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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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VOL. 31, NO. 4

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE HALF MILLION DOLLAR DIAMOND CAPER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The man behind the desk held up his hand, and his hired killers backed away. "Bring the dough," he told Mike Shayne. "No fuzz. Bring it nice and quiet to me. That way you get the stones and everybody goes away happy. If you don't—" his eyes glinted—"the girl dies—real messy."

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THE HALF MILLION DOLLAR DIAMOND CAPER

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

"Bring the dough," the voice told Mike Shayne. "Bring it nice and quiet, without no cops. If you do, you get the stones. If not—the girl dies real messy."



"BUZZ OFF!" snarled Fats Stransky.

Michael Shayne, Miami private detective, didn't move a muscle, "I want something from you, Fats," he said in a voice that was as keen as a sword edge. "I'm here to get it."

"You get one thing from me, shamus—this!"

The hood fired the spittle with a jerk of his head. Shayne ducked and launched the large fist from below his knee. The

blow landed against the side of Stransky's neck. Shayne followed with a left chop into the midsection. Most men, had they caught Shayne's two blows, would have been out of action.

Not the hood. Not Fats Stransky. He was a tough nut. He shuddered all over, yowled and launched himself as if he had been catapulted at the redhead.

Shayne took a solid punch against his shoulder and a glancing flick off his ear. He put

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The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel



a one-two into the hood's middle. And then what felt like a sledgehammer slammed against his shin. Shayne gave under the vicious kick. He peeled out of range, cursing.

Fats chortled and came after him fast. Shayne popped a left into the hood's exposed face and brought a roundhouse right to the ribs. Then he butted savagely with his head and lifted a short left uppercut. The left sent Stransky up on his toes. Shayne heard teeth splinter and jaw bone crack. Blood spurted from the hood's mouth. He went glassy-eyed and crumbled.

Shayne reached down and caught the lapels of the hood's coat, jerked his shoulders up from the carpeting. Fats' head lolled, blood poured from his thick lips, and his breathing was harsh. He was semi-conscious, and no good to Shayne now. Shayne dropped the man in disgust. He'd wanted information but all he'd got was some exercise.

He snapped a look across the room. The cowering blonde floozie had a phone jammed against her ear. She flinched when she caught Shayne's look but she kept on yakking into the mouthpiece.

Shayne walked out quietly. The blonde was calling in troops. Shayne liked a good fight but he didn't have time to take on Fats

Stransky's army tonight. He had a man to find.

A crisp note and a crisp one thousand dollar bill had been the lure. Lucy Hamilton, pert secretary, had placed both on Shayne's desk around four o'clock that bright afternoon.

"These just arrived by special messenger," she said, the corners of her eyes crinkled with curiosity.

The paper was expensive, but there was no letterhead. The penned hand was a scrawl, yet Shayne sensed the note had not been written in desperation. The message was simple. Franklin Grant, multimillionaire, needed the services of a private detective. Just what kind of services the note did not stipulate. The single stipulation urged that Shayne be at the Grant mansion at 7:30 p.m.

The private detective was five minutes early for the semi-mysterious rendezvous when he turned the powerful topdown convertible from Rickenbacker Causeway into the long white wall. Black iron gates in the wall were open and he piloted the convertible carefully on a curved drive that was flanked by exotic shrubbery. He braked at the top of the drive and sat for a few seconds, thumbing his hat to the back of his head. The house was a palatial chunk of stone and glass. It had set someone back

well into six figures. He looked around. The grounds had been sculptured by professionals.

There wasn't a soul or another car in sight.

Shayne left the convertible and moved on long strides up steps to a massive, black double front door. One half of the door opened before he could rap or find a button to punch. He had expected to get some kind of domestic, but he got a large, rawboned man with a hooked nose and an outdoors look in tailored sportswear, a man with salt and pepper hair and steady eyes who, somewhere in his mid-fifties, looked physically fit and mentally sharp.

"Mr. Shayne?" said the man. "I am Franklin Grant."

His grip in quick handshake was strong. He took Shayne into the huge house. Shayne felt as if he had been pulled and yet he knew he had not been. Grant used another smooth gesture to usher the redhead from the entry into a sumptuous library.

A beautiful girl, exquisitely attired in a pale pink pantsuit, got out of a wing chair to stand tall and composed. She expertly balanced a teacup and saucer on the palm of a long-fingered left hand as she inventoried him. Her face remained expressionless. She might be thirty, Shayne thought. Certainly she was many years Grant's junior. Probably his

daughter. She was a statuesque brownette with a glowing tan and dark eyes that held gleaming mysteries. But there were no mysteries about her figure.

"My wife, Emily," Grant introduced. "Mr. Shayne."

The beautiful girl nodded slightly before flowing from the library.

"Emily was a Miss America just a few short years ago," Grant said.

Shayne detected pride and pleasure. "I can believe it," he said.

Grant looked mildly surprised. "She struck you?"

"Hard," Shayne acknowledged.

The multimillionaire seemed to consider the bluntness for a few moments before he said, "I think you and I are going to see eye to eye, Mr. Shayne. Emily stuns most men. Few admit it to me, however. I suppose they are afraid of falling out of favor with me, perhaps some are frightened of me. Drink?"

"Cognac with ice water chaser."

Grant worked a couple of buttons on a wall and a section of loaded bookshelves swung around silently to become a black-cushioned bar. He poured drinks before he said, "You don't surprise easily, Mr. Shayne. Nor do you seem to stand in much awe."

"I've seen bars swing out of walls before, Mr. Grant."

"How about diamonds? Have you seen many unmounted diamonds in your work? Could you recognize a half million dollars worth of diamonds, ten unmounted stones?"

"No."

"One half million in diamonds is why I sent for you, Mr. Shayne."

"Who stole them from you, Mr. Grant?"

II

FRANKLIN GRANT had purchased the ten stones from a reputable dealer in Amsterdam, a man named Paul Herzog. It was not the first time Grant and Herzog had done business. Grant had no qualms about Herzog. He had already paid Herzog the \$500,000 for the diamonds, which he had intended to have mounted into a wristlet of his wife's choosing. The wristlet was to be a birthday present. Grant had sent a trusted employee, a man named Andrew Flemming, to Amsterdam on Saturday to pick up the stones.

Flemming had traveled by private plane, a lone passenger with two pilots. Jack Whitwer and Tony Salo operated a charter flight service. Grant used them often, for business and for pleasure. He liked and trusted

both. They kept their collective nose to the flying business. They did not know why they were taking Flemming to Amsterdam and back, nor had they asked. All of which did not mean the trip was of a secretive nature. Grant had been interested solely in speed of delivery and safety for the stones.

The diamonds had been cleared at Customs at both ends of the flight. Everything was above board—except that Flemming, after the Sunday return flight, had disappeared somewhere between International Airport and the Grant estate.

"And now," Shayne said, "you want me to find Flemming and your stones."

Grant frowned as he took an empty cognac glass from the detective's hand. He went to the wall bar again. With his back to Shayne, he said flatly, "I think Andy met foul play between the airport and here yesterday afternoon."

"Why?"

"Because I know the man. I trust him. Otherwise, he would not have been with me these past eight years." Grant returned with a fresh cognac. "I am a self-made millionaire, Mr. Shayne, and I have that fortune because I am a student of people. I do not profess to possess the mystic midas touch we occasionally hear about. I made my money

because I have been able to put together a network of good people. I've been burned a few times, yes, I don't claim to be all-seeing, but in the case of Andy Flemming I have not been burned again. Flemming is not a thief."

"Uh-huh." Shayne used a thumb and forefinger of his right hand to tug at the lobe of his left ear. "Tell me, Mr. Grant, why have you waited so long to summon help? It's been more than twenty-four hours since you should have had these diamonds spread on your lap."

Grant sat in the wing chair and crossed his legs. "Because Emily and I were in Lauderdale for the weekend. We did not get back here until three o'clock this afternoon. I expected Andy to be here, naturally. When he was not, I checked with Whitwer and Salo. They informed me that the return flight had been completed at four-fifteen yesterday afternoon, right on schedule."

"We have an excellent police department."

Grant nodded. "I may summon the police eventually. But for the moment, I want you, Mr. Shayne. Police would produce publicity, and publicity would bring sundry approaches, by phone and by person. I can handle these people, but I prefer not to be bothered. With the same reasoning in mind, I voted



against contacting a detective agency. An agency would afford manpower, true, but right now I want a loner. And that is you, Mr. Shayne. A loner, one of the few left. It is my understanding most private detectives are now with agencies, have formed agencies, or work for attorneys."

Shayne nodded in silent agreement and pulled at his ear again. "What about insurance?"

Grant sipped his Scotch and water. "If you do not agree to work for me, I'll summon the insurance people."

"You're sure hung up on me, Mr. Grant."

"You come highly recommended—by Andy Flemming."

Shayne said nothing and, after a few moments, Grant added, "Even that doesn't surprise you, I see."

"Oh, yes it does."

"Andy and you have a mutual friend, Mr. Shayne. A *Miami Daily News* reporter named Tim Rourke. Andy and Rourke have had some rather savage games of tennis, I've gathered. I'm unfamiliar with the total background of this friendship; however there have been one or two other occasions when I have harbored thoughts about employing a private detective, and Andy has been rather unflinching in his recommendation: 'Hire Mike Shayne, Mr. Grant.'"

Shayne searched his memory. Rourke was his closest friend and for years Rourke was one of the few men the detective trusted and had confidence in. He thought he knew all of Rourke's friends. But obviously he did not. He'd never heard of Andrew Flemming until now.

"What's Flemming to you, Mr. Grant? Exactly."

"A confidant and a companion."

"Bodyguard?"

"He could be," Grant nodded, "if the occasion demanded." He sipped the Scotch. "And there are times," he added, "I am out of the city. Emily needs someone in the house."

"You do not employ domestics?"

"Two for the house, Henry and Helga Overton. They are man and wife, competent. In

addition, there is James Doyle and his son, Rex. They take care of the grounds, the maintenance. The Overtons are not here this evening because I gave them a long weekend while Emily and I were in Lauderdale. They live in, as does Andy. The Doyles do not."

Shayne digested the briefing swiftly and then said, "Okay, your man arrived back in the city at four-fifteen yesterday afternoon. How would he come here? By cab, car—"

"Auto. One of mine. A 1972 Volkswagen convertible, dark blue." Grant rattled off the license plate number. "Andy drove the Volks to the airport Saturday. He was to leave it in the parking lot so that it would be available when he got back here."

"Well, that should help. Cars don't just disappear. Sooner or later they turn up somewhere."

Shayne went to a telephone across the room and called Traffic Division of the Miami police department. He asked about a 1972 Volkswagen convertible that might have been found abandoned. After a short delay, he was told that no car of that description had been hauled in.

The detective returned to his cognac, finished the drink and stood frowning into the glass. Finally he said, "Mr. Grant,

Flemming could be on the run."

Grant pinched his hook nose. "It's difficult for me to even think that. Do I now consider you in my employment?"

"At two hundred dollars a day plus expenses," Shayne nodded, looking Grant straight in the eye. "And no handholds. For instance, right at the moment, I figure that if I can turn up your Volks, I'll turn up Flemming—and your missing stones. How about it?"

Grant stared at him hard.

"Okay," he said after several seconds. "You're running the show."

"Point," Shayne said, "don't you forget it. Now, let's have another drink and do some homework."

III

MIKE SHAYNE wanted to know how many people knew about the diamond purchase, the worth, and when and how the stones were to be delivered to Franklin Grant.

"Originally, three," Grant said. "Myself, Paul Herzog and Andy. Of course, we now can add Emily. I told her about the loss tonight while I was awaiting your arrival."

"How did she accept it?"

"Calmly. Emily is a calm person."

"What about these domestics? The Overtons. The Doyles. Any

chance one of them could have overheard you discussing the purchase? Perhaps with Flemming, or maybe a telephone conversation with Herzog in Amsterdam? I assume there are extension phones in the house."

Grant frowned. "Mr. Shayne, I trust these people. I—"

"Look," Shayne interrupted, "if I accept your theory that Flemming was hijacked somewhere between International and here, then I have to figure that somebody knew when and how he was coming in and what he was carrying. Or do you want me to write off the hijacking to some lucky dollar hood who just happened to pick the right guy at the right hour on the right day and made out like a Chinese bandit?"

