz." Thomas learned that Froelich had split up his unit so that he could enter the town and discover

a safe way to the bridge. His men had doubled back when he failed to make the rendezvous.

Froelich boasted about his act as a deserter. He knew that he would stand a better chance if he was caught by not wearing the German uniform under the American. He had two months to rehearse everything he was going to say.

The door to the room opened and another German dressed as a GI told Froelich that it was now safe for them to leave. The Captain unloaded Thomas's pistol and slipped it back into the Lieutenant's holster. He then gave instructions to his men. They would pretend as if they were taking him, Froelich, out for execution. If anyone stops them they are to say and do nothing. Thomas will go with them until they are swallowed up by the confusion of the retreat. He will be shot if he tries to give them away.

And the bridge, asks one of Froelich's men?

They will get the bridge, is the answer.

They moved out into the hall and opened the front door. The fourth member of Froelich's Kommando team who had been standing guard on the steps outside gave the all clear signal. The street in front of the school house was deserted as the five men started down the steps. Suddenly, they were illuminated by the lights of Major Heil's jeep which had been parked hidden across the street in an alley. The

machinegun mounted on the jeep was trained on the doorway of the school house, as were the weapons of Mendoza, Lebeuf, and Love. Along with Heil's men they had been spread around the school house covering all exits.

The Major, who was crouched low next to his jeep shouted, "Drop your weapons, surrender!"

Grabbing Thomas by the shirt, Froelich pushed him forward as a shield. He thought the Americans wouldn't fire once they had seen one of their own men was in danger. But Froelich's well trained men changed all of that. Instinctively, they threw their weapons up and began shooting blindly at their hidden enemies in the shadows of the alley.

Froelich whirled on his men in a rage and ordered them to stop. As he did this, he relaxed his hold on Thomas's shirt who took immediate advantage of the opportunity by diving into the street. Major Heil gave the order to fire. For a few seconds the street was filled with the murderous fusilade of heavy machinegun and rifle fire. The headlights had spotted the Germans almost as if they were on a stage—they were hard to miss. Froelich caught one in the chest. He rolled down the steps but was dead before he hit the street. Two of the Germans, both firing wildly at Heil's headlights, tried backing into the safety of the doorway, but they never made it. On Heil's or-

der the shooting stopped just as suddenly as it had begun.

It was then that they realized one of the Germans had made it out of the glare of the headlights. An oversized field pack strapped to his back he was making a dash for the corner at the end of the school house.

Sergeant Love saw him first. He was in a doorway directly across the street from the steps, an easy shot, but as he took aim something clicked in his mind. The explosives they had found in that room were in a field pack. The escaping German carried the same kind of overstuffed field pack on *his* back. It was then that he saw Thomas scrambling along the ground in the light of the jeep's headlights towards a rifle which had been dropped by one of the Germans. Thomas had seen the man escape too.

Thomas had trouble picking up the rifle with only one good arm. Sergeant Love burst from the doorway screaming, "Aim low Lieutenant, aim *low*!" Thomas did not hear him. At the same time that he fired, Love hit him with a flying tackle, both of them rolling safely behind the high stone staircase leading up to the school house. Thomas's bullet pierced the field pack of the escaping German. There was a tremendous, shattering explosion.

It was a few moments before the Americans scattered around the school house had recovered themselves from the shock of the blast

and began stepping cautiously out of the doorways along the street. Lebeuf and Mendoza ran over to the steps where Thomas and Love were picking themselves up off the ground. "Lieutenant," said Mendoza. "When you shoot somebody you really *shoot 'em*!"

When they were on their feet again Thomas said, "Thanks Sergeant."

"Lieutenant, I told you to aim low."

Thomas saw Major Heil bending over the German's bodies searching for valuable information. He rushed over to his side. "You knew all the time he was a German, didn't you Major?"

Heil didn't bother to turn around to answer. "Yes."

"Didn't you consider I might have been killed?"

"Yes, I was aware of it. Frankly I didn't expect you to come out of it alive. But now that you have I'm willing to keep my part of the bargain. You can have your platoon back, I'm sure Colonel Simms will agree with me, he usually does," he added with a smile.

"Bargain!" Thomas snapped, his eyes blazing with indignation. "Is that what you call it?"

Heil finished his examination of the bodies. "Well, that's done," he said standing up.

"Major, you must think I'm an awful fool."

"Lieutenant, these infiltrators were a dangerous threat to this

Regiment's withdrawal. I had a job to do and I did it. I knew there was a good chance that the rest of the Commando team would come back to find out what happened to him. They wouldn't have bothered if they had known he was already executed. Yes, I used you, I used the Colonel too. He would never have agreed to this plan, too far fetched for him. But when I tell him how it paid off I *don't* expect to hear any complaints. Grow up Lieutenant, we've got a war to fight. You'll find your platoon organizing for the withdrawal on the south side of town. You've got some good men in your platoon Lieutenant, they risked their lives here, don't let them down. Good luck."

The sounds of the withdrawal from the town were beginning all around them. The low heavy rumble of the newly arrived tanks was heard and the sound of marching men.

Thomas felt a hand on his shoul-

der—it was Sergeant Love. "Let's go Lieutenant, before somebody else gives us another dirty job to do."

Thomas turned to face him. "Do you really want me back as your platoon leader?" he asked earnestly.

Love thought for a moment, a smile spreading slowly across his face. "We could do a lot worse Lieutenant."

Thomas took his hand and shook it. "Sergeant, the next time I get ready to do something foolish, you tell me about it."

"I'll tell you Sir, but will you listen?"

Will I listen, thought Thomas? "Maybe I won't Sergeant, but then again, maybe I will."

As Lieutenant Thomas and his men moved off down the street to find their outfit, a company of infantry marched down the street past them hurried along by the sharp, anxious commands of their officers. "Move out soldier, move! Do you want those Krauts to blow your tail off!"



I took the bus out of L. A. Like to travel on busses. You get to see something. Take a plane—Zoom!—you're up to 30,000 feet—Whoosh!—you're on the ground again. All you see's the airports. Bus is different. There's a lot of the U.S. I haven't seen, and you can do it pretty good from a bus. Now they're mostly air conditioned, too. And a lot cheaper.

Anyway, I bought a ticket to Phoenix. This bus was pretty crowded. I got a seat by a window, but another guy came and sat beside me. Can't squawk about that, but I like to have a seat to myself if I can. Just like to have a little room to stretch out and relax.

I gave this guy a quick look and turned back to the window. He looked like a kid, but it was hard to tell. Hat, dark glasses, some kind of

bandage over his nose and part of one cheek. The whole thing looked like a disguise. Well, I didn't care who he was or what he was made up for, so I didn't pay much attention to him. Until he started talking, that is.

He had a newspaper, and he folded and unfolded it about twenty times before he found something he liked. There was a big article on the front page about a holdup in Long Beach. He rattled the paper around so much I finally looked over to see what he was reading. It was about the holdup. The way he held that paper, you'd think he wanted me to read over his shoulder. So I read. There was a black headline "LONE BANDIT ROBS BRANCH BANK", and in smaller type "Gunman Nets \$12,000 in Daylight Holdup".

BY MORRIS F. BAUGHMAN

A FRIEND ... OF A FRIEND ...

Busses are nice. You get to see the countryside. The trouble is with the people who ride them.

When this guy saw I was looking, he said, "What about that? Twelve grand for five minutes work!"

I smelled whiskey when he opened his mouth, and his tongue was a shade on the thick side. Not stoned, just on his way getting organized.

"Yeah, I guess that's all right," I said, "if you don't care what kind of work you do."

The guy had had enough to make him a little mean. "What the hell difference it make what you do, long as you get the dough?"

I didn't argue. Guy like that, with a couple drinks in him, you never can tell what might happen. That bandage on his nose might have got there because some guy didn't agree with him, and maybe the other guy looked worse.

But he didn't want to drop it. "Man, let me tell you. Only thing that matters is getting yours while the getting's good, and not letting them catch you. Take it from me, I know!"

Well, I know a thing or two myself, so I didn't keep quiet on that one. "Yeah? Just what do you know?"

He leaned close to me, after a Secret Agent X-9 peek around the bus. The fumes were pretty strong. I was getting a cheap jag on.

"What I know's worth twelve gee's," he muttered, into my ear.

I sat up and looked this character over real good. He could have been most anything. He looked like a cheap imitation of a high school

dropout. A bandit? Maybe, but if he was he was either drunker than he acted or the world's biggest damn fool. He leaned over to me again. I was beginning to need a beer chaser.

"See this guy Barney Harris they're looking for?" he asked, pointing to the paper.

My heart went thump! when he said that, and I looked at him real close. I took the paper and read a little more. It said the police were on the lookout for Barney Harris, recently escaped from San Quentin, because he fitted the description and the job read like one of his. My mouth was a little dry when I answered.

"Yeah. What about him?"

He cased the bus again and leaned over.

"Friend a mine."

I felt a little better. At least he wasn't going to tell me his name was Barney Harris. But he still seemed like a nut. I didn't know how to handle him. Figured I better treat him normal and see what happened.

"That so? You seen him lately?"

The guy was happy then. He figured I believed every word that fell out of his mouth, and he started to let quite a few of them fall.

"Yeah, I see him all the time. We're gonna be partners when this caper dies down. We grew up together. Buddies in school. We even used to steal candy from the grocery store." All of a sudden, he gave me

the steely eye. "Hey, you gonna blow the whistle on Barney?"

"Me? How am I going to blow any whistles? What am I supposed to tell them when I blow it?"

He kept looking at me. I must have passed, because he started beating the gums again, mile a minute. He broke out a pint he had on the hip and took a few jolts out of that while we travelled. I had one little belt. Figured I owed it to myself.

We got as far as Riverside before I saw my chance. The bus stopped there, and I told this guy I had to get off for cigarettes. He started to pull his pack out again, but I had already crawled over his legs and was half way down the aisle.

There was a cop on a corner, about

a block away from the bus. I didn't know it, but there was another one right beside the bus door. As I walked away from the bus, my foot caught a bump in the sidewalk. I sprawled all over hell. My dark glasses and the stuff out of my jacket pockets scattered out ahead of me.

The cop by the bus door took a look. He was about to help me up when he spotted the Roscoe. There I laid, flat on my face, the gun just out of my reach. He yanked out his own .38, just in case, and got up closer for a good look at me.

"Say, aren't you Barney Harris? Just hold it right there, and don't move. They want to talk to you in Long Beach."

Well, what could I say?



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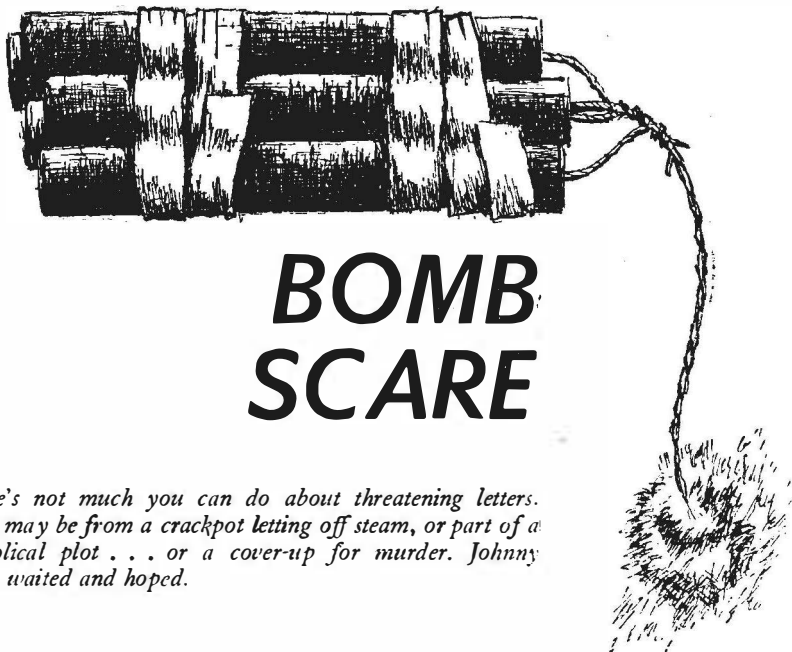
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BOMB SCARE

There's not much you can do about threatening letters. They may be from a crackpot letting off steam, or part of a diabolical plot . . . or a cover-up for murder. Johnny Stain waited and hoped.

BY ROBERT SLAUGHTER

My God," she gasped. "But will it work?"

He smiled at her, indulgently. "Of course it will work. I've planned it down to the last detail. Nothing can go wrong."

She only moaned and rolled over on her stomach, her face buried in a pillow.

"Listen, don't be like that," he said. His voice was urgent. "It's the only way. You know that."

She lifted her head. "I'm afraid."

"No," he said. "There's no need for that. I don't want you to worry."

"But that's crazy—if they find out—both of us will . . ."

"Not both of us—only me. You're not involved—not at all. No matter what happens you'll be in the clear."

"That's not fair. If they get you . . . if something happens to you, I'll be alone."

He laughed. "You won't be alone. Now, quit worrying. Let me tell you how it will be."

She regarded him doubtfully for a moment. Her eyes were wide and wondering. Then, because she had never been able to resist his mood,

she smiled. "All right," she said, "All right, but kiss me first."

The way she said it made him laugh again.

"The initial series of three letters were received—let's see, the thirteenth, a Monday. Last week, on the twentieth, Monday again, the second series arrived. Yesterday, the twenty-seventh, we get three more letters. It looks, from the way these things are worded, as if this will be the end of it or else something is going to happen. That's why I got you both in here this morning—in case something happens. We want to be ready."

The Captain surveyed the two men sitting across from him. The expression on his face and the way his hands plucked at the file on the desk before him betrayed his nervousness. The Captain was a big, bluff man, and hearty. He had proved himself extremely able at departmental politics. He was particularly admired by those who counted, the press and his superiors, for his directness and lack of subterfuge. He had been made a captain not long ago, having been transferred from Robbery and Homicide over a number of older and more experienced officers. He was young enough to smile with his own set of perfect white teeth and his severely brush cut, blond hair was not thinning in the least.

The two men who faced the Captain were utterly different types.

One was long and lean. He slumped in his chair, his legs stretched out, ankle crossing over knee, his hands dangled uselessly over the arms of his chair. His sallow face held no expression beyond a slight angry twist to the heavy brows above glittering dark eyes. He was the picture of insolence. His name was John Stain.

The third man in the room was Sergeant Bill Kruse. He was fair like the Captain but in contrast had a washed out look. He was older and tired and not particularly impressed with this meeting but he'd been around long enough not to show it. His blue eyes were fixed attentively on the Captain, waiting for his next words. John Stain forestalled them.

"What do we want to be ready for, Captain?" he said.

"Don't be funny, Stain. You know as well as I do that a nut like this . . ." he gestured with the file, "can cause more trouble than a dozen professional crooks."

"How do we know he's a nut? Besides, why are we getting so excited? So far he's only written letters. Maybe he's harmless."

The Captain knew that Stain was trying to get to him. His irritation was only increased by the knowledge that Stain did it so effortlessly. "All right, but maybe he's not. Whoever he is the guy is threatening to use dynamite on the public utilities of this city. If he does set off a bomb, even if nobody gets hurt, the news-

papers are going to have a field day. I want to be prepared for any criticism they'll dream up to damage the department."

"Or yourself," thought Stain. But he was tired of pushing the Captain. It was too easy. "OK, what do you want us to do?" he asked. Each had photostats of the letters.

"I'll tell you in a minute. First, I'd like to run over what we've got so far, what the situation is. Open your files."

The two men flipped open the manila folders they held in their laps.

"All right. As I said we've had three of these letters delivered on three successive Mondays, all in the early post." The Captain had his own file open and he picked up a single sheet to read from it. "You are ruining the people of this city with your high rates. Some of our babies are starving. Lower your rates or suffer the consequences. Dynamite can cost you more. This is your first warning." The Captain put the paper down. "He signs it, 'Justice for all.' Now does that sound like a nut?"

The sergeant spoke up. "And these things went to Metro Transit, the Power Company and the Gas Company?"

"That's right," said the Captain. "As far as we know these are all of them. As you can see the only difference in the wording of the letters is in the warning line. He says, 'first warning, second warning,

and final warning' in each successive letter. Now, if he really is going to do anything it will probably be soon."

"So what do you want us to do?" asked Stain.

"I think it might be a good idea to start pulling in a few of the crackpots we've had in here before, on the quiet, of course."

"But we've never talked to anybody that's pulled this kind of stuff before," protested Stain. "We'll just be spinning our wheels."

"I know that," said the Captain. "But we've got to be realistic. If this guy actually sets off a bomb there will be hell to pay in the papers and we can't do much about it. Too many people at the utility companies have seen these letters, jerks in mail room, supervisors. They'll start talking. The next thing you know everybody will start asking what we're doing about the situation. I've got to be able to tell them something."

"It won't be much," muttered Stain. "Hauling in innocent kooks won't get it."

The Captain's eyes narrowed. This was getting too close to insubordination. He knew how to handle that. "Look, Stain, I'm not requesting your cooperation. I'm giving you an order. I want you to bring in a few of these people and talk to them. I *don't* want you to make a big fuss now but in case this thing blows up big I want to show a little activity, show the press we're on our toes . . ."

John Stain uncoiled with remarkable speed from his chair to stand in front of the Captain's desk on his toes. "How's this?" he asked.

The Captain flushed. He'd had enough. His voice was harsh and grating and he waved a finger across his desk as he spoke. "You're not funny Stain. I know you think you ought to be sitting behind this desk instead of me but you're not. I don't think you ever will. You're a lieutenant and I think that'll be the end of the line for you. I know you think you're pretty hot because you get headlines and solve cases. Well, that's what lieutenants are for. This is a case. Get to work on it like I told you. Or if you'd rather not you can always hand in your badge."

It was Stain's turn to flush. He'd gone too far and he knew it. He nodded curtly and turned for the door. Sergeant Kruse, who had been bored by the exchange, followed him.

The two men made their way back to their own office in silence. Stain was angry with himself for his childish behavior, angrier still at the Captain for being right when he said that Stain had wanted and expected the job the Captain had got as Chief of Homicide.

At thirty-nine Johnny Stain had seventeen years in the department, the last eight as a lieutenant. While he was by no means the senior lieutenant in the Homicide division, his record was easily the most im-

pressive. He was the best detective on the force. He knew it. Everybody knew it. They also knew that in compiling that record he had rubbed far too many people the wrong way, for Johnny Stain was no good at politics. A man could only get so far on his record. After that he had to be liked.

The office Stain shared with Sergeant Kruse was off to one side of the main Homicide Division room. It had been assigned to them when the powers that he had decided there was a need for a 'Bomb Investigation Squad.' Stain had been put in charge of the 'Squad' when he had been passed over for captain. The slight increase in salary that went along with the assignment was designed as a sop to his pride.

When he reached his desk Stain flipped his file onto the blotter and turned to face Kruse. "I suppose you're happy with what we got to do?"

Kruse shrugged and sat down. "I don't mind. We don't have to break our backs. The Captain said just interview a few screwballs. Why work up a sweat?"

Stain lit a cigarette and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. "It's a waste of time. We won't get anywhere with it."

Kruse yawned. "So what? Like the Captain said. If this nut does blow something up it won't hurt to let the reporters know we're doing something."

"Something phony," said Stain.

"Besides, I don't think this guy is a nut."

A flicker of interest showed in Kruse's eyes. "You know something?"

Stain waved his cigarette impatiently. "That's not what I meant. It just doesn't figure, that's all. Look at those letters, nine of them, and not a single latent print on one of them. And the way the words were cut out of magazines and pasted on the paper. Plus the paper's so cheap it's untraceable. You'd think this guy was making up ransom notes. He's too careful to be a nut."

Kruse nodded. "Yeah, but he sure sounds like a nut—babies starving and that. It don't make sense."

"Maybe it's a cover," said Stain.

"For what, extortion?" Kruse laughed. "You think maybe somebody's going to hold up the Gas Company, the Power Company and the Transit Company all at once for a little dough? If that's it he's gotta be a nut."

Stain grinned reluctantly. "Yeah, but maybe he's a smart nut." He took his hat from the rack and made for the door. "Listen, I got to get out of here for a while. Maybe I can talk to a couple people on the street. If anything comes up you can get me in the car."

"Lunch?"

"I'll grab it out somewhere. Go through the files and pick out a few characters. We'll start pulling them in tomorrow."

"How about today?"

"Aaaaah," Stain waved and left.

As was usual in the midafternoon of a weekday, the Forest Hills IRS station was nearly deserted. A solitary passenger sat in the waiting room reading his newspaper. The lone ticket agent drowsed in his cage over a magazine. Outside, the afternoon sun warmed the platform. The air was still and quiet. A lazily circling fly made a sudden decision and darted for the warm green surface of a bench set up against a pillar. It died there.

The blast turned the little world of the IRS station upside down. The force of it shook the whole platform. The windows on the side of the waiting room facing the explosion were blown inward sending a thousand tiny spears flying. The waiting passenger was pitched forward onto his face; the ticket agent was slammed off his stool onto his back. Dust billowed from the wooden floor. Plaster sprinkled from the ceiling and walls. Then the quiet returned. For a little while the only sounds were the scraping of shoes and rattle of glass made by the two men as they pushed themselves to their feet to stand stupidly, staring, trying to comprehend what had happened.

Sergeant Kruse took the call at his desk. Minutes later he was in his car headed for Forest Hills. It was a good twenty-five minute drive through traffic and Kruse had more

than enough time to wonder what was bugging him about this case. He had no doubt that the bomb in Forest Hills would turn out to be the work of whoever had sent the letters. Maybe Johnny was right. Maybe this wasn't the work of just another kook. Nowhere in the files had he been able to find a parallel series of letters or even anyone who had chosen multiple victims for their crazy plots. Now there was this bomb. Without exception the people in what was called the 'kook file' were harmless or were currently held in an institution. Pointedly, none of those who had managed to do some damage had ever given prior warning to their targets. It didn't add up. At that moment Sergeant Kruse felt that nothing was going to work out right with this case.

When he reached the IRS Station Kruse saw that the expected crowd was on hand. He wondered, as always, where they came from, how they found out about such things. He also saw Johnny Stain's car wedged in between two patrol vehicles. Then they'd managed to reach him by radio.

A dozen uniformed men were keeping people away from the actual site of the explosion but others jammed the rest of the platform. Kruse bulled his way through to find Stain squatting on his heels beside a gaping hole in the platform. Two news photographers were rapidly taking pictures.

"Hi, Johnny. Did you do that?"

Stain looked up with a grin. "Yeah, nice job, huh?"

Kruse surveyed the scene. Thick dust, heavily trampled by many feet lay all about the ragged gap in the platform. A vertical H-beam that supported the roof was bowed slightly but there appeared to be no overhead damage.

"Did you find anything?" he asked.

Stain stood with a shrug indicating his evidence case. "Enough." He waved at the crowd of people. "They probably got most of it. I don't think it makes much difference. I got pieces of battery and clock. It looks like a simple timer setup. He used maybe four or five sticks." He pointed to the vertical column. "Sec where those H-beam flanges are bent out at floor level? It looks like the bomb was tucked under a bench that sat here and right up against the H-beam. I scraped some fibers off that steel. I figure they'll turn out to be brown paper bag. The guy probably just sat down on the bench, dropped the bag and kicked it back against the H-beam. Then he gets up and leaves. Nobody notices and nobody is going to bother a dirty paper bag even if he sees it under the bench. Simple." Stain leaned over and snapped shut the catches on his evidence case.

Kruse looked glum. "In other words we ain't got much."

Johnny Stain's grin was wolfish

as he fished out a cigarette. He talked through the smoke as he lit it. "Oh, we know something," he said. "We know the guy's serious."

"Witnesses?" asked Kruse.

Stain shook his head. "Nobody on the platform. Two men, one a ticket agent, in the waiting room, got cut up a little by flying glass. They went to the hospital."

Kruse heaved a sigh and bent down to pick up Stain's evidence case. "Looks like this is all the good I can do here." As he straightened a thought struck him. "By the way, how soon did you get here?"

"Five or six minutes. I happened to be in the neighborhood talking to one of the Captain's kooky friends."

"Which one?"

Stain smiled thinly. "You don't know him. He's not in the files."

Kruse might have said more but two reporters who had been waiting for them to show signs of leaving came up to beg for a statement. Stain wouldn't give them anything though they badgered him all the way to his car.

Getting into his own car, Kruse heard Stain's parting words to the disappointed newsmen. "Just tell them the police are mystified. They'll understand. They've read it before. Kruse grinned and started his engine.

The Captain was not in a good mood the next morning when the lab report came in. He had already

talked to, or rather, been talked to by the Police Commissioner and two City Councilmen. The Captain had tried to sound cheerfully optimistic. He had sounded false in his own ears. Now this lab report indicated they had really nothing to work on. He told his secretary to get Johnny Stain in there for him.

"You get your copy of the lab report?"

Stain nodded.

"Well?"

"It was what I figured. A two dollar clock, untraceable. Ordinary batteries, untraceable. Standard brand dynamite used by most construction outfits in the area, probably untraceable except to a recent theft." He paused.

"And?" asked the Captain.

For some reason this irritated Stain. He sat up abruptly. "And what? That's it! We've got nothing to go on. I've got robbery checking out the dynamite. They won't find out anything. Kruse and I are down in interrogation talking one at a time to every nut in the city. It won't do any good. What else do you want to know?" He subsided back in his chair and dug out a smoke.

The Captain would have enjoyed throwing Stain out of his office at that moment, but the knowledge that he might very well need him now made him control his anger.

"All right, all right. I know you're working. What I'd like to get is your opinion of the case."

Johnny Stain was only partly mollified. "Why didn't you say so?"

The Captain spread his hands in despair.

Stain relented. "OK. I think we got a very smart cookie who is trying to make us think we're dealing with a nut."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, in the first place the thing is too well planned. Look, every Monday for three weeks we get warning letters sent to the various companies. Why? None of these companies has increased its rates recently. It doesn't make sense."

"Like a nut," said the Captain.

"Not like a nut," said Johnny. "Not out of the blue like that. It takes something to trigger a nut. Then look how careful he is to see that nothing he's used can be traced. Again, not like a nut. They get too excited to be careful. No, this guy is going to pull something."

"Like what?"

"That's the catch. You can't expect me to give you everything. But my guess is that we won't get anywhere until he tries whatever it is he wants to do. Then we'll have something hard to go on and we can maybe trace it back to our boy."

The Captain shook his head. "I don't know. That's pretty complicated."

A thin smile formed on Johnny's mouth. "I think we're dealing with a pretty complicated character."

"And in the meantime we sit around and wait."

"That's about it. But, somehow I don't think it'll be for long. He's really started the thing with that bomb yesterday. I think he'll maybe pull one or two more like that and then get down to business."

"Well, goddamnit, I hope it won't be long." The Captain's irritation returned at the thought of waiting. "The papers are already asking about the letters. I've had photostats printed up for them."

"Good, let 'em have them. They know we're hauling in kooks by the dozen. Maybe their stories will convince the guy we're buying his story and things will move faster."

"God, I hope so," said the Captain. "The Commissioner is already on my back."

Johnny Stain rose. "Maybe I ought to be glad I'm still a lieutenant. Well, I better get back downstairs. Kruse is probably biting his wrists by now."

The Captain hardly heard the last. He was pushing the button for his secretary and formulating in his mind what he would tell the reporters. He wondered how best to hint that he had a private theory of the reasons behind the letters that would appear on tomorrow's front pages.

The next day's headlines should have gratified the Captain for along with closeups of the letters there were shots in each paper of his handing the photostats to reporters

and a definite implication in the story that the Captain knew more than he was telling. Unfortunately, there was the screaming announcement: "2ND EXPLOSION WRECKS TRANSFORMER!"

It had happened about midnight and power had been lost for nearly four hours in one of the city's better residential areas. Pressure was mounting rapidly. This time the call from the Commissioner had got the Captain out of bed. But another he received shortly after he arrived in his office disturbed him more.

As before, the investigation by Stain and Kruse had yielded nothing positive. Precisely the same kind of bomb had been used. There were no witnesses.

Both men showed the signs of lost sleep when they came in that morning. They were not pleased to hear they were wanted immediately in the Captain's office.

The Captain's message was brief. Robert Anselm Hadley, President of National City Bank, had called and wanted to see the man who was handling the case.

"Did he say what he wanted?" asked Stain.

"He didn't want to talk over the phone."

The corners of Stain's mouth drew down. "Big deal," he said.

"My God, be careful what you say to him, Johnny." There was pleading in the Captain's voice. "Hadley can cause more trouble

than any dozen people in this town."

"How?"

"Don't be funny. You know who he is as well as I do."

Johnny nodded. "Money," he said. "Maybe this thing will start to make sense now."

Robert Hadley had his offices on the top floor of the National City Bank building. Both Kruse and Stain were suitably impressed when they were ushered onto the deep pile carpet to face the massive, carved ebony desk. Hadley was on the phone. He did not look up as his secretary showed them to comfortable leather chairs.

Robert Hadley was a man nearing sixty. He looked older. His face was thin and lined, his expression severe. What hair he had lay flat and grey, close to his skull. The words he spoke into the phone were clipped and economical. He did not keep them waiting long.

When he had put down the phone his eyes jumped quickly from one man to the other. "Which one of you is in charge?"

Stain answered. "I am. I'm Lieutenant Stain. This is my partner . . ."

Hadley cut him off. "This is not a social occasion. I asked you here for a reason. I'd like to make this as brief as possible. I'm a busy man."

Johnny Stain did not like to be treated this way. He expressed himself by sliding into the relaxed

position with his legs crossed that so irritated the Captain. He took his time lighting a cigarette and stared through the smoke at Hadley. He would not speak first.

"Well?" Hadley's tone was abrupt.

"It's your ball, Mr. Hadley. You called us," said Stain.

Hadley's gaze was icy but he did not betray any irritation as he reached into a drawer and drew forth some papers. "Very well. I noticed in the paper this morning some photographs of threatening letters received by the utility companies of this city. They have to do, I believe, with the two recent bombings."

Stain nodded.

"It might interest you to know that I have received three similar letters, and if the papers are correct, on the same dates as the others."

Hadley offered the papers, his arm only just outstretched. To get them Stain had to get to his feet and lean over the huge desk. It rather ruined his pose.

He only glanced at the letters before he asked, "Why didn't you let us know about these before?"

Hadley did not hesitate. "I merely assumed they were sent by a disgruntled employee. That would hardly have been of interest to the police."

"Then why did you save them?"

"It occurred to me that something might come up that would indicate who sent them. If it had,

I would have fired the man and thrown the letters away."

It was apparent the man knew his own mind. Stain hadn't disturbed him in the least. Now he looked at the letters Hadley had given him. The wording was only slightly different than in the messages sent to the utility companies. As with the others the words had been cut from magazines and pasted onto blank typing paper.

YOU PERSONALLY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR UTILITY COMPANY RATES. THE PEOPLE OF THIS CITY ARE BEING RUINED. SOME OF OUR BABIES ARE STARVING. LOWER YOUR RATES OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES. DYNAMITE CAN COST YOU MORE. THIS IS YOUR FIRST WARNING.

Again the letters had been signed 'Justice for all' and in turn the warning line read second warning and final warning. Stain shoved the letters into the file he carried.

"What would you like us to do with them, Mr. Hadley?" he asked. The question was senseless and Stain knew it. He only wanted to get the older man's reaction, ruffle him if he could.

"Do? I don't care what you do with them. I had assumed you would want any material having to do with the madman who is exploding those bombs." Hadley's voice, high and rather light, carried no emotion whatever.

Stain pressed on. "Do you have any idea why they were sent to you?"

"I sit as Chairman of the Board for the power company and am a director of the other two utilities. That would seem explanation enough."

"You don't think there is anything personal in this? You don't have any enemies?"

This time Hadley did react. He smiled very slightly. "You have a ridiculous sense of the dramatic, Lieutenant. But I will answer your questions. No, I do not think these letters have to do with me personally. Yes, there are people who do not like me, who might be called enemies, but none of them, I think, are insane."

"I only asked because I thought you might like to have us assign someone to you for protection," said Stain, watching Hadley narrowly.

Hadley's momentary smile vanished. He was icily contemptuous with his answer. "Now you are merely being stupid. I would like no such thing." He paused only slightly. "You have the letters. I don't think there is anything more to be said." He did not stand or hold out his hand but it was clear the interview was over.

Outside Kruse turned to Stain. "Boy, you really handled him."

"Yeah, I sure did," said Stain, shaking his head. "Kind of tough, isn't he?"

"Kind of. But what the hell made you ask if he wanted protection? You think maybe he'll get blown up?"

"I just wanted to see what he'd say."

"Well, you found out."

The Captain was not happy when he saw the three letters Hadley had received. "Christ, now what?" he said. What did he want us to do? Is he sore?"

"Nothing. He didn't ask us to do a thing. I don't know if he was sore. It's hard to tell about a man like him."

"My God," the Captain worried. "The trouble he could make with one phone call."

"I don't think he'll call anybody. I don't think he gives much of a damn."

"How about protection? Did you offer him protection?"

"Yeah, he wouldn't have it."

"That's good. I mean, it's good you offered. If anything happens we're in the clear." The Captain hesitated, picking up the letters Stain had put on his desk.

"Yeah, that's important, said Stain.

As he was leaving the office Stain stopped long enough for a parting remark. "By the way, I wouldn't give those letters to the newspapers. I don't think Mr. Hadley would like it." From the instant flush on the Captain's face he knew he'd scored. He was pleased.

As it turned out the Captain needn't have worried about Hadley's reaction to publicity. Early the next morning as he turned the ignition of his new Cadillac Robert Anselm Hadley ceased reacting to anything. Besides demolishing the car and Mr. Hadley, the force of the explosion smashed windows in houses on both sides of the street where he lived. His neighbors were very upset about the windows.

Word got out quickly. Even while Stain and Kruse were still picking at the ruins on the Cadillac, the Captain's phone became busy as never before. The pressure was unbearable. City Councilmen called, business leaders called. A man highly placed in the Governor's office called. The Police Commissioner called twice, the second time to ask if the Captain was certain he was happy in his job.

The Captain was not. He was even less happy when Stain and Kruse returned to say they had gathered no more useful evidence than they had at the two earlier explosions. It was too much for the Captain. There was the listlessness of defeat in his tone when he had finished questioning the two men.

"Well then, that's it, I suppose. We just keep going through the motions. We still have nothing to go on."

There was a moment of quiet in the room. Then Stain, from his comfortable collapse in his chair said

softly, "I don't think so, Captain."

It jerked the Captain awake. "What?"

"I think this is what we've been looking for." There was a hard, dark glitter to his eyes as he watched the Captain and a taut smile just barely drew up the corners of his mouth.

"Say what you mean for God's sake, Stain."

"The motive, Captain, the motive."

The Captain brightened a little. "Hadley?"

"Maybe. Hadley was rich. Kruse checked with his house servants, and it seems he has only one relative, a married niece. They said she and the old man didn't get along too well but he was a great family man. They guessed she'd inherit everything."

It was better than a straw. It could be a life preserver. The Captain grabbed at it. "Money! My God, I should have figured something like this. It's . . ." But then his face fell as another thought struck him. "But a woman . . . bombs . . . how could a woman. . . ?"

"She's got a husband, remember? said Stain, rising to his feet. "I think we'd better go talk to her anyway."

"Yes, sure, hurry up!" said the Captain. "And Stain, come straight in here when you get back." There was fearful hope in the Captain's eyes as he watched them leave.

In the car Kruse flipped open his notebook and repeated the information he had given Stain earlier. "Mrs. Selina Burdick, 1900 Ruddy-stone Drive, Boxwood Heights."

"Selina," said Stain. "A musical name."

Kruse was in deep thought, staring at the open book he held in one big hand. "Burdick," he mumbled. Then suddenly, "Say, isn't that the babe we had in on a hit and run last year?"

Stain turned his head to grin at his partner. "I wondered how long it would take you to remember."

"Yeah, well I was working with Charlie Sims then. I must have seen her when she was in for questioning a couple times. She was some dish, long black hair, blue eyes. That was your case wasn't it?" He looked at Stain a little strangely.

"Second hand. Joe Dorrance went to the hospital for an operation. I finished it up for him. I talked to her a couple times."

"I forgot what happened. What was she like?"

"The case was dropped, insufficient evidence. What was she like? Wait and see."

"So maybe she did it."

"What?"

"The hit and run."

Stain shrugged. "We couldn't prove it. We weren't even close enough to indict."

Kruse snapped his notebook shut. "Well, one thing's for sure. She

don't live in the same style as her Uncle Robert. This Boxwood Heights sounds good but it's pretty cheesy for a suburb."

Sergeant Kruse was right. The neighborhood they drove through before reaching the Burdick house looked worn, many of the lawns were untended, the construction in general seemed shoddy.

The Burdick house afforded some contrast. It was no better built than its neighbors but the grass was neatly clipped and the stucco exterior had a decent coat of paint.

"I wonder which one of them goes to all the trouble," said Kruse.

"What?"

"To keep up appearances." They got out of the car.

Selina Burdick was unquestionably a beautiful woman. She answered the door at their first ring and Kruse, at least, was forced to take an audible if involuntary breath at the sight of her. Her hair was jet, shoulder length; her eyes, a deep blue were only slightly marred by signs of weeping. Her mouth, swollen and sweet, was more than inviting; it was nearly a demand. Despite all this there was nothing blatant or artificial about her beauty. She was dressed conservatively, her makeup was no more than minimal. It was the woman, herself, who was astonishing.

She stood for a long moment staring at Johnny Stain. She said,

"I had a terrible feeling I would see you again."

Embarrassed, Kruse looked at his feet. Stain spoke. "I'm sorry it had to be under these circumstances."

With a slight movement of her shoulders she moved inside. They followed.

The living room they entered showed the same care as the outside of the house. There was no sign of dust or disarray. Here, though, there was greater evidence of a lack of money. The furniture was worn, the rugs not quite threadbare. The room obviously represented a struggle against adversity.

When they were seated Selina Burdick was the first to speak. "I suppose you're here because you think I had something to do with Uncle Robert's death." Her voice was controlled but it might have hidden a note of anger.

"We didn't say that, Mrs. Burdick," said Stain.

"You don't have to, Mr., er Lieutenant," she stopped. "I've forgotten your name."

Stain supplied it and introduced Kruse who looked as if he would have liked to get up to shake her hand.

"You don't have to tell me why you're here," she said. "The police aren't interested in facts, only in accusations."

"That's not quite fair, Mrs. Burdick," said Stain. "When we were

unable to get sufficient facts the hit and run case against you was dropped. We didn't persecute you."

"Maybe not from your point of view," she said, but her voice had lost some of its conviction.

"In any case," pursued Stain. "We only want to know if you can help us with this matter of your uncle's death. By the way, you know how he was killed, do you?"

"Tilden, one of the servants told me, an explosion."

"Yes. Well, somebody put a bomb in his car. Now, we'd like to know if you could tell us of anyone who hated your uncle enough to kill him, or who would benefit from his death."

"Hated him? I suppose you mean business. I never knew anything about his business." She waved her hands helplessly. "But I'm the only one who could benefit—that is, financially, from Uncle Robert's death. We were never a large family. I'm his only living relative."

Stain didn't say anything. Only looked at her questioningly.

She went on. "I don't suppose it would do any good to say we liked each other, Uncle Robert and I."

Still he said nothing, only looked appraisingly about the poorly furnished room. She became agitated.

"I know," she said. "You're wondering why we live like this. Why Uncle Robert didn't help us."

Stain nodded.

"You're going to find out anyway," she said, "So I might as well

tell you. My uncle didn't approve of my marriage. He wouldn't do anything as long as I lived with my husband."

"And how did your husband feel about your uncle?"

"Ralph? He—ah he didn't like him very much, naturally. They just didn't get along at all." Selina Burdick's eyes shuttered and she looked down at her hands twisting in her lap. The implication of what she had said hung heavy in the room.

Watching Stain question her, Kruse wondered if she was merely a fine actress or if she was really what she seemed. The obvious work that had gone into the house to make it presentable unnerved him. He couldn't imagine such a beautiful creature on her knees scrubbing these floors. Did she mow the lawn too? He bet she did. Kruse was beginning to dislike her husband without knowing anything about him.

"About your husband, Mrs. Burdick," Stain was saying. "What kind of work does he do?"

"He sells insurance," she said, clearly relieved to get off the subject of Ralph and her uncle.

"He's not doing too well, I take it," said Stain.

She was immediately defensive. "Well, he hasn't been at it long. He's tried other things. . . . It's just that they haven't worked out."

"Why not, Mrs. Burdick?"

Her reluctance to answer was

apparent as the silence stretched out. Finally she spoke. "It's not really his fault. Not entirely. He gets depressed. The only thing that makes him feel any better is drinking."

"Your husband is an alcoholic?"

Selina Burdick nodded miserably, then choked, then her face crumpling said, "Excuse me, just a minute," and ran from the room.

That did it for Kruse. Now he hated the son-of-a-bitch. "How do you like that," he said. "A beautiful girl like that and a lush." He shook his head ponderously. "What was he like? Did you meet him on that other case?"

"I met him. He's a lush. He's quite a bit older than she is, too. In his forties, I think."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty six or seven, I forget. He married her when she was just a kid, seventeen. Eloped with her."

"My God, I wonder why she never got a divorce?"

Stain smiled thinly. "I wonder," he said.

"Don't you think we better find out?"

Stain was nodding his answer to that as Selina Burdick came back into the room.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm very upset." Before they could protest she hurried on. "Of course, I'm aware that I sound like I'm blaming my husband. I'm not. These things happen to people. One thing I'm certain of, though, is that Ralph

would never have the courage to . . ." her voice broke, "to do anything to my uncle. He just isn't that kind of man."

Stain caught a meaningful look from Kruse. "I wonder if you'd tell us what your relationship is with your husband. Would you say it was satisfactory, a happy marriage?"

"You want to know why I haven't divorced him, is that it?"

Stain nodded.

Kruse' respect for her increased. No nonsense, she gets right to the point, he thought.

Mrs. Burdick gazed pointedly into Stain's eyes. "I'm not the kind of person who goes back on a bargain," she said. "Quite apart from that there has never been a divorce in my family. My uncle told me quite frankly that if I ever became a divorced woman he would cut me off without a cent."

Damned if she did and damned if she didn't, thought Kruse. He felt sorrier for her than ever.

Stain got to his feet as if ready to leave. "Where is your husband now, Mrs. Burdick?"

"Working, I suppose. Or maybe drunk. He's been pretty upset the past few weeks."

Stain glanced significantly at Kruse. "One more thing, Mrs. Burdick. Has it occurred to you there might be a connection between the recent bombings of utility companies and your uncle's death?"

"What?" She seemed surprised

by the question. "Oh that. I haven't paid much attention . . . only what I saw on television. Why, *is* there a connection?"

"We're not sure," said Stain starting for the door. Then he turned. "Oh yes, can you tell me if your husband has any kind of a workroom, a place where he does repairs, that sort of thing. The basement, maybe?"

Again she seemed surprised. "Why yes, the garage. He used to like to work with his hands quite a bit."

"Does he still use it?"

"Well, yes, sometimes. But I don't think he does much work anymore."

"You mean he goes there to drink?"

She was on the defensive again. "He just likes to be by himself once in a while."

Stain nodded. "I wonder if you'd mind showing us the garage."

She made as if to say something and then stopped. She lifted her hands. "I can't. I don't have a key."

"How long has it been since you were in the garage?"

"I don't know, a year—two years. Ralph doesn't like me to bother him when he's there and he keeps it locked the rest of the time."

"The windows too?"

"I don't know. I never tried them. Why? Why do you want to know? What's so important about the garage?" she cried.

"Do you mind if we try the windows, Mrs. Burdick?"

She shook her head slowly from side to side. "No, I guess not. You will anyway, won't you." It was not a question.

Stain motioned for her to lead the way and they followed her through the house to a side door.

They found only two windows set in the garage walls. Both were solidly locked and besides that had bars set in the sills behind the glass. Stain turned to Mrs. Burdick.

"I forgot about the bars. Ralph had them put in a long time ago. He said he had valuable tools he didn't want stolen."

Stain ignored that. "Mrs. Burdick, I'd like to have your permission to break that door in."

She stared at him wonderingly. "You're looking for something, aren't you?"

Stain nodded.

"If I said no, would you get a warrant and do it anyway?"

He nodded again.

"Then what good would it do to say no?" she turned on her heel and made for the house. "If you want me for anything I'll be inside."

The door was not difficult to force. Kruse got a bar from the car and after a few heaves it swung wide and they stepped inside.

The place was a shambles. Dirt and debris lay everywhere. A stack of old lumber lay in one corner, engine parts covered with grease were in another. Much of the wall space was taken up with homemade

cabinets. There had not been room for a car in there for a long time. Kruse fumbled for lights; even with the door open the place was dim. He found the switch and the sudden brilliance was startling. There were lights in two rows in strip fixtures hung from the ceiling. Now it was possible to see that the place might once have been a very acceptable workshop. Unfortunately, the light only served to make the dirt and disorder more apparent.

"My God, what a mess," said Kruse. "Well it sure proves one thing."

"What's that?"

"Mrs. Burdick hasn't been in here. Did you see how she keeps that house?"

Stain grinned. "Yeah."

They looked around. There were three work benches set against the walls. Two of them were piled high with tools and miscellaneous junk, the third was swept clean. Kruse went over to it.

"Copper wire, cutting pliers, screwdriver, a couple other things. Not enough to make a bomb with but that wire would come in handy."

"Let's go through the cabinets."

It took longer than it should have because things were piled in such helter skelter fashion. Both men were soon dirty and sweating. They might not have bothered. They found nothing. Kruse snatched up a rag to wipe his hands. He started to bring it to his face but then

looked at it and threw it down in disgust.

Stain fished out a cigarette, ignoring the dirt on his hands. "Looks like we goofed," he said.

"Yeah," said Kruse in a disappointed tone. He stepped back, stumbled and cursed. Then he stood staring at the floor. A plank walkway about three feet wide had been laid over the concrete of the garage floor. It stretched the length of the garage in front of the workbenches. Stepping back off this had made Kruse stumble. Now he stared at the planking as if fascinated.

"I see what you mean," said Stain.

It took only a moment to strip away the planking though they got their hands dirtier still. It proved to be worth it. A small lined pit sunk in the concrete floor held everything they had expected to find. In a wooden box were wrapped packages of dynamite, the right brand, several batteries and three cheap alarm clocks. Beside the box was a stack of magazines. Kruse picked one up and fanned a few pages. They could see the holes where letters had been scissored out.

This time Kruse wiped his face as well as his hands on the dirty rag. Stain went outside. The clean air was good after the musty smell of the garage. Kruse joined him, his face solemn.

When he had first seen the pit Kruse had been so elated he had

shouted "Got the bastard!" and had nearly done a jig on the floor of the garage. Now, he was thinking of Mrs. Burdick's reaction.

"You gonna tell her?" he asked Stain.

"No, you are. She's had enough from me."

Kruse didn't like the idea but he couldn't think of a good argument that would get him out of it. Still, he hesitated.

Stain was impatient. "Don't tell her everything. Just say we have to talk to him. Get his description from her and then call the Captain. Tell him to get out an APB on Burdick and ask him to send all the technical people out here. We'll give him the details when we get back."

Kruse looked at him. He still hadn't moved.

"Well?" snapped Stain.

"I was just wondering about that little lady in there. Do you think she figures in this?" There was a menacing rumble to Kruse' tone.

"Do you?" asked Stain.

"Hell no, I don't. Never mind the last two years, I'd swear she ain't never been in that garage. Look at that mess. It just ain't her style. There's nothing to connect her with it at all as far as I can see. Why, she don't even have a key to the place."

"All right. I don't see how we can connect her in either."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Johnny," Kruse said, grinning. "I'd have hated to disagree with you right in front of the Captain."

Stain waved him toward the house, then watched as the big man trudged up the steps. Kruse was a damned good man to have on your side, he thought.

Suddenly relieved of the awful pressure from above to solve this case, The Captain was uncommonly generous in his praise of the two men who had worked on it under him. He even went so far as to say to the press that he mightn't have solved it at all if it hadn't been for the sterling efforts of Lieutenant Stain and Sergeant Kruse.

The District Attorney, too, was pleased. The case was a simple one, he felt, and he agreed wholeheartedly that Mrs. Burdick should be kept as much as possible out of the picture. If he didn't see quite how a sodden wreck like Ralph Burdick could work out such a basically clever plan by himself, much less accomplish what he did, the District Attorney was not foolish enough to complicate matters by voicing his doubts aloud. A number of influential citizens had called to express their relief and gratification that a homicidal maniac was so speedily being brought to justice. It showed, they said, that the city administration was on its toes. Adding to the District Attorney's feeling of well-being were the extremely satisfying headlines he got. It helps to have one's efforts appreciated.

The case had what might be termed a whirlwind finish. Burdick

had been picked up drunk in a tavern the same afternoon Stain and Kruse found the incriminating pit in the garage. It hadn't helped his case at all when the arresting officer's testified that he had been clutching a newspaper extra announcing the death of his wife's uncle, shouting that he was rich, and trying to buy drinks for everybody in the bar when they found him.

Burdick protested his innocence, of course, but he made a poor showing when, against his lawyer's advice, he took the witness stand. He kept saying he was being framed and he never did seem to understand what the letters to the utility companies and the explosions that wrecked an IRS station and a power transformer had to do with Robert Hadley's death.

The jury knew he was lying. The District Attorney took them right down the line of the diabolical plot. He explained that the letters and the first two explosions had merely been a cover for the real crime, and that, indeed, the authorities had been convinced that a madman was out to terrorize the city. They had even been prepared to see the death of Robert Hadly as the work of this deranged mentality. Only the work of two alert police officers had thwarted the scheme. He further asked the jury to consider what Ralph Burdick had planned to do with the dynamite and batteries and clocks still in his pos-

session. He wondered if all the people who sat on that jury might still be alive had Ralph Burdick not been apprehended before he could construct another bomb.

Only one slight criticism was leveled at Selina Burdick during the trial. It was pointed out to her by reporters that the lawyer retained for her husband's defense was young, and inexperienced and she could have afforded the best. Pale and wan, Selina answered that she couldn't bring herself to spend her uncle's money to defend the man who might have killed him and just didn't have enough of her own to do better. The criticism stopped.

Four months after his convictions Burdick's mandatory appeal was denied by the appellate court. A last minute plea to the Governor met a like fate. The Governor had been a personal friend of Robert Hadley. A few weeks later Ralph Burdick was done to death to the greater glory of the State and for the betterment of the people. He was not mourned.

On the morning following the execution Johnny Stain walked into The Captain's office and tossed his badge into The Captain's lap. He told The Captain what he could do with his lousy job and then went into some detail to express the low esteem in which he held The Captain, himself. It took him quite a little while. Then, pleased with himself, he went to his own office and began to clear out his desk. He

was moodily watched by Sergeant Kruse.

"I was kind of wondering if you'd move out today," Kruse said at last.

"I was kind of wondering when you'd start to wonder," said Johnny, but he didn't stop getting his things together.

"It was some time after the trial," admitted Kruse. "By then it was too late. Nobody would have listened. I don't think it would have done much good earlier. I had nothing to go on. It was all in my head."

"I figured you'd see that, too," said Johnny. He snapped the catches on the small bag he'd put his stuff in.

"Yeah," said Kruse. Then he added softly, "be careful, Johnny."

After so many months of being alone, of sleeping alone, of being watchful day and night, never permitting himself a single mistake, not relaxing for an instant, Johnny Stain was very near exhaustion. Nevertheless, he made love that night with an intensity and passion he had never known before. Afterwards, side by side, they talked. He smoked a cigarette and watched the smoke rise.

"Oh, Johnny. It's been so long, so long," she cried.

"I know. I know," he said.

"I was so afraid sometimes. I was terrified. What if something had gone wrong?" She was trembling.

"Sshh. It's all finished. Nothing

went wrong. There's nothing more to worry about."

"It was the waiting that was the worst."

"I know," he said. "For me too."

Suddenly she rolled over to hug

him fiercely. "Oh Johnny, I love you so."

"I love you too, Selina," he murmured. He breathed her hair.

"Selina, Selina," he whispered.

"What a musical sound."



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TWO WEEKS WITH PAY

The band did a flourish, and they all drank a toast to their good pal, Frank. A fist fight broke out on the dance floor, over who was Frank's best friend.

BY
ERNEST
CHAMBERLAIN

AT eight o'clock on a beautiful Saturday morning in June Frank Wilhite headed his blue Buick south out of Chicago on U.S. 41. Destination—Miami, Florida, and parts unknown. Most people took Florida vacations in the wintertime, if they could, but Frank had picked June because the rates were lower at the motels and on the fishing boats, and when he had put in for his vacation last year he had been concerned about things like that. The picture was different now, and it didn't matter what time of

year it was. The way it had all turned out, winter would have been much better for Frank, but if he did what he had to do in a big hurry, it would still be all right. Eunice was in the back of the car, all by herself, which was the place for her, under the circumstances.

There was a lot of traffic on the highway, and Frank drove carefully; his palms were soon sweaty from gripping the wheel, and the first faint traces of one of his headaches began to appear. He blinked his eyes at the Illinois-Indiana state line marker and followed the red map line in his mind down the western edge of the Hoosier state. Every now and then a grim smile would touch his lips, and he would mumble something to Eunice. He stared through the windshield at the hard ribbon of concrete, glaring in the bright sun. The headache was worsening.

Without thinking about it Frank manipulated the gas pedal with his toe, keeping the speedometer needle at a steady 55. He didn't want—couldn't afford—a run-in with the highway patrol. He stopped once for gas, then continued south. Terre Haute; Vincennes; Evansville. The headache had settled down to a dull throb, and he patiently waited it out, because when they hit him nothing helped but time; they came and went as they pleased.

Frowning at the pain, he drove on. Just out of Evansville he crossed the big bridge over the Ohio river,

into Kentucky, on south. Henderson, two miles, the sign said. He pulled left, across the four lane highway, into a truck stop. Time for more gas and something to eat. Maybe a beer or two, though he knew he shouldn't have any, because he knew all too well what alcohol did to him sometimes; made him forget, for one thing. But he forgot a lot of things anyway. A couple wouldn't hurt anything though, and besides, it was a special occasion. His mouth gathered saliva at the thought of a cold beer. Time — 4:30 P.M.

Frank got out and walked around behind the car. The luggage compartment was locked, but he tested the handle anyway. Eunice was tricky. But she'd probably never talk her way out of there—not with it locked good and tight. He chuckled and thought about the fit Eunice would have if she could see what he had used her hat box for, and how he had thrown her favorite hat in the trash can. It always looked silly on her, anyway.

He leaned close to the trunk lid and whispered, "After all these years of yelling about money, how does it feel to be in there with \$100,000 dollars, Eunice?" He stood there chuckling and talking to her. He shut up when the station attendant came toward the car. When the tank had been filled and the oil checked Frank parked the car out of the way, between two big trucks, and walked toward the

restaurant. The headache was gone.

Two weeks. That's just about how long it'll be before they find out the money's gone. He could picture the scene back at the bank—the excited whispering—"That funny little Wilhite!" "Where do you think he could have gone?" "And all that money!" "His wife must have known about it, too!" Frank chuckled again when he thought about the extra two weeks pay. They'd actually paid him to loot the bank. All in cash—all covered by his own figure manipulating. He had all the time he'd need to get so far away they'd never find him or any trace of him. Or Eunice. . . .

Visions of palm lined avenues and beautiful, warm, golden sunshine flowed through Frank's head. He could fish. He could swim. He could just loaf when he wanted to. He hadn't had the money long, and had never spent a cent of it yet, but he had planned the job for so long that he had the feeling of earnership and ownership; he was beginning to feel the power that went with both.

Maybe he'd go to Mexico City. Rio. Honolulu. And he'd have a lot of beautiful women, following him around like puppy dogs. All tall, and all quiet. A man could have all the women he wanted, when he had money. Then it struck the middle of his head, and some of the pain flashed back—he still had Eunice, too—in the back of the car. As fast as the thought came in, it went out. **Maybe now he could do**

something about the headaches. No operations, though—they'd never cut his head open.

A little chill rippled up his back, even though it was a warm, muggy day, when he thought about the cold, cold winters in Chicago. How many? For years he'd wanted to get away. He'd wanted to chuck the job at the bank—the house—the whole rut he'd been in and take off, maybe out west somewhere, but Eunice wouldn't hear of it. Why hadn't he done it a long time ago? It had been easy, once he had made his mind up. Some people were built for snow and cold and nagging wives, to live out their days in a clock regulated world, but not Frank. It was enough to drive a man nuts, living that way from day to day. Some people would have cracked up, putting up with what he had. Some people would have turned out like some of the nuts in that hospital Eunice had stuck him in. Last week? . . . Last year? . . . They'd never get him in there again. Even some of the doctors had been nuttier than fruit cakes . . . all those stupid questions . . . but that was all in the past. Finished. Dead. Dead? Eunice was dead. What had happened to poor Eunice? Nag, nag, nag. No more, Eunice. No more. . . .

Frank froze in his tracks when he saw the big, shiny car. The one with the chrome-plated siren on the fender, and the big, red light on top. The one marked "Sheriff" in

big, gold letters. The police! What are they doing here? He shook his head to clear it and laughed at himself. Who's worried about the police? Police are like cockroaches—you've got 'em everywhere. His eyes narrowed. Police had come and helped put him in that hospital, hadn't they? They were all against him. He'd have to watch out for them.

He watched the cars whizzing up and down the highway, and wondered how many of them had their wives in the trunk compartment? Their wives and a hundred thousand dollars? He walked on to the restaurant, pushed the door open, and went inside.

The cool, air-conditioned-air hit him a pleasant blow. There they were—down at the end of the counter where they could watch everyone who came in. Everything about them was big; hats, stars, guns—stomachs. Big slob types. Frank was big, too. A hundred grand big. They probably took home about a hundred bucks a week. He climbed up onto a stool and sneaked a look at the Fat-Bat-Mastersons. They looked at him, and he jerked his eyes away. They continued eating, but they were watching him—he could tell.

He knew their kind, all right. About a 7th grade education and usually all set to prove it. Like that dumb guard at the bank—watching for bank robbers and people who stole ballpoint pens, while he walked

out with a hundred grand. The pain eased in a final knife-stroke.

The food odors coming from the kitchen made Frank realize how hungry he was. He couldn't remember when he had eaten last. Must have been sometime yesterday, because he couldn't remember eating anything today. Didn't stop at all on the way down from Chicago, except once for gas. A steak. He'd have a steak, bigger than he could eat, and just get up and walk away from whatever was left. He could tip big, too. No more squeezing nickles for Eunice. He'd have a beer first, while he waited for the steak.

Frank's eyes bugged at the tall, good looking waitress coming toward him. He stared. She smiled, and he felt like telling her about the money out in the car with Eunice. *You see, I'm not married anymore, and I've got a lot of money. How would you like to come and go to Rio with me? We'll fly by jet, of course.* He picked up the menu.

Frank slugged the first glass of cold beer and it tasted great. He felt it rushing down his throat and into his stomach with a satisfying wallop. He could feel it run out to his fingertips and down to his toes. He thought about how long it had been since he had tasted anything quite so good. Eunice wouldn't let him drink anything at all since he got out of the hospital. He mustn't think about the hospital. When he thought about the hospital he got nervous and excited and he didn't

want to get that way today. He had to stay calm . . . he had to find a place for Eunice. . . .

He refilled his glass, sipped at it, and sneaked a look at the two cops again, who were kidding with the waitress. She was giggling at something one of them had said. Frank glared at them with hatred. He'd never ask her to go to Rio with him; not if she was the kind who liked to talk to cops. A chip came out of his brain, walked out onto his shoulder, and sat there, belligerently. Slobs. All of them. The broad, too. He could buy and sell them all. He gulped his beer and ordered another, looking contemptuously at the waitress.

"Traveling far?"

It was a few seconds before Frank realized one of the cops had spoken to him. He swallowed another mouthful of beer and looked at the two deputies. His hand, holding the glass, trembled slightly.

"You talking to me?"

What now? Twenty-questions time? Just like cockroaches—everywhere. Getting so a man can't go anywhere without cops starting to ask questions—just like Russia, that's what it is—just like Russia. Fatboy'd flip if he knew he was sitting next to an embezzler. *How'd you like to arrest an embezzler—and a murderer—Fatboy? They'd make you head-high-sheriff—maybe even mayor—if you caught me. Murderer? What about murder?* Frank shook his head to clear it.

"See you're from Chicago," Fat-boy said.

The chip turned around on Frank's shoulder, to get in a better position. How does he know you're from Chicago? . . . maybe just guessing . . . but anyway, what difference does it make? A lot of people are from up north and come driving down through this hick state, but does that make them all from Chicago? . . .

"What makes you think I'm from Chicago?"

Who do they think they are, going around questioning a man just because he happened to drive up and come in a place where they are? Getting to be a regular police state. Maybe they know something . . . but how could they? . . . nobody knows anything back in Chicago, except that Eunice and me left for our vacation. Maybe some of those nosy neighbors got to snooping around! I'll bet that woman next door! . . .

"You drove up in a blue Buick, didn't you?"

They don't know anything . . . how could they? . . . still . . .

"Yeah."

"Saw your Cook County tag when you pulled up to the pumps." The big deputy looked closely at Frank. "You feeling okay, fella?"

"What do you mean, am I feeling okay?"

"You look a little sick, or something."

Frank forced a smile. "Little

tired from too much driving, I guess. Two weeks vacation and trying to get to Kentucky Lake before it starts, I guess. Little tired."

"Yeah," the cop said. "Better take it a little easy. Guy gets tired driving, dozes, bingo! Pick 'em up all the time. This's one of the worst stretches of highway in the country, along here. Thought you looked a little tired, or didn't feel too good." He smiled and pointed to the beer. "Better take it easy on that stuff, too. The city boys up ahead are tough on drinking and driving."

"What do you mean? Can't a man have a beer or two in this state without you guys telling him to take it easy? The stuff's legal, isn't it? Why, I—" Frank cut it off, realizing, suddenly, there was no point in making a thing out of it. Just like cockroaches.

The beer, on an empty stomach, had made him a little dizzy, but it wasn't any of the cops' business. Just like Eunice—always somebody telling you what to do. I'll drink all the damn beer I want. I'll drink anything I want, anytime I want, and it's my own business. *Better take it easy on that stuff!* You mind your own business, Buster, and I'll take care of mine. How much you make? How much you take home, Buster? The pain edged back, and the room blurred. The waitress brought his steak, but suddenly he wasn't hungry.