Grant should have been ruffled, Shayne thought. He wasn't. He merely sat like stone for a few seconds, his eyes squeezed down into tiny bright slits. Then he shifted in the chair and recrossed his legs.

"All right, Mr. Shayne, I suppose there is the chance one of the Overtons could have overheard. They move freely about the house. I made three phone calls to Herzog before completing the deal and Andy and I discussed the matter twice, once when I was contemplating sending him to Amsterdam and then when I made the decision. I

suppose someone could have eavesdropped."

"How about some of your friends, some of your business associates?" Shayne pressed. "Did you discuss the purchase with anyone other than Herzog and Flemming?"

"No," Grant said flatly.

"Didn't drop any hints somewhere? Maybe at a party, at your country club, at—"

"No," Grant repeated.

"Maybe Flemming did."

Grant shook his head. "Andy is a closed-mouth person."

"The two pilots? They could've trailed Flemming from International, waylaid him. Or they could've had an accomplice."

Grant was shaking his head.

Shayne continued, "Or let's take it from the other end. Amsterdam. Maybe your friend Herzog confided in someone, maybe he's got an employee who—"

"No," Grant cut in, "I won't accept that speculation at all."

"Customs?"

Grant looked surprised.

"You said the diamonds were cleared. That means people in Customs knew about them."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Mr. Grant?"

"Yes?"

"Either Flemming has cut on you with the stones or someone was waiting for him yesterday at

International. How'd you get to be a millionaire?"

"What?"

"It wasn't by figuring some other guy might know what he's talking about. This evening will cost you two hundred bucks. I'll have my secretary put eight hundred in the mail to you in the morning. Good evening, sir. It's been—"

"All right!" Grant suddenly was flushed.

Shayne stared him straight in the eye. "All right, what?"

Grant went to the bar and spent a long time building a new drink for himself. Shayne waited. He knew what was going on inside Grant. Petals were being stripped from his rosy little world. All Grant had to do now was accept the peeling. It was a tough chore for a man who had built his special sphere in the comfort of thinking that all of the crooks were out there on another planet.

Grant finally faced the redhead. He said, "All right, Mr. Shayne, I've reversed my thinking. I now suspicion everyone in my employment, every acquaintance."

"And you don't like it."

"I do not like it."

Shayne said, "I need a photograph of Flemming."

"There are three that I know of in his quarters in the south wing of the house. One was

taken quite recently, less than three months ago."

"Drink your drink, cool down some more and let's go."

The quarters were plush. It might pay to give up being an eye and turn to full-time bodyguarding, Shayne thought ruefully as he inventoried the expensive furnishings and carpeting. Grant ushered him from a vast living room into a male bedroom with an archway at one end. The bedroom contained a huge four-poster, a wall dresser, a door mirror, two bed tables, two lamps with skin-colored shades.

Beyond the archway was an oblong area Flemming used as a den. There were two large, color wall photographs and a framed five by seven black and white on a desk. In each, the photographed man was in tennis attire.

Grant picked up the desk photo and handed it to Shayne. "This is Andy. It's the most recent of the three."

Flemming looked tanned and athletic, trim in body, solid in leg. He had a thick mane of hair and broad-cheeked good looks.

Shayne prowled the quarters. They seemed especially clean and neat for a man's place. He paid particular attention to the bath and the walk-in closet. Finally Grant had to ask: "Mr. Shayne, what in God's name are you looking for?"

"Gaps."



Lucy Hamilton

"Gaps?"

"People can travel light, Grant, especially people who plan to move fast. But even the runners take some things with them, favorite suits, changes of underwear, shoes, tennis rackets."

"But—"

"Yeah, I see them. Four tennis rackets lined up in a row in the back of the closet."

"If Andy planned to never return to this house from the Amsterdam trip, Mr. Shayne, those rackets wouldn't be there."

"On that I've got a hunch you're right," Shayne agreed.

He headed for the front door suddenly.

"Where are you going?" Grant said.

Shayne said, "Look. Someone, right at this moment, is tracking with your diamonds or attempting to peddle them. If he's running, he's already got one

helluva jump on me. He could be anywhere in the U.S., Canada, Mexico—hell, maybe in Europe or Hawaii.

"On the other hand, if he's attempting to peddle in the Miami area, we've got a chance. Peddling takes time. Too, the fences in Miami or on the Beach who can handle your kind of loss are few. I'm going visiting. The night's a pup, and I've been on vacation. I need to let certain people know I'm back in town!"

IV

GIMPY GILLIS operated a very fancy bowling alley in Miami. Gimpy had a very fancy office in the very fancy bowling alley. But then Gimpy was a very fancy man who would buy and sell his best friend's right ear—no questions asked—if there was a profit in ears.

Gimpy flashed a huge white smile and a diamond-studded hand at Mike Shayne and waved the redhead into the opulent office. Gimpy's goon stopped at the door. Goons were not allowed to tread on Gimpy's rose-colored carpeting unless summoned. Gimpy closed a heavy door on the goon's nose and limped in behind a wide slab of black desk.

Shayne dropped a mile into a black leather chair in front of the black desk. "How is it, Gimp?"

Gimpy kept the grin, teeth very white and square, and remained silent, waiting.

"I'm looking for half a mill in ice," Shayne said.

Gimpy Gillis shrugged. "Got nothing in sight at the moment, Mike. I wish I did. I'd like to sell you a half a mill of anything."

"I'm also looking for a guy named Andrew Flemming."

"Never heard of him. Who is he?"

Shayne flashed the photograph of Andrew Flemming.

Gimpy looked and shook his head. "I don't dig tennis."

"And no stones clicking loose around town?"

"Not that I've heard about, and I'd've heard."

"Well . . ." Shayne said, leaving the chair, "so it's been a short visit. See you around."

"Hold it a sec, Mike. Who lost the ice?"

"Just a guy I know."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"Where?"

"Maybe at International."

"Hmm. Imported stuff, huh?"

"By courier."

"And the courier's name is Flemming?"

"It'd figure, wouldn't it, Gimp? I mean, here I am, looking for a guy named Flemming and—"

"Uh-huh, Mike, yeah, it'd figure. You, the logical man. It'd

figure. And it also figures there could be a bird in flight—a very heavy bird, and goin' like hell."

"Doesn't it."

"Especially since I ain't had a smell."

"There are others."

Gimpy Gillis looked almost injured. "You mean Artie Karnes and Fats Stransky?"

Shayne shrugged. "They live, too."

"Me and Artie and Fats, we're the only three who can handle a half a mill, Mike."

"I know," Shayne said in departure.

Shayne went to see Arthur Karnes.

Arthur Karnes owned a squat, yellow stucco building that housed the crammed Karnes' Book Store on the ground floor and an equally crammed apartment on the second floor. Karnes spent his days in the crammed book store and his evenings in the crammed apartment. He lived modestly, he had a wife of twenty-seven years, and he appeared to be kind to the children of the quiet neighborhood. He drove a five-year-old Buick that needed a valve job, he had a small, portable black and white television set in the front room of the apartment, and he probably had purchased his last suit in the mid-1960s. It all was facade.

Someday Arthur Karnes

would be living permanently on the French Riviera or some other such exotic place. Because Arthur Karnes was reputed to have more safety deposit boxes and Swiss accounts—also crammed with cash—than a Kennedy.

Arthur Karnes dealt with crooks. He was a fence, and he was considered a very knowledgeable and shrewd man in his moonlighting venture. Especially by the cops; since these same cops never had been able to pin so much as a traffic ticket on Arthur Karnes.

"I'm sorry, Mike," he said, and he sounded genuine, "but I am not acquainted with Mr. Flemming." He returned the photograph to Shayne and adjusted the black-rimmed glasses on his nose. "Mildred, did you hear of him?"

She looked up from her knitting across the room. The smile for her husband was soft. "No." She shook her head. "I don't believe I have ever met anyone by that name, Arthur."

"And you haven't heard anything about any loose diamonds that might be for sale?"

"No."

Shayne stood tall. The front room of the apartment was small and the detective felt as if he filled most of it. "If someone does come around, Artie?" He let the words hang.

Karnes looked crafty, shrugged. "We'll see, Mike."

Shayne pointed the convertible into the shank of the city. It was where he would find Fats Stransky. He had hoped to get a lead with Gimpy Gillis or Arthur Karnes; it would have saved him flushing out Fats. He wasn't particularly fond of Gimpy or Artie but he knew when they were telling the truth and when they were not. Fats Stransky was a different horse. Fats was destined to die from a slug in the back of his meaty skull. He was all slobbering hood and hadn't given anyone the correct time of day in forty years.

Shayne searched the shank with care, talking only to trusted informers. He wanted to hit Fats cold, and alone. He didn't need an army of muscle breathing down the back of his neck.

He got lucky. By putting tidbits gathered here and there together, he finally discovered that Fats was socializing this night, showing the ropes, as it were, to a blonde kid just down from Nebraska. Shayne traced Fats' footsteps to the blonde's front door where he beat on wood. The blonde looked disheveled and marble-eyed when she finally cracked the door.

Shayne shot inside. Fats was heaving up from a couch. Shayne stiff-armed his shoulders. But Fats bounced. He came up

surprisingly fast and squared off on wide-spread legs, his pig eyes filled with anger.

"Cool it!" snapped Shayne. "We talk!"

Fats Stransky snarled, "You'n me, shamus, we got nothun in common! Buzz!"

And then he jerked his head and fired the spittle.

V

MIKE SHAYNE piloted the convertible at city cruising speed. Fats Stransky had been a zero but Gimpy Gillis and Arthur Karnes had told him one thing: the diamonds had not yet been fenced in Miami. Neither had gone coy on him. So what did it leave? Flemming on the lam? Flemming hiding out, biding his time? Flemming dead?

Shayne scowled on the last thought and reached for the car phone. He called Timothy Rourke at home. Shayne told the newspaperman to hang tight and then he fed gas to the convertible. For a second, he had a mental image of Rourke standing in his apartment and staring at the phone receiver in his hand. Rourke's face would be screwed up in curiosity. Rourke had the curiosity of eleven cats.

Timothy Rourke also had gone longhair, and the long hair, heavy on the back of his neck and around his ears, sliced off

across his forehead as if he had stood before a mirror and used a bowl for a guide as he chopped, made him look younger, almost gave him a kooky, boyish look.

Shayne, however, knew there was nothing boyish or kooky about Timothy Rourke. And so did anyone else who bothered to look Rourke in the eye. Rourke had deep-set, slate-colored eyes that mirrored too much cynicism for casual closeness but made him one helluva fine newspaper reporter.

Shayne laid it all out in detail, and off the record, for Rourke and Rourke respected the detective by not interrupting with questions or going for the Scotch and cognac until Shayne had finished. At the liquor cabinet Rourke poured Scotch into one glass, cognac in another, and, in the kitchenette, he filled a third glass with ice cubes and tap water. He gave Shayne the cognac and ice water, and then he lifted the Scotch in a semi-salute.

"Andrew Flemming is one tough nut as a tennis opponent," he said, as he drank the Scotch neat.

"Now that I need to know," Shayne said sourly. He worked on the cognac.

Rourke poured more Scotch and took it to a deep chair where he folded his long, lean body. He sat frowning in silence for awhile



before he said, "Andy is a square guy, Mike, and I don't mean square square. I mean level head, level body, level psych. He lives clean. A bit of a ladies' man, but he wears white underwear. No hidden lusts."

"You're telling me the guy wouldn't steal diamonds, huh?" Shayne said.

"That's what I'm telling you."

"He's missing, Tim."

"Somebody hijacked him," Rourke said flatly.

"Then where's the Volks?"

"Somebody's driving it West, South, East, North, Mike. It'll turn up eventually."

"With Flemming at the wheel maybe."

Rourke shook his head. "Let's run out to International. Maybe somebody out there saw something out of the ordinary last Saturday afternoon."

"Let's," said Shayne, standing.

"But, first, let me make a call," Rourke said.

"No story in the morning paper, Tim," Shayne said quickly. "I'm in this because Grant doesn't want publicity."

Rourke fixed Shayne with a steady look. "Mike, how many stories have I had from you over the years?"

Shayne said nothing.

"Didn't I get them by mutual trust?"

Shayne remained silent as Rourke went to the phone. Rourke looked up a number in the book, dialed, stood quiet for a long time, didn't get an answer. He put the phone together, frowned thoughtfully.

Shayne waited patiently and Rourke finally said, "Andy's been dating a girl named Nancy Morman, an interior decorator for one of the department stores. I thought she might help us."

"How?"

"Hell, I don't know." Rourke shrugged, "but you'd take any lead you can get, I assume."

"Maybe she and Flemming are heading across country right now in a blue Volks convertible," Shayne said. "Maybe that's why you didn't get an answer."

"Maybe," Rourke nodded. "Normally, Andy is a mover among the ladies, but he seemed to be a bit hung on this Morman girl. On the other hand, what the hell, I thought the same thing

about him and Peggy Overton and then—"

"Overton?" Shayne interrupted. "Grant has domestics named Overton."

"Right," Rourke said. "Peggy is the daughter. She and Andy were hitting it off at a steady clip until about a year ago, and then something happened. I don't know what. I didn't ask. All I know is, Peggy married some other dude and Andy found Nancy Morman. Are we going out to International?"

"Now," said Shayne.

They killed ninety minutes in the parking environs at International Airport, and they drew blanks. No one remembered a blue Volkswagen convertible and nobody recognized the picture of Andrew Flemming. Rolling back into the city along Airport Expressway, Shayne said, "Point me to where this Nancy Morman lives, Tim."

"It's midnight, Mike."

"So?"

Rourke pointed them north on Biscayne Boulevard. Nancy Morman lived in a two story, cement block apartment complex on a side street. The complex was quiet, most of the parking stalls filled, a few lights here and there behind draped windows.

Rourke pointed to a second floor apartment. There was no light in its single large window

and no one came to the door when Shayne punched a button. He saw a light next door and he punched the button beside that door. The door was cracked cautiously by a young blonde girl in a man's white shirt and blue jeans. She kept a night chain stretched across the crack as she peered out. She looked uncertain and as if she would scream against any sudden movement.

Shayne pushed his hat to the back of his head and turned on a wide grin for the girl. "We're looking for Miss Morman who lives next door, Miss. I wonder if you could—"

"She went out," the blonde girl said quickly. She hesitated, shuffled. "Oh, hours ago now."

"I see," Shayne said gently. "Do you mean she went out around, say eight or nine o'clock?"

"It was around nine."

"Was she alone when she went?"

"Yes."

"Was she carrying a suitcase?" Shayne asked.

"No."

"You didn't happen to notice if she met someone in the parking area, did you?"

"I didn't notice."

"Well . . ."

The girl closed the door. Shayne heard a lock click. He looked at Rourke. The newspaperman lifted hands. "I'm

telling you, Mike, Andy and Nancy aren't flying with the diamonds. Neither are that kind of people. Anyway, if they were pulling a swiftie, why would they wait until tonight to fly? Why not yesterday afternoon when Andy got back in town?"

They returned to Rourke's apartment building. Shayne whipped the convertible into the curbing. "I feel like I'm running in grease, Tim," he said, as Rourke vacated the car.

Rourke turned and put his hands on the edge of the car. "Maybe it'll help," he said carefully, "if you'll look across the street."

Shayne snapped his head around. There was a small economy car braked over there and a girl was leaving it with a flash of leg. She stood tall for a second, looking up and down the street, and then she moved quickly toward them, running on her toes.

"Nancy Morman," Rourke breathed while the girl approached.

Shayne watched the girl dodge around the front of the convertible. She ran to Timothy Rourke and caught his biceps in her hands.

"Tim!" she gasped. "I've been waiting! I tried to call, but—Oh, Tim, it's awful! Andrew is dead! He's been murdered!"

VI

THEY WERE in the front room of Rourke's apartment, and they had calmed Nancy Morman. Now she sat twisted slightly on the edge of the long couch, feet and knees pressed tightly together, fingers interlocked around a drink which she kept in her lap, spine very straight, her cheeks almost hollow and her color wan. She had corn-colored hair, worn long, and blue-gray eyes.

Rourke poured more Scotch into his glass at the liquor cabinet. He lifted the bottle.

"Nancy?" he said gently.

She shook her head. "No."

Her voice was dead. Mike Shayne took his cognac to a chair opposite her and sat. She looked at the detective. Her eyes inventories openly, but she remained silent, and it was as if she might be hollow inside. Shayne said, "When you're ready, Miss Morman, I'd like to know some things."

His voice seemed to jar her slightly. She sat without flicking a muscle for a moment and then Shayne saw a little ripple go through her. She put an empty glass to her lips without thinking and drank. When she discovered her error, she became suddenly nervous.

Rourke sat beside her and put his Scotch in her hand, taking

the empty glass. But she didn't lift the drink. She looked straight at Shayne, her blue-gray eyes filled with one question.

"Why?" she breathed. "Why did it have to happen to Andrew?"

She looked at Rourke. His face was long, the corners of his mouth turned down. "I think, Mike," he said in a tone that was flat, "you should level with her. She's entitled."

Shayne told her why Andrew Flemming probably had been killed. She sat shaking her head in disbelief, the drink in her hand remaining untouched. And then Shayne said, "You were summoned to the morgue by the police, Miss Morman. Do you remember the name of the detective you talked to?"

"A Sergeant Reynolds."

Shayne knew Reynolds. He was one of Will Gentry's boys and a good cop. "Reynolds asked you to identify Andrew Flemming. Is that correct?"

"Yes," the girl said quickly.

"How did he happen to pick you? Did he say?"

Nancy Morman frowned slightly. "He mentioned Andrew's wallet."

"Did he question you about your relationship with Andrew?"

"He started to, but—well, I think he gave up. 'I'm afraid I wasn't much help to him. The shock, the—'"

"Sure," Shayne said gently, nodding. "Sergeant Reynolds would understand that." He sipped cognac before he asked, "Did Reynolds tell you anything about where they found Andrew, how they found him?"

"N-no. Only that—"

"Mike," Rourke broke in, "maybe you should call Reynolds. He's obviously, working the night trick."

"It's all right, Tim," Nancy Morman said. She stood, walked away from the couch. "I'm in control now."

She went to a window, stood looking outside on the black Miami night. Nancy Morman said from the window, "Sergeant Reynolds told me they found Andrew in a motel room, the Sunshine Motel. He had been stabbed."

"Had he been robbed?" Shayne asked.

Nancy Morman sipped the Scotch in her hand, made a face. She moved to a small table and put down the glass.

"I don't know," she said. "Sergeant Reynolds didn't say, but if they found Andrew's wallet—"

"It could've been emptied and left behind," Shayne said.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Miss Morman, when did you last see Andrew alive?" the detective asked.

"Last Wednesday evening,"



she replied without hesitation. "We went out to dinner and to a movie."

"Did Andrew tell you he was going to be out of town this weekend?"

"No."

"Did you make a next date?"

"No. We seldom do...did."

She paused a moment after shuffling her tenses. "Andrew usually couldn't. His employment with Mr. Grant wouldn't allow it."

"Did Andrew often talk to you about that employment, the nature of it, the Grants themselves?"

She shook her head. "Seldom."

He never said anything about his work and he seldom mentioned the Grants by name. When I first started dating him, it bothered me. But as I got to know him, I understood. He had his job with Mr. Grant because he was—"

She seemed to search for a word and Shayne borrowed from Grant: "Closed-mouth?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Have you met Mr. Grant?"

"No."

"Mrs. Grant?"

Nancy Norman shook her head.

"Have you met any of Grant's other employees, or anyone associated with him in business?"

"No."

"How about a girl named Peggy Overton?"

"I think... Andrew used to date her."

"But not recently, huh?"

"I understand she married."

"Well, do you know of any reason why someone might have killed Andrew, Miss Morman?"

She bit her lower lip. "I can't believe he is dead, Mr. Shayne. Right this very second, standing here, I can't believe that I'll never see him again."

Shayne stood. He recognized the signs. Emotion was catching up with Nancy Morman again. She wasn't going to be much good answering questions for a while. He wouldn't be able to get straight, hard answers. He'd have

to do a lot of sifting, plucking emotion from fact.

He went to Rourke's phone and called police headquarters. Reynolds was out on another squeal now, and the cop on the other end of the line professed not to know anything about the Flemming killing. Shayne hooked the phone and looked at Rourke. The newspaperman was standing with Nancy Morman, talking gently.

He faced Shayne, "Nancy is staying here, Mike, in my extra bedroom."

Shayne grunted and found his hat. It seemed like the Father Protector role was becoming popular as hell. Outside Rourke's apartment, he clomped the hat down hard on his head and marched on long strides out of the building into the warm Miami night. In his car, he phoned the Grant estate. He did not get an answer. He put the phone together and glanced at his watch. Almost two o'clock in the morning. Where the hell was Grant?

He drove to his apartment building, braked in his parking slot behind the building, put up the top of the car and looked up. The night was quiet, warm. He glanced up at the bright stars, and then he heard the shuffling sound and he became instantly alert. He could smell danger lurking nearby.

Two huge shadows materialized off to his left and moved toward him silently, sliding along side by side and in step, almost with a rhythm. Shayne whirled to meet the onslaught. The shadows said nothing as they split. One hulk moved off to the detective's left, the other to the right, circling slightly as they continued to come forward.

Shayne crouched, prepared for anything. The left shadow lunged forward, then peeled off suddenly. Without really looking, Shayne swung a roundhouse left to his right and followed with his body. His fist smashed against a face and brought a grunt. Then it was as if a club had been slammed against the back of the detective's neck. Pain splayed down through his shoulders and rippled along his spine. He went down to his knees hard.

One of the thugs launched a kick. Shayne caught the ankle and twisted viciously. The thug cursed as he spun off balance. Shayne fell flat on his face and rolled. The other thug lunged over him. Shayne brought a knee up hard against spread thighs and rammed his hands against buttocks, helping the hood along in his plunge.

Rolling again, the detective came up on his knees and fired a straight right punch that caught a middle. The thug gasped and jackknifed. Shayne brought his

head up swiftly and snapped a jaw with the top of his skull while he pummeled a hard body. The body relaxed suddenly and Shayne shoved it out of his way as he whirled quickly on his knees.

The second hood was moving back in. He was snarling now. There was little doubt in Shayne's mind about who the hoods belonged to and he rasped, "This is for Fats, bozo!" as he leaped to his feet and fired a one-two combination. The hood stiffened and jerked under the pounding, an uppercut aimed at Shayne's jaw fizzling before it reached the mark. The hood sagged.

Shayne slammed a hard right into the hood's ribs and brought his left knee up into the man's middle. The hood staggered away, doubling and moaning. Shayne started after him. Scrambling off to his right stopped him. He whirled, ready for a new charge. But the second hood was moving out too, lurching away in a wobbly run.

Shayne stood spread-legged, watching the muscle move out. They got into a car down the line. A motor came alive, smoothed out. Headlights popped on and the car lurched away. Breathing harshly, the detective watched the taillights disappear. He felt better. Some of his frustrations of the evening

seemed to have vanished with the hoods.

VII

WILL GENTRY, friend of long-standing and Chief of the Miami police detective bureau, was an early riser and an early-to-work man. Gentry liked to get his day collected before the trick change from night to day. Loose ends were easier to tie down if he still had his night people in pocket before the day boys took over.

Mike Shayne found Gentry and a large man he didn't recognize pouring through folders on Gentry's desk.

The large man stood with Shayne's entry into the office and Shayne paused a moment. The large man was red-haired too.

"Okay, Phillips," Gentry grunted.

The large man departed without even recognizing that Shayne was present.

Gentry shoved folders aside, picked up a new one, placed it square before him, then sat back and considered Shayne.

"Mike," he nodded. "I've been waiting."

Gentry was a burly man with heavy features and grizzled eyebrows. Now the brows were pulled down into a tight little knit. Shayne took a straightback

chair from a wall, turned it in front of Gentry's desk, straddled it, sat, and lit a cigarette. "Phillips is new?"