"Going to get in a little fishing,"

he said. "Taking a two weeks vacation—with pay." He giggled. He blinked his eyes against the pain. *Why in the hell can't people let me alone?*

The two deputies left at 5:15 P.M., cruising north.

Frank left at 5:19 P.M., headed south.

He left a \$10 dollar bill on the floor of the restaurant, a cursing waitress, a cloud of dust, and four cars in the ditch where they had gone to keep from smashing into the blue Buick when he roared out of the truckstop driveway.

At 5:20 P.M. the two deputies heard the APB crackling over their radio. ". . . *Chicago June 13th . . . pick up and hold for Chicago police . . . Frank Wilhite, WMA, 42, five-nine, 140, sand-colored hair parted on left, thick-lensed eyeglasses . . . last seen driving blue Buick south U.S. 41 . . . Illinois license number TU dash one-four-four-four . . . wanted questioning . . . embezzlement . . . murder . . .*"

At 5:21 P.M. the big deputy behind the wheel spun the cruiser around and flicked on the siren. His partner reached for the hand-mike.

At 5:22 P.M., two-and-a-half miles from the truckstop, Frank saw the big LIQUOR-DANCING sign and turned into the driveway of Tucker's Tavern, just inside the Henderson city limits. He pulled around to the rear of the building and parked, in case any cops were

snooping around just because he happened to pull out in front of a couple of cars. His hands were shaking again; he wanted something stronger than beer this time. He was walking around to the entrance when the sheriff's cruiser roared past on the highway.

By 5:45 P.M. the area within a 100 mile radius of Henderson, Kentucky, was tied down as tight as East Berlin, and the only way you could get out of Henderson itself was to *not* be Frank Wilhite. If you were to drive through in a blue Buick you were sure to be checked out. Frank was happily drinking vodka and orange juice, buying drinks for the house, and dancing with a tall, good looking brunette. He was blissfully unaware of the search being made for him.

At 6:32 P.M. Johnny Tucker put in a call for four of his off duty waitresses; put in a long distance call to Evansville, across the river, and made arrangements for four tall, good looking call girls, who would be over as soon as a cab could get them there; shoved six tables together near the dance floor; then took off his apron and joined the growing party of his new friend, the bank president from Chicago. Johnny knew a spender when he saw one.

At 9:05 P.M. Frank wobbled out to the Buick. He had to have some more money. No one could ever say he wasn't a good sport. When he opened the trunk-lid he didn't

say a word to Eunice; just shoved the hatbox out of the way, stuffed his pockets with hundred dollar bills from the small suitcase, and went back inside.

The party was going full blast. No one had missed him, until he returned, then they all wanted to know where he had been. Frank jumped up on a table, pulled out a roll of bills, and yelled, "I've been out making some more money! Here's a fresh batch!" They all laughed and cheered at Frank's big joke, and told each other what a swell guy old Frank was. The band did a flourish, and they all drank a toast to their good pal, Frank. A fist fight broke out on the dance floor, over who was Frank's best friend.

Why couldn't everybody be like his new friends? They didn't care how much he drank. He put an arm around the beautiful, tall brunette, and pulled her close to him. She kissed him on the mouth, and Frank felt ten feet tall. Her name was Margie; Margie was going to Rio with him. She didn't care how much he drank, either. Why, every time his glass got empty she fixed him another drink. Margie wasn't like Eunice at all. Eunice? She'd give him hell when he got home this time. But he wasn't going

home—he **was** going to Rio. Pain jabbed at the base of his skull, and mushroomed through his head. *Dammit! Just when I'm having a good time for a change! Couldn't you wait?* He pressed a hand to his eyes. A siren screamed past, outside, and made the pain worse.

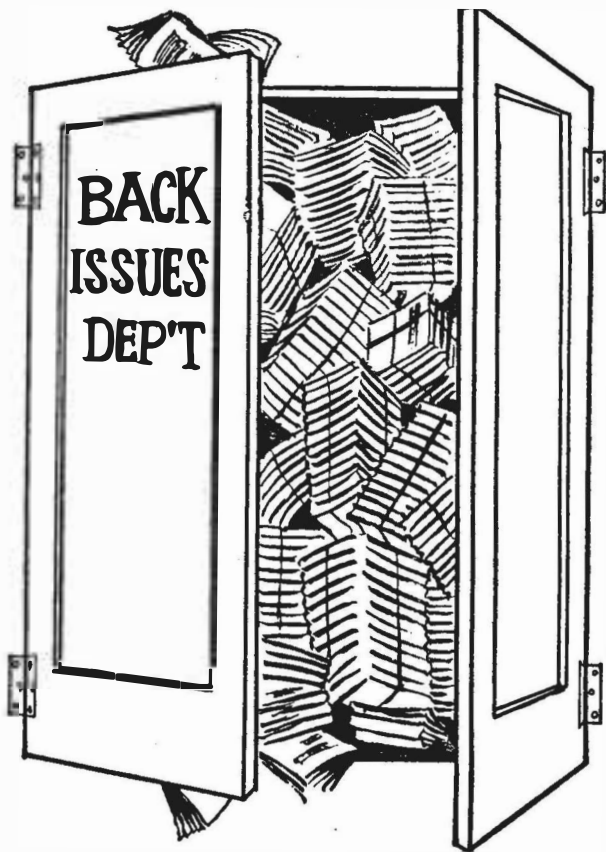
It was 11:50 P.M. when he saw Eunice. She was standing across the dance floor, watching him. When their eyes met she floated toward him—and he screamed. The scream ripped through the din . . . above the voices and laughter . . . the music . . . bounced from the ceiling back to the floor . . . around the walls . . . and brought sudden, every silence to the room. Eunice had stopped—her eyes wide—and was watching him.

No one moved when Frank ran out of the tavern, screaming wildly. When he came back, carrying a hatbox, they gave him plenty of room.

When the two big deputies came, at 12:02 A.M., Frank was sitting on the floor with the hatbox on his lap, babbling incoherently. The crowd was hushed, standing in a wide circle around him. Margie had her arm around Johnny Tucker, who had just come in from the blue Buick.

Neither one of the **deputies** would touch the hatbox.





If you missed any of the past issues of Manhunt you can still catch up while we clean out our files to make room for the new issues ahead. The issues available are listed on the facing page. Supplies are limited . . . so please hurry.

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Sergeant Weigand was a crack shot with a pistol. And there was no end to the ways he'd go about proving it.

SITTING DUCK

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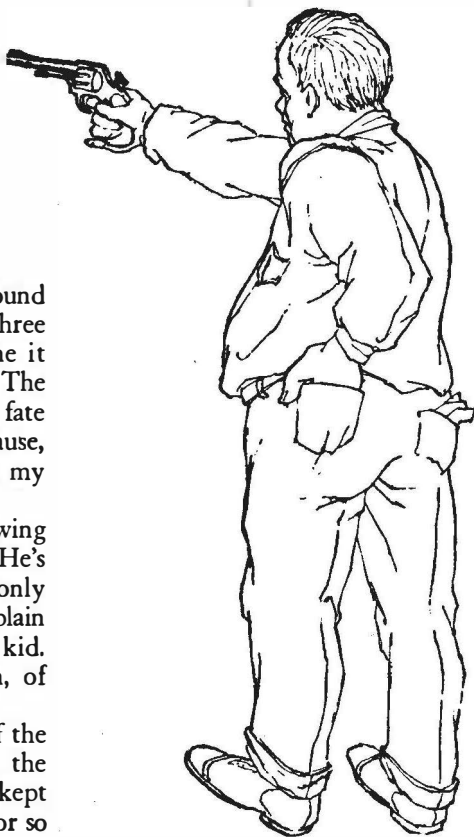
A
MANHUNT
CLASSIC

BY
ROBERT
TURNER

WE WORKED the clock around four of us at a time, in three shifts, so that it was two to one it wouldn't happen on my tour. The fact that it did was probably fate or justice or something because, you see, the whole thing was my idea.

I was on the four-to-twelve swing and Hollenbeck was with me. He's Third-Grade, a boy wonder only on the cops four years and in plain clothes already, but not a bad kid. Only he had a little to learn, of course.

We were in a supply room, off the hospital lobby, to the left of the visitor's reception desk. We kept the door open and fixed a mirror so



we could see out without being seen from the desk. On the other side of the lobby in a small office were the other two. Smitty, another Third Grade but he'd done it the hard way, twelve years and a couple of special commendations. And Weigand. Sergeant Weigand, in charge of this.

For three nights Hollenbeck and I sat it out, smoking too much, talking not enough. It was on our nerves now and there was still two nights to go. The Lieutenant gave it five. They only kept women in the maternity ward five days on an average these times.

We were on a half hour this night when Hollenbeck started on me again. He was cute about it. I guess they *get* pretty cute, graduating a University before they join the cops, these kids. At some things, anyhow.

"You do much fishing, Tom?" Hollenbeck asked. Hollenbeck is the crew-cut, rosy-cheeked outdoors type. He looked maybe twenty although he was at least six, seven years older. He looked very innocent.

"Why?" I said. I knew what was coming. I just didn't know in what form this time.

"Well, I was thinking about all the different *ways* of fishing there are," he said, his eyes on the mirror, not on me. "Like, there's seining. You get a bunch of guys and get drunk and whoop it up and drag a big net from bank to bank, along

a small creek. You get a lot of fish. It can't miss. It's real sport. The fish don't have a chance. Or you can set fish traps. That's almost as good."

"I see," I felt my neck getting red. The comparison wasn't too good but it was different.

"Well," he continued, "me, I like to fish, too. But I like to use a fly-rod. Sometimes I don't have much luck, but I don't know, when I do hook something I get a bigger bang out of it. I got a silly notion that even fish deserves at least a fighting chance. . . . And, of course, there's shooting fish in a barrel. You ever do that, Tom?"

It took awhile to ease the needle out of my arm so I could talk. Then I told him: "All the time. When I'm not doing that, I'm spotlighting deer."

He looked at me long and blandly and he didn't say anything else. After awhile I felt some of the red go out of my neck. "You've got the wrong man," I said, then. "Weigand, over there, is the one. He *likes* to shoot. He's the sportsman. Ask him to show you his target medals. Or better, ask him about how he shot three unarmed kids in a stolen car, once. And watch his eyes. Me, I don't consider this like hunting *or* fishing; it's a job and I do it the quickest, easiest way I can. You understand that?"

He didn't. I could tell. He said: "That's what I mean. He'll shoot him. Weigand will kill Meade before he can open his mouth, even.

You know that. Eventually Meade would have been picked up somewhere in the regular way. It didn't have to be like this."

I told Hollenbeck that I didn't know Weigand would be in on it and I didn't like that, either, but there was nothing I could do. I'd thought about everything except that, though, when I first got the idea, before I took it to the Lieutenant. I said:

"Meade took a chance on getting killed, himself, breaking out and it didn't bother him to slug that guard. The guard died, don't forget. Maybe it wouldn't bother Meade to kill a few more rather than go back for the rest of that life jolt. The sooner he's nailed, no matter how, the sooner he'll stop being even a possible menace."

Hollenbeck snorted. "He likely won't even have a gun. Meade wasn't a gun boy. He never carried one. And they don't change."

I got a little sick of all of this, of trying to justify something that maybe couldn't be justified and one way or the other it wasn't any skin off Hollenbeck. I started to tell him that fair or unfair, dirty pool or not, if the gimmick worked and we recaptured Meade, it would mean a commendation for me for cooking it up. A commendation would mean points on the next Sergeant's exam. I wanted that promotion. I *had* to have it now, with another mouth to feed. But I didn't tell that to Hollenbeck.

This idea was simple and I wasn't exactly proud of it, but it was practical. Some nine months ago, before Danny Meade was picked up for his fourth breaking-and-entering, he was living with an Agnes Borst. Later we learned that when Meade was convicted, she'd gone back to her family in the midwest. Meade didn't know this, though. Nobody in the underworld knew what happened to her. We found out by accident.

Anyhow, when I heard Danny escaped and was believed holed-up in the city, I got this idea to root him out. A snow-bird stoolie did the job for us. He circulated it around that Agnes Borst was in Polyclinic, registered as a Mrs. Nizlek, having a baby, Danny Meade's baby. It figured that when Meade heard that, he'd want to see his kid. What man wouldn't?

We had some trouble getting the hospital to cooperate but after we assured them there'd be no shooting in the building under any circumstances, they agreed.

It was nine o'clock and visiting hours were about over and I somehow couldn't get Hollenbeck's attitude out of my mind and was wondering if maybe he was right and maybe there weren't any game laws for hunting criminals but maybe there were some other kind, when a little red light flicked over the door of our room, inside.

I looked toward the mirror and saw a slightly built man with his hat

pulled low over his face, talking to the receptionist. Huskily, I said to Hollenbeck: "Yea-boy, let's go."

We were wearing white intern coats. Meade didn't know any of us so we figured to get right up to him and grab him before he knew what was happening. None of us were to speak until the first one reached him and collared him.

Hollenbeck and I walked out of the room and toward the man at the desk, who was looking nervously toward Smitty and Weigand, approaching from the other side. But the white coats threw him off. He swung his eyes back to the receptionist. I heard him say: "I wasn't listening. What ward did you say she's in?"

It was obvious we were going to pin him easily. I was in front of Hollenbeck and only a step away from Meade and he still wasn't tipped. Then I looked past him and saw Weigand's moon face. He was flushed and his fat-embedded eyes shone terribly and I knew this was going to go wrong. This wasn't going to be good enough for him.

I wish I could describe Weigand better. He isn't really so awful fat. He's more solid, chunky, yet he gives this impression of terrible grossness. And not because he's dirty. He's neat and clean enough. I don't know what it is. But Weigand's eyes I can tell you about. They usually look dull and stupid but they didn't look that way now. They were as near to what you'd

call laughing as that kind of eyes would ever get.

Weigand's voice, a little reedy for a man his bulk, called out: "Watch it, Meade! Don't try to make any break!"

Meade hadn't even known we were alive but now he almost came out of his skin. His head swiveled and he ducked under my too quick, desperate lunge. The woman behind the desk screamed. When I looked around again. Meade's spindly legs were scissoring toward the hospital's front door.

Weigand wasn't hardly hurrying, it seemed. Hollenbeck and Smitty were running and yet Weigand still got to the door before them. His gun was in his hand at his side. I'll give him this: he kept our promise and there was no shooting inside the building. But as he went outside his gun slammed twice.

When I got out there Weigand was standing on the hospital steps, blowing smoke from the barrel of his Special. He turned to the rest of us. Once I'd had a golf partner make a hole in one. I'd never seen anyone so tickled with himself, so proud and the whole big world was his own little old oyster that moment. Not until now. Weigand's moon face held the same expression.

He gestured with the gun. "There he is." He was so happy and excited spittle sprayed when he spoke. "How's that for shooting, huh?"

About thirty yards away on the lawn in front of the hospital there

was a crumpled heap in the tree-and-shrubbery-dappled moon-glow. Neither Hollenbeck nor I, nor Smitty spoke.

"Fifty, maybe sixty feet, by God," Weigand blurted. "And he was running, dodging, don't forget. You should've seen him, almost doubled-over and spinning, twisting like a damn broken field runner. For a moment, all those highlights and shadows from the moon and shrubbery out there, I thought I was going to miss. But they don't just hand me those target shooting medals every year for nothing, by God."

Nobody said anything. But very deliberately, Hollenbeck hawked and spat, his eyes on Weigand while he did it. You couldn't mistake what he had in mind. I guess maybe instinctively I had to show Hollenbeck I agreed with him on this, no matter what. I said:

"Oh, goody, goody. You can carve another notch on your gun, now, Sarge. And maybe we can call you Wild Bill Weigand—The Only Law West Of The Polyclinic?"

Ordinarily Weigand doesn't take stuff like that. He knew nobody liked him and at times he almost gloried in that but you weren't supposed to come right out and say it. You were supposed to be too afraid, to have too much respect for his rank. But neither Hollenbeck nor I seemed to get through to him, now.

"Come on," he said. "Let's take a look. Five'll get you ten if I didn't

hit with both slugs and he's ready for the meat wagon."

He started down the steps and across the grass toward that huddled dark heap, moving fast. We followed more slowly, like men on their feet for the first time after a long illness.

Danny Meade had no gun in his long, thin, dirty-nailed hand. Smitty searched him and there was no weapon on him at all, not even a pocket knife. He was still alive. If you'd call it that. His thin, once good looking face was so gray you could see the veins in it. His cheeks were all sucked in and his lips were two pale welts against his teeth. Sweat was globed on his face and his stringy hair was soaked with it.

I'd seen death in men's eyes before and I knew Meade didn't have long. He was still able to talk, though, in a hoarse whisper. He lay there, spilling curses at all of us while Hollenbeck ran to Emergency for help.

Weigand stood over Meade and after awhile he said, chuckling: "Ah-ah-ah! Better save those last few breaths, Danny. Sticks and stones, you know . . ." Weigand was a great one for worn out sayings.

I turned away. I felt sick at even being part of the same race as Weigand, let alone being on the same job. I heard Hollenbeck, back again, say: "Why did you do it, Sarge?" He asked that as though he'd been knocking himself out trying to figure the answer ever since it had happened but now he had to give up;

the riddle was too much for him. "If you hadn't hollered—"

"Why, he reached toward his pocket, didn't he?" Weigand cut Hollenbeck off. "What you so upset about? He killed a prison guard, didn't he? Well, a life for a life."

"I didn't see him reach for anything." Hollenbeck's voice sounded gritty.

"That's funny. I did." I could almost see Weigand looking straight and hard at Hollenbeck and grinning.

We all knew, then, that's the way it would be. No charges against Weigand for this. Nobody could prove he hadn't seen Meade make a threatening gesture. I wondered how many more times this would happen. Weigand had at least ten years before retirement.

At the same time I could feel young Hollenbeck's eyes boring into my back and they felt a little like Weigand's bullets must have felt to Meade. I walked away.

The doc said Meade might go in fifteen minutes or he might last the night. He lapsed into unconsciousness after they took him to Emergency. He might or might not come out of it again, the doc said.

Weigand assigned me to stay with Meade. He thought that was a master touch, I guess. He could see by looking at me how I felt about my idea ending the way it had. The way I felt was not good. And it had nothing to do with the fact that I probably wouldn't get any com-

mendation now that the gimmick had inadvertently set Weigand up for some live target practice, the way even the Brass in the department felt about him. But I didn't care about that. That wasn't what was bothering me.

Weigand and the others were about to leave when Meade came to again and whispered something to the doc. The doc had to bend his head down almost to Meade's mouth, his voice was now so weak. I heard the doc say: "Okay."

Then the doc straightened and called: "Sergeant, this man says he's got something to say to the one who shot him. He said to tell the fat slob who shot him he wants to talk to him. Those were his words." The doc grinned.

Weigand didn't like that. He looked hard at the doc and he wanted to say something, you could tell. But what could he say? With a snort of disgust he stalked back into the room. He stood over the rolling table where Meade was stretched out on his back.

"What the hell is it?" Weigand demanded, impatiently.

Meade coughed. "If I'd—known it was you, Weigand, I'd—never—have run. I've heard—about you. You—never miss, do you?" He spoke hoarsely, haltingly. His skinny hand clawed toward his throat. "I—I can't talk loud. It—it hurts my throat. Can't you bend down so I don't have to strain so much? I got one last thing to tell

you, sharp-shooter. It—it's important."

Weigand looked him over. He couldn't see any danger. Meade was dying and didn't have strength to hit him or try and grab him or anything. As Meade began to whisper something unintelligible, then, Weigand bent and put his ear close to Meade's mouth, to hear.

We were all watching. We saw Meade's hand move suddenly but the angle of Weigand's head blocked us from seeing what Meade did with that hand. But we saw Weigand straighten like someone had goosed him with a white hot poker. We saw his fat fists pushed against both eyes. He screamed once, a thin, womanish sound that faded in a few moments to a sick whinnying. We all stared, dumbfounded.

We watched Weigand stamp his feet like a kid playing soldier and bend and straighten and then bend again, over and over, while he lurched around the room, bumping into a table and a desk and finally the wall. He leaned against the wall, all bent over and we saw the trickle of blood running down his cheek from under one fist.

The doc ran to Weigand then and forcibly tore the big man's hands away from his face.

"Jesus!" the doc said when he saw Weigand's eyes.

I looked at Danny Meade, then. His right hand was across his chest and he still had the first two fingers

forked, the thumb holding the others out of the way, and I knew what he had done. There was something like a grin on Meade's drawn gray face. He whispered loud enough for all of us to hear: "He won't ever shoot anyone again, will he?"

Weigand didn't hear it, though. We saw he had fainted. The doc ran, out into the hall to get help. I walked over to Meade and when I reached him I saw that he was gone, now, for sure. That same expression, the grin, or maybe it was just a death contraction, I don't know, was still on his face. . . .

We waited around until the doc came down from the operating room, some time later. He shook his head. He said: "Meade must've had nails like a Mandarin's. There wasn't much we could do. A specialist might be able to save partial sight, later, but he'll have to wear glasses thick as headlight lenses. He won't be much good as a cop anymore, I'm afraid."

"Hell," Hollenbeck said, then, belatedly. "He never was."

I looked at Hollenbeck. I said: "Kid, does a fine, sensitive young sporting gentleman like you ever think about going out and getting roaring drunk? For emetic purposes, only, of course?"

He didn't look at me but he said: "You're damn well told. Let's get out of here."

And he and I and Smitty, we did that.

WILLFUL MURDER

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A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY HAROLD Q. MASUR

Millicent Mack hadn't an enemy in the world that Scout Jordan could think of. So why in the world was she murdered?

THE judge looked down at me and banged his gavel. I heard him set bail and my eyes widened. Assignment to night court had not improved his dyspeptic temperament.

"Why, you simple-headed, sanctimonious old—"

"Next case," he rumbled.

"One moment, your honor," I said, out loud this time and not under my breath, "five thousand dollars seems rather excessive under

the circumstances. I think five hundred would be more—"

He interrupted with a stony glare. "Are you instructing the bench how to run this court, counselor?"

"No, your honor, but we have a simple charge here—"

"Ha! Assault in the second degree, wilfully inflicting serious bodily injury upon this man, Tom Clinton, knocking out one front incisor and fracturing his left forearm. There was no earthly reason for exercising

such a degree of force. You are a lawyer, Mr. Jordan, not a hoodlum."

"But he was prowling around my office, Your Honor. I caught him emerging from the file room and when I tried to detain him, he swung at me. He refused to explain what he was doing there and—"

"He did not refuse, and he had a right to be there. A law office is open to the public. The door is an invitation to enter. He said he came to see you about drawing his will, and found the place deserted. He was looking for someone when you attacked him."

"He's lying."

"Perhaps. On the other hand, if you didn't like the man's explanation, you should have summoned a policeman. Instead you elected to decide the issues and inflict punishment yourself. The Assistant District Attorney tells me you have a tendency to take the law into your own hands." He pitched his head sideways, sounding irascible. "Now, that will be all, counselor. I have no intention of turning this court into a forum for public debate. Next case."

I held my tongue, but my internal temperature was up about ten degrees. Usually a judge will release a lawyer on his own recognizance, but this bird was suffering from bad digestion or a henpecking wife.

I turned and saw Louis Homer in the back of the room, grinning at me. I beckoned and he came. Louis was a bail bondsman.

I said, "Will you post a bond for me, Louis?"

"Sure. You got security?"

"Please," I said, looking pained. "No humor. I'm not in the mood. Just send the bill to my office." I started searching for the complainant, caught a glimpse of him disappearing through the door, and headed after him. I didn't get far. A set of fingers lassoed my arm and swung me around.

"Just a minute, counselor." It was a city detective named Wienick.

"Not now," I said. "I'm on a job."

"Me too."

"I'm in a hurry."

"Forget it. You're wanted up on 20th Street."

"Lieutenant Nola?"

"The same."

"Can't it wait?"

He shook his head. "Let's go."

"But I'm trying to catch someone."

"So are we."

"Who?"

"A murderer."

I stopped struggling and blinked at his impassive face. He was dead serious and his iron grip on my arm brooked no argument. He had a squad car waiting under the street lamp and he convoyed me to the back seat. A uniformed cop straightened behind the wheel. The engine coughed and thundered and the siren keened and the tires started rolling.

"Who got shelved?" I inquired.

"A woman."

"Where do I fit?"

"Ask the lieutenant."

"Taciturn this evening," I said. "All right. You're following instructions. The lieutenant wants to play it cagey. But you can at least explain how you knew where to find me."

"Easy." He almost smiled. It was an effort but he tried. "Went to your apartment and found nobody home. Took a crack at your usual hangouts. No luck. Tried your office—bull's-eye. Couldn't shut the night man up. He told me about the fight in your office and how he called the cops. Phoned the precinct sergeant and learned you were in night court. What gives, Jordan?"

I shrugged. "Search me. I had a late appointment with a client and went down for a cup of coffee. The punk must have been lurking out in the hall. When he saw me leave he probably thought I had gone for the day and walked in."

"What was he after?"

"How do I know? Petty cash, maybe. He lied to the Judge. Said he changed his mind about drawing a will after he sized me up."

"Did you have to break his arm?"

"That was an accident," I said resentfully. "He swung and missed and I swung and connected and he slipped and fell and cracked it on the desk."

The car pulled up at 250 West 20th Street, which is headquarters for the Homicide Squad handling murders committed on this side of Manhattan. We went up to Nola's

office and he took his chin out of a file, staring at me, unsmiling.

John Nola, Detective-lieutenant, Homicide, a neat slender sober man with a dark intelligent face, alert as a squirrel and tougher than yesterday's eggstains, inflexible and incorruptible, a career cop who'd pulled himself up from the ranks and danced at the end of nobody's string. I liked, respected, and had worked in harmony with him on several cases.

He turned balefully to Wienick. "What took you so long?"

The detective explained about night court.

Nola dismissed it with a wave of his hand and switched back to me. "Unimportant. The name of Milliecent Mack mean anything to you?"

My mouth was suddenly dry. "Yes."

"She's dead."

I stared at him. Bitter saliva threaded its way down my throat. "How?"

"Shot leaving her apartment."

"When?"

"Early this evening, about six o'clock."

My knees were weak and I sat down. I made a fist and almost broke it on his desk. "God damn it! I spoke to her on the phone this afternoon. She wanted to see me and made an appointment for 6:30. I was waiting for her when that other thing happened."

"What did she want to see you about?"

"She didn't say. She sounded upset and hinted that it was important." I frowned at him. "What led you to me?"

"A piece of paper we found in her purse. It had your name and address on it. She involved in one of your cases?"

"No."

"How come she selected you?"

"Because we used to work together in the same office. She was legal secretary to my first boss, Malcom Warner. He's dead now and I took over what was left of his practise." I shook my head violently. "Millicent Mack. She was sixty-five if she was a day. A sweet old lady, a spinster, without relatives. Who the hell would knock her off?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Robbery?"

"I doubt it. Apparently nothing in her apartment was touched."

"Clues?"

"Not even a smell. Somebody rang her bell and when she opened the door, bang!"

"How about the neighbors?"

"They heard nothing. He must have used a silencer."

"The elevator boy?"

"It's a walkup."

We batted it around for a while, inspecting various angles. After a moment, Nola rubbed the back of his neck and his cheek bulged thoughtfully behind his tongue.

"How about this Tom Clinton?

You think he might be connected with the murder?"

"Beats me."

"Suppose we talk to him."

"I'd like that. Call the precinct and get his address."

Nola used the phone. He spoke briefly, listened, scratched with his pencil, broke the connection, and was starting to push upright when the door opened. A city employee poked his head through and met the lieutenant's inquiring eye.

"We found Miss Mack's maid. She's here now."

"Send her in," Nola said, settling back in his chair.

A short round cinnamon-tinted female entered, looking nervous and unhappy. Nola spent a couple of minutes putting her at ease. He learned that she had been working for Millicent Mack three hours a day, four afternoons a week, for over a year.

"You understand that Miss Mack is dead."

She nodded and dabbed a handkerchief at the corners of her eyes, swallowing hugely.

"Did she have many visitors?" Nola asked.

"Never. 'Cepting the last two days. A lady came to visit each afternoon."

"The same lady?"

"Different ones. I announced them."

"Do you remember their names?"

"Only the second one. A Mrs. Lovett. I remembered because Miss

Mack told me her husband owned that big department store—Lovett's."

It rang a bell. Old Oscar Lovett had been a client of Malcom Warner's. His first store, a sprawling dingy cavern on 14th Street, had spilled over into adjoining buildings. Then it had moved up to the Fifties and began catering class merchandise to the carriage trade. When Malcom Warner passed on, Oscar Lovett had found himself new lawyers. I didn't blame him. His interests were vast and I was still unseasoned.

Now Oscar Lovett was gone too. Old age and general deterioration. I had read his obituary in the Times last week, and it had stuck in my memory. Surviving him were Grace Lovett, the widow, and an adopted daughter, Mrs. Charles Gair, souvenir of an earlier marriage.

I said to the maid, "Let me refresh your recollection. Miss Mack's first visitor—was the name Mrs. Charles Gair?"

She pounced on it. "Yessir, that's it, Gair. I remember now."

"How long did they stay?" asked Nola.

"'Bout half an hour apiece."

"That will be all, thank you." He buzzed for the city employee and got her a lift in an official vehicle back to Harlem. His eyes came back to me. "Well?"

"The background is sketchy," I said. "I don't have much but I'll fill you in. Oscar Lovett died last

week. His widow had only five years on the course. She used to be a buyer in the lingerie department of the store, and is reputed to be young and beautiful. I have never seen her."

"Who is Mrs. Gair?"

I told him and added, "From an occasional gossip column or two, I gathered there was considerable friction between the two ladies. Mrs. Gair resented the marriage."

"Why?"

"Well, now, she was a legally adopted daughter. There was a sizeable inheritance involved."

"How much?"

"A million, perhaps more."

"Quite a slice of motive."

I gave him a nod and a lopsided smile. "How about this Tom Clinton we were going to visit?"

"Okay. It's only a few blocks away. I'll catch the widow next."

The old Chelsea district is only a stone's throw from Homicide West, providing Willie Mays rifles it over the buildings. But we made the trip for nothing; he wasn't home. His landlady had a loose tongue, however, and enjoyed exercising it.

"I saw Tom half an hour ago. He was in a terrible accident. Knocked out a tooth and broke his arm." The victim had been someone else and she was relishing the details. "Tom said a truck hit him. That beautiful blue Cadillac, my goodness, it must be all smashed in. I hope the Lovetts don't fire him."

"Who?" Nola was restraining himself.

"The Lovetts . . . those department store people. Tom's their chauffeur."

He thanked her quickly and hopped down the steps to the squad car. He was inside, with the door closed, looking out at me through the window and unsmiling. "Police business, Scott. I'll take it alone. Sorry."

Exhaust fumes fanned into my face as the car leaped away, careening around the corner on two wheels and burning an inch of rubber off the tires. I stood there for a moment, alone, feeling like an orphan. Then I shrugged. While he was tackling Mrs. Lovett, at least I could see Mrs. Charles Gair.

A telephone directory gave me the address.

They lived in style, in a tall building on East End Avenue, with an acre of casement windows blinking out over the river, with a fine view of barges and ferries and Welfare Island, with a liveried doorman and polite elevator operators. One of them took me up to the tenth floor.