"Very fresh," Gentry nodded, the eyebrows growing even tighter. "Which probably is more than can be said for you this fine Miami morning. You didn't get much sleep last night, Mike. You called in here about one-thirty and you wanted to know about a dead man named Andrew Flemming."

"You keep tabs, Will."

"You got a client named Franklin Grant?"

"A very wealthy client."

"So I hear. And he had an employee named Flemming."

"Yep."

"Are we going to level?"

"Don't we always? Me first?"

"I'd like it that way," Gentry said flatly.

When Shayne had finished, Gentry grunted, pulled at his nose, and opened the folder on his desk. He flipped through pages as though in brief review, and then he said. "So now we've got motive. I didn't have one in Reynolds' report here."

"Just what have you got in Reynolds' report?" Shayne wanted to know.

The squeal had come in at 8:28 Monday evening from a man named Fred Blocker, who was the manager of the Sunshine Motel. Blocker had found a dead



man in one of his units. The dead man was a stranger to Blocker. Blocker had yelped for help.

Reynolds had answered the squeal. He had experienced no difficulty in identifying the body. He had found a wallet on the corpse. The wallet had contained several identification and credit cards. Reynolds also had found an address for Franklin Grant and another for Nancy Morman. The detective had been unable to raise anyone by phone at the Grant estate, but he had found Nancy Morman. He had asked her to come to the morgue to make a positive identification of Flemming. She had.

"Will," Shayne said, scowling as he butted his cigarette, "you said Blocker reported that Flemming was a stranger. Does

that mean he didn't remember renting a unit to Flemming?"

"On the nut, Mike," Gentry grunted. "He rented that particular unit to a red-haired woman sometime between five and five-fifteen Sunday afternoon. She arrived at the motel in a 1972 blue Volkswagen convertible. A man was driving the Volks. He remained in the car outside while the woman registered as Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher Carter, Tampa.

"Blocker claims that's one of the reasons he remembers the couple, because it was the woman who registered. A woman registering isn't unique, he says, but more often than not it is the man who registers while the woman remains in the car. The other reason Blocker remembers this particular couple is the woman paid for two nights, in advance, cash, and she asked that they not be disturbed on Monday, not even by a maid. Blocker says he went along with it because he had his dough and it wasn't any skin off him if a couple wanted to shack up for a couple of days with no knocks on the door."

"So how come this Blocker all of a sudden got curious last night?"

Gentry sighed. "He didn't get curious, he says. It was a matter of operating a motel. The couple went to the unit alone when they

checked in Sunday. They wanted it that way. Blocker didn't accompany them. But the couple also happened to park the Volks on a yellow line that separates parking places. In other words, they took up two parking slots. Well, Blocker says that was no sweat on Sunday night since his business wasn't so hot and it was no sweat yesterday, either, since he didn't have hardly anyone in until last evening.

"But then he filled up, and the last unit he rented was next door to the couple, so he finally decided he had to ask them to move the Volks. He tried the phone first, but no answer. So he went down there, beat on the door. Again no answer. And that's when he became suspicious. There was light inside the unit and he could hear radio music. He finally opened up and made the discovery."

"Have you got the Volks?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's registered to Grant, I assume."

"Uh-huh."

"Did Reynolds find money in Grant's wallet?"

"Two hundred and sixty-nine dollars. Forty-seven cents in change in the man's pocket."

"Suitcase in the room?"

"Flemming's."

"No diamonds, of course."

"You're kidding."

"Okay," Shayne sighed. He

left the chair, returned it to the wall. "What we've got is Flemming with a redheaded accomplice who killed him, or a couple who waylaid him, probably in the parking lot at International. And if that's how it was, how did this couple know about the diamonds, when they were coming in? I figure we can skip a luck-out artist, somebody that just picked a guy out of an airport crowd of returning Americans and hit him for whatever he had left in his billfold. But nobody touched the billfold."

"And," Gentry said thoughtfully, "if we buy Tim Rourke's analysis of his friend, Flemming, I guess we might eliminate the accomplice bit, too, huh? Or at least shove the search for one down the list of priorities."

"I'd go along with that," Shayne nodded. "Which gets us around to a redhead and a male pal. Who are they? How the hell did they know about Flemming and the diamonds? Who tipped them? Are they loners, or working for someone? Amateurs or pros?"

Gentry stood behind his desk. "I'm going out and talk to Fred Blocker. Do you want to come along?"

"Yeah, but first..." Shayne said. He used the phone book, found Franklin Grant's number. He dialed and got an immediate

answer. It was a feminine voice he did not recognize. He asked for Grant and was told: "I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Grant is not available."

"Just what does that mean, Mrs. Overton?"

Shayne heard an intake of air, as if drawn in surprise. Then the voice asked: "Who is this, please?"

Shayne countered, "Andrew Flemming is dead, Mrs. Overton."

This time Shayne heard a gasp. "P-please. One moment, sir. I'll get Mr. Grant."

Two and one half minutes passed. Shayne clocked the time. And then Franklin Grant came on the phone. "Yes? You say Andy Flemming is dead? Who is this, please?"

"Shayne."

"Oh."

"He was murdered, Grant. You called it. And I don't have your diamonds. Where were you last night?"

"Emily and I were invited to—Shayne, are you sure it is Andy?"

"I'm sure, pal. Where were you last night? I tried to call you."

"At the home of some friends."

"All night?"

"Well. . .until four this morning."

"And the Overtons?"

"I told you yesterday, I gave them a long weekend. They weren't due here until this morning. Shayne, what happened to Andy?"

"He was stabbed to death in a motel room. It looks like someone hijacked him at International, took him to the motel, killed him, and cut with your stones. Are you sure, Grant, you haven't said anything to anyone about those rocks?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure, but—" Grant didn't finish.

"Okay, I'll be in touch."

Shayne heard Grant sucking air as he searched for words, but the redhead didn't wait. He put the phone together. "Let's travel, Will."

"I might've wanted to talk to Grant," Gentry said sourly.

Shayne jammed his hat down on his head. "He isn't going to disappear, Will. He'll hang tight."

VIII

DETECTIVE REYNOLDS had done a good job on Fred Blocker. Blocker had very little that was new to offer. But Mike Shayne pressed: "The red-haired woman, pal. She had skinny arms, fat arms? Skinny legs, fat legs?"

"She was a thin woman."

"How old?"

"Oh, thirty-five, forty."

"You ever see her before?"

"No, I never did."

"So how come this couple picked your place? The Sunshine? You figure they were driving down the street, huh, and just spotted this place and—"

"Yes!"

"What color were her eyes?"

"I don't know."

"How about the guy outside? The guy waiting in the car. I notice that from here you can see out that big window behind me, you can see where the people pull in. You must've seen the guy."

"Yes, I saw him. He was just another man, sitting at a steering wheel. I really didn't pay that much attention, Mr. Shayne."

"Would you say he was a very large man?"

"I'd say he was average size. Those small cars fool you, you know."

"What's that mean? Maybe five-ten? Maybe a hundred and sixty pounds?"

"Yes."

"Lots of hair, I guess."

"No, bald. Like a marble."

"How about the other guy in the car?"

"What other man?"

"You didn't see another man in the car?"

"No!"

"Well, this dead man you found in the unit wasn't a bald man."

"I know! But I didn't notice

anyone else in the car! Honest!"

"Okay, Mr. Blocker. You've been helpful."

Outside the motel office, Shayne asked Gentry: "You satisfied Reynolds covered the unit thoroughly? Maybe we should take a look."

"I'm satisfied," Gentry grunted.

They returned to Gentry's office where Gentry supplemented the APB that was out on the red-haired woman and the bald man. Then he got a report on the Volkswagen from the police compound. He was scowling when he put the phone together.

"The Volks is as clean as freshly brushed teeth, Mike," he said. "Somebody wiped it down good."

Shayne lit a fresh cigarette. "The way I've got it laid out, Will, this Red and Baldy were waiting for Flemming at International. They could've picked out the Sunshine early Sunday afternoon, left their car down the street and taken a cab out to the airport where they waited on foot. They pulled a gun or a knife on Flemming in the parking lot and took him to the motel, where they killed him, grabbed the diamonds and walked away to their heap."

"How come, if they picked the motel early in the afternoon, they didn't register then?"

Gentry wanted to know. "Seems to me it would've been easier than after they had picked up Flemming."

Shayne smoked. "So maybe they left their car at International. Maybe they went back by cab, or maybe it's a stolen heap; maybe it's still out there in the lot."

"It'll be like looking for a needle," Gentry said. But he ordered a detail to turn the airport parking lots inside out.

Timothy Rourke shot into Gentry's office. He looked angry.

"Thanks a bunch!" he snapped.

Shayne was surprised and Gentry pulled his nose, grizzled eyebrows going down. "What's with you, Rourke?" he growled.

"I sit on a story and every damn radio jockey in town is bleating about a dead Andy Flemming and some missing diamonds. That's what's with me, Will!"

Gentry swore. "Okay, so I've got a man with a big mouth. The lid was supposed to be on Rourke, I swear it."

"A helluva lot of good that does me!"

Gentry sat behind his desk, pondered briefly, then asked, "What are they saying about a red-headed woman and a bald guy?"

Rourke shuffled, seemed on the brink of snapping again, then

cooled slightly. "Not much," he said. "Why?"

"If I fill you in on them, will that help you with your editors?"

Gentry shot Shayne a look. Shayne considered it, then shrugged. "Publicity might help flush them out, Will, if they're still in town. It'll put Gimpy and Arthur and some others on their toes. And Grant's already got the noise he didn't want, not that I really give a damn about Grant's wants. You two have fun. I'm going hunting."

"Where?" Gentry said quickly.

Shayne butted the cigarette. "Will, we're down to bird-dogging. We've got to turn up stones. I don't know any other way to pick up the scent on Red and Baldy now. If they're locals, somebody around town must know about them. So I'm going out and converse with some of our city's more disreputable citizens. You've got your informers, and I've got my—uh, pals. See you."

Shayne felt as if he were plodding in deep, loose sand as he walked toward his convertible in the police parking lot. The couple had pulled off a beaut. They'd hit swiftly, silently, and given themselves traveling time. Hell, they could be on their way to India by now.

He dropped inside the conver-

tible and phoned Lucy Hamilton. He hadn't checked into the office yet this morning and Lucy needed to be briefed.

"Michael!" Lucy said when he got her on the line.

The excitement in her voice alerted him. "What have you got, Angel?"

"A man has been calling about the Grant diamonds! He said he heard on the radio that you were interested in them! He's going to call again in. . . let's see, in twenty minutes!"

"I can just make it."

The office phone on Lucy's desk was ringing when Shayne pounded inside. Lucy Hamilton swept up the receiver, answered politely, listened, then nodded and said, "Just a moment, please." She handed the receiver to Mike Shayne. "Him."

"Shayne," said the heavy voice without preliminary, "I've got the Grant diamonds, and I want \$500,000 cash for them. You get the word to Grant. Tell him I'll give him until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon to put the money together. I'll let you know then where to deliver it."

"Me?"

"You. Grant might play cops. Not you. You know better, Eye." There was a hesitation on the line and then the caller added, "You wouldn't want to see that pretty little wife of

Grant's get a rifle slug through her head, would you?"

Shayne said nothing.

"I'm pretty good with a rifle, Shayne."

"Okay," the redhead snapped.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE picked up Gentry at police headquarters. Gentry was waiting on the curbing and popped into the convertible.

"Roll," he said savagely.

"Where's Rourke?" Shayne wanted to know as he eased the powerful car into traffic again.

"Went back to his office."

Shayne kept a sharp eye in both rear view mirrors, watching for a tail. Nothing behind them looked suspicious, so far. "I thought he might have still been with you when I called. He could be tough to handle after being aced out once today."

"He'd just cut," Gentry said. He drew a breath, settled back in the seat slightly and then added flatly, "This time nobody but you and me knows, Mike. I figure on keeping it that way. I don't want this shot down before it gets off the ground. Did you make the voice?"

"No." Shayne scowled. "I've been scratching my brains, but so far not even a smell. Lucy is going through my files right now. I've worked on plenty of bald

characters, of course, and a few redheaded females, but, frankly, I figure it'll be strictly a longshot if Lucy comes up with something."

Gentry said, "I've got Records humping, too."

Shayne piloted the convertible around the Orange Bowl and onto the South Dixie Highway. A gold-colored Buick was riding his tail hard. Shayne speeded up. The Buick didn't lose an inch. He slowed. The Buick dropped off quickly, then whipped around him with a surge of power. A young girl driver made a face at Shayne as she passed. The Buick disappeared swiftly on down the highway.

Shayne said, "Did you get that \$500,000 bit, Will? It's exactly the amount Grant paid for the stones in Amsterdam. This boy seems to be on top of things."

"Which narrows the field," Gentry nodded. "He's no dum-dum. He's got the value of the stones tagged, and he's smart enough to know he wouldn't get that kind of money from a Gimpy Gillis. Do you figure Grant is going to divvy up?"

"I don't figure he's going to take a chance on his wife's life," Shayne said flatly.

"And I assume you're also figuring on going through the motions of a payoff."

Shayne shot the detective



chief a sharp glance. "Why the hell wouldn't I? We're looking for a thief, a killer, and here he is practically handing himself to us."

"Killer, yeah," Gentry grunted, nodding. "Point: you could get a bullet in the skull, friend. This boy doesn't seem to be the kind who leaves witnesses."

Shayne maneuvered onto Rickenbacker Causeway.

"Figure it this way," Gentry continued. "The guy could put a gun to your head, walk you and the money away. It'd keep secreted cops off his back."

"He won't get the drop on me, Will," the redhead said grimly.

When they arrived at the Grant estate, Shayne noticed that the long white wall fronting the grounds was coral, and the clipped hedge flanking the drive

was intertwined Australian pines. A parked gray Mercedes at the top of the drive sparkled in sunlight. He pointed Gentry up steps to the door and put a thumb against the door button.

"Plush, huh?" Shayne said.

Gentry said nothing. One half of the black double front door opened. The woman who stood before them looked like she was fresh from the old country. She was small, tidy, gray-haired and impassive.

"Yes?" she said politely.

"Mrs. Overton?" Shayne said.

A frown flickered across the impassive face and was gone in the bat of an eyelid. "Yes."

"My name is Shayne. This is Will Gentry, Chief of the Miami police detective division. We'd like to see Mr. Grant, please."

Names and titles didn't seem to impress Helga Overton. She stepped back. "Come inside, gentlemen. Will you wait here? I'll call Mr. Grant."

But she got only two steps away before Emily Grant was in sight. She came from the library and she stood with her head cocked slightly in curiosity, a beautiful, concaved-belly figure in brown bare feet and a bright red, leather-trimmed pantsuit. She wanted to know things. It was in her eyes. The eyes asked silent questions.

But all she said was, "Come in to the library, Mr. Shayne, Mr.

Gentry. Helga, tell Mr. Grant, and then bring coffee, please."

Emily Grant disappeared back into the library. Shayne felt an elbow dig into his ribs. He growled out of the corner of his mouth at Gentry, "Mrs. Grant."

"Zowie," Gentry breathed.

The coffee arrived before Grant put in an appearance. But when the multimillionaire entered he seemed to shoot into the room. He wore a pullover shirt and flared trousers, and he was dapper in casualness. He also was upset. He barely acknowledged the introduction to Gentry and then he looked Shayne straight in the eye.

"I've been listening to the radio all morning," he snapped.

"I'm afraid those newscasts are my fault, Mr. Grant," Gentry put in quickly. "Somebody in my department seems to have a big—didn't realize we intended to keep this matter under wraps."

"Anyway," Shayne added, "you don't often hide murder, Grant. Too, it's irrelevant now. We've got a new wrinkle. It's why we're here."

The redhead hesitated, shot a look at Emily Grant, who had curled her bare feet in under her and now sat silent and straight in a wing chair, balancing a cup of coffee on a saucer, listening. Shayne had thought she would vacate the library. But she looked anchored.

"Shayne?" Grant said, clipping the name.

"I got a call," Shayne said. "From a guy who claims to have your diamonds. He wants \$500,000 ransom paid for their return."

"When?" It was all Grant said.

"He's going to call me again at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. He's giving you that much time to put the cash together. He'll tell me then how and where to make the delivery."

"Will he also tell you then how and where he will deliver my stones?"

The sarcasm nicked Shayne. But he managed to control his rising anger. "Grant, this guy is holding an ace. He says—"

Shayne chopped off the words, shot another glance at Emily Grant. She still sat silent, straight, alert, and her eyelids didn't even flicker as she looked back at him.

"I'm a strong person, Mr. Shayne," she said in a soft voice. "What is the nature of this man's threat?"

Shayne moved his eyes back to Grant. The multimillionaire stood solid, his jaws tight, his eyes bright. Shayne let him have it square in those bright eyes: "The guy says he'll kill your wife, Grant, if you don't come up with the cash."

Grant took a couple of seconds to digest and then he

whirled. He went to the telephone, dialed, waited briefly and then said, "Jack? Mr. Grant. I'll need you and Tony here at the house at two o'clock this afternoon. Have your plane prepared for an overseas flight. You will be taking Mrs. Grant out of the country. I will have made the arrangements by two. I'll give you the destination when you come here. Have a gun on you, Jack."

Grant put the phone together, faced Shayne and Gentry. "If you will excuse us, gentlemen? Emily and I will be busy for the next two hours."

She had left the wing chair to stand tall. She looked at her husband and Shayne had the impression he and Gentry could have been riding an iceberg in the North Atlantic.

"I'm not frightened, Frank," she said.

"I know," he nodded, "but this is best."

"All right," she said simply. She nodded to Shayne and Gentry. "Gentlemen." And then she padded on those pretty bare feet out of the library.

"Okay, hold everything!" Gentry rasped suddenly.

Emily Grant was gone. She did not return. Her husband was icy in nature and mood now. Shayne had the suspicion it was how Grant operated when he was supplementing his millions.

Grant said, "This matter is now in my hands, Mr. Gentry, and I will appreciate your vacating the house."

"Like hell it's in your hands," Gentry snapped. "There's a little matter of crime involved. Theft and murder for starters. Not to mention extortion. And crime is my business, Mr. Grant. I call the shots."

"In this particular case you do not, Mr. Gentry."

"You're going to try and fly your wife out of the country, aren't you? Didn't I just hear you talking to a man I presume to be Jack Whitwer, who has a partner named Anthony Salo, a couple of charter pilots? Grant, I can stop them cold. They won't get off the ground."

"My wife's life has been threatened," Grant replied, "What do you expect me to do, stand here?"

"Hell, no. But I don't expect you to go off half-cocked, either. Look, Grant, the guy we're dealing with is going about all of this sure of himself. That means he's keeping tabs on people. For instance, he could be outside somewhere right now, have your home under surveillance. We don't know where he called Mike from this morning. He could've been across the street from Mike's office in a phone booth. He could've trailed us out here."

"Mr. Gentry," Grant said, still

all ice and defiance, "the man could be standing at my front door. He won't know when Emily leaves here. I'm no stranger to subterfuge."

Shayne stepped in. He'd had enough of the dog-fighting. "Grant, let's make like a team, huh? You too, Will. How about if we turn all the cards face up, see where we are? We've three heads. Let's weave the thinking, come up with safety for Mrs. Grant, the return of the diamonds and the collaring of a killer. Damn it, one-man shows went out with brick streets!"

Silence hung so heavy it seemed as if the library walls were moving in. Grant stared, Gentry stood yanking at his nose, and Shayne glowered. Finally, Grant broke.

"Emily's safety is my prime concern," he said simply.

"Okay," Shayne granted. "So the question now is, do you figure you can get her away from the house and in flight clean? How about if someone is watching this place?"

"Leave all of that to me, will you, Shayne?" Grant said stonily. "After all, she is my wife. I'll be the one to lose if—"

He let the words dribble off without finishing the thought.

Shayne looked at Gentry. "What do you think? It'd be a worry we could forget."

Gentry debated only briefly,

made a decision. "Makes sense," he grunted. Then he shot Grant a look. "You want help?"

"No," Grant said.

"Next question," said Shayne. "Do you want to pay, Grant, or shall we just go through the motions? They're your stones. Only you know how much you value them."

"I'm paying," Grant said flatly, "because I value my wife's life. If this person does not get his money, do you think he will just go away? Shayne, you're smarter than that."

"Grant, I expect to nab the bastard," Shayne said savagely.

"How?"

"Right now I don't know how, but I expect to collar him! And you can lay your \$500,000 on it!"

"You won't mind," Grant said sarcastically, "if I put it on my wife retaining her life. Yes, I'm paying, gentlemen. I'm not taking any chances on a botched attempt at capture. I'll have the money together by tomorrow afternoon. Now please excuse me, I need to be with Emily."

X

MRS. OVERTON appeared as if Franklin Grant had punched a button. Mike Shayne knew Grant had not and the redhead scowled as the domestic showed the two detectives to the front door. She



opened the door. Gentry went outside. Shayne stopped, confronted the woman.

"Have you got the picture, Mrs. Overton?" he said.

She looked startled, said nothing as her lips thinned into a line. A trapped look appeared in her eyes.

"Do you often listen in, Mrs. Overton?" Shayne pressed.

The woman continued to remain silent. And then Grant snapped from somewhere far back along the hall, "Now what?"

Shayne said, "She was listening to us."

Grant moved to them swiftly. He put a comforting arm across the woman's shoulders, held her as he stared hard at Shayne. "Please," he said, clipping the words, "leave."

But Shayne hung tight. "Where's your daughter these days, Mrs. Overton?" he asked.

The woman looked surprised and Grant twitched slightly in exasperation. The woman looked up at Grant. He said, "What is this, Shayne?"

"I understand Mrs. Overton's daughter and Flemming once were cozy," the detective replied, also clipping words. "That makes me interested in her whereabouts, Grant—if you know what I mean."

Grant snorted in disgust, freed the woman and turned Shayne out of the mansion. On the veranda, he said, "I'm not sure what you are reaching for, Shayne, but I can tell you that you are reaching in the wrong direction. Peggy Overton married six months ago. She and her husband live in Miami Beach. She has absolutely nothing to do with the theft of my diamonds or the murder of Andy."

"You say," Shayne said, noting that Mrs. Overton had disappeared into the depth of the house. He bet himself a dollar she still was within hearing range.

Shayne squared off on Grant. "In the beginning, pal," he said flatly, "I told you I might have to peel a little skin. Okay, I'm peeling. What's this Peggy's married name?"

"King," Grant said coldly. "Mrs. Lawrence King."

"And she and hubby live on the Beach. Where on the Beach?"

"I don't know."

"What's hubby's racket?"

"If you mean his occupation, Shayne, I don't know."

"Peggy ever work for you?"

"No."

"She ever live with her parents here?"

"She has. She moved out about a year ago, leased an apartment on the Beach."

"That's about the time she and Flemming called it quits, isn't it?"

"I really don't remember."

"Okay, how old is she?"

"Thirty-six, thirty-seven. Shayne, I'm very busy, I'm—"

"Hmm. Odd, isn't it, a woman in her thirties living with her parents in someone else's house?"

Grant took a deep breath and sighed. He lowered his head and wagged it. It was as if he had conceded defeat. "Shayne, the Overtons are a close-knit family. I see absolutely nothing at all odd about—"

"Does Peggy work?" Shayne interrupted.

Grant's head snapped up. "As a hostess at the Sea Inn. It's a cocktail lounge on the Beach."

"I'll find it," Shayne said, turning. He started down the steps.

"Shayne?"

The redhead turned. Grant

stood rigid on the veranda. He looked puzzled. "I don't understand," he said simply.

"Like you said, pal," Shayne grunted, "I'm reaching."

Will Gentry remained silent until they were on the causeway. "Okay, Mike," he said, "unload. What the hell was that all about?"

"A tie," Shayne said, his large hands working against the steering wheel. "There's a tie somewhere, Will. The couple knew where and when to lean on Flemming. They knew the value of the stones to Grant."

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, so Peggy and Andrew once were cozy, then split. Maybe this Peggy has been carrying a beef. We don't know why they split. It could figure: the split, Peggy off somewhere sulking, but not too far off, she's got an eye on Flemming, she knows Flemming's work for Grant and she's got a little revenge in mind, maybe she's a vindictive little fox. Anyway, Mama, who doesn't miss much around the Grant place, just happens to mention Flemming's trip to Amsterdam to her daughter. 'Ahh,' says daughter, 'here it is, an opportunity to ax Flemming.'"