A slender gent with a Coleman mustache opened the door. He was wearing Bermuda shorts of Irish linen, a slate-gray polo shirt, and white yachting shoes. One eyebrow moved up slightly.

"Something I can do for you, sir?" He had polished manners and first class diction.

"I'd like to see Mrs. Gair."

"She's on the terrace. Who shall I say is calling?"

"Scott Jordan."

If he recognized the name, he gave no sign of it. "Come in. This way, please."

I followed him across the living room and through a pair of French doors. It was a warm night, with barely a breeze fluttering the drapes. A man and a woman were comfortable in deck chairs, holding long highballs in perspiring glasses. Introductions straightened out everybody's identity.

The woman, a tall severe item, not yet past the deadline, was Anita Gair. The smooth article in Bermuda shorts turned out to be her husband, Charles. And I recognized the name of their visitor, Ray Burroughs, a small precise gent with thinning hair and pince-nez glasses. He was general manager of Lovett's, Incorporated.

I looked pointedly at Anita Gair. "May I speak to you alone?"

She exchanged glances with her husband. "I hardly think that's necessary. I have no secrets from Charles."

"Quite," he said. "Speak up, old boy. What's on your mind?"

I said, "A couple of days ago, your wife visited a woman named Millicent Mack."

"Did you, darling?"

"Yes."

"Well, Jordan, what about it?"

"I'd like to know why."

A meager smile brushed his lips. "I can't see that it's any of your business, to put it bluntly."

"She'll have to tell someone," I said.

"Have to?" His eyebrow was up again.

"Absolutely."

"Who?"

"The police. Millicent Mack is dead."

Anita Gair and Ray Burroughs spilled some of their drink. The chair tipped over behind Burroughs as he bounced to his feet, jaw working spasmodically. Charles reached for his glass and siphoned it off.

Burroughs opened his mouth, managed to emit a little static, and finally got wired for sound. "Dead? How? Old age, accident?"

"Murder," I said.

Charles put his glass down and took a slow breath. "And just what is your position in this thing?"

"I was Millicent Mack's lawyer."

"Why do you come to us?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? Miss Mack was sixty-five years old. In all that time your wife never went to see her. Then she did. Two days later, Miss Mack was dead."

"Does that mean there's any connection between the two incidents?"

"How can I tell without questioning your wife?"

"But you're not a policeman."

"True. And you can toss me out on my ear, if you like."

He showed me his teeth. "I rather think I will."

"Just a moment." Anita Gair held up her hand. "What is it you want to know, Mr. Jordan?"

"The reason for your visit."

"It's quite simple. My step-father, Oscar Lovett, died last week. No will was found, neither in his safe deposit box, nor in his apartment. I believe Grace—that's his second wife—destroyed it."

"That still doesn't explain why you went to see Miss Mack."

"I wanted to know what was in Dad's will. I called his attorneys, but they hadn't drawn any will for him. Then I thought of his old lawyer, Malcom Warner, and I wondered if Mr. Warner's secretary, who probably typed it, might remember. So I went to see her."

"Did she remember?"

"No."

"That's quite a story," I said.

"Don't you believe me?"

"About this much," I said, holding my thumb and forefinger about a millimeter apart.

"Look here, old boy," Charles demanded, "are you calling my wife a liar?"

"Just about."

He may have looked like a gentleman, but he swung like a longshoreman and he caught me off balance, completely unprepared, and the impact of his fist, flush on the jaw, snapped my head back and sat me down, hard. The cement floor caught me at the base of my spine with a resounding wallop and for a moment I was paralyzed. I collected

myself and started to rise slowly, measuring him.

But his hand had reached through a window for the telephone and I heard him asking for a policeman.

One charge of assault and battery was enough. This time the judge might not even release me on bail, and I had no stomach for spending a whole night in the tank. So I dusted myself off and said pleasantly, "Good evening, folks. Thanks for the hospitality."

I flushed a passing cab and went back to 23rd Street for another go at Tom Clinton. No luck. He was still out. I thought of trying Grace Lovett, but was afraid of barging in on Lieutenant Nola. He wanted the field for himself and he had the authority to back up his demands. So I decided to go home.

I was thinking of a shower and a pair of scrambled eggs when I opened the door. I was thinking of a bourbon and a pair of slippers. I was not thinking of a blonde . . . but that's what I got.

She was sitting in a club chair, smoking a king-size cigarette through a filter-type holder. She was dressed in a tailored suit that fought a losing battle with her figure. Her face was rather angular in structure, the lashes long and curled over a pair of disconcerting blue eyes. Her mouth was wistful, with a full and slightly puckered shining underlip. Whatever you might need, wherever you happened to be, she had it, in spades.

"Mr. Jordan?" she inquired, shaking an ash into the tray.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I hope you don't mind my waiting here in your apartment. I told the superintendent that I was a client of yours and he let me in."

Either I kill that guy, I thought, or I promise him a bonus.

"My name is Grace Lovett," she said. "I wish you'd stop staring like that. Please relax."

I swallowed a bubble of air and walked to the bar. "Excuse me," I said. "I need a drink. Join me?"

"Please."

I poured two brandies and brought her one and sat down on the sofa. "Have you seen the lieutenant?"

"Who?"

"Detective-lieutenant John Nola, Homicide. He was heading for your apartment when I left him about an hour ago."

She shook her head. "No. I haven't been home. I've been waiting here for you."

I took a sip of brandy. "Where's your stooge?"

"Stooge?"

"Tom Clinton, your chauffeur."

She gave me a reproachful look.

"He swung first," I said defensively. "And besides, most of that damage came from a fall."

"Yes, I know. He told me."

"I wish he had told the judge. I got nicked for the premium on a five thousand dollar bond. Why was he in my office?"

"I sent him."

"What for?"

"To find a copy of my husband's will. I learned that you had taken over Malcom Warner's practise and I thought you might have a duplicate of the will in your files."

"Who told you?"

"Miss Mack—Miss Millicent Mack."

"You know where she is now?"

"Home, I imagine."

"In the morgue. She was killed earlier this evening, murdered."

She digested it slowly, her lips apart and her face distressed. Suddenly she remembered the brandy in her hand and took a prodigious unladylike pull that put some of the bloom back into her cheeks.

"Why all the cloak-and-dagger stuff? Why didn't you come to me and ask instead of sending your chauffeur?"

"Because I didn't trust anyone." She dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I thought they might have reached you first, perhaps bribed you."

"Who's they?"

"Anita Gair and her husband. They've been against me ever since Oscar and I got married. They said I married him for his money."

"Didn't you?"

"A little bit, maybe. But I was very fond of him, and I respected him. He was a brilliant man."

"Did Oscar ever tell you anything about his will?"

"Yes. He was leaving me the bulk of his estate. There were a few

minor bequests to the servants and twenty-five thousand dollars to Anita Gair."

"That's all?"

"She was only his step-daughter."

"All right," I said. "Why did you come to see me?"

"They couldn't find Oscar's will in his safe-deposit box. I searched the apartment and couldn't find it there either. I thought he might have put it in the safe at the store and I asked Ray Burroughs, the general manager, who knows the combination. He looked and said he couldn't find it. If the original is missing, maybe we can prove the duplicate. Tom Clinton was searching your files for it, but you returned unexpectedly and stopped him. Now I have no choice. I'm coming to you directly. I asked around town and everybody tells me you're tricky but honest."

"Thanks," I said wryly. "Are you retaining me?"

"Yes. I want Oscar's will admitted to probate."

I stood up. "Lady, you've got yourself a lawyer. Go home and wait for my call. One thing more, I want you to send Tom Clinton on a vacation. Tonight. If he doesn't appear as the complainant against me, those charges of assault and battery will be dropped."

"Agreed."

We went down and she took the first cab and I took the second. The night man in Rockefeller Center signed me in and gave me a

pass and I took the elevator up to my office.

I sat down with a manual containing the Decedent Estate Law and studied for half an hour. At the end of that time, I checked the telephone directory for the address of Ray Burroughs, committed it to memory, and quit the office.

The precise little man answered my ring. He opened his door, goggled at me, started to splutter, and tried to slam the door shut. But I put a hand on his chest and backed him into the room.

"What . . ." he said.

"Quiet," I told him, slipping out of my coat and rolling up my sleeves. "Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know," I said. "You know and you're going to tell me. It may take the rest of the night, but I'm a determined man. What happened to Oscar Lovett's will?"

"Please, you're making a mistake."

"No mistake," I said, encompassing the room with a quick circular glance. "Where's your company?"

"What company?" he gulped audibly.

"Two highball glasses on the coffee table. You didn't mix both of them for yourself, did you?"

He shifted uneasily. "No, I—had company for a nightcap, but he's gone now."

"Okay. Let's get back to the will."

"I—I don't understand . . ."

"Not much," I said. "However, I'll spell it out. Sit down."

He sank weakly into a chair, watching me apprehensively, his Adam's Apple working overtime, and not too much color in his puckered lips.

"Here it is," I said. "Listen. Oscar Lovett's widow asked you to search the store safe for her husband's will. You told her you couldn't find it. That was a lie. You found it and you read it."

He started to open his mouth.

"I'm not finished," I said. "Sit still. The bulk of old Oscar's estate went to Mrs. Lovett, with a paltry token bequest to Anita Gair. If the will was hidden, if it couldn't be found, if Oscar died intestate, his widow, under the law, would inherit only one-third, and the rest would go to Anita Gair as his legally adopted daughter.

"So you went to them with a proposition. For a substantial cut you would dispose of the will. And they agreed. But you had to be sure that no attempt would be made to probate the carbon copy, if one existed. Most probably Millicent Mack was one of the testamentary witnesses and that's how you got her name and address. So Mrs. Gair went to her and learned that a duplicate was probably in my office. Did you steal it?"

"I didn't." Pallor diluted the color in his face. "I swear I didn't."

"That much I'm inclined to be-

lieve," I said. "You haven't the guts. I imagine the job was performed by Charles Gair himself. And Charles assumed that Millicent Mack had probably typed out the will and might remember its contents. He paid her a quiet visit and found the old lady greatly disturbed. She'd been told the will was missing and she suspected skulduggery. She told him she remembered the contents and was going to see me.

"That meant she had to die. So he stopped her heart with a bullet and now he felt secure. But not for long."

"Forever, Jordan," a voice said behind me. "Secure forever because you won't live to tell anyone."

He'd come in from the kitchen where he'd been hiding and he held a carving knife in his hand.

"A knife," I said. "What happened to the gun?"

"In the sewers," he whispered, "where it will never be found."

He took a single crablike step in my direction. "Tell me, Jordan, how did you know?"

"It figured," I said. "Somebody found the original of Lovett's will and kept it under his hat. Somebody rifled my files and stole the carbon copy. Somebody killed Millicent Mack who might have remembered its contents. And you were the only people who stood to gain if the old man died intestate."

He coiled his tongue over his parched lips and moved another step forward. "Keep talking."

"I suspected a conspiracy the minute I walked out on your terrace tonight, and your wife refused to see me alone. She wanted all three of you present and listening, in case she missed a cue. She said Grace must have destroyed the will. That was the last thing Grace would ever do, deprive herself of a fortune. And she lied when she said Oscar Lovett told her he was going to change his will. The old man never believed a word she said about Grace."

And then I stood very still, holding his eyes with my own, not breathing, just watching, the scalp tingling under my hair. It was happening right in front of me, but I could hardly believe it. Ray Burroughs was on his feet, a heavy plaster bookend brandished like a hammer in his fist.

Gair sucked in a heaving breath, lunged, and made his thrust. But the blade never reached me. With a rasping sob, Ray Burroughs slammed the bookend against the taller man's skull. Gair stiffened, his back arched, his eyes glazed, and he fell like a statue.

Burroughs collapsed behind him. "I had to do it," he said in a shredded whisper. "One murder was enough. I didn't count on murder."

"All right," I said. "I'll see what I can do for you. Get some cord and tie him up. Where's the phone?"

He pointed.

I dialled and got through to Nola. "It's all wrapped up, Lieutenant."

The Misplaced Star



AN OLIVER SHORT NOVEL

BY

NELSON ADCOCK

Hazel Harris said, "His sex-libido was arrested at the anal-sadistic stage. He'll beat you to a pulp and enjoy it. I strongly advise you to talk." Oliver Short snorted.

You'd think, wouldn't you," Chief Harry Zorn said to Oliver Short, "that a guy smart enough to win International Science Awards would be smart enough to keep away from women. Especially Italian movie-stars."

Short crumpled the paper-cup he'd been using and tossed it into the waste-can under the cooler. He looked at Zorn with a suspicious eye. "I've got two solid weeks of vacation, starting—" he glanced at the Omega chronometer strapped on his fat wrist—"in exactly thirty-seven minutes, forty and two-tenth seconds. Whatever you're going to try to sucker me into, it won't work."

Zorn let a hurt expression come into his beadlike, piercing eyes. The corners of his thin, almost bloodless lips drooped. His skin-and-bones, dry, mummy-like face looked sad enough to cry. "Your cynical attitude, Ollie, is a terrible commentary on life. Your suspicious distrust of your fellow man, your—"

"Uh, huh," Short interrupted, nodding and consulting his watch again, "you're wasting your time, Zorn. It's thirty-seven minutes, thirty and eight-tenth seconds now. In an hour, if I can get my paycheck, I'll be on my way to the Adirondacks with Hazel Harris."

Zorn looked shocked. "You're going to the mountains with that

crazy beatnik? You must be getting senile."

"No. She's doing a folk-singing trick up at Kate Kelley's Alpine Lodge. I'm going up to fish. Our plans just happened to coincide."

"I bet." An evil glint came into Zorn's eyes. "I'd be doing you a big favor if I postponed your vacation."

"Try it," Short challenged. "I hear Pinkerton and Burns're always on the lookout for good men."

Zorn ignored the threat. "It's disgusting. A fifty-year old man and a twenty-year old kid." Zorn took on an indignant, self-righteous air. "Downright disgusting."

"You mean your mind is," Short replied, grinning. "Hazel is Maurice Ginsberg's girl-friend. Besides, she's precocious."

"I bet she is. Maurice Ginsberg!—another nut. Why do you hang around such people?"

"They're invaluable. They're in touch with things. And they're also interesting. Now, Great White Father, if you don't mind . . ." Short smiled, let a twinkle come into his pale, slate-blue eyes, and began moving away.

"Wait!" Zorn caught his sleeve. "This Boltoni thing's fascinating. The guy's a renowned physicist. There could be international complications."

"Sorry." Short kept grinning and rocking his fat body back on his heels. "I just hocked my Secret Agent 007 $\frac{1}{4}$ gun and I've forgotten

all the karate I ever knew. I'm ill-equipped for international complications. I'm going up to the Adirondacks and have a sex-orgy."

Zorn tugged Short into the corridor by the sleeve, saying, "Be serious, Ollie. Luigi Boltini's in my office now. He's a famous man and his wife's missing. Now—get this—his wife's Maria Tarella. That ring a bell?"

Short blinked. "The Italian movie-actress? The world's number one sex-symbol? The tall, sloe-eyed gal with the big knockers and the million-dollar legs?"

"Nobody else." A contented grin came over Zorn's skull-like features.

"And she's married to a prize-winning scientist? Funny I never heard about it."

"Nobody has. She married him over ten years ago, long before she was a star. Before she was an actress even. And—" Zorn grinned wider and showed a pair of gold bicuspid — "just wait'll you see him. He's skinnier than me and about half as handsome. And damn near as old. Come on in, Ollie. He's in there with Maria's producer, Benvenuto Casselli. I know you heard of him—the Boy Wonder of Filmdom—he was a star-actor at fifteen and now, as a producer, he's had six French and Italian award-winning hits in a row. He started on a shoe-string and he's anted Casselli Productions, Inc. up into the biggest movie-outfit in Europe. Casselli's touch, they say, is magic. You put the Casselli

Touch in a film and it's a sure winner."

"I've heard of him." Short nodded. "I've also heard he's hell with the women."

"Yeah, he's a handsome devil, all right. Anyway, he brought Boltoni to us. Poor Boltoni's in a fog about his missing wife and don't know what he's doing. If Casselli hadn't brought him here, he'd have gone to the police."

"What's foggy about that? Sounds sensible enough to me."

"Don't be dumb." Zorn shook his head. "Casselli doesn't dare let the public know Maria Tarella's missing. They're shooting *Lucretia Borgia* in Florence, Italy, right now. If the news got out, it could ruin the picture—the box-office take, that is. Look, Ollie, I don't have to tell you this could be a big thing moneywise for the Cosmopolitan Agency. This Philadelphia branch's been running in the red the past two months and the stockholders don't like it. This could be the break we've been needing. Casselli's ready to pay anything to find Maria."

Oliver Short slipped a Kent from his pocket and flipped open his Zippo lighter. "How long's she been gone?"

"You'll have to ask them. I haven't had a chance to say more than 'hello'. I dashed out to catch you. Come on in. At least you can hear the facts of the case."

"And spoil my vacation?" Short

puffed cigarette smoke and shook his head. "It's my first in three years. No, I'm sorry, Zorn."

Chief Zorn shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "Well, if that's how you feel—I'll admit I kind of hoped you—well—" Zorn sighed and seemed to shrink up in defeat; he became worn and tired-looking, an object of pity—"I'll find somebody else to handle it. I don't mind telling you, though, Ollie, I'd feel safer if you were on the job. At my age there's nothing left for me if this branch goes under. It'll spell my doom." Zorn shook his head resignedly and patted Oliver Short's arm. "Of course, you can get transferred easy enough. You've got youth and strength, but me—well—that's enough of that. Have a nice trip. Don't worry about me; I'll make out somehow. Maybe I'll manage to at least start the thing myself—if it wasn't for these damn lungs and tired heart of mine, I'd—well—"

"You old fraud," Short said, "if they ever close this agency, you can go on the stage. There's not a damn thing wrong with your heart and lungs. I saw your company insurance report."

"Don't be impertinent!" Zorn fixed a drill-like stare on Short's pudgy frame. "Remember, I retired from the military with the rank of full colonel. And during the war, when I was your director, in the OSS, you weren't even an army man. Show some respect."

"I'd been a pilot and an aerial-gunner in the navy—or doesn't the navy count in your book?"

"It's something," Zorn conceded. "But you're still disrespectful to a superior officer."

"All right. I respect you, Colonel, sir. And now I'm leaving."

"Wait." Zorn held up a bony, bronze-skinned forefinger and wagged it an inch or so under Short's nose. "I'm getting way up in years, Ollie. And so are you. You can't pound pavements forever. The time's fast coming when I'll have to recommend my successor. Now—"

Short grinned widely and made a guffawing noise. "You retire? Haw, haw! You'll never die. You're not a human being—you're a machine. The only way they'll ever get you out is to disassemble you,"

Instead of becoming angry at this, Zorn turned cautious and canny. He murmured, "There could be as much as a five-hundred dollar bonus in this thing."

"If you said—" Short inhaled smoke—"there *would* be a five-hundred dollar bonus, I think maybe I could get up to the mountains a day or so later. It would be damn tempting, at any rate."

"You're a cold-hearted materialist," Zorn replied. "Here we have a great scientist, devoted to the welfare of all mankind, and an internationally idolized woman who—"

"Forget it." Short shrugged his heavy shoulders. "For a minute

there I thought you were talking my language. I'll see you in two weeks." Once again he started moving away.

"All right, all right. You'll get your blood-money." Zorn pointed to his office door. "Come on, they're waiting."

Short squelched his cigarette-butt in the water-puddle remaining in the cooler tray and flipped it into the used cup basket. "No rest for the wicked," he said. "Lead on, Mephistopheles."

Zorn merely grunted. His mind had already advanced to his next problem.

2

True to Zorn's description, Luigi Boltoni was a thin sparrow of a man, about sixty years old. Olive-skinned, white-haired, dark eyes fearful and harassed, he was lost in the arms and seat of one of Zorn's big, comfortable clients' chairs. He licked his lips nervously when Short and Zorn entered.

Casselli, the producer, was a man some twenty-five years younger; a man bigger, bolder, and far more self-possessed. He rose to meet Short, was introduced, and shook his hand eagerly. "Mr. Zorn speaks of you in the highest terms. I want to assure you that every effort you expend will be appreciated. I cannot overemphasize the importance of finding Mrs. Boltoni—that is, Maria Tarella, as she is universally known. Not only will my company, Casselli

Productions, suffer until she's found, but Mr. Boltoni is verging on collapse. And should anything happen to him, the entire scientific world would shudder at the loss. Since Einstein, Planck, and Schroedinger, no man has—"

"Please, Casselli," the little man in the chair waved a hand, "don't exaggerate. I'm not a box-office attraction and I'm not that important. Just say, like any normal husband, I'm concerned about my wife's safety and whereabouts."

Short turned, walked past Casselli with a brief nod, and stood before Luigi Boltoni. "I'm honored to be of service. A good friend of mine, Mr. Maurice Ginsberg, often mentions an equation or law called the Boltoni Principle—I don't pretend to understand it—Ginsberg's a nuclear physicist who recently spent five years working for the army in Japan—but would that principle have some connection with you?"

Boltoni smiled weakly and squared his narrow shoulders the least bit. "I'm afraid so. Mr. Ginsberg no doubt referred to my constant, used in calculating the changing parameters of complex interrelated magnetic fields in empty space at great velocities. It's a constant derived from a variation of the Lorentz contraction and the Maxwell Field Equations. A restricted version of my transformation and constant is useful for approximating neutron-capture cross-sections under certain unusual

conditions. Doubtless Mr. Ginsberg encounters this application." Boltoni paused, smiled again, and shrugged. "Actually the work of the main theory was done long ago, but because of the recent interest in rocketry and motion in empty space, I've suddenly found myself the focus of attention in popular scientific literature and magazine-supplements."

"I understand," Short said, nodding. He looked at Chief Zorn, who, after listening to Boltoni's words with obvious perplexed impatience, had gone round and seated himself behind his huge desk. Benvenuto Casselli had also sat down again. Short took the fourth chair in the room, facing Boltoni, and asked the physicist: "Is there anything secret about your work? Something some other government might need or want?"

"Absolutely nothing. The Boltoni constant has been the common property of physicists and engineers throughout the world for the past twenty years. You can find it in any standard text in any comprehensive library anywhere. No," Boltoni shook his head, "if Maria's met with foul play or been abducted, it wasn't done for any secrets I might know."

"Uh huh. How about secrets somebody might *think* you know?"

Boltoni put out his hands, palms up. "I can't answer for what everybody thinks, of course. But there's no valid reason for anyone to sup-

pose I know any secrets. Besides, my work is highly theoretical and academic—"

"Uh huh," Short repeated. "That sounds reasonable. And what are you working on now, Mr. Boltoni?"

"I'm refining the molecular-spin theory of magnetism. At least I was until—" Boltoni stopped short.

"Yes?"

"Maria's behavior—" Boltoni paused, hesitated, and looked across at Casselli, who was smoking a cigarette in a longish holder and slapping a pair of gray suede gloves against a crossed knee. "You'll have to tell him, Luigi," he said to Boltoni.

"Yes," Boltoni sighed and continued, looking even more glum than he had, "well, my marriage has hardly been a success. For the last six or seven years, Maria has chased all over Europe and America, involving herself in one scandal after another. All this while I—I—" the little man broke off and swallowed hard, as if he was about to cry.

"—kept the homes fires burning?" Short suggested.

"Yes. And it's taken its toll from my work," Boltoni replied in a choked tone. "Oh, it's all been a mistake. But when I married Maria, ten years ago, she was nothing. Just a penniless, uneducated girl from my village in Italy. Her mother was a lifelong neighbor and friend of my sister's. On my sister's recommendation, I befriended the girl. She was an orphan then. Gentlemen—"

Boltoni spread his hands wide and looked appealingly at Short and Zorn—"I know it seems ridiculous that a man of my age, devoted to science and a quiet, thoughtful life, should have the most beautiful, most glamorous woman in the world for a wife, but I swear to you she wanted it that way. Naturally, I fell in love with her—what man, regardless of age, wouldn't? And in the beginning, before she got into the movies and became a star, she was a good girl and utterly devoted. He—" Boltoni pointed to Casselli—"made her what she is."

"Ridiculous!" Casselli snapped back. "When she came to me, I'd no idea she even had a husband. After I spent thousands creating an image in the public eye, you—a husband—were suddenly presented to me. As for Maria's character, whatever it is, I didn't make it. It was there all along, Luigi. Fame and success merely brought it out, that's all. Do you—" Casselli's face became dark and annoyed—"think I've enjoyed this crazy merry-go-round of the past years? Your wife has worn me to a frazzle just keeping her out of trouble."

Before Boltoni could say anything to this, Chief Zorn suggested, "Maybe we'd better get down to some facts. Would you tell us exactly what's happened, Mr. Boltoni?"

Boltoni nodded and attempted to pull himself together. He cleared his throat. "The facts are simple

enough. Wednesday of last week I flew to Paris for an International Scientists' Convention where I read an important paper on the work I'm doing. You could call it a summation of my lifelong efforts thus far. Maria was in Florence with Mr. Casselli, making the film, *Lucretia Borgia*. Late Friday afternoon I received a wire from Maria saying she was leaving Florence immediately—that very day—she gave no details, but she said she would see me either Saturday night or Sunday morning here in our apartment in Philadelphia. I—

"Where is your apartment?" Short asked.

"Chestnut Street, near Fortieth. The Walton Court." Boltoni waited, as if for approval or further questions.

"Go on," Short urged.

"Yes. I finished up my business in Paris at once—let some of it go, in fact, and even made a rather serious error in my magnetic field equa—"

"You took a plane home?" Short interrupted.

"Yes. Saturday noon. I arrived at my apartment about six A.M. Sunday morning. Maria was not there. I waited all day for her. And all Sunday night. Monday morning, I phoned Casselli's apartment in New York—"

Short lifted a hand. "Just a minute. You took a plane from Paris Saturday noon? A jet?"

"Yes."

"That should have put you in New York around nine or ten o'clock. It's only an hour down to here. Where else did you go?"

"I can't tell you that exactly," Boltoni sighed "I remember nothing from a moment on the plane a few minutes out of Paris to finding myself on a ramp in the New York airport about two A.M. Sunday. I presume I got off the plane several hours before and wandered round the place."

Both Short and Zorn were staring with narrowed, skeptical eyes at the little physicist. A sharp cough from Casselli's direction caused them to swing round simultaneously. "Let me explain for him," Casselli said. "Mr. Boltoni is subject to attacks of amnesia. His brain is a highly sensitive, highly refined instrument, and the level at which he constantly works it is responsible for this weakness."

"I'd only been aloft a few minutes," Boltoni broke in apologetically, "and I remember opening my brief-case and taking out some papers. You see, I was very worried and very concerned, for I'd made a stupid, elementary mistake that had become immediately obvious as I was reading my paper to the convention. The fact is, my magnetic field equations have to be invariant in "n" dimensions, and—"

"Are you under treatment for this?" Short asked.

"I've consulted many specialists many times over the past ten years.

They can do nothing. It's something you learn to live with. Fortunately, it doesn't happen often—almost never, if I'm not excited or perturbed."

"All right," Short said. "All in all, it just means you lost the flight time and a couple hours at the airport. You were perfectly conscious of coming down here?"

"Oh yes, certainly."

"And when you regained normal consciousness on the ramp, you had all your possessions? Your baggage? You were all right?"

"Yes." Boltoni made his weak smile. "I wasn't robbed or beaten, if that's what you mean. Yes, I had everything."

"Fine. Go on with the story, please."

"I came home, as I said. Maria wasn't there. I was in torture all Sunday and Sunday night. By Monday morning I was extremely upset. I phoned Mr. Casselli's apartment in New York. He told me that Maria had landed Saturday morning and that he'd arrived a couple hours later. He'd searched all day and finally found her that night at a party in some New York restaurant. After that she'd gone to a place in Jersey owned by a man named Gruber. Casselli said the last he'd seen of Maria was when she'd gone off to this Gruber's place. I got the phone number and called the man around noon, Monday—that's yesterday, of course. Mr. Gruber said Maria had left the party—

apparently he'd been giving a party and many persons were there—sometime during the early hours Sunday morning. He didn't know exactly when. He said everybody and his brother had been in and out of the place all night, and he'd no idea when any particular person came or went. He said further that he didn't give a damn. Well, I called Mr. Casselli back and told him what Mr. Gruber had told me. I said if Maria didn't come home or communicate with me by this morning, I was going to the police. Casselli said to wait till he got here. He arrived this morning and suggested we come to you, for he's afraid bringing the police in will trigger a great deal of unfavorable publicity. Unfavorable for the film production, *Lucretia Borgia*, that is. And, although I'm frantically worried about Maria, I can understand Casselli's viewpoint—his company has three or four million dollars tied up in that movie."

Short nodded and looked at Casselli. "According to the papers, *Lucretia Borgia's* costing over ten-million to film."

"Publicity," Casselli replied. "The actual figure's about three and a half-million."

"It's enough," Chief Zorn remarked from behind his desk. "Suppose you tell us what happened at your end, Mr. Casselli?"

"Surely." Casselli fitted a fresh cigarette into his holder and lit it. "Mr. Boltoni's story is basically cor-

rect; I can fill in a few details, that's all. Last week, in Florence, the picture was going fine and everybody was happy in the fact that it would be finished within a few days, when all of a sudden, right out of the blue, Maria Tarella threw a terrible fit of temperament. It was a bad one—even for her. Realizing the strain she was under, I babied her for a while, for we had certain key-scenes to get through, but finally I blew up. We quarreled all over the location, putting on a great show for the other actors, and then Maria announced her determination to walk out. Quit cold. She wired her husband, as he said, and took a plane from Rome. That was Friday. I was on the next jet. I found her at ten-thirty Saturday night at Sigurd's restaurant. I guess you know the place—it's a favorite with show people."

"Yes," Short said. "Tell me, is *Lucretia Borgia* far from finished?"

Casselli looked unhappy. "Yes. I've at least a dozen key-scenes. Close up stuff. All but impossible to fake or use a double. Right now, I've got three or four men searching through thousands of feet of test film, just in case . . ."

"Yes?" Short's face looked blank.

"In case something has happened to her that'll prevent her ever finishing the picture. In that case, we'll *have* to use a double. But the slightest bit of publicity now . . ." Casselli snapped his fingers . . . "and, poof!—that's it."

"I see." Short lit another cigarette and fingered his lighter idly, turning it against the arm of the chair. "Go on about the party at Sigurd's."

Casselli shrugged. "It was a typical thing. Good food, champagne, celebrities. A big-shot gangster named Joe Gruber was there. He was throwing money around like confetti. About eleven o'clock he invited a dozen or so people to come over to his Jersey place and finish the party. Maria was one of them. That's the last I saw her."

"You didn't go?"

"No, I was tired. Worried. I have many problems. I was in no mood for a drunken spree—which was the direction the party was obviously taking. I went home to bed."

"And you didn't look for her Sunday?"

"No. It wasn't the first time she'd done that sort of thing. I phoned the Ritz to see if she'd checked in; when they said she hadn't, I assumed she'd gone down to Philadelphia."

"Does Maria always check in at the Ritz?"

Casselli nodded. "Always."

"Go on," Short said.

"Well, like I said, I'd concluded she'd gone down to Philadelphia. I decided to let her cool off a few days, go down, and pick her up, and get her back on location. It's all happened before."

"But somehow, this time it's different?" Short looked from Casselli to Boltoni and back. "You didn't hire detectives before, did you?"