"Mike," Gentry said patiently, "the girl is the one who married someone else. Don't forget that!"

"That could have been rebound."

"And if killing Flemming was what she had in mind, she didn't have to wait six months. I'm sure she had plenty of opportunities before last weekend. It's weak, Mike, full of holes."

"Okay, so let's say the split was amicable. But let's also say Peggy Overton King likes the smell of wealth. Maybe she didn't hang around the Grant place all of those years just to be close to Mama and Pappa. Maybe it was the association with the Grant wealth. Then she marries. And she and hubby cook up a little caper to buy themselves a ticket to Gold Avenue. Peggy sure as hell would know the inner workings of the Grant mansion, and she hears about the diamonds coming in, and—"

"Mike, Peggy Overton could be an okay woman, straight. Ditto for husband. You're hanging them without knowing one damn thing about either."

"Yeah, yeah," Shayne was forced to concede, "but, damn it, Will, there's a tie, something that pulls this thing all together."

Gentry surprised Shayne. He said, "Emily Grant?"

Shayne shot the detective chief a sharp glance.

Gentry said, "Rourke says Flemming was somewhat of a lady killer. Could there have been hanky-panky between

Flemming and Emily Grant? Maybe it'd gone sour, but maybe Flemming wouldn't let Emily off the hook. Then Flemming makes this run overseas and Emily goes out and hires a couple of hit artists. She'd have access to that kind of dough. Then the artists go smart on her. They knock off Flemming okay, but they decide to double their take-home pay by ransoming the stones back to Grant instead of playing footsie with a fence."

Shayne chewed the theory mentally. "Or blackmail," he said thoughtfully. "How about something out of her past, Will? Some loose play a few years ago, maybe when she was a Miss America—when she didn't have bucks. Maybe someone out of her past has found her, has been leaning on her. Maybe she handed them an opportunity at the diamonds in lieu of cash."

"Maybe," Gentry nodded. "And there's the Morman girl, too. Let's not forget her. If she and Flemming were real cozy, she could've been briefed on the journey. She also could have some pals Flemming didn't know about—a baldy and a redhead, for instance. Maybe someone has had Grant spotted for a hit for a long time, just been waiting for the right time to pounce. Maybe this Morman girl was playing cozy with Flemming merely to open a line to Grant."

They were at police headquarters. Shayne braked the convertible at the curbing, looked at his friend. "Something ties it, Will," he repeated, yanking at his earlobe.

Gentry sniffed. "Yeah." He left the convertible, stood on the sidewalk. "Well, it's a long time until tomorrow afternoon and another call from Baldy. Maybe something will snap in the meantime."

"Except I'm not in the mood to wait," said Shayne.

"And that means?"

"I think I may run over to Miami Beach and the Sea Inn. I'm suddenly very thirsty."

The Sea Inn was a standard lounge, cocktail area to the left, dinner area to the right. Fake fish nets and tiny, blue-coated spot lights created the atmosphere. The dining area was empty when Shayne entered. A young, mod couple was the only table customers in the bar room while three guys sat clustered at the bar.

Shayne took a stool out of earshot of the trio, ordered cognac and an ice water chaser from the slight man with the handlebar mustache behind the bar.

When the cognac was delivered, he said, "I'm looking for Peggy King."

The bartender grimaced. "Who isn't?"

"She's popular, huh?"

"Unpopular," corrected the bartender.

"How come?"

"How come your asking?" countered the bartender.

"Does it really make a difference?" Shayne shot at him.

The bartender flinched slightly, fingered one side of the handlebar. "Okay, so I don't always recognize fuzz. Sorry. You cops leaning on her? Maybe that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"How come she cut."

"When?"

"Last Wednesday night, with sixty bucks out of the till."

"Your till?"

"My till. My name's Jerry Feldman. I own this place. When you catch up with her, she owes me sixty."

"She was your hostess, huh?"

"Hostess?" Jerry Feldman became a statue for a few seconds as he stared at Shayne. Then he burst: "You kiddin', man? She was relief behind the bar and sometimes she got up on the bar and did a little stuff, you know?"

"Larry King," Shayne said.

"A flash."

"What kind of flash?"

"Bar stool flash." Feldman shrugged.

"Regular here?"

"Last year or so, yeah."

"Then he and Peggy married."

"Them two? Married? Never."

"Okay, so they've been living together."

"It ain't a sin no more, is it?"

"Is Larry a heavy?"

"Well, . . . he might lean if he was to put his mind to it."

"How hard?"

"Depend on what was in it for Larry."

"Say there was a half million in it."

"Larry'd sell his own eyes for that kind of green."

"Would he kill?"

Jerry Feldman took a few seconds to twirl an end of his mustache. "He might," he said finally. "He just might."

"Larry been around since last Wednesday night?"

"Nope."

"He disappeared with Peggy."

"Yep."

"Is he bald?"

"Yep."

"Is Peggy a redhead?"

"Sometimes. Wigs, you know? She's a natural redhead though."

"You know a guy named Andrew Flemming?"

"Never heard of him, nope."

"So where have Peggy and Larry been padding out?"

"Upstairs. But that ain't gonna do you no good, friend. I already looked. They've cut."

"You own the building?"

"I do."

"Got any idea where might be found?"

"I do not."

"Okay, see you around, Jerry."

"Don't forget, Sarge—she owes me sixty."

"I'm not a sergeant."

"Oh."

"I'm not even a cop."

"Oh?"

"See you around."

"Please? I think I'd like to be spared."

XI

MIKE SHAYNE drove to his office on Flagler Street, phoned Will Gentry, filled him in on Peggy and Larry King.

"Interesting," Gentry mused. "They've got all the earmarks of being who we want. So now all we have to do is turn every hiding hole in two cities inside out."

"Uh-huh."

"Except Baldy is going to be coming to us tomorrow, Mike. So why waste time and energy today?"

"I don't like waiting, Will," Shayne growled.

"I know," said Gentry. "Neither do I. On the other hand, we go nosing around and we could scare 'em off. It's better to sit tight, Mike. Incidentally, I phoned Grant about ten minutes ago. His wife is on her way out of the country and he's already got half of the

ransom collected. The other half is to be delivered in the morning."

Shayne shuffled. "This waiting is going to gall, Will."

"Clean your gun or something."

Shayne closed the office and took Lucy Hamilton out for cocktails and dinner instead. But it was only ten o'clock when he deposited her outside the building where she had an apartment. She hung on the convertible, frowning prettily. "Don't you want to come up, Mike? We can listen to records, tapes, kill some time."

"Some other night, Angel."

"You're so restless."

"Yeah." He turned on a lopsided grin for her.

He then drove to his apartment where he forced himself to move slowly as he shaved and bathed. Finally, he looked at the bedroom clock. Only an hour gone. Damn. He turned on television, attempted to concentrate on a late movie, a war film. It didn't hold him. He got out the shoulder rig and the .45, wiped down the gun, loaded the clip with slugs. Another hour gone. His phone rang.

He leaped for it.

"Mr. Shayne?"

The feminine voice was hesitant. He didn't recognize it.

"Mr. Shayne, this is Pearl Thompson. You know—I live in

THE HALF MILLION DOLLAR DIAMOND CAPER

the apartment next to Nancy Morman."

"Oh. Yeah, sure, honey."

"Mr. Shayne, I don't know if I should be calling you. I mean—well, tonight earlier, I was talking to Nancy and she told me who you are a private detective. Maybe I should call the police."

Shayne was instantly alert. "What's the trouble?"

"I'm not really sure. But a little while ago, I heard noises next door. You know, over at Nancy's place. Walls in an apartment—you know, sometimes you can hear your neighbors—anyway, I heard these sounds. Mr. Shayne, I think a man just took Nancy away!"

Shayne was stiff. "Did you see them go?"

"Well, sorta. I mean, I heard the noise in the apartment and I went to my window and sorta looked out and I saw this man and Nancy going down the steps. Nancy was in pajamas! She didn't have on a robe or anything!"

"Was the man bald, Pearl?"

"Why, yes, he was, Mr. Shayne! Do you know him?"

"Did you see him take Nancy to a car?"

"Yes, there was a car in the drive. I couldn't see very good, the light is bad in the drive, but I think someone else was in the car. Oh, I know someone else was in it because the man and



Nancy got into the back seat and then the car drove off!"

Gentry met Shayne at the apartment complex. The door to Nancy Morman's apartment was halfway open. Lamplight inside revealed a modest front room. The room looked lived-in, normal. There was a magazine, folded open, on a coffee table, a plastic bowl half filled with potato chips, five cigarette butts in an ashtray, two indented pillows propped against an arm of the couch.

Shayne and Gentry quizzed Pearl Thompson. She was excited and a little frightened, and she couldn't give them anything new. The car, she said, was a dark sedan. She hadn't been able to see the color. Nor did she know the make of the car. She wasn't very good on cars. She never could tell one from another, even in daylight. No, she hadn't seen

license plate—or, if she had, she didn't remember the number.

Pearl Thompson was sent back to her apartment. Police technicians were brought in. Gentry told the technicians he could use fingerprints. "Any latents," he emphasized, then he motioned Shayne outside. On the balcony walkway, he exhaled heavily. "Well, Mike?"

Shayne was scowling. "Peggy King would know about Nancy Morman and Flemming."

Baldy telephoned Shayne at exactly 3 p.m. the next afternoon. The phone on Lucy Hamilton's desk jangled. She swept it up, answered politely. Shayne glanced around the office at Will Gentry and Timothy Rourke. Gentry was breathing in short spurts and Rourke was working hard on a cigarette.

Lucy handed the phone to Shayne. "Him," she said.

"Shayne," he said into the mouthpiece.

He got a chuckle. And then: "Has Grant got the bundle together, Shayne?"

"Yeah."

"Is he there?"

"I talked to him at his home five minutes ago. He's waiting."

"You got cops?"

Shayne growled, "Lay it out, pal."

"Get rid of the pigs, Shayne. I've got the girl. You heard about that? The Morman girl?"

"I heard."

"So no cops, or the girl is dead. She's gonna be with me tonight. You take the bread to the Orange Grove Shopping Center. There's a discount store there, only one. You'll spot it. Two parking lanes stretch out from the store. Use either one. Park your car, leave the money in a suitcase on the front seat passenger side, walk away; and keep going. I'll be watching you. Make it 8:30, Shayne, straight up. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"We'll drop the girl off when we're clear."

"You're forgetting something, pal," Shayne snapped. "Where do I find the diamonds?"

Chuckle. "In the mail—pal."

Shayne put the phone together. He was taut. "He's using Nancy Morman as a shield, going to have her with him at the drop. He said no cops, Will."

Gentry growled without saying anything and Rourke lit a fresh cigarette from the butt in his fingertips. Shayne sat against the edge of Lucy's desk and relayed Baldy's payoff instructions.

"Simple enough," he finished.

"Now, how do we take him without getting the girl killed?" Or do we write her off as already dead? He didn't have to kill Flemming, but he did. He could've left Flemming with his

brains scrambled but alive, in a parking lot at International, cut with the diamonds. He didn't. He killed."

"Michael!" Lucy gasped.

"He's going to kill her, all right," Rourke put in. "I've got to go along with that. The sonofabitch."

"I'll flood that damn parking lot with people," Gentry snapped.

"But can we take that chance, Will?" Shayne said. "I think he's going to show with the girl. I think he'll have her in tow when he walks up to the car and picks up the suitcase. I've got a hunch Red is going to be somewhere nearby, with a motor running. Look, if there's any hope at all for keeping Nancy Morman alive it's while Baldy's making the pickup. She's the big thing now. The hell with Grant and his \$500,000. He's got more. The hell with the diamonds. He'll live without them. The complexion of this thing has changed. Top priority now is keeping Nancy Morman alive. Any dissenters?"

"Michael, you are now making sense," Lucy said, sounding grateful.

"The sonofabitch is going to kill her," Rourke repeated. "Sooner or later, he's going to—"

"I can snug up the area," Gentry put in. "Two blocks out, all around Orange Grove, all directions. We can get a make on

the car as they leave the parking lot and—"

"We've got to get him at the car, Will. While he still needs Nancy Morman," Shayne said. "What's your man Phillips doing tonight?"

"Huh?" Gentry suddenly looked puzzled.

"Your new man," Shayne said. "He was with you in your office yesterday morning. He's big, like me. He has red hair."

"So?"

"He makes the drop. At eight-thirty it's going to be dark. There'll just be the parking lot lights. Phillips can wheel in in my car, top up, vacate and vamoose. Between now and tonight, you can teach him enough about my walk to fool Baldy for a few seconds. And I've got a hunch, that's all we're going to need. He isn't going to hesitate once he knows the money is within reach. I can get him in the car."

Gentry grunted, "The Morman girl's life will be in your hands, Mike."

"I know," Shayne said grimly.

XII

THE REDHEAD turned the dusty brown Mustang, borrowed from the police compound and specially souped, into the Orange Grove Shopping Center parking lot at 8:25 that night. The discount store was the largest

store in the center, easily picked out. Mike Shayne braked the Mustang in a parking aisle back from those that shot out from the discount store. He had a good view of the two aisles in front of him, the aisles he wanted, and he noted with satisfaction that there were plenty of parking slots open.

The policewoman riding with him smiled, vacated the Mustang, and walked away toward the discount store. Shayne settled lower in the bucket seat, hoping he created the impression of a husband in green jumpsuit and yellow baseball cap who was long resigned to women and discounts. He wore a pasted orange mustache.

Phillips, the cop, wheeled the convertible into a parking slot across the drive and about fifteen yards to Shayne's left. He braked and left the convertible immediately, walking off toward a street that flanked the center. Shayne watched him go, and he wondered if he really walked that way. He grunted. He knew that Phillips would join other Gentry men near an entrance-exit.

Gentry had all of the entrance-exits littered with loiterers. Two blocks away there was a solid ring of police in nondescript clothing and vehicles. Gentry even had put lovers on street corners.

Movement to Shayne's right caught his eye. But it was only a middle-aged longhair in dungarees and white tennies, ambling toward the row of stores. Shayne glanced at his wrist watch. Eight-thirty.

The blast came from the left. The sound brought him up in the bucket seat. He saw the orange flare. The front of the discount store seemed to puff. And then it crumpled in a crescendo of shattered glass, snapped cement blocks and the screams of human beings.

Shayne sat like a statue, stunned. But suddenly he became conscious of the movement all around him: the screams, the shouts, people racing toward the store. He rolled from the car, moved with the tide, and then abruptly caught himself. He whirled. The longhaired man in the dungarees and white tennies had the door of the convertible open. He whisked out the suitcase of money and bolted.

Shayne realized what had happened. The bomb had been planted as a distraction. He peeled back to the Mustang, leaped inside. The motor came alive. Headlights were bouncing from the streets into the parking lot now. But three parking aisles over, Shayne saw headlights weaving out toward the street.

He curved the Mustang across in front of a sedan and snaked it

between the oncoming cars. He wanted to tromp. But he couldn't. He finally reached an exit behind a light-colored sedan.

The sedan whipped out into the street with a squeal of spinning tires. Shayne pushed the Mustang after it. A slug splattered the passenger side of the Mustang windshield.

Shayne went for the .45 in his shoulder rig, then froze. If Nancy Morman was in that car up ahead—

He pulled his head down between his shoulders and put the accelerator on the floor. The Mustang coughed and bucked slightly and then almost seemed to shoot out from under him. He roared through a green traffic light and crawled up on the back of the sedan.

The sedan whipped off to his left at the next intersection, rocking as the driver attempted to keep control. Shayne attempted the turn too, but was too far across the intersection. He bounced out of control up on the sidewalk and smashed into a building. His body shot forward and pain splayed across his chest. Then he rocked back in the bucket seat. He groaned against the pain and sucked a breath. He stared at the building wall. He still had his senses.

Abruptly the sound of the motor filled his ears. He still was in business. He rammed the



Mustang in reverse, backed off the wall and shot across the sidewalk corner to bounce into the side street. Taillights far ahead of him now flashed bright, then disappeared to his right. He tromped on the accelerator. The Mustang was making odd noises up front but it still had guts.

He hit the intersection, turned right. The sedan's taillights were bright again. They remained bright and swayed as if caught in a crosswind. Then suddenly they dimmed and became stationary. Shayne roared toward them. His headlights picked up two fleeing figures, one shooting off to his left, the other to his right.

He stomped on the brake pedal and concentrated on the

skid. The back end of the Mustang wanted to come around, but he played the weight of the car and its rolling wheels against the whip, snapping the steering wheel to the left and then to the right almost in a rhythm. He skidded in beside the sedan, riding the skid expertly, and slammed into the side of a marked police car.

He rolled from the Mustang, drawing the .45 from his shoulder holster. There were shouts all around him. He went into a semi-crouch and surveyed. He saw two struggling figures ahead. One of the figures broke from the other and streaked. Then a uniformed cop went into a long dive and brought down a woman with the flying tackle. The woman screamed, but went silent when her face slammed against the sidewalk.

A scrambling noise to Shayne's left alerted him. He whirled as a large man came around the rear of the Mustang. Shayne saw the flash of streetlight against the gun in the man's hand and lowered his shoulder. He plunged forward, colliding with the man. There was a moment of force meeting force, then Shayne's lone sensation was that of going up, straightening. He plunged forward again. A hoarse rattle broke from the man as they went down.

Shayne flailed with a knee and scrambled, his feet skidding against concrete. He caught the man's gun wrist, attempted to shake the gun loose from the clamped fingers. The fingers wouldn't give. There was an exposed wrist. Shayne instinctively reverted to animalism. Viciously, he chomped on the wrist with his teeth.

The man howled, flicked his hand. The gun skidded away. Shayne rolled up on his knees to fall flat on the man, driving an elbow up into the man's jaw. Abruptly, he had help. Cops seemed to be swarming all over him. He wriggled free, went up on his knees again.

He saw two cops and a writhing figure between them moving toward him.

Will Gentry stomped along with the trio.

"Where's the girl, Mike?" Gentry snapped.

"I haven't seen her."

They went to the sedan. Nancy Morman was piled up on the front seat, curled into a ball, flinching and moaning. Shayne caught her legs, straightened her. Gentry produced a flashlight. Shayne examined the wound. It was a crease across her stomach. He envisioned the scene: Red driving, Nancy in the middle, Baldy with a gun aimed at her. Baldy had fired the gun, but Nancy Morman had sucked for

air just at the right second. The slug had creased her, maybe even had creased Red.

Gentry dug a suitcase off the floor of the car, opened it to sheaves of money. They returned to the prostrate man, still held down by three cops. Shayne yanked the wig from the man's head and looked at him a second time in the light of the flash.

"King?" he snapped.

Baldy's eyes widened. He remained stiff as he nodded.

Shayne went to the woman held by two policemen. She continued to struggle, but her vigor was ebbing. She was blonde this night, the hair askew now. There was a tear across the front of her minidress, but Shayne didn't see any blood traces.

"The diamonds, Peggy?" he snapped.

"Drop dead," she snarled.

They went over the sedan and did not find the diamonds. They shook down Larry King and came up blank. They returned to Peggy. She strained back between the two policemen. "Get away from me, you creeps!"

Suddenly she shot forward, breaking from the hold the policemen had on her. She came at Shayne, head down, snarling and cursing. The top of her head rammed his stomach, driving him back. On his way down, he reached out blindly and his fingers pulled the blonde wig from her. He hit the sidewalk on his buttocks hard, jarring him all over, but he managed to catch a clump of the woman's natural red hair. She spun in a scream and crashed down on top of him. Two cops grabbed her ankles, Gentry put a knee against her spine. And she suddenly was immobile.

Shayne held her head up, heard her dry gulps for air. He wasn't sure what he should do next. And then his fingertips scratched over foreign lumps on her skull. He dug in the hair, peeled off a strip of adhesive tape, reversed it, and held it up against the streetlight. The light bounced weakly off the diamond.

"Scavenger hunt ended," Mike Shayne wheezed.



A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL NEXT MONTH

THE HOLY WITCH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Could I, dare I try to pierce
the dread riddle of the girl
whose frown caused death?

I'D DRIFTED into Westchester after two years of army service in the waning days of the Vietnam War. When the army finished with me it was a matter of going home or somewhere else, and I decided to try New York for a year. I rented a little furnished apartment just north of the Bronx line, only a twenty minute ride from Grand Central.

The nights dragged at first, with a monotony that blended with my job-seeking days, but finally one autumn evening I tried to pick up a cute little blonde at the station waiting room and ended up in the most terrifying adventure of my life.

"You live around here?" I asked her.

"New Rochelle. I came down for a meeting."

Encouraged by the fullness of her answer, I slid onto the uncomfortable wooden bench next to her. "Waiting for a girl friend?"

"A boy friend, actually."

"Oh."

"He usually picks me up here, so I don't have to walk over alone."

Well, I figured I still had a little time before he showed up. "I'll bet your name is Mary."

She smiled at that, showing a row of perfect teeth. "Why?"

"I don't know. You look like a Mary."

"My name is Joyce. That's not too close to Mary."



"No, it isn't. I'm batting zero."

"You sure are!" But she said it with a grin.

"What sort of meeting is this?"

"Aquinas Club. Books and philosophy and stuff."

"Catholic?"

She nodded, looking me over a bit more carefully. "Come

along if you want. It's open to the public. We have a priest coming up from Fordham to speak tonight."

I weighed the prospect of further time with Joyce against the dullness of an evening's religious discussion, and decided to give it a try. My church-going had fallen off in the army, but I was still enough of a Catholic to

fake my way through a discussion.

When Joyce's boy friend arrived on the scene, he proved to be a tall, dark-haired fellow in his late twenties, maybe three or four years older than me. His name was Frank Planter and he greeted me like an old friend.

"Gaines? Thomas Gaines?" he repeated, planting my name firmly in mind. "Where you from, Tom?"

"Upstate," I answered vaguely. "I'm just out of the army."

"Bet you're glad to be back! You a friend of Joyce's?"

"I just met her, but she was kind enough to invite me to your meeting." I turned to her. "But I don't think I caught your last name, Joyce?"

"Joyce Mancusso," she answered. "Glad to meet you, Tom."

We crowded into the front seat of Frank Planter's Ford while he apologized for the clutter of boxes in back. "I'm an engineer with Transtell Electronics. That junk goes with the job."

Planter started the car and we drove up one of the side streets, away from the station. His headlights picked up a few snow flurries in the air, and I was reminded it was the first week in December.

"You work in New York, Joyce?" I asked, making conversation.

She nodded. "I'm with Transtell, too, on Park Avenue. Only the receptionist, though. It's an interesting place to work, even if I don't know the first thing about electronics."

"I'm looking for a job myself. Any openings there?"

Frank Planter snorted. "Not unless you've got a master's degree. We're into a lot of government stuff now, and we need nothing but brains."

"That lets me out," I said with a chuckle.

We reached our destination, pulling up before a great old building that looked like a movie theater. The marquee over the entrance was blank, shattered by stones in a few places, and only a few dim lights burned in the lobby.

"That's right," Frank Planter said, reading my thoughts. "It's an old neighborhood movie house. Used to come here every Saturday afternoon when I was a kid. Come on in, Tom. We'll show you around."

I followed them inside. The back part, where the candy counter had probably once been, was converted now into a small library with perhaps five hundred or so religious titles staring out at me and daring to be touched. In the theatre proper, the seats were occupied by about thirty or forty people, about evenly split between fellows and girls. They

all seemed to be in their late twenties or early thirties, and I was willing to bet that most of them were unmarried.

I met the most important members that first evening, standing around before and after the program. Frank Planter was currently president of the group, and Joyce was quite obviously his girl. I stuck pretty close to them, and to a quiet, bearded fellow of about thirty who walked with a bit of a limp. His name was Charles Andrews, and everybody called him Chuck. He worked with Frank and Joyce in the city, and seemed friendly with them both.

"I'm still limping around a little," he explained to me. "Broke my left leg skiing last winter and it still hasn't quite healed."

"Always wanted to ski myself," I admitted.