"No, that's true," Boltoni spoke up. "Strange as it may seem, Maria is very precise about engagements. She's almost superstitious about it—like a fetish. Yes, it is different this time."

"It's part of her luck ritual," Casselli said. "Never breaking an appointment, never being late—you'd be surprised how childishly superstitious she is."

"Uh, huh," Short grunted. "From what I've already heard, I'm not surprised at all. Can you tell me who else was on that party—that is, who also went to Jersey to Gruber's place? And, by the way, this Gruber you're speaking of, he's Joe 'Blockhead' Gruber, of course?"

"I believe he's called that," Casselli replied. "As to the others, well, there was—" Casselli paused and shook his head—"I must have been introduced to a hundred people at Sigurd's and I'm having trouble remembering a single name. Let's see, there was Shirley Cramer the actress, Leonard Barnes the British promoter, the Westcott brothers, George Gorse the portrait painter, Nell Jones the columnist—incidentally, I hope she didn't nose out any—"

"But did any of these go to Gruber's place?" Short asked.

After a silence, Casselli said, "I'm sure Gorse the painter did. I remember him particularly because he was so very drunk and so very obnoxious. He kept kneeling before Maria, kissing her feet and begging

her to let him do her portrait. Yes, I'm sure he went along."

"And the others?"

"I couldn't say for sure about them. I was tired, disgusted, and very anxious to get home to bed."

"All right." Short turned to Boltoni. "How is it you make your home in Philadelphia?"

The little scientist looked confused and surprised.

"I mean," Short explained, "in view of the fact that your wife makes pictures in Rome and Hollywood, that Mr. Casselli lives in New York, that you yourself are a kind of international figure, well—Philadelphia isn't exactly the crossroads of the world."

Chief Zorn broke in, laughing. "Mr. Short's a native. He considers his home town as something close to a graveyard."

Boltoni made a polite attempt at laughter that wasn't very successful. "For the past five years I've been retained by the Rand Solenoid Corporation. They sponsor my research. I also give special lectures in the university school of advanced studies. I find my apartment on Chestnut Street very convenient. In the beginning, Maria claimed she liked it because she could live here incognito and rest from the demands of her public."

"I see," Short said. He looked at Casselli, thought a moment, then asked, "Do you realize, a few minutes back, you spoke of Maria Tarella in the past tense? You said,

'It wasn't the first time she'd done that sort of thing,' referring to her possibly running off to Philadelphia without telling you." Short paused and cleared his throat. "Do you have some reason to believe she's met with foul play?"

"No." Casselli looked steadily at Short. "Unless this Joe 'Blockhead' Gruber's unsavory reputation influenced me unconsciously. Other than that, my words were accidental."

"Blockhead's a rough boy," Short conceded. "If he wanted something, from all I've heard, he'd take it. Maria picked a cute playmate."

"I advised her not to go, but for all the good it did, I might as well have saved my breath." Casselli sighed and then, when nobody spoke for a few moments, took a leather-bound check-book from his inner breast-pocket, along with a ball-point pen, and began scribbling a check. "Naturally, Mr. Zorn," he said, "Casselli Productions will guarantee any expense and pay all bills. Allow me." He signed the check with a flourish and, leaning forward, placed it as near to the center of Zorn's desk as he could get. Zorn's eyes flicked down, then up, and his mummy-like head nodded approval. "Thank you. Cosmopolitan will leave no stone unturned to find Maria Tarella. You may depend on it. Meanwhile—" he put the check in the center drawer of his desk—"unless Mr. Short has more questions . . .?"

"Just a couple. They're not pleasant, but I've got to know. What kind of insurance did Maria—I'm sorry—does Maria carry?"

"Five-thousand in life insurance, that's all," Boltoni said. "I insisted on at least that much. Maria wouldn't spend a minute thinking of things like insurance. She claims she hasn't the slightest interest in the disposition of her corpse, or in elaborate funerals, monuments, or the like."

"Has she a large personal fortune?" Short asked.

Casselli laughed. "Excuse me," he said quickly, "but I couldn't help that. The truth is at such variance with the public's conception. Maria Tarella hasn't a dime. True, her earnings are tremendous—they'll reach well into six figures this year—but she spends money faster than we can make it. I'm sure an accounting as of this moment would show she's way in debt."

"Does Casselli Productions have her insured?"

"We'd like to, but it can't be done. No reliable company would underwrite anything involving Maria Tarella. She's probably the biggest box-office draw in the world, but the most infantile, headstrong, temperamental, unpredictable personality any producer ever had to handle. Over the years her behavior has cost us millions."

"And yet," Short smiled, "you continue to employ her."

Casselli gave a long-drawn sigh.

"Mr. Short, when you create a symbol like Maria Tarella in the public mind, you don't undo it in a day. Not even in years. Furthermore, after you create it, you don't own it—it owns you. Ours is a strange business, Mr. Short."

"Yes," Short agreed. "I'm beginning to see that." He stood up and slid his hands into his pockets. "I know enough for now, I guess. I'll run up and have a talk with Blockhead Gruber."

3

Joe "Blockhead" Gruber was a big man. Big shouldered, big chested, and—as of recent years—big bellied. He was mostly bald, had a thick straight neck, and his head was suggestive of the rectangular—hence his nickname. At the moment, he sat at ease in a huge upholstered chair and looked at Oliver Short and Hazel Harris with interested, calm, and somewhat amused eyes. Occasionally he plugged the end of a long, expensive cigar into a wide, thick-lipped mouth and sucked smoke. One of his ears—the left—was missing; in its place was a hard, calloused, pink and purple-white knob of flesh.

"You think I'm holding the Tarella dame here?" he asked in a gruff tone. "You're some joker. A real joker." His eyes, small dark blue chips, left Short and flicked to Hazel. "Your dad's gotta be kiddin', Girlie."

Short's face showed no particular emotion. "I'm just trying to find out what time she left your party. And where she went. I'm not accusing anybody of anything. I just want some help from you."

Blockhead Gruber looked at Short a long moment, then let a grin spread across his vast jaw. "You're well-spoken. And polite. I'll say that for you." Blockhead turned to a middle-sized, compact, tight-lipped man standing about six feet to his left. "Rod?—I thought you said this guy was a cop?"

"He was. Thirty-years ago he cooled Frank Connelly. Don't let him fool you; he's no different now."

Short gave the standing man a curt, disinterested glance. "I was on the Force thirty-years ago," he told Gruber. "Right now I'm a private investigator."

"And you did cool Frank Connelly?"

Short shrugged. "I've cooled a few guys in my time—when there was no alternative. Frank Connelly could've been one. To be truthful, I don't particularly remember him."

A look of disbelief crossed Gruber's face. "Frankie was a big boy in Detroit. Funny a guy'd cool him and not even remember it. Or have you cooled so many big guys?"

"That could be," Short said, smiling pleasantly. "Anyway, I'm not much for stewing in old memories. All I want is to find Maria

Tarella or some kind of a lead on her. I don't want trouble. Honest."

Blockhead Gruber studied Short's face some more, then said, "All right, I'll go a little way with you. Saturday I picked the Tarella dame and a couple dozen other screwballs up in Sigurd's. That was about eleven o'clock. I brought 'em all out here for a shindig. I was feeling pretty good, you see. A little later a bunch came in from Newark and another from Philly. I don't know who all in hell was there. The place was crawling with broads. I lost track of the Tarella dame after about a half hour. Yesterday, when her old man called up, I asked around and heard she'd powdered out just before midnight."

"Alone?"

"I don't know." Blockhead turned to the man who stood by his left. "Tell the Chink to bring some drinks in here." He looked at Hazel Harris. "Anything special you'd like?"

"Whatever you're drinking, Mr. Gruber," Hazel said.

"Tell him to bring whiskey-sours—that okay with you, Short?"

"Sure. Look, Joe—" Short leaned forward—"there's no bus line out here. The Tarella dame didn't have a car, right? Somebody'd have to take her into town."

Blockhead shrugged. "I ain't arguing the point. I just don't know. Maybe that creep, Casselli came and got her."

"You know Casselli?"

"Sure. The creep's into me for a million and a half."

"What?" Short frowned and leaned forward.

Gruber grunted. "It's the truth. If it wasn't for the peculiar circumstances, I'd mush him all over the pavement. Three or four years ago, Fischetti put a million and a half in that one-lung film company of Casselli's—at least it was one-lung then. I ain't got the money back yet."

Considering this a moment, Short asked, "You mean 'Fisheye'—Fischetti? Your old partner?"

"Yeah. He's dead now." Gruber dropped his eyes. "Rest his soul. Anyway, I inherited the account." Gruber paused and chuckled. "It wouldn't be so bad if I paid an income-tax—I could write it off as a bad debt. But I don't."

A door opened somewhere in the rear and a wizened, wrinkled Chinese padded in, bearing a large tray containing bottles and glasses and a bowl of ice. Gruber watched while the Oriental put the tray on a table and began pouring and mixing. "Whenever I ask for a drink," Gruber complained, "he makes a production out of it. He brought enough for a binge. I think he's picking up a little change on the side for trying to make me drink myself to death."

Short was staring vaguely at the Oriental's long silk shirt. He thought how the man was almost as dry and mummified-looking as Chief Zorn.

"Yeah," Short finally said, then asked, "Do you know that if Maria Tarella doesn't show up, Casselli might not be able to finish his four-million dollar movie?"

"Yeah," Gruber nodded, "I can see that." His eyes were fixed on the drinks and there was a note of indifference in his voice. "Rotten racket, movies. I told Fischetti he was nuts."

"But," Short pointed out, "if Casselli Productions goes under, how'll you ever get your money?"

The Chinese served the drinks. Blockhead Gruber scowled at the Oriental's expressionless, stoical face, lifted his glass and said, "To nothing. What's anybody got to drink to nowadays, huh? What'd they ever have, come to think of it?"

Short and Hazel drank. Hazel said, "To nothing. I like that, Mr. Gruber. You've summed up things better than Camus or John Paul Sartre."

"Huh?" Gruber's big jaw went slack. "What's all that, Doll?"

"Don't mind her," Short grunted, "she's been reading sexy French novels."

Hazel laughed. She told Gruber, "Camus and Sartre took a million words between them to say what you said in two or three."

"Camus and Sartre, eh?" Blockhead nodded. "Where do they operate?"

"Paris."

Blockhead scowled and shrugged. "I keep clear of foreigners. Can't

trust 'em. Take Casselli, for instance—"

"Yes," Short broke in. "Did you get my point about him? If Casselli doesn't finish his picture, how'll you get your money?"

"Fischetti's money," Gruber corrected. "I wouldn't put a plugged quarter in any lousy movie. I got more sense. Especially a foreign movie."

"But the debt has legally passed to you, hasn't it?"

"Legal enough. If Casselli doesn't pay, he'll be one sick dago."

"But he *can't*, if he doesn't finish his picture."

"That's his headache. If he's got millions to spread around making a film, he can pay me. Let him hock his company."

Short was quiet while he considered, then he asked, "Do you know what the police might think of this?"

Blockhead's eyes went narrow. He looked from Hazel Harris to Short and said, "No. What?"

"They have nasty minds. They might think you're holding Maria Tarella as security for the debt. Casselli'll give both his arms, let alone a million and a half, to get her back."

Blockhead looked steadily at Short. "They're nuts if they do think that. I don't need a dame to pressure Casselli. I'll squash him like a roach, if I have to. At my age, after what I been through, no dago's gonna take me for an M and a half.

That kinda thing reflects on American business all over."

Short smiled and nodded. "I spoke to Casselli."

"I figured that," Gruber replied flatly.

"He didn't say anything about owing you money."

"That figures too."

Short nodded again. He finished his drink and asked in a confidential tone, "Why'd you bring her over here, Joe? You must've known who she was."

"Yeah, sure, I knew who she was." Blockhead shifted in his chair and signaled for more drinks. He looked at Hazel, grinned, and turned back to Short. "You want me to say why I brought her over?"

"Yeah, sure."

"You'd believe the truth?"

"Sure."

Blockhead Gruber laughed, low and throaty. "She looked like a good lay. And—" Gruber waved a thick hand—"I kind of figured, in a way, I owned a piece of that world-famous behind."

Hazel Harris began laughing.

"I like him," Hazel said, as she and Short crossed Fifth Avenue. "He's a big, rough, tough mugg, but under it all he's soft. Did you hear him about his partner?"

Short guided Hazel by the elbow and chuckled. "Don't be fooled by that Slapsie Maxie act. I happen

to know Gruber came out of New York University in the thirties with a law degree. He's sharp and plenty smart. You notice how quick he got it out that Casselli owed him money? As for his partner, Fischetti—" Short laughed again—"rest his soul—Blockhead had him hit. Of course, I'll give him this—old Fisheye was probably just waiting his chance to do the same."

"Why'd he want you to know Casselli owed him money?" Hazel asked.

"No matter what he says, the last thing he'd want would be for Maria Tarella not to finish *Lucretia Borgia*. His million and a half's riding on it and he knows it. Squashing Casselli's just talk—you can't get blood from a stone and Gruber's too big to get a boot out of just killing Casselli." Short snapped his fingers. "Gruber'll kill like that—for a practical reason, but not for revenge. There's no percentage in it." After saying this, Short lapsed into silence, leaving Hazel's questions unanswered until she took the hint.

They found George Gorse, the portrait painter, in his apartment studio overlooking Central Park. The tall, thin, bearded painter not only looked like, but was almost a double for John Carradine. But he lacked the actor's fine voice and controlled *savoir faire*, for when Short questioned him, he became nervous and squeaked out rapid, jerky answers.

"It was one of those wild binges," he said, "where hardly anybody knew anybody else. I'm not exactly sure how I got there. I guess I was pretty drunk."

Hazel Harris tittered. She'd made a circuit of Gorse's studio, looking at the paintings which overloaded the walls. Gorse turned at the sound and eyed her trim figure from head to feet and back up again. But before he could make any comment, Hazel smiled disarmingly and said, "Yours are the most psychologically interesting portraits I've seen since Modigliani's. I do hate painting that's just painting, however beautiful. So few painters in our time have anything to say, but you're certainly one of the few."

The line of Gorse's mouth relaxed and his face behind the black beard softened. "Thank you, indeed." In his paint-splattered shirt, none-too-clean dungarees, and holding a large brush, he bowed and added, "Discerning, intelligent critics like yourself are also all too few."

Hazel blushed prettily. "If I ever have a portrait done," her large green eyes danced, "I want you to paint it. You're working for the deepest essences. I'm fascinated by deep essences. I believe a portrait by an inspired painter can reveal more than two years of psychoanalysis."

At this, a gleam came into Gorse's eyes and, ignoring Short's presence for the moment, he began saying, "Well now, Miss Harris, it's not imposs—"

Short interrupted him. "But you certainly knew Maria Tarella was at the party? You'd been asking her all evening to pose for you."

With reluctance, Gorse gave Short his attention. "Yes, that's true. She was there."

"Gruber specifically invited her? He was interested in her?"

This time Gorse was slower in answering. "Yes, that's so. But believe me, by then I was mighty drunk."

"When did you leave?"

"Around dawn. I don't know the time. The sun was just coming up. I guess—" Gorse laughed nervously—"an almanac'll tell that—the time."

"Uh huh. Now what time did Maria Tarella leave?"

Gorse took a deep breath. "I don't know as I can say. I don't have to answer your questions, you know. You've no genuine authority."

"Uh huh." Short nodded. "You'd be surprised what constitutes authority, son. But maybe you'd rather talk to Captain Grimes of Homicide?"

"Homicide?" Gorse held out a pair of thin, nervous hands; the thumb of one was broadly stained with Prussian Blue. "Maria Tarella isn't dead, is she?"

"Would it surprise you?" Short asked, then before Gorse could reply, he added, "Do you think whatever happened at Gruber's can be kept a secret? With all those

people? It's just a question of time. Now, when did she leave?— or didn't she leave?"

Gorse shook his head and maintained a stubborn silence.

"I won't divulge the source of my information," Short said, after a moment. "You'll be safe enough, if that's what's bothering you."

Again Gorse shook his head. "No dice."

A calm, dreamy look came into Oliver Short's eyes. Their pale blue became soft gray, and his thin blond eyebrow tilted in an expression that might almost be called anguish. "You're making things tough, son. I've got to know." His thick left arm hooked up sharply and his big fist gathered in a handful of Gorse's shirtfront. He jerked the tall man forward and drew back his right fist. "Talk, boy," he said. "I'm low on time."

Fear widened Gorse's eyes. Physical danger had appeared so suddenly his squeaky voice went up another half-octave. "Don't hit me!" he cried, staring at Short's fat fist.

"Then talk—fast! Did you see Maria Tarella leave Gruber's?"

Hazel Harris trotted round in front where she could get a clear view of Gorse's face. "You'd better tell him what he wants," she advised, keeping her mouth straight. "His sex-libido was arrested at the anal-sadistic stage. He'll beat you to a pulp and get a charge out of it. I strongly advise you to talk."

Gorse's breath came in gasps as

his eyes rolled from Short to Hazel Harris and back. Short's fist loomed before him like a poised mallet. "All right!" Gorse cried, "but you won't say I told you?"

"Talk!"

"Gruber and Maria were together most of the time. He was rushing her. I think—I think he fed her a little H— anyway, I know there was some going round. Maybe Gruber supplied it; maybe somebody brought it; I don't know. But it wasn't long before Maria was feeling no pain and swinging like a well-oiled gate. The stuff really sent her. She had a little dagger, a tiny jeweled stiletto, in a sheath in her stocking-top. She danced on a table and showed the dagger, drew it, and brandished it. Then she clenched it in her teeth and whirled into the wildest dance I ever saw—a tarantella, I believe. Then she waved the knife and said she was going to kill the meanest, dirtiest, son-of-a-bitch—those were her words—in all Italy, her director, Benvenuto Cas-selli. She called him a few other things too—" Gorse glanced at Hazel—"that I can't possibly repeat."

"Then what happened?" Short asked.

"Well, she danced some more, whirling and whirling round on the big table, then she almost kicked one old fellow's eye out who was leaning forward trying to see too much. An elderly, distinguished-looking man. Somebody said he was

a banker or big-shot broker—I forget which. Anyway, it took three or four people to hold him down while they poured iodine into his head and patched him up.”

“Good God,” Hazel murmured, “I wonder why?”

“Then what?” Short asked.

“Gruber finally got Maria off the table and took her somewhere. An hour later, I saw Gruber. He was alone. I didn’t see Maria the rest of the night. In fact, I never saw her again.”

“Then you didn’t see her leave?”

“No. A little later I said something to Gruber, in an offhand way, like, ‘Where’s the Tarella babe, Joe?’ but he just grunted and said he thought she’d beat it—that the party wasn’t hot enough for her.” Gorse shrugged. “It might be true too.”

“It might.” Short released the painter. “Why all the caginess? You could’ve told me this right off and saved us both trouble.”

“Yeah?” Gorse straightened his shirt and walked across the studio to a cabinet. He got a bottle and a glass, and poured himself a drink. “Why should I get involved? There’s nothing in it for me.”

Short shrugged. “You can rejoice in the fact that you’ve aided justice.”

The painter wrinkled his lip and poured a second drink. “That’s fine. Maybe I just wish I’d never seen Maria Tarella or Gruber—or you, for that matter.”

“And me too?” Hazel asked, pouting.

Gorse merely looked at her and grunted.

5

On their way to the airport, Short asked Hazel, “What was that crap about an arrested sex-libido?”

“You should read Freud,” Hazel answered. “Whenever you want to scare painters, you quote his theories. Especially modern painters who can’t paint—which is most of them.”

“Yes?” Short said the word idly. He gave Hazel a cigarette, lit one for himself, and, before she could comment any further on Freud, asked, “Back in Philly—did you ask Maurice about Luigi Boltoni?”

“I phoned from the station. He says Boltoni’s one of the leading scientists in the world. One of the few detached seekers of pure truth left. Maury couldn’t praise him enough.”

“Yeah.” Short puffed his cigarette and shook his head. “I’m convinced he’s a great scientist all right. The trouble is, when you get down to it, it’s got nothing to do with whether he could kill a playgirl wife or not. Yet everybody’s highly influenced. I wonder . . .” Short trailed the word off into a silence.

“You don’t know that Maria Tarella’s dead, do you?” Hazel asked.

“It’s my considered guess she is.

The way everybody's acting makes me think so. Nobody gets so excited when a person as goofy as this Maria Tarella just takes off for a single day and night. She's got to be dead. Boltoni's explained himself blue in the face—all unnecessarily—and has the perfect bereaved husband air. Casselli clucks over him like a mother-hen, all sympathy and condolence, and in addition talks about Maria in the past tense and has a couple men in Italy hunting for a double already. Gruber couldn't wait to tell me he'd lose by Maria's death, and you saw the way Gorse carried on. And besides that, there's the matter of the general attitude; Maria's only been gone a little more than two days, yet nobody expects her to turn up of her own accord. It's taken for granted that Cosmo will find her. Understand?"

"Yes. You know what I think?"

"No."

"I think we should start looking for a one-eyed banker."

Short chuckled. "No. I'll admit that guy had reason to twist Maria's neck, but he'd have had to do it then and there, and Gruber would never be fool enough to cover up for him."

"Then who did it, Ollie?" Hazel asked, stretching back and yawning. "Who's the culprit? — Casselli? — Maria was ready to kill him, remember?"

"She *said* she was," Short corrected. "Remember, she's the world's number one temperamental

actress. She probably says she'll kill the waiter if the soup's not quite hot enough or the mailman if he doesn't bring a letter. I've an idea saying she'll kill people's part of her personality." Short laughed and added, "But let's get back to Boltoni. He took flight 4 out of Paris, Saturday. He arrived at 10 P.M. Let's see if anybody at the field noticed him fumbling around." Short paused again, nodded in satisfaction, and described Boltoni to Hazel. Then he said, "If we can clear this thing up tonight or tomorrow, we can get right up to the Alpine."

"No hurry on my part, Daddio," Hazel said. She primped her short red hair and let her eyes sparkle mischievously. "I'd rather hunt killers than plunk the guitar and yodel. Why don't you give in and marry me, Ollie? We'd make a wonderful team."

"Marry you?" Short grunted. "You mean adopt you, don't you?"

"Age is just a matter of mental attitude," Hazel pointed out.

"I know. That's just the thing. I feel about eighty-five. Besides, I don't want to get married. I just want to fish and look at mountains and smoke cigarettes."

Hazel laughed. "I'll give you two, maybe three, days of that and you'll be beating your head against a tree out of sheer boredom."

"Maybe. But I'd like to get a chance to find out for myself."

"Romance and marriage," Hazel pressed, "are wonderful."

"Yeah. I noticed what it did to Boltoni. He's a great advertisement."

"There are women and there are women. Boltoni married an emotional infant. Probably an intellectual one too. Now a woman like me—mature, intelligent, capable, disc—"

"We're at the airport," Short interrupted, laughing, "I hope we can fit your head through the doorway."

Hazel wrinkled her snubby nose, stuck a pink tongue out, and said, "All right. Let's get the dope on your absent-minded professor. He probably sat in the waiting-room two hours, reading *Playboy*."

Short assigned the cigar-counters, lunch-bars, restaurants, and notion-shops to Hazel. After covering the flight-desk, the station-police, the baggage-rooms, several lavatory attendants, the supervisor of porters, a barber-shop, and a half-dozen other places, he wandered round the various ramps and caught up with Hazel at the Jetstream Bar. He asked, "Any luck, Lazylegs?"

"None." Hazel waved a hand and plunged it into the pocket of her green-gray kidskin coat. "Nobody knows anything about anything. It's a madhouse. When I ask about Boltoni, everybody gets cagey, like I'm trying to sucker them into something. What a world." Hazel pointed a finger. "The bartender's a nice guy though. He's dead sure Boltoni wasn't in here."

"He is?"

"Yeah," Hazel snickered, "this bar was closed Saturday when flight 4 arrived."

"Very funny. Come on, let's get moving."

"But don't I even get a drink?"

"Next year—when you're twenty-one." Short frowned. "Wait a minute—why was this bar closed Saturday at ten o'clock?"

Hazel smiled. "I wondered when you'd tumble. One of their big refrigerator systems blew a valve or something. The escaping gas drove all the customers out and they shut down. They couldn't get a mechanic till Sunday morning."

"Interesting. Come on, let's quiz some cab-drivers. It's a cinch Boltoni didn't walk into town."

Short found three in a group, talking and laughing. He got their attention and described Boltoni while he fingered some crisp banknotes. None of the men had taken Boltoni from the airport; however, one of them, a flat-faced, broad-shouldered fellow with alert, interested eyes that peered through thick lensed spectacles, said he'd pass the word round through the trade and let Short know if anything came forth. Short gave him one of the banknotes, the phone-number of the Cosmopolitan's New York City branch, and the job of driving them back to town. As they rode, Hazel eased her feet out of her shoes, tucked her legs under her body on the seat, and stretched

back comfortably. "You're not using psychology on this Boltoni case," she said to Oliver, smiling. "You've got to consider how the mind works."

Short looked at her, gave her a patient, "Yes?" and added, "How so, Lazylegs?"

"Well, this Boltoni's a little, quiet, inhibited man—right?"

"Right."

"What's that mean? It means all his aggressive, conquering, man-brute instincts are held down—right? He takes a lot of—of nonsense from his wife, her director, and God knows who else—right? Okay—" Hazel's voice rose energetically—"so if he goes into a state of amnesia, what happens? Remember, the amnesia is occasioned by all those repressed qualities fighting for expression, battering his ego from within while the environment batters it from without. So what happens?"

"According to the way you're putting it," Short answered, "I suspect he turns into a tough, aggressive character, ready to chop down the first person who treads on his shoes. Or even looks like he might."

"Exactly. A clear case of Jekyll and Hyde or Three Faces of Eve. So what's the first thing he does on hitting New York?"

"Who knows?—the way you're describing him. Maybe up to Central Park to beat up an old lady?"

"No. Now, I'm not kidding."

Hazel shook her head and wiggled her stocking-clad toes. "Here's what he does. He's hard and tough now. Like a rock. He hops a cab and goes to Casselli's apartment because he knows Maria's walked out on the picture and has flown over here. He hits Casselli's, goes in, pushes him down in a chair, and says, "Look, pisan, I've had enough crap. Where's my frau—I mean, where's my—my—"

"Signora?" Short suggested.

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, Casselli won't talk and Boltoni slaps him round a little and finally Casselli confesses he left Maria at Sigurd's and that she went over to Blockhead's place in Jersey. This burns Boltoni and he dashes down to Happy Mary's and gifts a smokepole and heads over to Jersey."

"Happy Mary's?" Short asked, frowning curiously.

"A joint on Forty-ninth Street. Things like smokepoles, pot, horse, and certain types of broads can be found there."

"And you know about it?" Short asked, chuckling.

"Sure. I sang doubles there with Larry Waters when I was fifteen. It's a swinging joint if it's still open."

The cab-driver glanced back at Hazel and grinned. "It is." Then nodding at Short, he added, "It's everything she says, Mister, and more."

"Thanks," Short told the driver. "And you think Boltoni would

know a place like that?" he asked Hazel.

"He could ask and find it. He could ask a cab-driver. Our friend here—" Hazel pointed to the cabby's thick shoulders— "knows Happy Mary's."

"All right," Short agreed, "it's crude, but I'll go along. So he gets the gun and goes to Jersey. Then what?"

Hazel hesitated. "I don't know exactly. I didn't get that far."

Short laughed and patted her knee. "You better relax a while."

"You're the detective," Hazel complained. "I can't solve the whole case for you. And stop feeling my leg—either marry me or treat me like a lady."

Short laughed again. The driver turned and said, "Excuse me—you mind if I butt in?"

"No," Short told him, "go ahead. You got a theory?"

"No, it ain't that. I ain't heard enough to form a theory, but I like you people. You got a certain detached, happy attitude. You wouldn't be Zen scholars, by any chance?"

"Not yet," Short said. "We're the way we are because we don't know any better."

"Funny," the driver said, "I get a sensation of a definite encounter with you people. I'm never wrong."

"I've read Zen," Helen said, "and it's wonderful." She leaned forward in the seat and wiggled her feet into her shoes. "I attained

satori when I was thirteen. I'd love to discuss it with you sometime."

"I knew it," the driver shook his head. "I'm never mistaken. And you attained *satori*?"

"Oh yes."

"At thirteen? It's amazing. I wish we could get together for a talk."

"Maybe we can. What's your name?"

"Hender. Charley Hender."

"Glad to know you, Charley." Hazel nodded toward Short. "This is Oliver Short. He's an ace-detective."

"A real pleasure, Mr. Short." Charley Hender sounded impressed.

Short stared at Hazel and said, "Same here, Mr. Hender. This precocious child is named Hazel Harris. Pay no attention to what she says, for she's utterly irresponsible. And now, if you'll take us to—" he gave the name and number of Casselli's apartment-building—"we'll carry on."

Charley Hender sounded disappointed. "You ain't going to Happy Mary's?"

"Not just yet."

For the remainder of the drive, Short was silent. Hazel chatted with Charley about the meaning of the *koan*, "Has a dog the Buddha-nature—answer: Woof, woof!" and similar bits of Zen curiosia. Then they drifted into folk-music, the classical guitar, the Baroque recorder, some kind of ancient viola possessing a double set of strings, the second of which vibrated in

sympathy with the first, Mahayana Buddhism, statutory rape, rape in general, the philosophy of Nietzsche, Freud, circumcision as a remnant of an ancient tribal ritual designed to drive home the castration-threat against incest and enforce the authority of the "Old Man", the probability of the existence of an autonomous "super-ego", and the possibility of substituting marihuana and/or mescaline for tobacco in general use. Short half-listened to this verbal potpourri, smiled now and then, and said nothing. When the cab reached Casselli's, he gave Charley a generous tip and reminded him to ask round about Boltoni. Charley said he would, gave Short a phone-number where he could be reached in an hour or two, and concluded by saying:

"That's one swell, hip chick you got there, Mr. Short."

Hazel had just walked beyond earshot. "Yeah," Short nodded. "In her spare time she's working on the 'Beat Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica'."

And, as he pressed Casselli's bell, Short told Hazel, "Please don't introduce me to people as an 'ace-detective'. It sounds ridiculous."

"You are, aren't you?"

"I don't know. That's not the point. I'm not—"

"You're just too modest. You—"

"Never mind," Short sighed. "Call me 'ace-detective', if you want." He pressed Casselli's bell-button a couple more times.

"He's out," Hazel said.

"Yeah. Down in Philadelphia."

Short pressed the button next to Casselli's. Almost instantly the door buzzed and Short pushed it open. When he and Hazel came out of the elevator, a woman in a flowered housecoat stood at an open door numbered 6. Short looked surprised.

"I meant to ring 4," he said. "Mr. Casselli's. I'm sorry."

The woman gave him a forced smile and went inside. Moving quickly, Short examined Casselli's door. He worked the knob, pushed with the flat of his hand, and examined the key-plate. "A damn good one," he muttered. "Probably vertical bronze bolts. You lock it a full turn from the outside. The best kind."

"Can't you pick it with a hair-pin?"

"Don't be silly. It'd take a locksmith with tools a half hour to crack that thing. Besides—" Short frowned—"you haven't any hair-pins, have you?"

"No. But that's what the ace-detective's girl always suggests."

"You're a laugh-riot. Keep it up and you'll get no dinner." Short stripped off his jacket and pulled his snub-nosed .38 from his shoulder-holster. He studied the lock again, placed the pistol-barrel at an exact angle, flush with it, and proceeded to wrap his coat round his hand, wrist, and the gun. He continued winding until all the cloth was used up. Then he stood, waiting.

"Well?" Hazel demanded. She plugged her fingers into her ears and squinted.

"I'm waiting for the traffic. There's a light down the corner holding it up. Ssh—listen."

After some twenty-seconds, which seemed to stretch out into as many minutes, the roar of cars and buses began in the distance. When it reached a crescendo, Short fired. "In quick!" he ordered, pushing the door wide and closing it immediately.

"Not bad," Hazel said. "I've heard people cough as loud as that. Not bad at all."

"Thanks." Short found a light-switch, clicked it, and picked up the lock, which had blasted out fairly clean. He jammed it back into the splintered door, shook out his coat, and holstered his pistol. The coat was still smoking from powder-burns. He examined it and shook his head sadly, saying, "This'll go on Casselli's bill. Sixty bucks."

Hazel looked round the large drawing-room they'd entered and gave a low whistle. "Wow! This guy lives in style. Look—" she walked over to a large, framed oil-painting—"he's got a Picasso original! And—" she examined another that hung over a long, low, walnut bookcase—"a Leger! And what a Leger! About five by eight feet!" She spun round on her heel. "What a layout! Your Casselli must be a millionaire."

"Probably," Short grunted.

"Anyway, he lived like one. But never mind that now—start looking round. You don't have to be too neat about it, for it won't matter if Casselli learns the place's been ransacked. Might even shake him up a little."

"Anything special we're looking for?"

"Evidence that Maria Tarella was here, or, better still—" Short grinned—"her body. But we'll take anything we can get."

Some minutes later, Short stood before an oak wall-cabinet, looking rather wistfully at a magnificent collection of custom-built sporting rifles. He took down a fine Mannlicher, rubbed the stock, put it to his shoulder, and sighted along the barrel at a black-rimmed, pinkish eye on the Picasso canvas on the far wall. For an instant he had the illusion of being in African tall grass-land, drawing a bead on a charging rhino or water-buff, then he grinned, shook his head, and put the gun back. "Not my cup of tea," he thought, considering further and taking satisfaction in the fact that all his life he'd hunted men and that they were by far the most difficult and deadly game.

On the cabinet door opposite the rifles there were many framed photographs of Casselli standing beside dead lion, a buffalo, and an elephant. Several of the pictures showed him standing beside strung-up swordfish, as long as he was tall. Inside the cabinet there was a row of heavy

fishing tackle, big expensive stuff used for marlin and sailfish such as displayed in the photographs. While Short stood looking and admiring the equipment, Hazel came from the bedroom and stood beside him. He nodded and pointed to a chrome-plated reel almost a foot in diameter and said, "Lord, how I'd like to be behind that somewhere off the Florida Keys. This guy really lives."

Hazel gave the fishing-gear a brief, disdainful glance. "Find anything important?" she asked. There was an impish, self-satisfied urgency in her tone.

"No, not yet." Short fingered the heavy line on the big reel. He noted that the end had been cut, not properly knotted, and was frayed a couple inches. "Sloppy," he muttered and twisted the costly silk into a tight, neat figure-eight.

"I found something," Hazel said. "Look at this, if you can get off the fishing-kick a minute."

She was holding a brown leather brief-case. Short took it and saw the initials "L.B." neatly lettered in gold on the flap near the handle.

"Where'd you find it?" he asked as he pulled out a thick sheaf of papers.

"Bottom of the closet in the bedroom. It was stashed behind some suitcases."

"Nice work." Short nodded. "Look at these." He pointed to pages covered with symbols and closely typed text. "It must be the stuff Boltoni used in Paris."

"So he did come here," Hazel said, a triumphant look in her eyes. "I told you so. He came up and threatened to beat hell out of Casselli. Then he went to Gruber's after Maria. Maybe he killed her."

"Then went down to Philadelphia and phoned Casselli to come down and help him hire a detective to catch himself? Be reasonable, Wonder-girl. And tell me—why'd he leave his briefcase here?"

"He forgot it."

Short smiled. "The summation of his life's work? It's unlikely. But if he did, why'd Casselli hide it in the closet? And above all, why's Casselli protecting him?"

Hazel looked confused and disappointed. "Then you tell me what happened."

"I don't know yet. But look at this." Short reached into the very bottom of the case and drew out a small, thin-bladed, jeweled stiletto. Its double cutting edges tapered to a needle-sharp point. "Ten to one," he laughed, balancing the knife on his forefinger, "this little toy danced the tarentella Saturday night."

"She came here then," Hazel said, staring at the wicked looking dagger.

"Seems so. Maybe the miracle is this thing didn't end up in Casselli's ribs." Short tossed the dagger back into the brief-case and shrugged. "I wonder what—" he stopped abruptly and his eyes flicked to one of the windows. A long heavy drape was moving.

Hazel followed Short's eyes and her lips parted as she snuggled close against his thick arm.

"It's nothing," he assured her, glancing quickly at the floor and noting a good six inches of unoccupied clearance between the drape and the rug. "The window must be open, that's all." He went over, drew back the drape, and ran up the blind. Both casements were thrust outward as far as they could go. A strong breeze had come up and it whipped across Short's face. He leaned out the window and looked down. There was a straight, unbroken drop of eight stories to a narrow cement driveway; the wall of the building opposite the window was blank brick.

"Lousy view," Short said, pulling back. "For what this joint probably costs, I'd want some park and trees."

Hazel's face held a worried frown. "Casselli wouldn't go out of town and leave a window that wide open. Somebody was in here and heard us coming."

"Nobody but a human-fly could come in through it." Short laughed. "And if anybody went down, it's a cinch they didn't get up and walk away. Not unless two or three firemen were waiting below with a net. It's a straight drop and no hand-holds."

Still looking unconvinced, Hazel peeped cautiously beyond the sill. "I guess you're right," she conceded. "But who would leave a window open that wide? It's senseless."

Short didn't answer. He was staring at a brownish line running across the sill, perpendicular to the plane of the window. He ran his fingernail along it and found it was cut into the white paint clear down to the metal. Taking out his Zippo lighter, he flicked it and held the flame close, at an obtuse angle to his eye. The narrow metal surface was bright and shiny.

"Don't burn the dump down," Hazel warned. "What is it?"

"Looks like a saw-cut. It's new and fresh. Funny —" Short closed the lighter and began walking round the room. After two trips in silence, he said, "Something screwy happened in here. Something real screwy. And I suspect whatever it was, it had the Casselli touch." Upon this, Short stopped in front of a large marble-topped fireplace and frowned at the pink and white stone. The surface curved, protruding in sharp points at each end, thus giving a swooping wing-like effect. Decorative lines were cut parallel to the front edge. Short noticed several tiny smudges of purplish-black in one of the lines, where the stone point was sharpest, and he poked curiously with a fingernail. The stuff flaked off easily. He took a slip of paper from his notebook, folded it, and flicked a dozen or so crumbs of the material onto the white surface. Thus presented, the scrapings looked a dark, blackened crimson. Short folded the paper, and put it in his wallet.

Watching all this, Hazel asked, "Dried blood?"

"It could be. And look down there." Short pointed to the thick-piled gray rug. "No — stand more this way, against the light."

Hazel looked and pulled her brows close in puzzlement as she said, "Why a section about a yard in diameter was washed or scrubbed."

"Yes. If it was blood, a police technician'll find traces. You can't scrub it all out of a rug like that." Short moved close to the wall and examined the binding. "It hasn't been disturbed lately." Opening his penknife, he wedged the blade under the plastic strip, ripped up a section a yard long, and pulled back the rug. The heavy matted underside was damp.

"My God," Hazel breathed, while she stared, "Casselli had her up here and killed her. He beat her to death against that mantlepiece. Ugh!"

Short closed his knife and put it away. His pale blue eyes were bright and interested as he asked, "Why?"

Hazel kept staring, shook her head, and answered, "I don't know. But he must have had some reason."

"It'd have to be a pip to outweigh three and a half million bucks. That's what Maria and *Lucretia Borgia* are worth to him. But there's one — she was packing a shiv and had threatened to kill him. But, in that case, if Boltoni was here too — and it's fairly certain he was . . ." Short let his words trail off, lit a

Kent, and chuckled. "Well, at least it might explain the open window — to air the place and dry the rug. Come on, Lazylegs, let's look some more in the kitchen and bath."

As they turned, both Short and Hazel faced the hall door of the apartment. Hazel jumped when the broken lock suddenly fell inward and bounced once on the carpet. Then the door swung open and a man entered. He was medium-sized, hard-looking, and dressed in quiet gray. As his colorless, cold eyes glimpsed Short and Hazel, his hand moved quickly and a .45 Colt automatic appeared. He was the man who'd stood at Blockhead Gruber's left during Short and Hazel's interview some hours earlier.

6

"Well," the man grinned humorlessly, "look who's here."

Short remembered that Gruber had called the man Rod. "Hello, Rod," he said pleasantly enough. "What brings you out? And why the hardware?"

"Where's Casselli?" Rod asked, waving the gun. "Back up—over there by the wall."

Short put a hand on Hazel's elbow, preventing her from moving. He smiled blandly at Rod and shook his head. "We're doing fine right here. You want me moved, come over and move me."

Rod steadied the gun on Short's chest. The hollow smile left his face

and several deep lines formed on his forehead. "What are you," he asked, almost in a whisper, "some kind of nut? Nobody's tougher than a .45 slug, Mister."

Smiling even more broadly, Short let his big shoulders relax. "Who do you think you're kidding, Sonny? Put that thing back in your pocket and run home and tell your boss Casselli wasn't here. And next time don't pull a rod unless you intend to use it—that way you won't look like such a damn fool."

The hood's face became expressionless. His mouth was a thin, grim straight line. "You're a fink-cop," he hissed in a barely audible monotone. "You was a fink-cop back in the days when you plugged Frank Connelly and you're a fink-cop now."

Short took a final drag on his cigarette, moving neither slow nor fast. He flicked the butt into the fireplace. His eyes moved up and down Rod's figure. "I do remember you now," he said at last. "You were a pimply-faced, slimy punk who chased errands for Connelly's boys. You —"

"Can that!" Rod whipped the words out. "Or, by Christ, I'll drill you!"

"—were a hanger-on at Studs Raftery's Golden Eagle poolhall," Short continued calmly. "I remember now all right. At the time I thought you were something that had dribbed out of one of the spittoons."

Hazel Harris looked at Oliver Short with astonished horror. Her lips were agape.

White showed all round the watery pupils of Rod's eyes. His mouth worked convulsively, but no words came.

Short laughed out loud. "A punk." He looked at Hazel. "Don't be scared. He can't use that thing without the word from Blockhead. All he'd have to do would be smoke somebody without orders and Gruber'd lock him up without a fix for a month. And if he lived, which I doubt, Gruber'd bury him alive in the Jersey flats, just to set an example for his other boys. Blockheads got a cute way of—"

"Shut up!" Rod cried, his hand now tense and trembling, "One more word—"

"And you'll what? Shoot me and go back and tell Gruber? He hasn't enough headaches without you messing him up? You think you'd ever get away from him? Think you could scrape up fifty bucks a day for a fix without him? Forget it, punk." With these words, Short began walking forward. Amazed disbelief came into Rod's eyes. When Short was within arm's length, he cried, "You crazy fat bastard!" and drew back his gun hand. He lashed out viciously at Short's face with the gun-barrel.

Short caught it slantwise on his left forearm, easing the force, and drove his right fist up into Rod's chest. All of Short's 250 lbs. was be-

hind the fist. Bones crunched, Rod gasped, turned pasty green-white, and doubled down onto the floor. Short kicked him once in the head, then reached down and took the gun from his limp hand. He felt the unconscious man's pulse, nodded, straightened up, and slipped the .45 in his pocket.

"Is he dead?" Hazel asked.

"No," Short grinned, "but when he wakes up with that head and chest he'll wish he was."

Hazel shook her head. "It might've been simpler to back up. He wanted Casselli. He'd have searched the dump and left quietly enough."

"He remembered I was a cop," Short said, walking to the telephone, "but he didn't remember what kind. Now he'll remember." Dialing a number, Short winked at Hazel and waited, adding, "Don't waste any sympathy on that trash—the streets and alleys are crawling with it. In fact—hello?" Short gave his attention to the phone—"hello? . . . I want to talk to Joe Gruber. Oliver Short speaking . . . yeah, I'll hold it—" Short looked up and winked at Hazel again. "We'll let Blockhead clean up the mess. It's his boy."

Hazel's eyes widened. "You're going to tell Gruber?"

"Sure, why not? He—hello, Joe Gruber? . . . yeah, Oliver Short . . . look, Gruber, I'm at B.C.'s apartment. I just cold-conked your punk . . . yeah, that's right. He's got rotten manners . . . no, Casselli wasn't here. I was . . . no, I

don't think he feels much like talking—half his ribs are busted. Maybe his head too. I figured you wouldn't want the cops to scoop him up . . . yeah, that's right . . . no, I'll do any talking I got to do to you . . . yes . . . yes, I would if I were you . . . yes? Gorse? What about him? . . . I just got his viewpoint on your party . . . yeah . . . yeah, so long, Gruber." Short put down the phone and frowned at it.

"What a man," Hazel said, lighting a cigarette and shaking her head. "Are we working for Gruber now?"

"Don't be silly." Short nodded at the unconscious Rod. "Gruber'll send some boys to pick him up before the cops do. Funny—Gruber wanted to know what I'd told Gorse. That makes me wonder what Gorse's up to. Well—come on, we've got work to do."

Hazel pointed to Rod. "What did he want Casselli for?"

"Who knows?" Short grinned. "A screen-test maybe."

7

As they entered the Cosmopolitan Agency Offices on Fifth Avenue, Hazel had a worried look. "You think Gruber'll really bury that guy alive?" she asked. "Wouldn't it have been more humane to have given him to the police?"

Short looked at her. "You're turning bourgeois—you mean the fuzz?"

"I'm not kidding, Ollie."

Shrugging, Short pointed to a

chair where Hazel could wait in comfort. He said, "Putting the slug on one of Gruber's punks and owning up to it's one thing. I've got a reputation to uphold. Gruber knows for sure now I'm not a guy you push around—even with a forty-five. That's one thing and he respects it—" Short shook his head—"but selling him out cold to the cops is another. And right now it wouldn't do anybody any good. So the punk'll have to take whatever's coming—I can't afford to be humane."

With this, Short told Hazel to relax while he went in and talked to the man handling traffic at the night-desk. The man was Manny Fineman, a dapper little hawk-faced guy of thirty-nine who'd already put in eight years with the police and ten with the Secret Service. The rear third of his skull was a stainless steel plate. He stood up to shake hands with Short.

"Christ," he said, "I don't know what you're up to, but you're sure hot around here tonight." He glanced at a note-pad. "Lieutenant Halver-son—no less—of Detective Division's called for you twice. A guy named Boltoni and a guy named Casselli—our clients, I'm told—phoned. They're together and pulled into town an hour ago. A hack-driver named Harry—no, Charley—Charley Hender wants you to call him. Says you know the number. And old Zorn's been calling on the hour and raising high hell."

"What's bothering Zorn?" Short asked.

Manny Fineman glanced at his notes again and grinned. "This Bol-toni got scared or impatient or something and ducked out on Casselli and went to the police with his troubles. The Philly police."

"What?" Short's jaw dropped.

"Apparently it's a fact. The way I got it," Manny chuckled, "old Zorn came back from dinner and walked into an office full of cops. They put the screws on him."

Short laughed. "And I missed that. I'll bet you a fiver, Manny, that Zorn didn't tell 'em a thing and that within ten minutes he had 'em all down on their knees, polishing their badges."

"No bet—I know Zorn. He could con Goldwater into running on the Socialist ticket." Manny looked at the clock. "Zorn said he'd be there till eight. You want a line?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Short lit a smoke while he waited. When the line came live, he said cheerfully, "Zorn? Hi—what happened? . . . yeah, so Manny just said. So?—what happened? . . . Yes, I—"

The door opened and Hazel Harris entered. "It's dull out there. Can't I—?"

Manny Fineman eyed her appreciatively and looked at Short. "Hazel Harris," Short said. "She's with me. Introduce yourself, Manny." Short looked at the phone. "No, no . . . yes, yes, she's here . . . party? . . . oh sure, the joint's jumpin'

... wait a minute, Chief . . .” Short turned to Hazel and handed her his notebook, saying, “Call the Hender guy and see what he’s got. He’ll probably want to come over and meet us, but try to get it over the wire. Tell him we’ll treat him to drinks later.”

Turning back to the phone, Short said, “Now, Chief, just tell me what happened, straight, please . . . yes . . . yes . . . all right, I got it . . . no, I won’t . . . yeah, goodbye.” Short hung up.

“The Philly police got a want out on Maria Tarella,” he told Manny. “She’s the babe we’re looking for. The movie-actress. Nobody’s supposed to know she’s missing. So far, Zorn and Casselli—Casselli’s her director—have the cops convinced it’s just an emotional actress’s spree. But if the papers get it, Casselli’s a dead duck. He’s got a half-finished picture, starring Maria, waiting in Italy.”

“Too bad.” Many clucked his tongue. “But it’s this Boltoni’s fault, whoever the hell he is.”

“Maria Tarella’s husband. He’s a world-famous, prize winning physicist. He’s about thirty years older than Maria.”

Manny whistled low. “Nice case.” He pointed to his note-pad. “Don’t forget Lieutenant Halverson.”

“Yeah. I wonder if the Philly cops contacted him?”

“I doubt it. A lieutenant of detectives on a routine missing person’s make? I doubt it.”

“You’re right.” Short nodded. “Then what in hell does he want?”

Manny started dialing the phone, but Short stopped him with a hand. “No, I’ll go over. I’ve never met Halverson.” He reached in his pocket and got out the folded paper containing the scrapings from Casselli’s mantelpiece. “Take a look at these, Manny.”

“Dried blood, maybe?”

“That’s what I think. Can you get them analyzed? Tonight?”

Manny looked at the clock again. “I can try. Check me in about two hours.”

“Fine.” Short turned and called to Hazel. “How’re you doing?”

“Fine. Charley circulated Boltoni’s description and plane-arrival time amongst the hack-drivers. One named Paul Wilford picked Boltoni up at the airport at 10:20 Saturday night. He drives a Green Dome cab, license R-2434-S. And—” Hazel grinned, letting her green eyes dance—“another cabby named Max Gotchalk, in a Black and White Checker, license YY44-92B, picked him up at the airport at 2:10 Sunday morning. Both drivers are dead-sure and absolutely certain they had Boltoni—they recognized the description instantly.”

“What’s this?” Short frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Two cabbies took him into town. One at 10:20 and the other almost four hours later at 2:10. Incidentally, the plane landed at 9:47, in case you didn’t know.”

"I'll be damned," Short muttered. He glared at Hazel. "I hope you asked where they took him specifically?"

Hazel tilted her chin and an eyebrow. "Certainly I did. You think I'm stupid? Paul Wilford—the first—took him to Casselli's apartment-building. Max Gotchalk took him to the railroad-station."

"I'll be damned," Short repeated.

"You made that point," Hazel said. "Now, do you want to hear about luggage?"

"Yeah. You thought of that?—good girl."

"Thank you, kind sir. On the first trip he had a two-suit and a brief-case. On the second he had only the two-suit."

"Then he left the brief-case at Casselli's," Short said, mostly to himself.

"Obviously. Where we found it," Hazel said.

"But," Short asked, "how'd he get back to the airport? There should be a third cab."

Hazel shrugged. "Two's the best Charley can do so far. I'd say it was pretty good—you only bargained for one."

"Yeah, it was very generous of him."

Manny Fineman looked up from his desk. "Why would the guy go back to the airport to take a cab to the railroad station?"

"Maybe," Short grunted, "he enjoys doing things the hard way."

"I told you," Hazel said, a look

of smug satisfaction on her face, "when he first arrived he was his alter ego, the tough dominant character. He took a cab to Casselli's to give him what for. When he took that second cab, he was his normal timid self—Professor Boltoni."

Short considered. "But why'd he go back to the airport to change?"

"You can't answer that without knowing the relationship between Boltoni's two selves. Maybe the Hyde character always takes him back to the situation where Jekyll left off."

"Whew!" Short breathed, snaking his head. "it's just screwy enough to be true. But I don't believe it."

"Is this Boltoni some kind of psycho?" Manny asked. "I don't get it."

"An amnesiac," Hazel explained. "He has intervals when he can't remember where he was or what he did."

"Hypnotism," Manny said. "Those guys always remember under hypnosis. Either that or scopolamine. It's a proven fact."

"Fine," Short laughed, "that'll be Hazel's job—hypnotizing Boltoni." He moved toward the door. "Come on, Lazy-legs, let's get some dinner. So long, Manny."

"What about Halverson?"

"After dinner. If he phones again, tell him we're at Victor's where they have the best Italian food and the best music in the world."

"You're in New York—remem-

ber?" Hazel said.

"True," Short sighed. "Well, we'll go down to Hymen Schultz's for pastrami, pigs' feet, sauerkraut, cheesecake, and dark-ale."

Hazel shook her head sideways. "That's a switch. From Venice to Warsaw. What a man."

"And what a stomach," Manny added, laughing.

8

"You know a fellow named Gorse—George Gorse?" Lieutenant Halverson asked Oliver Short. Halverson was a stocky, bull-necked, competent-looking man with a serious, heavy mouth that drooped at the corners. His eyes were dark and troubled, with a sort of disillusioned, resigned sadness. His thick crop of hair was brown at the center and snow-white at the sides.

Short flashed a glance at Hazel Harris. She was seated comfortably, legs crossed, hands relaxed in her lap, studying the rather large collection of pipes on Halverson's desk. They were scattered every which way and propped against anything convenient, from the penstand to a gold-framed photograph of Halverson's wife and three kids.

"You know I know him, Lieutenant," Short answered finally, "What're you trying to do to me?"

Halverson looked away from Short, consulted his opened notebook, then brought his eyes back. "You saw him this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

"A little before three."

"What about?"

Short shook his head. "Not till you tell me what's up. What I say may reflect on privileged information obtained from a client. Also—" Short smiled—"it might tend to incriminate me."

Halverson didn't smile. "I'll drop that for now. You also know Joe Blockhead Gruber?"

"I've met him. I've heard a great deal about him over the years."

"You saw him today?"

Short studied his watch for five seconds, then raised his eyes and smiled. "Yes. Just before I saw Gorse, in fact."

"You realize," Halverson tapped his desk, "you've said enough for me to hold you on suspicion?"

"That could happen if I hadn't said a word. What am I suspected of having done?"

Halverson wrinkled his mouth, pulled at the corners, and rubbed the white hair at the side of his head with the base of his thumb. His eyes were worried, uncertain. At last he said, "George Gorse is in St. Andrew's Hospital. He was beaten half to death in his studio sometime this afternoon. So far, he's been conscious long enough to say two names—Joe Gruber and Oliver Short." Halverson paused and let his eyes become hard and steady. "Now, suppose you talk to me."

"Sure I will," Short bobbed his

head once. "I just want to know what's going on. I told you I saw Gorse at three. It's the truth. I left him hale and hearty, working on a third drink."

"What did you see him about?"

"He was on a party at Gruber's Jersey place Saturday night. I wanted to know if he saw somebody I'm interested in there. He did. He told me and I left."

"Who?" Halverson scribbled some notes.

"Who what?" Short frowned.

"Who were you inquiring about?"

"The wife of a friend of my client."

"What's her name?"

Before Short answered, Halverson's telephone rang. He scowled, picked it up, and said, "Yeah, Halverson." He listened a few seconds, glanced at his watch, and wrote something on his pad. "I'll see you there. I'll be fifteen or twenty minutes behind you. You know the routine—get it started." He put down the phone, muttered, "Damn," and glared at Short. "Well?"

Short's face was serene and blank. "Her name would be privileged information. I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

Halverson's eyes flared up. "Privileged hell! Blockhead Gruber's your client. You went to Gorse for him, but you couldn't make a deal. You put the slug on Gorse. I've asked around about you, Short. You've pulled some pretty rough stuff over the years. You've presumed

on your previous official connections and milked that angle dry. But you've slipped this time. Gorse is a respectable citizen. An artist. No police record. If Gorse dies, you're going to take fall on this one."

"In that case," Short said, lighting a cigarette, "the sooner I shut up and the sooner I get Herb Levy here, the better. What's the charge?—felonious assault?"

"You admit Blockhead Gruber's your client?" Halverson ignored Short's question.

"I admit nothing," Short laughed. "But I'll give you an opinion. I don't think there's a man on the whole New York Police Force dumb enough to think Joe Blockhead Gruber would be simple enough to try to hire a Cosmopolitan operative to do his rough stuff when for the price of a phone call he could import the best red-hots from any of a dozen cities. By the way—" Short noted a tinge of red coming on Halverson's neck and ears, and looked round in pretended surprise—"Where is Gruber? You mean you haven't pulled him in?"

Halverson stood up and walked to a cabinet at the far wall. He remained standing with his back to Short. His arms hung straight down at his sides and his hands were clenched into tight fists.

"Oh, I forgot," Short added, "he belongs to Jersey, doesn't he? You can't just go at him by gosh and by damn, can you?"

"That's enough." Halverson

turned and, from his position by the cabinet, pointed a finger at Short. "Would you sign a statement to the effect that Joe Gruber is not and never was a client of Cosmopolitan's—or yours?"

"Certainly. To my knowledge, of course. You'd have to check at the office for all-time records. He might've hired Cosmo back in '38 to follow his wife—how would I know?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I told you, I'm not working for Gruber. I never worked for Gruber. Bring in a steno and a notary and I'll give you an affidavit."

"Then you shouldn't mind answering questions about Gruber—right? He's not privileged, as you call it?"

"No, I don't mind." Short nodded happily. "Now you're being nice."

"Don't push your luck. What's Gruber got against Gorse?"

"I'm willing to answer that, all right," Short said, "but when I do, you'll ask, 'Who's the person and who's your client?' and we'll be right back on that merry-go-round."

"Answer your way—for now."

"As I said—or implied, I forget which now—Gorse knew that the wife of a friend of my client was at Gruber's."

"Why would Gruber work him over for knowing that?"

"He wouldn't. But—" Short shrugged—"and this is just a guess—it could be that when I ques-

tioned Gorse, he wised up to the fact he knew something important. He could've called Gruber and tried to make some kind of deal. A shake-down, in plain words. For a few grand he might've been willing to forget he saw my client's friend's wife at the party, or even say he saw her leave. The trouble is, as maybe Gorse found out, Blockhead Joe doesn't shake down so easy."

Halverson came back to his desk and sat down. He considered a long minute, then said. "That'd be hard to prove. It all hinges on what this woman was to Gruber, or—" Halverson paused—"what he did to her."

"I know," Short nodded. "I'm working on it."

"And you think Gruber's goons came to Gorse's place just after you left?"

"They must have." Short turned to Hazel. "Tell the Lieutenant how we left Gorse."

Annoyance crossed Halverson's face and he set his jaw. "She was there? All this time and you didn't say so? You think this is a game?"

"Take it easy," Short replied. "When I walked in here, you were hell-bent on nailing me. Tell him, Hazel."

"Gorse was very much alive. He was drinking whiskey and cursing the fact he'd ever gone to Gruber's party."

Halverson nodded and kept his attention on Hazel. He asked, "Who is this mystery woman?"

"Search me." Hazel smiled brightly. "I've been dying to know since I got on the case." She shrugged toward Short. "He won't talk—says the less I know, the better."

Halverson looked disgusted. He selected one of the many pipes on his desk, banged ashes from it into a battered brass tray, and filled it with tobacco from a pouch. He took out a box of matches and struck one after shaking his head sideways when Short offered his lighter. While he lit the pipe, he asked, "Was Maria Tarella the woman in question at Gruber's party?"

Short never moved an eyelash. "Yes," he replied simply.

"You're a cool, smart one," Halverson said. "I'll give you that. You'll tell me anything I want, won't you—provided I know it already."

Shrugging and smiling, Short answered, "I'd only your word what Gorse said. Apparently he mentioned Maria Tarella as well as Gruber and myself."

"You know where she is?"

"No. That's my main job—finding her."

"For whom?"

"Her husband, Luigi Boltoni, and her director, Benvenuto Casselli."

Halverson's eyes brightened. He started to say something, thought better of it, waited, then asked, "You know where this Boltoni and Casselli are?"

"In a general way. I understand they arrived in New York a couple hours ago."

"And they're your clients?"

"Yes."

"Uh huh," Halverson looked satisfied. "Now tell me what's Gruber's interest in Maria Tarella?"

"He told me that he thought she looked like a good lay."

Halverson glanced at Hazel and back to Short, frowning.

"It's true," Hazel said. "I was there and heard it."

"Just like that, eh?"

"Yeah, just like that. What's so strange, Lieutenant?" Hazel leaned forward. "Isn't she supposed to be the Ideal Lay? Don't they show her in every town, village, and hamlet as near naked as they can, on a wide-screen in living, breathing color? Isn't that the idea—what a perfect lay she'd be? Well, Blockhead's only human, ain't he?"

"All right, all right—never mind that." Halverson waved a hand and addressed Short. "Gorse told you he saw her at Gruber's party?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"What I'm saying is hearsay," Short told Halverson. "It's not worth a damn as evidence."

"I know. Tell me anyway."

"Gruber and Maria disappeared around midnight. Gruber returned to the party; Maria didn't."

"Then Gorse didn't see her leave?"

"No."

"And that's all?"

"That's all."

"Would you help me nail Gruber? I've been waiting for him to slip for six years."

"If he's guilty of anything involving Maria Tarella, sure I will. I've no love for gangsters. I won't help frame him."

"I didn't ask you to."

"Good."

Halverson relit his pipe. "I hear Captain Grimes is a good friend of yours?"

"Yes. I think I'm a good friend of his."

"When I pushed you, you didn't bring up his name."

"Maybe I was keeping that in reserve."

"Or you knew damn well that I knew it." Halverson stood up. "All right. I've got a call to make. You won't skip town?"

"No. You can contact me at Cosmo. One question of you, Lieutenant."

"Yes?"

"Have you sent some boys over to Gruber's farm?"

Halverson nodded.

"And if Maria Tarella's body's hidden there, they'll find it?"

The lieutenant nodded again. "They'll find it."

9.

Manny Fineman looked up as Short and Hazel entered the office. "Where've you been?"

Short consulted his watch. "It's not yet twelve. What's the rush?"

"Your client Casselli was here. He had Boltoni with him." Manny chuckled. "You mean to tell me that guy's married to Maria Tarella? The dish I been seeing in the movies? Hell, whoever hooked him up to her ought to be jailed. It ain't human. He'll be dead before the year's out."

"He's married to her all right," Short replied. "What did they want?"

"To see you. They went to Casselli's apartment."

"Some of those little old skinny guys fool you," Hazel remarked. "My sister was married to a regular Hercules, a champion weight-lifter, and he hardly ever made a pass at her. Broke his training, he claimed. He'd come home from work, eat, and spend the whole evening at the local Y cleaning and jerking six or seven-hundred pounds. Florence—that's my sister—finally got tired of it and divorced him. Her second husband was sixteen years her senior. He weighed ninety-six pounds soaking wet and had limp spaghetti strings for muscles, but he wore her down to a frazzle. "Hazel, she told me, 'a guy can put it one place or the other, but not both.'"

While Manny Fineman laughed, Short said, "Good—now that that's settled, what else?"

"She's funny," Manny said, indicating Hazel.

"Uproarious," Short agreed.

"Your scrapings were blood," Manny told him. "Human blood."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. The guy who made the tests mounted up a couple sample slides, just in case you wanted to see for yourself."

"Good work. And you said Casselli went home?"

"Yeah, both him and Boltoni. He said to call anytime, regardless of the hour."

"Good."

"And," Manny smiled, "a Mr. Gruber called. His message was 'Mission accomplished'. He said you'd dig him."

"Yeah." Short shook his head. He went over to a chair, sat down, lit a cigarette, and told Hazel, "Sit down a minute—or talk to Manny. I've got to think."

"Yes, Master." Hazel bowed, touching her forehead and stomach with her fingertips. The telephone rang; Manny spoke into it, working his pencil, and Hazel sat down. She slipped her shoes off and stretched her toes. "This work's hard on the feet," she complained, "in fact, it's killing."

Manny flipped a switch on his board and looked up at Short. "I've got Halverson. He wants you. I told him I'd see if you were at your hotel."

"Wants me?" Short looked surprised. "I just left him an hour ago."

"He sounds hot. I thought you'd want a chance to think."

"Yeah." Short considered. "See

if you can find out where he is. Tell him I'll call as soon as you locate me. Find out anything you can."

"Right." Manny worked his switches and spoke low into the phone. After a half minute's conversation, he pulled the plug and nodded at Short. "He's at your client's. Casselli's. There's been a killing there."

"What? Who?"

"Maria Tarella. Casselli and Boltoni walked in and found her. Must have been just after they left here. Casselli wants you."

Short set his elbows on his knees, put his head in his hands, and muttered, "This is ridiculous." A couple seconds later he looked up and sighed. "All right, get him back, Manny, please. Say I just walked in."

When Manny nodded and dialed, Short picked up the phone on the desk near the chair he was using. "Hello, Lieutenant Halverson? . . . Oliver Short . . . yes, running down some leads. Afraid they came to nothing. I've a message you found her . . . yes . . . yes . . . on the living-room floor? . . . beaten to death? . . . how long? . . . couple days? . . . but, Lieutenant, remember Casselli only left the apartment this morning and went down to Philadelphia. It's not reasonable . . . all right, all right, I'll be there. I'll leave now . . . yes . . . look, Halverson, would you take a chance on something I'd suggest? You see,

there's a fact or two you don't know and I can't explain now . . . no, I'm not altogether clear on it myself. But what I want is Gruber. How about having your boys in Jersey—they're still there? . . . good—have them pull Blockhead in . . . yes, right away . . . anything you can—suspicion, material witness, City-tax evasion—you must have some way you can do it . . . yeah, fine . . . I think I can. I'll be there in a half-hour. Fine, good-bye."

Short put down the phone and looked at Hazel. "They found Maria Tarella's body near the fire-place. According to the lab technician she was killed a couple days ago. They found blood under the rug and on the mantlepiece, but not enough blood, so they know a clean-up job was done. They've located a taxicab that brought Maria from Trenton to Casselli's Saturday night—the driver spent ten-minutes or so talking to the superintendent of Casselli's apartment-building. And Casselli admits he was home Saturday night, Sunday, Monday, and early this morning. Naturally, he claims the body wasn't there all that time. And naturally nobody believes him. Little Boltoni went wild-ape and tried to strangle Casselli, but they got him off in time. Lieutenant Halverson's ready to book Casselli, but he's leery on the motive. Ain't it a sweetheart?"

"But—" Hazel's eyes were wide—"we were there a few hours ago.

Maria Tarella wasn't there, **dead** or alive."

"True. There we have the advantage of the lieutenant. Now—" Short put a hand to his forehead and frowned—"let me think."

"Again?"

Short didn't answer. Manny's phone rang and for the next few minutes he was busy taking a report from an operative who was guarding a fur-storage vault whose owner believed was marked for a heist.

When Manny finished, Short lifted his head and said to Hazel, "There's only one explanation that fits all the facts. The problem'll be proving it." Then, before Hazel could ask any questions, he added, "Look, put your shoes on. Neither Casselli nor Boltoni ever saw you, so here's what I want you to do. Do you know where you can pick up some sophisticated, slinky clothes at this hour?"

"What type?"

"The sort you might wear if you were on the make at say the bar of the Savoy or the Drake or Club 17."

"I think so. Louise Wilson's Swap-Shop in the Village's full of classy hand-me-downs. I know her well; she'll let me in any time—'specially if I'm carrying ready cash."

"Good. Here's some money." Short gave Hazel five tens. "Will that be enough, including the cab?"

"Sure. The stuff you want isn't worth much after the first sucker buys it."

"Good. Now listen close." Rapidly, Short outlined the procedure Hazel was to follow. "Be sure to time it close," he concluded.

"Sure. It'll be easy," Hazel assured him. She smiled, winked, and went out.

Manny Fineman followed her with his eyes, then looked at Short. "That's a lovely, lovely package, but—" Manny shook his head, grinning—"I think you've got a tiger by the tail. That kid's nuts about you."

"Just a father-complex." Short laughed. "It'll wear off."

Manny frowned. "No sir. You don't know the signs, brother. That little redhead's nobody's fool and she's a million miles from any complexes. She knows what she's doing and she's playing for keeps. She's out to put you into the pipe, slippers, and desk-job bit. I saw the way she studies you when you're not looking. Mark my words."

"Well," Short shrugged, "at my age, what the hell have I got to lose? See you later, Dear Abbie."

10.

One of the largest car-rental systems in New York had a branch office only two blocks from Cosmopolitan's. Short went there. In the driveway, beside the glass-fronted office, he saw a small white and black plastic sign stating: *Premises protected by Cosmopolitan Detective Agency.* He smiled and

identified himself to the night-manager.

"A guy named Casselli," he said, "Luigi Casselli, came in from Italy Saturday morning. I think he might've rented a car. You've got the biggest ad in the book and your signs are plastered all over town."

The night-manager nodded. "Plane or boat?"

"Plane."

"Just a minute." The man went to his desk and picked up his phone. He mumbled a few words, waited, listened, jotted some facts on a pad, hung up, and returned to Short. "Yes. A '66 Cadillac Calais, 4 door hardtop, blue with gray trim. License, NB-238-23. Mileage, 7,060. It's still out. Casselli's credit is A-1. Okay?" The man stopped and watched Short without any particular expression.

"Okay," Short repeated. "If I locate that car, I might want to look through it."

"I have master-keys," the night-manager said, "but I couldn't just hand you one over the counter. I believe you're who you say you are, but I couldn't do that."

"What could you do?"

"I could send it up to the Cosmopolitan office. My garage man could deliver it within five minutes. You could get it from Manny Fineman."

Short nodded. "Good enough. You know Manny personally?"

"For the past ten years. He's my brother-in-law."

Short smiled, shook hands with the man, and cut back to the office to wait for the key. It arrived before he finished his first cigarette. He dashed out and on his way uptown he bought a cheap flashlight in an all-night drugstore. He spotted the blue Cadillac parked half-way down the block from Casselli's apartment-building. To his surprise, he found the front door on the driver's side open. Climbing in, he turned on a light and began searching the seat and floor. He wasted no time, but he worked calmly and efficiently. When he was satisfied, he got out, went in the back, and repeated the process. He found nothing. He checked the speedometer; the total mileage reading was 7,182. He left the car then and walked round to the alley that ran below Casselli's livingroom window. Snapping on the flashlight, he searched the alley's length, paying particular attention to the sides. At the end he found four covered trash cans. He removed the lids, saw they were empty, and was about to go on when the beam of his light caught a soft gray mass mixed with some sticky residue at the very bottom of the can nearest the street. He reached down and, pulling it up gingerly, shook off as much of the debris as possible. His flashlight now clearly revealed a tangled bundle of fine quality, strong cord. At one end was tied a pair of steel rings anchored into a hollow steel ball in a way that either ring could turn

freely. The other end of the line was cut and frayed. Short wrapped the whole thing in his handkerchief, pocketed it, and went round to the building entrance.

A harness-bull was standing in front of Casselli's door. Short told the man his name and he brought Halverson out. Halverson took Short aside, saying in a low voice, "I'm sorry for what happened back in my office. I talked to Captain Grimes on the phone a half-hour ago; he says he'd trade any six men to get you on his squad. Says he'd pull in the mayor himself on your say-so." With this, Halverson offered his hand.

Short shook it. "Don't look so worried," he told the lieutenant. "It'll be all cleared up in less than an hour."

Halverson looked doubtful. "You don't know what a crazy mess this is— at least I don't think you do. The lab-man states the woman in there's been dead at least thirty-six hours—"

"Yes. She was killed Saturday night. Sometime near twelve."

"Yeah, but wait. Her blood's on the mantelpiece and the rug, and the rug's been scrubbed, which means she was killed in that room. Yet this damn Casselli swears the body wasn't there this morning or over the weekend."

"It wasn't," Short said.

"Then her skull wasn't cracked up against the mantelpiece?"

"Yes, it was. Saturday night."

Halverson stared at Short. "But how—?"

Short smiled. "Believe me, the body wasn't here this morning. It wasn't here five hours ago. Let's go in now. Just follow my lead. Oh, and—" he pointed to the uniformed cop—"instruct him to admit a beautiful red-haired woman who'll be coming along shortly. And—" Short grinned at Halverson—"when you see her, remember, you don't know her from Eve."

Looking very puzzled, Halverson did as Short asked. When he finished, Short handed him the tangled ball of gray line. "While he's standing here, guarding, let him untangle this, measure it, and wind it up neatly. It's evidence on this case."

"Go ahead like he says." Halverson passed the line to the harness-bull, then said to Short, "He'll need a yardstick or something."

"His armspan's close enough," Short said. "Call it six feet. You understand?" he asked the cop, who answered that he did.

As he and Halverson entered the apartment, Short asked, "Gruber coming?"

"On his way. I sent two extra men just to make sure there's no nonsense. He'll be here even if I go back to prowling a beat for it."

"You won't." Short glanced back at the apartment-door. "I noticed the lock was shot off."

"Yeah—another screwy fact that fits nothing."

"Well, maybe it doesn't matter."

Short pointed to a long thick cylindrical object lying on the floor, parallel to the wall. "What's that?"

Halverson frowned. "What is it?—it's a rolled-up rug, of course."

"But what's it doing there?"

"The cleaning company men delivered it a little past eight o'clock. Why?"

"They brought it up the service elevator?"

"Sure. The superintendent of the building saw them below at the entrance. Why?"

Short reached down and pulled aside the edge of the rug, exposing a yard or so of the inner surface. It was an oriental with a very busy, colorful design consisting of birds, trees, flowers, leaves, and interwoven vines. Short straightened up and looked at Halverson. "You think it goes with the decor of this apartment?"

"Hell—" Halverson's ears became pinkish as he glanced round at the plain, neutral walls and quiet gray carpets—"Casselli never said anything—"

"He's probably in a fog," Short grunted. "Maria's body arrived rolled up in that. You'd better put a man to checking the so-called cleaning company."

"Yeah, I'll get right on it." Halverson went to the telephone while Short entered the living-room proper and looked at Beltoni and Casselli, who were seated side by side on a long sofa. Boltoni was staring dully into space, apparently oblivious to everything; lines on his fore-

head and a deep wedge between his eyes testified to the anguish he felt. Casselli was smoking one of his long aromatic cigarettes and he looked up resignedly when Short entered. He returned Short's greeting and said nothing further. Boltoni still paid no attention to Short.

Halverson finished phoning and moved up behind Short, whispering in his ear, "Look at them—they're like blood brothers now. Yet an hour ago Boltoni tried to strangle Casselli. What a case."

"Probably went berserk when he saw that," Short said, letting his eyes travel to a long, sheet-covered form on the gray rug near the fireplace.

"Yeah," Halverson said. "I held it here in case you wanted a look. But I doubt either you or I could find anything Peters, the lab-expert, would miss."

"You're right. Tell me, under her arms and across the chest, maybe—were there any cuts?"

Halverson's face tightened and a cautious look came into his eyes. "What the hell?—how—?"

"I figured there might be."

"There are. She's wearing a strapless gown. Under both arms, across the chest, and a little on the back there are long cuts. Not deep. More like rope burns."

"Good guess. Your man in the hall's winding up the cord that did it."

"That string?" Halverson's smile was skeptical.

"That string's 1000 lb. Marlin line. Casselli's a big game fisherman. Take a look in that closet beside the hi-fi."

Halverson pursed his lips, frowned, and went to the closet. Short walked over to Casselli and, indicating Boltoni, asked, "He all right?"

"As good as you might expect. It's sadistic making him sit in here—" Casselli stared at the sheet-covered form—"with that. She was his wife and, for all her faults, he loved her."

Before Short could comment, Boltoni raised a pair of red-rimmed eyes and shook his head. "No, no, Benvenuto. The lieutenant said I could wait in the kitchen. Don't give him the wrong impression. I chose to stay. I'll remain with her till they take her away. If I hadn't—" the little man's shoulders began to tremble violently—"if I hadn't brought her from Piombo, none of this would have happened. She would have lived a happy peasant's life. Married, raised children—" tears flooded Boltoni's eyes—"it's all my fault."

Casselli patted Boltoni's shoulder and consoled him in soft Italian. The apartment door opened and Short turned. Joe Blockhead Gruber, dressed in neat blue, sporting a boutonniere, a fifty-dollar hat, a fine cigar, and a fresh manicure, entered and was followed by two plain-clothesmen who looked shabby and down-at-heel by comparison. Lieutenant Halverson, carrying the large

marlin-reel, went to him, nodded, and pointed to one of the upholstered chairs. Blockhead glanced at the reel, chuckled, slipped off his topcoat, folded it once, put it along with his hat on a side table, and took the chair. He puffed his cigar, removed it from his thick lips, grinned, and said, "This better be very, very good, Copper. Remember, I got a few important friends in this town. Some of them can snap fingers and make you jump. I wouldn't forget it, if I was you." Then Blockhead turned to Short and let the grin widen. "Hello, Shamus. How'd you like the service? For free too."

Halverson's brows drew together as he looked at Short. "What's he talking about?"

"A little earlier I had to chop down one of his choppers," Short explained. "For some reason, the guy took an instant dislike to me. He tried pressing the point with a .45."

"You shot him?"

"Don't be silly. He was a punk. You don't shoot punks; you bust them apart."

The smile left Blockhead's face and his eyes became cold on Short. "So it's that way. You are a fink-cop."

Halverson stepped in front of Blockhead. "Mister, you're going to talk polite. I don't give a God damn if you own the governor—one more crack about cops and I'm going to put these boys and six others on you all night."

After staring at Halverson a few seconds, Blockhead shrugged his big shoulders and lowered his eyes. "All right, I'll be polite. May I use that phone?" He indicated the instrument on the table. "To report to my lawyers that I've been taken from New Jersey to New York by force? May I also know what I'm charged with—if anything?"

Halverson looked at Short. Short smiled and said to Blockhead: "I'm surprised at you, Joe. You're acting like a small-time creep. If I was you, I'd hold off telling tales—you brought the matter of the punk up, not me—and I'd hold off aggravating cops and yelling for charges and lawyers. I'd wait and see what the total grift is."

Blockhead studied Oliver Short and a worried, uncertain light came in his eyes. "I don't make you at all," he said finally. "But I think Rod was right."

"Try listening," Short suggested. He turned to Halverson and said, "Let's all settle down a little now and get things ironed out."

"Suits me fine." The lieutenant nodded toward the sheet-draped body of Maria Tarella. "Shall I have it taken out?"

"Might as well." Short lit a Kent and walked over to Casselli. "The news is out about Maria. You might as well tell the truth."

Casselli's face was immobile. "I have told the truth."

"Don't be a fool. Or rather, don't think we're fools. There's Maria's

body. This is your apartment. Saturday night Maria skipped out of Blockhead's party, hitched a ride into Trenton, and rented a cab. She came up here with a skinful of dope, all primed to kill you." Short stopped and pointed to Boltoni's brief-case which was now lying on a long, low cocktail-table. "The pig-sticker she was going to use is in there, where you put it." Short paused again and waited. Halverson was seated on a straight chair, arms crossed, eyes boring into Casselli. He held an unlit pipe in his left hand.

"But you're insane," Casselli cried. "Why would I harm Maria? Even if I hated her—which I certainly don't—why would I harm myself? The success of my picture depends on her. Her death will cost me millions, maybe."

"I didn't say you wanted to kill her," Short answered. "There are times a man's passions overcome his best interests. She came here to argue and fight. Doubtless she goaded you, maybe kicked and stabbed; you struggled with her, tried to talk sense, then suddenly your patience gave way—you'd been pampering this spoiled brat for years—and you hit her. She reeled back against that—" Short pointed to the pink and white marble ledge—"and that was it."

Luigi Boltoni raised his head and looked at Casselli with new interest. Even grimmer lines began to form below his mouth. Lieutenant Hal-

verson frowned and pointed his pipestem at the little scientist. "Don't you go haywire again. I let it go the first time because I took into account the sudden shock. But sit tight now. Maybe—" Halverson swung the pipestem till it pointed at a chair on the opposite side of the room—"you'd better move over there."

Boltoni changed seats as directed, but he kept his eyes glued on Casselli. "Go on," Halverson told Short.

"You want to finish the story yourself?" Short asked Casselli.

Casselli did not reply. His handsome face was pale and his mouth was a tight, stubborn line.

"Then I will," Short said. "Maria Tarella came up here a few minutes past midnight, Saturday, intending to kill you. She announced her intentions to a hundred people at Gruber's place. But something else happened and it didn't work out that way. You struggled with her and she was thrown up against that marble fireplace, her skull cracked, and she died. Your immediate problem was to get rid of the body in a way that would keep Maria's death hidden. The success of your film depended on it. So you cleaned up as best you could and lowered the body out the window with that—" Short went over and picked up the big marlin reel—"you looped the line under her arms, tied it, and eased her down eight stories with this powerful star-drag. It was a risk, but a risk you had to take. You

knew you'd never get her down the elevator, through the foyer, and out of the building unobserved. And you were lucky. The alley was dark and the wall facing your window's a blank—not a window in it. But the line cut into the corpse's flesh. It also cut a deep groove into the paint on the window sill. We have that line, Casselli. Analysis will reveal traces of blood, flesh, and paint. Are you ready to talk now, Casselli?"

Still Casselli said nothing. He stared blankly at Short, chin thrust out and neck muscles tense.

"Very well, I'll continue," Short nodded. "When the body reached the cement down in the alley, you cut the line—what else could you do?—and you put the reel away. Then you went downstairs, took the rented Cadillac round to the street near the alley, got the body, removed the line, threw it in the trash-barrel out there—a mistake—and put the body in the car. Then you had a brainstorm—a real Casselli Touch—you decided to make Gruber a present of the body. He—" Short pointed to Blockhead who was leaning forward and listening with interest—"was dunning you for a million and a half. Maria was last known to be at his place. If Blockhead was blamed for Maria's murder and electrocuted or jailed, you'd be out of hock. The debt to Gruber isn't collectable in court; it depends on Gruber's own unique and effective methods of collection,

so with him out of the way you'd be safe. And in the event the body remained undiscovered at Gruber's, no one need know *Lucretia Borgia* was finished by a double. So whatever happened, you benefited."

Gruber took the cigar from his mouth. "You dago son-of-a-bitch!" he growled at Casselli. "If the state lets you off the hook, you'd better leave the earth, for I'll get you."

"That's enough of that," Lieutenant Halverson ordered.

"Anyway," Short told Casselli, "you drove Maria's body to Gruber's farm—"

"—and stashed it in my spring-house," Gruber said. "My gardener only found it before dinner."

"And," Short said, "you suspected it was Casselli's work. You sent the punk, Rod, over to bring him in. Then when I phoned you had just enough time to roll the body up in a rug and get it back here. You had to send some boys anyway to pick up the busted punk, so you thought giving Maria to Casselli might be a nice exchange."

"Why not?" Blockhead growled. "He tried to frame me into something I'd no part of. These damn foreigners, you—"

Halverson got up and faced Casselli. "I'm arresting you and charging you with the murder of Maria Tarella."

The two plainclothesmen who'd brought Gruber in stepped forward and moved to each side of Casselli. Casselli raised a hand.

"Wait," he said. "Wait, I—" his eyes moved appealingly to Short.

Short shook his head sideways. "Every detail's against you. The mileage on the rent car shows all the driving you did. The blood, the scrubbed rug, the window, the line, the dagger and the brief-case in the closet—it's all there. An examination of the Caddy's treads'll reveal dirt from Gruber's farm. As for Saturday night, they've already traced Maria to here. And she told a hundred witnesses she hated you and was out to kill you." Short shook his head again. "Nope, Casselli—there's only one way. It's up to you."

Casselli's head dropped. With a sort of half-hearted, mechanical movement, he took one of his long cigarettes and fitted it into his holder. Short flicked his Zippo lighter and held it out. Casselli looked up, put the holder to his lips, and puffed.

"Just say the essential fact and I'll supply the rest," Short offered, laying a hand on Casselli's shoulder.

"Luigi Boltoni killed his wife," Casselli said in a dull monotone. "Everything you said is true—about the picture, about Maria coming here, about the body—I can't—I—" Casselli looked at Boltoni, who was now staring at him with wide, startled eyes—"it's true, Luigi. You don't know. You didn't—" Casselli broke off, shuddered, and looked at Oliver Short—"you tell him. You know."

Halverson signaled one of his plainclothesmen. The man moved quickly to Boltoni and laid a hand, gently but firmly, on the little physicist's shoulder.

"Sometime after Maria got here,"

Short said, "and started giving Casselli a rough time, Luigi Boltoni came in. Boltoni's subject to attacks of amnesia—it's a chronic condition for which he's been treated many years—and just after he boarded the plane in Paris, he snapped into an attack. Now, under these attacks, I've reason to believe Boltoni's entire nature is different. He's aggressive, dominant, and even revengeful. At any rate—" Short smiled—"I've had an expert's opinion and that expert seemed to feel this particular syndrome might well take that direction. Is it true, Casselli?"

Casselli nodded that it was true.

"When Boltoni landed at the airport at 9:47 Saturday night he was this other self. He was tired of being shoved around by his beautiful, selfish wife and he determined to settle the thing once and for all. He took a cab to Casselli's and hung around the building until he saw Maria drive up in her cab and enter. Then he followed her in. He arrived just in time to see her struggling with Casselli—"

"She tried to stab me," Casselli said. "I grabbed her and pinned her arms to her sides. He—" Casselli nodded at the staring, thunderstruck Boltoni—"probably thought we were making love. He rushed over,

hit me, knocked me down and stunned me—his strength was unbelievable—and then he began slapping Maria. She kicked him viciously and he knocked her up against the fireplace. That was it. She just gave a little moan and slumped to the floor. I think Luigi's senses began to return then, for he stared at what he'd done and fainted dead away."

"And you," Short told Casselli, "planned things fast. You couldn't afford the scandal the truth would trigger and you saw a chance to get Gruber in trouble and off your back. So you half-carried and half-walked Boltoni out of the building, into your car, and drove him back to the airport. You left him on one of the deserted ramps, feeling sure that when he came to he'd remember nothing. And you were right. He revived at 2 a.m. as his normal self and took a cab to the railroad station and a train to Philadelphia. And that was that. But when you returned to the apartment, you discovered you'd left his briefcase here. A trip back to the airport was too far and too dangerous—after all, you didn't know exactly when Boltoni would come to, and, besides, you had to get busy getting Maria's body out to Gruber's farm—so you tossed the little dagger into the briefcase and put it into your bedroom closet, intending to permanently dispose of them later. You had no reason to expect this place to be searched, so you

felt safe enough. Then you proceeded as we said, lowering Maria's body and delivering it to Gruber's spring-house. After that, as far as you were concerned, Maria Tarella had never left Gruber's party. When Boltoni phoned Monday morning you told him that. And you learned, true to your expectations, that he remembered nothing at all of what had happened. You came to Philadelphia and hired Cosmopolitan to find Maria—presumably on Gruber's farm. Meanwhile, to make certain that nobody suspected you, you piled it on about *Lucretia Borgia* being unfinished." With this, Short stopped and turned to Halverson, adding, "And that's it, Lieutenant."

Luigi Boltoni stood up. His face was absolutely blank and drained of color. He moved mechanically toward Casselli.

"Easy now," said the plainclothesman at his side.

"I'm all right," Boltoni half-whispered. He fixed his eyes on Casselli. "Is all this true?"

"Yes, Luigi. As God's my witness, it's true. I hoped you'd never have to know."

"Then," Boltoni turned to Halverson. "I'm a murderer. Arrest me and hang me."

Lieutenant Halverson looked unhappy. "Well, now, Mr. Boltoni, we'll arrest you all right. But don't excite—"

"Mr. Boltoni," Short said, "you're an internationally famous man. Re-

spected by the whole world. You're not a criminal. From what you've told me—and Mr. Casselli has confirmed it—this chronic amnesia of yours is well documented. Now, considering all the circumstances with your wife, her violent temper and her attempt to kill Mr. Casselli with that dagger, the fact that she was under the influence of narcotics and alcohol, I doubt if you could be charged with much more than third-degree manslaughter. And, if I'm any judge, with the help of the state's psychiatrist, you'll end up with a suspended sentence."

"It wouldn't surprise me either," Lieutenant Halverson agreed.

Boltoni moaned. "Condemned to live with the awful knowledge of what I've done? Oh, my God . . ." his voice dwindled down into muffled sobs.

Blockhead Gruber stood up. "Can I go now?"

Halverson looked at Short and frowned.

"Outside of transporting a body without an undertaker's license," Short said, "I don't know what you could hold him for. What did he do?—in this case, I mean."

Blockhead grinned at Short. "Maybe you are all right, Shamus. I won't forget it."

"Wait a minute," Halverson said. "There's the matter of Gorse. He took a bad beating."

"I doubt if he'll press charges," Short said. "It's been my experience that blackmailers usually don't."

Blockhead grinned again.

"Go ahead," Halverson told Blockhead. "For now."

"And where do I stand?" Casselli asked.

"That'll be up to the D.A. and a Grand Jury," Halverson told him. "You played pretty fast and free with the law." As he said this, Halverson's eyes traveled past Casselli's shoulder and narrowed in puzzled surprise. Blockhead Gruber had opened the apartment door and a woman in a low-backed, crimson gown was standing and talking to the harness-bull on guard. She looked into the room, studied the occupants, and let her large dancing green eyes settle on Luigi Boltoni.

"Professor Boltoni!" she cried, giggled, and tripped into the room on high red and gold heels. Her arms were gloved to the elbows in black velvet. From her neck a huge diamond pendant dangled and in her left hand she carried a long boa of purple silk and white feathers.

"Good God!" Short breathed inaudibly. His and all eyes in the room locked on Hazel Harris. She minced forward on her jeweled slippers, threw her arms round the little physicist's neck, kissed him with a lush smacking noise, and giggled. "But, Popsie! I've been looking for you for days! I remembered you said you had a little job to do at this address, but I've been here time and time again without finding you. Oh, my—what's wrong, Popsie?—what—?"

Luigi Boltoni pushed Hazel Harris away roughly. "Are you crazy? I've never seen you in my life! Get away!"

"What?" Hazel stared with enormous surprised eyes. "Why, Popsiel! We met on flight 4. And when we landed Saturday night we sat for over an hour in the Jetstream Bar at the airport. You bought me drinks and told me all kinds of things. All about magnets and waves and how your wife was cheating on you. Why, we drank for over an hour and you said you'd see me again—and—" Hazel paused and took a deep breath—"why, how would I know you and this address, if—"

"She's insane!" Boltoni cried, his face flushing to full color. "She's lying. It couldn't be true. I never bought her drinks. Why, the bar at the airport wasn't even open. I tell you—" Boltoni stopped abruptly—caught himself, and moved his eyes from Hazel to Lieutenant Halverson to Oliver Short. Nobody said a word. Hazel sat down in a chair and the silly, vacuous look was gone from her face.

"You're right, Professor," Short finally spoke up. "You never saw her before. And the Jetstream Bar at the airport was closed—a refrigerator unit had sprung a leak—and you couldn't have bought her drinks there. *But how do you know?* You were in a state of amnesiac trance, remember? Just like you're supposed to have been when you killed your wife."

There was no softness nor timidity in Boltoni's face now. It had become hard and cunning. "I've nothing to say until I consult an attorney."

"Suits me," Lieutenant Halverson told him. He brought out a pair of shining steel handcuffs. "I think we'll just slip these on this time."

"He asked you to hang him only a few minutes ago," Short said drily. "Now maybe you can accommodate him."

Hazel Harris touched Short's arm. "Yes?" he asked, turning.

"Lean close," she instructed, holding the feathered boa up to form a screen.

Short bent down till his ear was only inches from Hazel's thickly rouged lips. "You're wonderful, Hawkshaw," she whispered, giggling, "but the word is *amnesic—amnesic trance*, not *amnesiac*."

"Sorry," Short grunted, "and, thank you, Auntie Mame."

11.

Lieutenant Halverson drove Short and Hazel to the train station. Dawn was just breaking as they were about to board a coach that would take them to Kate Kelly's Alpine Lodge. Halverson smoked a pipe and lingered on the platform a few minutes.

"So Boltoni admitted everything?" Short asked Halverson.

"Yeah. In less than a half hour. He'd been nursing a grudge against his wife and Casselli for years. Casselli claims there never was any-

thing between Maria and him, but—" Halverson shrugged—"who knows? Anyway, Boltoni planned to kill Maria a long time ago, when she first started stepping out on him. He went to doctors and built up that long background of amnesia attacks, while waiting for the ideal opportunity. Last Saturday was it. He thought Casselli would be blamed sure. Of course, he never figured on Casselli's screwy notion of planting the stiff on Gruber. Anyway, the scheme was almost foolproof and, if worst came to worst, he always had Casselli on his side—as actually happened. That's the funny part—Casselli believed the amnesia dodge and was Boltoni's friend."

"But that works two ways," Short said. "Casselli wanted Gruber to take the fall, yet, if he didn't and the deal bounced back to Casselli—it was his apartment, remember—he could always unload it on Boltoni. The fact that Boltoni went to the cops in Philadelphia first chance he got should have tipped Casselli that Boltoni knew what he was doing all along. But it didn't. Casselli believed the amnesia story and thought Boltoni was his dupe, when actually it was almost the other way around."

Halverson nodded and sighed. "Well, it's been a long night and your train's starting. Have a nice trip, both of you." He shook hands with Short and smiled at Hazel.

"Thanks. 'Bye," Hazel said. A

few seconds later, when she and Oliver were alone on the train, she asked, "But how did you figure it all out? I don't get it."

"Little things and a big one. Ostensibly I was hired to find Maria Tarella, but as soon as I learned that Luigi Boltoni had killed his wife and knew he killed her, I spent all my time putting things together in a way that would fit that fact. There was only one way, of course—the way it really happened."

"You knew all along Boltoni had killed Maria?"

"Well, I knew from the time you found the briefcase in Casselli's."

"But—" Hazel looked exasperated—"how?—damn it."

"Easy. We found Boltoni's briefcase in Casselli's closet. Now if Boltoni had really been to Casselli's without knowing it, in a state of trance, and had awakened at 2 a.m. on the airport ramp minus his briefcase which contained his life's work, he'd have gone crazy looking for it. Yet he even told me at our interview he'd missed nothing on waking up. He wasn't concerned about the briefcase. That meant he knew beyond all doubt he'd been to Casselli's and that precluded the amnesia business once and for all. In thirty years I've had four amnesia cases and not a single one was genuine—I don't mean it doesn't exist; I mean nice, normal people don't get amnesia and commit murder."

"But how did you know Boltoni killed her?"

"Come on," Short smiled at Hazel, "figuring from there is simple. Maria was at Casselli's—we found her dagger and she'd announced her intention of going. Boltoni was at Casselli's—we found his brief-case and the cabby who'd taken him there. Casselli was home by his own admission. Now either Casselli killed Maria or Boltoni did. If Casselli did, why on earth would Boltoni protect the man whom he firmly believed seduced his wife and ruined his marriage by making her a movie-star? He wouldn't—he'd have run out of the apartment yelling 'cops'. But, instead, he played along being friendly with Casselli—therefore I knew Boltoni killed her. And besides that, when he first discovered his wife was 'missing'—Sunday morning—he never phoned the Ritz. Monday, he called Casselli and Gruber, but not the Ritz—which would have been the first logical call, for he knew Maria always checked in at the Ritz. He didn't bother because he knew damn well she was dead."

"But you didn't know Casselli

had taken the body to Gruber's. You couldn't have known that."

"No, but I knew he'd taken it somewhere. The blood, open window, stained rug, and fishing line convinced me of that. Then when Gruber's boy came looking for Casselli, it sort of clicked as a possibility. It was a clever, sort of theatrical stunt that suited Casselli. I had to get Halverson to drag Gruber over and play him against Casselli to prove it though."

Hazel sighed. "I've only one question left, Ace-Detective."

"What?"

"Will you marry me?"

Short dug out a Kent and lit it.

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because my grandmother, if she were living, wouldn't approve."

"But that's a silly reason." Hazel frowned, reaching over and taking the cigarette from Short's hand.

"If you've firmly decided you're not going to do something," Short chuckled, digging out another Kent and lighting it, "a silly reason's just as good as any."



It was Sergeant Selby's opinion that the murderer had killed the wrong person . . . but then, Sergeant Selby was hunting the wrong suspect.

all the loose women

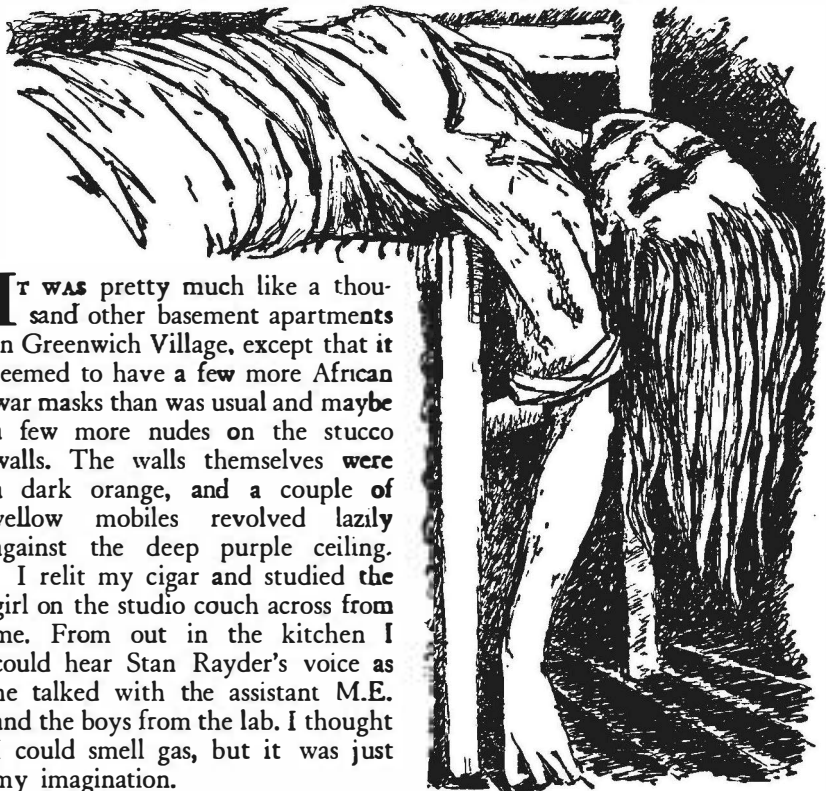
A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY JONATHAN CRAIG

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IT WAS pretty much like a thousand other basement apartments in Greenwich Village, except that it seemed to have a few more African war masks than was usual and maybe a few more nudes on the stucco walls. The walls themselves were a dark orange, and a couple of yellow mobiles revolved lazily against the deep purple ceiling.

I relit my cigar and studied the girl on the studio couch across from me. From out in the kitchen I could hear Stan Rayder's voice as he talked with the assistant M.E. and the boys from the lab. I thought I could smell gas, but it was just my imagination.



"It's all so wrong, somehow," the girl said. She was about twenty, dark-haired and blue-eyed and very pretty. "There was just no *reason* for it."

"There's always a reason for suicide," I said. "Maybe we'll find one."

"But Jean had everything."

"Maybe she didn't think so, though," I said. "You say you got here a little after eight?"

She nodded. She was dry-eyed now, a lot more calm than she'd been at first.

"And then what did you do? I mean exactly. Step by step."

"I've already told that other detective. Isn't it bad enough to walk in and find—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Johnson," I said. "I'm just doing a job." I took out my notebook. "You arrived here a few minutes after eight. Then what?"

Stan Rayder appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Come in here a moment, Sarge," he said, and went back.

I got up. "I'll be with you in a minute, Miss Johnson," I said, and went into the kitchen.

Stan and the assistant M.E. were bending down over the girl. There were three kitchen chairs pushed together in a row in front of the gas stove, and the girl lay on these with her head partly in the oven. The M.E. had pulled her housecoat aside, but otherwise the body was exactly as we'd found it. The lab boys were

packing up their equipment, and the photographer was replacing the lens cap on his Speed-Graphic.

The assistant M.E. glanced up at me, "You've got a homicide on your hands, Jess," he said. "This girl was dead before the gas went on."

I stepped close. "You sure, Ben?"

"Hell, yes."

"Then what was the cause of death?"

"I don't know yet. But the blood settled to her left side. It takes anywhere from an hour to two hours for postmortem lividity to show up, and in this case it's as pronounced as it'll ever be. The point is, she must have been dead at least an hour before somebody put her on the chairs. She's lying on her back now, but the p.m. lividity is on the left side."

I looked at the purplish discoloration. When the heart stops, the blood is no longer under pressure and it stops circulating. It settles in the body at the point nearest the floor. I hadn't seen the girl's body before, of course, because the initial examination of a corpse is the job of the M.E.'s office.

"How about those bruises?" I asked. "You think any of those could have caused death?"

"Could be. Most of them are pretty old, but you never can tell."

"When can you do the autopsy, doc?"

"We're lucky there. I can do it

right away." He flipped the girl's housecoat back over her body and straightened up. "I've done all I can for you, Jess. I know she didn't die with her head in that oven, and that's about all I'll know till I get her on the table. She's been dead—oh, say about five hours. Maybe a little longer."

I made a note of the approximate time of death and then asked Stan to tell the hospital attendants outside to come in and get the body. When they'd put her in the basket, signed a receipt for her, and left, I told the lab boys they could go back to Headquarters, and then I went out to the other room to talk to Miss Johnson. Stan Rayder, meanwhile, had begun his routine search of the entire apartment.

2.

"I heard you out there," the girl said. "I just *knew* something like this would happen. I—" She broke off, biting at her lip.

I watched her carefully. I could read fear in her face, but not much else. Not that it meant anything. People always feel fear first, before they sort out their other emotions.

"How'd you know it would happen?" I asked.

She glanced at me, a little startled. "What?"

"You just said you knew something like this would happen," I said. "What made you say that?"

"Well . . ."

"You ever hear anyone threaten her?"

"No."

"You know of anyone who might have killed her?"

She shook her head.

"Why, then? I mean, why did you say you knew this would happen?"

She moistened her lips, staring at a spot on the wall just above my left shoulder. "Well, I didn't really *know* it, of course. It's just that—well, she did treat them badly, and—"

"Treat who badly?"

"She had several men friends . . . and her husband still came around sometimes."

"How about women? Any enemies you know about?"

She thought a moment. "No. She really didn't have many girl friends. Not any, really."

"What about you? You were a friend of hers, weren't you?"

She bit at her lip again, frowning a little now. "Well, yes—in a way . . ."

"What do you mean, in a way? You were her roommate, weren't you?" I could see I might sound a little brusque with her, and I softened my tone a bit. "You understand how it is," I added. "These things have to be asked."

"I know," she said. "It's just that we'd stopped living together. I moved out about a week ago, and I hadn't seen her since."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. It was her

men friends, mostly. There was always someone here, and sometimes more than one. She'd make dates with two different men to the same night, and then when they came here, there'd be trouble. She seemed to like the idea of having men fighting over her. It got so I couldn't invite any of my own friends here, because I was afraid there'd be some kind of a scene."

"She drank quite a bit," I said.

"Yes. Yes, she did." She paused. "How did you know?"

"Her body's covered with what we call bottle bruises," I said. "A real lush falls down a lot, and knocks into things a lot. They're always bruising themselves. When you see someone with a lot of old bruises all over them, and some new ones too, you've probably got a dipso on your hands."

She shook her head slowly, as if remembering something. "She used to be a wonderful person," she said. "Then she started drinking more and more. Finally she lost her job, and from then on I couldn't handle her at all. She was a couple of years younger than I, and I—well, I'd always felt responsible for her."

"We'll get back to these men friends in a minute," I said. "First, though, I want you to tell me what you did when you got here this morning. You told me before that you came over to pick up some clothing you'd left here . . . Isn't eight o'clock in the morning sort of early to do a thing like that?"

She looked at me sharply.

"The questions have to be asked," I reminded her.

"Certainly you don't think I—"
I didn't say anything.

She stared at me a moment, and then shrugged. "I wanted a particular dress I had here. I wanted to wear it this afternoon. And the way Jean lived, eight o'clock in the morning was as good a time as any other."

"I see." I watched one of the mobiles on the ceiling move a few inches in one direction, and then move back again. "Where are you living now, Miss Johnson?"

"With another girl, on Fourteenth Street."

"Were you there last night? Say, from midnight on?"

She hesitated, then shook her head.

"Where were you?"

"With—a friend."

"Who?"

She folded her hands in her lap and studied them a moment. "With a soldier."

"Where?"

Her eyes came up. "Honestly, I don't see why—"

"What you do with your nights doesn't interest me at all," I told her. "Except, of course, if you spent last night here."

"But I didn't! I just told you!"

"What's this soldier's name, and where'd you spend the night with him?"

She started to get up, then sud-

denly sat back down again and spread her hands helplessly. "His name was Ralph Kirk, and I—we had a room at the Dayson Hotel, on Seventy-second Street. West Seventy-second."

I wrote it down. "Now what did you do when you got here this morning? Take it from the moment you got to the front door."

"I—well, I pushed the buzzer, but there wasn't any answer. I thought Jean was probably passed out from liquor, like she was a lot of times, and I let myself in. I still had my key. The second I opened the door, I smelled the gas. I knew it had to be coming from the kitchen, and I ran out there." She paused.

"And then?"

"It was—horrible. Just horrible. I saw Jean lying there on those chairs, and the way her head was in the oven and all, and then I ran upstairs to get the super. I—I couldn't bear to come back with him, so I stayed in his apartment with his wife while he came down here to—to . . ."

"You didn't try to open the windows to let the gas out?"

"I couldn't think. It was so horrible, and the gas made me so sick to my stomach. I did think to leave the kitchen door open, and I left the hall door open, too, but I was just too scared and sick to think about much else."

"You just came in and ran right out? You didn't touch anything?"

"Heavens no!"

"All right. Now what about these men?"

"They came and went. There were so many . . ."

"You probably remember some of their names, though."

"Well . . . well I do remember a couple of them. Full names, I mean. Most of the others I knew by just their first names."

"These two full names you do remember—were they her main friends?"

"Yes, I guess you'd say that. Every time they came around, Jean would make me leave the apartment. They'd never go out anywhere."

"Why not?"

"Both of them were married. They didn't want to be seen, I guess."

"Uh-huh."

"One of them is Clarence Walling and the other is Fred Baird."

"You know their addresses?"

"Jean has them listed on the front of the phone book."

"How about the husband?"

"Hal? I don't know where he lives. I don't think Jean did, either. She wanted to have him arrested one night, but she couldn't tell the cops where to find them. They never did, either."

"Why did she want him arrested?"

"He came over here one night, but she wouldn't let him in. He was drunk, and he kicked the door

down. But then he got scared when someone yelled for the super, and he left."

"Where's the husband work, then?"

"He doesn't work anywhere, so far as I know. I guess you'd call him a bum. He hangs around the Bowery quite a bit, and around the Village some. I don't know much about him, except that Jean was afraid of him. He was still jealous of her, even though they'd been separated over a year, and he used to wait outside for Jean's friends and try to beat them up."

"These married men—Walling and Baird—did they know one another?"

"Oh, no. She was always very careful about that."

"But the other guys got a little different treatment?"

"Yes. She liked to—well, play one against the other."

"Did either Walling or Baird give Jean money?"

She hesitated. "I—I guess they must have. I can't imagine any other reason she'd have anything to do with them. She always had all the money she wanted, and clothes and things, but she hadn't worked for a long time."

Stan Rayder came back from the bedroom.

"Any luck?" I asked.

"Not a thing. Unless you count a lot of empties under the bed."

"She'd do that a lot," the girl said. "Take a bottle to bed."

I looked up the number of the Dayson Hotel, identified myself, and asked if they had a Ralph Kirk registered, and if not, whether he had stayed with them the night before. The clerk came back after a few moments to say there was no Ralph Kirk with them now and there had been none last night. I thanked him and hung up.

"Well?" the girl said.

"No Ralph Kirk, miss."

She moistened her lips. "Well, he must have used another name, then. Naturally, he—"

"How well did you know this soldier?" I asked.

"How well? Why, I—" She paused. "I just met him last night. In a bar off Broadway, on Seventy-second."

I glanced at the phone book and wrote down the numbers of Clarence Walling and Fred Baird, and then I stood up and nodded to Stan. "Take her up to the Dayson Hotel," I said. "See if you can find anyone who remembers her. If the night clerk's off duty, look him up and see what he says. Check with the elevator operators and the bellhops, and see what happens."

The girl was on her feet in an instant. "Are you arresting me?"

"Take it easy," I told her. "We want you to help us, that's all."

"It doesn't sound that way. It sounds as if you think I—"

"We don't think anything," I said. "This is police routine, and it

has to be done. The sooner we can account for you, the sooner we can get on to something else."

Stan grinned at her and nodded to the door. "Let's go, miss," he said. The girl glanced from one of us to the other, a little angry, but finally she turned and walked toward the door.

"You going to hang around here a while, Sarge?" Stan asked.

"Couple minutes," I said.

"Check with you at the precinct?"

"Yeah." I looked at the girl. "What'd Jean's husband look like?" I asked.

Her voice sounded a little choked. "He—he's tall, and thin and blond. I guess you'd say he's got a hatchet face, sort of."

"How old?"

"Oh . . . about thirty, I guess."

3.

After Stan and the girl had left the apartment, I dialed the precinct and told the squad commander our suicide had become a homicide. I filled him in, and then asked for a pickup on Hal Proctor, the dead girl's husband. I gave the lieutenant the best description of Proctor I could, from what the Johnson girl had told me, and relayed what she'd said about his hanging around the Bowery and the Village. The lieutenant said the alarm would go out in a couple of minutes, and asked if I needed more help. I told him no,

that Stan was taking the girl over to the hotel and that I was going to talk to a couple of the men the dead girl had known. I told him I was to meet Stan at the station house, and hung up.

Some detectives like to work with a big crew. I don't. I hate to tie up any more men than is absolutely necessary. The Uniform Force would pick Proctor up, and inasmuch as he and Miss Johnson were our best bets so far, I didn't see any point in pulling in a lot of men until both Proctor and the girl had washed out on us—if they did.

Stan and I had brought two patrolmen with us from the station house. I left one of them staked out in the apartment, and the other patrolman and I drove uptown to a coffee shop and had some breakfast. Then I went back to the phone booth and called Clarence Walling's number. It turned out to be an office on Lexington Avenue. The girl who answered told me Mr. Walling was not in, and would not be in all day. I identified myself, and the girl told me Walling was home. She gave me his address—612 West Ninety-first Street—and I thanked her and hung up.

4.

Clarence Walling had been expecting me. He was a heavy-set, balding man, somewhere between fifty and fifty-five.

"My secretary called me," he

said as he let me into the apartment. "What's wrong?"

"Just a routine check, Mr. Walling," I said.

It wasn't an especially warm day, but Walling's face was sheened with sweat and his blue silk sport shirt hung to him damply. His eyes were bloodshot, and I noticed his hands shook a little. He looked like a man with a bad hangover.

"Routine? Really, now, officer."

"I'm Sergeant Selby," I said. "You know a girl named Jean Proctor, I believe." I watched him. His eyes narrowed a bit, and he swallowed a time or two.

"Yes," he said finally. "I know Jean. What's this all about?"

"Did you see her last night?"

"Why, no. I haven't seen her—let's see—since last Tuesday. Is she in trouble?"

He hadn't asked me to sit down, so I sat down anyhow.

He looked at me a moment, and then moved toward a cellarette. "I need a hair of the dog," he said, and poured a highball glass halfway up with bourbon. He drank it, poured another, and started back toward me. Then he seemed to remember suddenly that he had company, and said, "Would you like a drink, Sergeant?"

I shook my head.

"You don't mind if I do?"

"Not at all. Where were you last night, Mr. Walling—say from about midnight until about six or seven?"

He thought it over, swirling the whiskey around slowly in his glass. "Let's put it this way," he said. "I'm not an unreasonable man, but I think you are. I believe I have every right to know why I should be questioned this way, and in my own home too. If you'll tell me your reason for being here, I may tell you where I was."

"Jean Proctor was murdered last night, Mr. Walling," I said.

He didn't quite drop the glass, but he had to bring his other hand up quickly to avoid it. He stared at me a long moment, while his face paled, and then he sat down so suddenly most of the whiskey sloshed out of the glass and onto his lap. He formed the word once with his lips without actually saying it, and then he said it aloud: "Murdered?"

I nodded. Walling seemed genuinely stunned, but you never can tell. "I was told you were a very good friend of hers," I said.

It took him almost a full minute to get control of himself, but once the control was there I had the feeling it was there for keeps. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes, we were very good friends, Jean and I." He shook his head slowly, unbelievably. "Murdered . . . My God . . . Who killed her?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," I said.

"You mean you think I—"

"Not at all," I said. "It's just as I told you—routine. But I'm

afraid I'll have to ask you where you were last night, Mr. Walling."

He stared down at the spreading whiskey stains on his pant legs. "I was with a girl," he said tonelessly. "Another girl, not Jean."

"Mind telling me who?"

"I guess I haven't much choice, have I?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Walling."

"I was with—my sister-in-law."

"All night?"

"Yes. All night." He set his glass down and rubbed his face with his hands. "Lord," he said, "this is terrible. Everything will come out now."

"Everything?"

"I mean my wife will find out now. About Jean—and about Joyce too."

"Joyce—is that your sister-in-law?"

"Yes. She's considerably younger than my wife . . . a widow."

"You mean you've been seeing your wife's sister the same way you were seeing Jean, Mr. Walling? Clandestinely?"

He nodded. "It's an uncomfortable thing to admit, but that's the way it is."

"Where was your wife last night, Mr. Walling?"

"She's been away a few days."

"Out of town, you mean?"

"Yes. She's been visiting her mother in Albany. She'll be back tomorrow." He reached for his glass and swallowed the rest of the whiskey. "I guess we all have to pay the price, sooner or later. I don't

mind about myself so much, but when my wife finds out that I've been sleep—been having an affair with her own sister, I—"

"I'm not here to cause you unnecessary trouble, Mr. Walling," I said. "Your personal life is your own. If you can establish where you were last night, the information will go no further. That's a matter for your own conscience." I paused. "We'll have to take a run over there," I said.

Walling said nothing on the way over with the patrolman and me, and almost nothing once we arrived. An hour later I had him back in front of his apartment house. His hangover seemed to be worse than ever, and he looked a good ten years older than he had when I first saw him. But his sister-in-law had backed up his story, and unless something else turned up, he was in the clear. But in the clear only so far as the police were concerned, I reflected. Part of his little setup had exploded in his face, and I didn't envy him the day his wife tumbled to the fact that he'd been double-timing her with two mistresses, and that one of them was her own sister.

5.

The patrolman and I checked in the RMP car, and I climbed the stairs and walked along the corridor to the squad room. The squad commander was the only one around.

"Has Stan been in?" I asked.

The lieutenant shook his head.

"No. How's that girl he took over to the hotel? Pretty?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe he ran off with her."

"Maybe." I picked up the alarm book and thumbed through the flimsies.

"You looking for the one on Hal Proctor?" the lieutenant asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Second sheet, near the bottom."

It was very brief; almost too brief. The Uniform Force would be doing the best they could with it, but they didn't have much to go on. The teletype entry read:

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

ALARM 8777 CODE SIG A-9
AUTH 1ST SQD JULY 16—9:45
AM APPREHEND FOR QUES-
TIONING—HOMICIDE—HAL
PROCTOR—M-W-25-5-11-150
—BLOND HAIR—SHARP
FEATURES—SLIM BUILD—
PROBABLY SHABBY CLOTHES
—3-inch SCAR ON RIGHT
WRIST

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

I glanced at the lieutenant. "Where'd you get that info on the scar?"

"I went through the RKC'S," he said. "I left Proctor's card on your desk."

I picked up the *Resident Known Criminal* card and flipped it over to look at Proctor's picture. He had a hatchet face, all right, and there wasn't anything phony about the hardness in his eyes, but he was still

a pretty good-looking guy. A lot of women had gone for guys like that before, and a lot of them would keep right on going for them. I turned the card over again to read the information on the front.

*RESIDENT KNOWN CRIMINAL
NAME: Halston Proctor*

*ALIAS: Harry Pryor, Hal Barnes,
Hal Parker*

ADDRESS: Not fixed

BOROUGH: Man. PRCT: 1st

CRIMINAL SPECIALTY: Petit

Larceny

NAME OF ASSOCIATES:—

*PRISON (IN OR OUT): Believed
out.*

I skipped down the list of physical characteristics to the bottom of the reverse side.

REMARKS

Dr. Rhodes believes Proctor to be a constitutional psychopathic inferior. Proctor is dangerous when drunk. Panhandler, and sometimes touts tourists to dice and card rooms in Village. Fourteen arrests for vag; three for Dis. Con. one for simple assault; one for felonious assault with knife. No convictions for assault. Two convictions, petit larceny one suspension, 3-6 mos. Released Sept. '62.

I replaced the card in the RKC file and called Bellevue Hospital. When I'd been routed to the assistant M.E. who was posting Jean Proctor's body, I asked what he'd found.

"I just finished, Jess," he said. "I

was just lighting up a cigarette before I called you." I heard the sound of a match being struck. "It was one of those bruises, all right. She was either struck or kicked in the stomach. It killed her. The blow must have been a violent one, Jess."

"No question about the cause of death?"

"None at all. And, incidentally, there was no sexual assault."

"You find anything else?"

"Well, she'd had quite a bit to drink. There was a three per cent alcohol count in the blood, and that means she was just a couple of drinks away from stupor."

"Yeah. Well, thanks, Ben."

"Sure." He hung up.

The lieutenant threw a small envelope on my desk and grinned at me.

"What the hell's that?" I asked.

"Tickets," he said. "For the police benefit next Wednesday. I told the commissioner we'd sell a double quota for him, seeing we did so well last year."

"On our free time, naturally."

"Naturally."

6.

I stuck the envelope in my pocket and sat down at my desk to type up a 61 form on the homicide. I'd just rolled the original and carbons in the battered No. 5 Underwood when the phone rang. It was Patrolman Jenkins, the cop I'd asked to talk to the neighbors.

"I thought I'd better check with you, Sarge," he said. "It's N.G. with me. Nobody saw anything. Nobody heard anything. To listen to them, you'd think nobody in the Village was home all night."

"Yeah. Well, report back in, then."

"I'm supposed to be off now. Can you sign me out downstairs?"

"Sure. Go on home."

"Thanks, Sarge."

I hung up and then called the desk officer downstairs and asked him to sign Jenkins out at his regular time.

"I'm going out for some chow," the lieutenant said. "Want to come along?"

"I had some," I said. "I could use some more coffee, though."

"Black?"

"Uh-huh."

He left, and I went on typing up the Complaint Report. When I'd gone as far as I could with it, I put it aside and called BCI. They had nothing on Jean Proctor, and nothing new on her husband. Earlier, when we'd first arrived on the scene. Stan Rayder had questioned the Johnson girl about Mrs. Proctor's next of kin. He'd found there was none, so far as the Johnson girl knew, except for the husband.

I made a couple of other calls, but the crime lab had turned up nothing useful; and BOSSI, the special squad to whom Headquarters routed a report of all homicides and suicides, had found no subversive activities

or affiliations. Lately, we'd been investigating all except the most obvious suicides as if they were homicides, at least so far as the initial steps went, and so the work done by the crime lab and the others was as thorough as it was going to be, unless there were new developments.

Stan Rayder came into the squad room and straddled the straight chair next to my desk.

"Where's your girl friend?" I asked.

"I took her home."

"She checked out okay?"

"Yeah. She bedded down with that soldier, all right. The night clerk remembered her. Trouble was, I had a hell of a time finding the guy. He'd gone off duty at eight. We finally caught up with him, and he went back with us and we found this soldier still in the sack. He'd registered under a phony, naturally, and I guess he lost a couple years' growth when the girl and the night clerk and the manager and I walked in on him." He grinned. "But the guy admitted right off they'd climbed in the hay together, and hadn't left it until early this morning. About six, he said, and the girl'd already told me the same." He picked up the alarm book and ran a thumbnail down the entries. "Busy day for cops," he said. "More items than I've seen in a couple months."

"There was a lot of wickedness in this city last night, Stan," I said.

"Yeah? How so?"

I told him about Walling.

"It's a sinful town, all right," Stan said. "What do we do next on this Proctor girl?"

"I have to check on a guy named Fred Baird," I said. "He and Walling were footing her bills, and I guess each of them figured he was head man. If Baird washes out, we'll get the lieutenant to pull in a few more cops for us and start checking on all the men Mrs. Proctor ever even said hello to."

"She was a popular kid. We could make a career out of this one case."

"Looks like it."

"Hey!" Stan said suddenly. "What'd you say this guy's name was? The guy doubling up with his wife and sister-in-law?"

"Clarence Walling. Why?"

"That's it! Talk about your delayed reactions!" He started flipping through the earlier pages in the alarm book, scanning the listings rapidly.

"Let's don't have any mysteries around here, Stan," I said. "What'd you do—take this Johnson girl in for a few drinks somewhere?"

"On my salary I can't afford to buy girls drinks. Look at this." He handed me the alarm book, underlining an item with his fingernail. "I noticed this when it came in, before we went out on Proctor."

The item read:

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

ALARM 143 CODE SIG D-1
AUTH 18TH SQD JULY 16-6:10

AM CAR 29—CONTACT WOMAN NORTHEAST CORNER COLUMBUS AVE & 66TH—NAME MRS. EDNA WALLING—STATES SHE WANTS TO TALK TO POLICE

"Not too many people named Walling," Stan said.

7.

I picked up the phone and called the Eighteenth Precinct. I learned that Car Twenty-nine had gone to Columbus and Sixty-sixth and waited the better part of an hour. But the woman hadn't showed. The cops had called back to the precinct, found the woman had sounded a little incoherent, though not drunk, and they'd chalked it up as just another of the crackpot calls the police get by the dozen.

Next I called Clarence Walling and discovered that his wife had driven to Albany in one of the family's two cars. I got a description of Mrs. Walling and the car, tried to avoid upsetting Walling any more than was avoidable, and then got out a pickup for a new Cadillac, black, with the license number he'd given me. I left instructions that any info on the car should be radioed to Stan and me, and then we left the squad room and went downstairs to check out an RMP.

We found a parking place just off Columbus and walked back to the corner of Sixty-sixth. There

was no one answering Mrs. Walling's description and no black Cadillac. We covered the bars in the immediate neighborhood, and then started on the ones along Broadway, always keeping an eye out for the Cadillac.

We found the Cadillac parked near the corner at Sixty-fifth. There was a woman in the front seat, and she answered the description.

I opened the door and bent down. "Mrs. Walling?"

She was about forty, I guessed, a beautifully dressed woman with hair just beginning to gray. She was very attractive, but you'd call her handsome rather than pretty.

She nodded almost imperceptibly. "We're policemen, Mrs. Walling. You said you wanted to talk to us."

"Yes," she said softly. "I called . . . and then I . . . lost my nerve."

"May we get in?"

She nodded again. Stan got into the back and I slid into the front seat next to Mrs. Walling.

"What'd you want to tell us?" I asked.

She stared straight ahead, her face almost expressionless. "I—I killed a girl last night." She paused.

I didn't say anything, and neither did Stan.

"She was trying to break up my home," Mrs. Walling said. "My husband is a good man, but he is a weak man. He met this—this person some time ago. I—I found

out about it one night when he had been drinking. He said his conscience hurt him and he had to confess to me. He told me all about this girl, where she lived, and everything else. I went to her and told her I was aware of what had been going on. She promised she would never see him again. My husband had already promised the same thing—that is, that he would never see her." She paused again.

I waited almost a full minute, and then I said, "But they forgot their promises?"

"Yes. They forgot. I drove up to Albany to visit my mother, planning to return tomorrow. But I missed Clarence so much that I decided to come back yesterday. I had motor trouble on the way, and I didn't arrive at our apartment until four o'clock in the morning. My husband wasn't there. I thought he must be with this—girl. I went to her apartment. She was very drunk, or I don't suppose she would have let me in. We had words . . . I don't know, it seems so long ago now, as if it happened in my childhood. A bad dream . . ."

I nodded. "Please go on, Mrs. Walling."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I got the idea somehow that she was hiding my husband in

her bedroom. When I tried to go in there, the girl struck me, and we started fighting. She slipped and fell, and before I knew what I was doing, I kicked her. In the stomach, I think. I . . ."

"It's best to tell it all at once, Mrs. Walling," Stan said gently. "It's a lot better that way."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is . . . I couldn't believe she was dead. When I finally accepted the fact that I'd killed her, I was frantic. I had a dear friend once who committed suicide, and I remembered how she had done it. I thought I could make it look as if this girl had done the same. I dragged her into the kitchen . . ." Her voice broke off and she began to sob.

I turned to glance at Stan. "You want to bring the RMP around here?" I asked. "And you'd better call the precinct about this. And listen, Stan—tell them to put out a cancellation on Proctor."

"We'll take you down to the office in our own car, Mrs. Walling," I said. "We'll tell your husband where this one is parked."

Her eyes were suddenly very bright. "I'm so sorry for him," she said. "So awfully sorry . . ."

I didn't say anything, but I didn't feel sorry for her husband. For my money, she'd killed the wrong one.



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