"It's a great sport. Stick around with this crowd long enough and they'll have you out on the slopes."

The girls at the meeting were fully up to my expectations, especially a tall redhead named Betty Barrigan who somehow managed to make even a face full of freckles look sexy. Before the night was over she'd engaged the priest from Fordham in a lively discussion of the drug culture and youth in general.

Afterwards, seeing her alone, I

asked, "Can I buy you a drink and continue the discussion?"

"A drink?"

"Coffee or something," I explained, retreating a bit.

"Oh, sure!"

We ended up at a crowded table with Frank Planter and Joyce Mancusso and Chuck Andrews, and it wasn't at all what I'd hoped for. The place was a dim neighborhood soda fountain of the sort I didn't know still existed. The fly-specked light globes set high in the ceiling did nothing to glamorize their surroundings, and only accentuated the basic plainness of the girls' faces.

"You know a lot about drugs," I told Betty, trying to keep our conversation on its semi-private level before we were overwhelmed by the talk of the others.

She smiled and sipped her coffee. "I've read a lot about it."

Frank Planter chimed in. "What do you think, Tom? Like it?"

"Interesting group," I admitted.

"We meet every week, and there's a party once a month."

I nodded, thinking that the Aquinas Club, for all its high-minded discussions, was little more than a Catholic date bureau, where lonely ones could come for a pairing-off in the safety of their own religion.

We broke up a bit before midnight, and I drifted back to my bleak furnished room on the other side of town. It hadn't been a bad night, and at least it gave me something to do one evening a week.

I hadn't met Helen Dwain that first night. She came the following week.

BY THE NEXT Monday night I finally had a job, such as it was. I worked for a little paperbound book publisher in lower Manhattan, handling inventory control. Since many of their titles were little more than sex books, I was purposely vague about my activities to the other members of the Aquinas Club.

"You've got a job?" Joyce Mancusso said. "That's wonderful!"

"It's not much, but it's a start." Chuck Andrews came in then, pulling off his fleece-lined jacket. "Hi, Chuck. How's the leg this week?"

"Hello, Tom. It's coming along, I guess. Weather makes it ache like the devil, though."

The speaker that evening was the editor of a small Catholic magazine, a short grim-faced man with thick glasses who talked about sin with all the fervor of a conservative small-town preacher. After his talk there was a break for coffee before the discussion period to follow.

I was sitting between Joyce and Betty Barrigan when Frank Planter appeared from the back, looking worried. He slid into the seat next to Joyce.

"Helen's back," he said.

Joyce didn't answer at once. She twisted her head and peered at the rear of the auditorium where several people were standing with their coffee.

"Where's Chuck?" she asked finally.

"He's back there."

"My God!"

Then I saw her, saw this girl who obviously disturbed them. She'd shed her coat and was standing at the back of the aisle, a fairly tall, thin girl dressed all in black. Her skirt hung loosely a few inches below her knees, and the black sweater she wore over it seemed several sizes too large. Her hair too was jet black, and her face at that distance seemed completely bare of makeup. She would have been dismissed, in a Fifth Avenue crowd, as a plain or even ugly girl. But this was not Fifth Avenue, and there was something about her that first attracted and then riveted the attention.

"Who is she?" I whispered to Betty.

"Helen Dwain. I'll tell you about her later."

I noticed Chuck pass her in the aisle, saw the look she shot at him. It was a combination of

pleasure and triumph, and it was directed not at his face but at his leg, the one he'd broken skiing. She said something to him as they passed, but whatever it was he chose to ignore it.

As she came closer and picked a seat across the aisle for the balance of the program, I saw that her face was lightly pockmarked. Her hair was a tangled mess, uncombed and probably unwashed, cut a bit too short. She was ugly, and perhaps it was only that fact which riveted the attention. I watched her, fascinated, through the rest of the discussion.

Afterwards, when we headed once more down the hill to the soda fountain, I wondered why she hadn't joined us.

"Where's Helen?" I asked finally, when it was obvious she'd stayed behind.

The others exchanged glances across the table and finally Frank Planter said, "It's just as well she didn't come. Helen is a little—" He left the sentence dangling, and Chuck Andrews stepped into the breach.

"I'd better explain it," he said, "since it happened to me. In March, when Helen was living in town and around every week, I had a little run-in with her. Something to do with Church doctrine. Anyway, after one of the meetings she told me I lacked faith, that I didn't really believe

in God. She said—and on her lips it was almost a curse—that she prayed God would punish me, making something bad happen to me. Not too bad, she added, but just bad enough so I would believe." He paused to clear his throat. "Two days later I broke my leg skiing."

I tried to shrug it off. "Coincidence, of course."

"Of course. Except that the first time I came to a meeting with my leg in a cast she was standing by the door, watching me hobble up. She told me it was the will of God, and that she'd prayed I'd have an accident."

The girls had remained silent through the telling, but now Betty spoke up. "Helen's all right in her own way. Heaven knows she's a religious girl. Sometimes she's a little too intense, though."

"Where was she between March and now?"

"A convent," Planter answered. "She's been in them before."

Joyce Mancusso suddenly cleared her throat in obvious warning, and I knew Helen Dwain had come in behind me. I knew it too from the look on Chuck's face, an uncertain combination of fear and revulsion. The jukebox throbbed into life with a booming hard rock number, almost drowning out Helen Dwain's voice as she spoke close to my ear.

"Who's this one? I don't know him!" she said.

"Hello, Helen," Planter said. "This is Tom Gaines. He's just out of the army."

She nodded briefly and dismissed me, sinking into a chair to join our little group. Even up close it was next to impossible to guess her age. The facial blemishes seemed to cover her skin with a veil of timelessness. The only guess I could make was that she was somewhere around thirty, the same age as the others.

"What happened at the convent?" Betty asked, making conversation to cover the awkwardness of Chuck's presence.

"What usually happens?" She twisted a paper napkin between her long fingers as she talked. "They put me to work scrubbing floors. I did it for a month and then I got sick of it. I just left."

Planter smiled a bit. "You've been in and out of more convents than anyone I know, Helen. I guess you weren't cut out to be a nun. Where was this one, anyway?"

"On the side of a mountain in West Virginia. So what's been happening here?" Before they could answer she turned to the sleepy-eyed counter man and said, "Get me a Coke, will you?" Then she faced them again and repeated, "What's going here?"

"The usual stuff," Planter said. "We had a good summer."

"And how's Charles?" she asked, addressing him for the first time. "How's the leg?"

"Fine, thanks," he mumbled through tight lips.

"I hope you learned something from it."

Frank Planter ground out his cigarette angrily. "Damn it, Helen, stop that foolish talk! Pretty soon you'll believe it yourself!"

She turned her blue eyes silently on him. Chuck Andrews tried to laugh, but it came out as a snort. "Why don't you put your curse on him too, Helen?"

"I think the Lord will handle him," she said quietly. "That's the trouble with all of you, every one! You call yourself Christians, but you don't really believe at all. You demand signs and wonders, and even when I give them to you, you refuse to believe. You see his broken leg, but you don't believe. You, Frank Planter, you!"

"Knock it off, Helen."

"Do I have to show you again?" she asked, almost sadly. "Do I have to ask God to show you again? Another broken leg, or a broken arm this time? A broken arm, Frank Planter, so you could spend more time at prayer and less time hugging this girl!"

Joyce reddened at the words,

but kept silent. It was Frank Planter who spoke, his voice tinged with anger. "While you're at it, you might as well ask God to strike me dead. That's the only way I'll ever believe any of your mumbo-jumbo, Helen."

"You have said it yourself, Frank Planter! I will speak to the Lord about you, very soon."

She rose and stalked out, leaving the rest of her Coke unfinished.

After a moment Betty Barrigan broke the tension with, "I think that gal has really flipped. I've spent half my life defending her, but what can I say after that?"

"How did she get that way?" I asked.

Joyce shrugged. "You've known her longest, Betty."

"But not really well. She's always been a bug on religion. I guess her mother was bitter about men. Helen told me once that her father ran off someplace. There was nothing for her mother to do but pass along this gnawing hatred to Helen."

"I don't get the connection between a hatred of men and a love of God," I said.

"With Helen there is one," Planter assured us. "Come on, let's talk about something else. I've got enough problems at the office these days without worrying about Helen Dwain and her curses."

Two nights later, as I was watching television in my little apartment, the telephone rang. It was Joyce Mancusso, sounding almost hysterical. Frank Planter's car had run off the parkway and hit a tree. He'd been killed instantly.

I MET THEM at the funeral parlor the following night, quiet and grim-faced. "What in hell happened to him?" Chuck Andrews asked Betty, glancing over at where Joyce stood alone.

"The police don't know. He may have fallen asleep at the wheel, though there's some evidence that another car was involved."

"Another car?" I asked.

She nodded. "Some crazy driver who didn't stop."

"How could that happen on a parkway?" I asked. "You mean somebody forced him off the road?"

"Maybe."

"What do you think about it, Chuck?" I asked.

"Whatever happened, I don't think God had anything to do with it."

"You mean Helen's curse?"

"If you want to call it that. But I'm not ready to believe she can pray people into accidents."

"It's happened twice," Betty reminded him. "Two accidents."

"You said this one might not have been entirely an accident,"

I pointed out. "What about yours, Chuck? Was anyone with you when you broke your leg?"

He shook his head. "No one. I was trying to be foolish and show off and I got busted up. Nobody's fault but my own."

"Do you think Helen Dwain's words could have made you especially accident-prone that day?"

"I doubt it like hell. I never paid any attention to what she said. I still don't. 'We've come a long way from voodoo and witchcraft.'"

"Isn't witchcraft a calling upon the devil rather than God?"

"In Helen's mind there's very little difference. She goes to church every day and lights her candles in the same way a witch would stick pins in a wax doll."

We parted then, and I left Chuck Andrews standing with Betty outside the funeral parlor. I wanted very much to talk with Joyce, but just at that moment there seemed nothing to say.

Saturday evening, after Frank's funeral, I decided to take the train into Manhattan. The whole business depressed me, and I thought perhaps a movie could be cheering. As I stood on the chilly platform of the New Haven station, waiting for the next train, I was suddenly aware of a movement behind me.

"Hello, there."

I turned and saw that it was

Helen Dwain, all in black, her raincoat catching and reflecting a shimmer of light. "Hello. You took me by surprise!"

"We met the other night. I'm Helen Dwain."

"I remember."

"You're Tom Gaines, aren't you?" And when I acknowledged the name she asked, "Going into the city?"

"Night on the town," I answered, feeling foolish.

"Do you think any good will come of that?"

"I guess I don't think of it as being good or bad."

She stood very close to me, but in a manner devoid of sex.

"Everything is good or bad," she said, pushing the point. "I suppose they told you all about me. I know what they say about me. I go to church every morning, I practice my religion, and I believe in the power of prayer. For that they call me a fanatic."

"I never heard them call you that, Helen." And then, "Did you hear about Frank Planter's death?"

"I heard about it." She looked away, her face in shadows. From somewhere far above there came the passing cry of a night bird, and she looked up, searching for it. "Sometimes I think it's me up there, you know? Flying around close to God."

"Why do you hate people, Helen?"

Her eyes snapped back to my face. "Hate them? I don't hate them. It's just that I love God more than anything, and that takes all the love I have to give."

"But all this praying that people will have accidents! In other times you'd have been called a witch."

"Or a saint."

"You really believe that, don't you? That you're a saint?"

Her face was shadowed again, but her voice was harsh. "That's the real reason they never let me stay in convents. They're afraid, all of them! Afraid of what I can do! They don't want saints any more, not these days."

"Do you believe your prayers caused Chuck Andrews's broken leg, and Frank Planter's death?"

She turned to face me once more. "Of course!" She started to say something else, but her words were lost in the sudden roar of the approaching train. Sparks flew from the overhead power lines, distracting my eyes. When I looked back, she was gone. She'd walked off into the station, I supposed, though she might well have vanished in a puff of smoke.

On Monday I went to the meeting as usual. It was a gloomy gathering, with talk of Planter's death the main topic among the scattered groups of members.

Chuck showed up at the meeting with Joyce Mancusso, and I casually wondered if he'd met her at the station, filling in for the dead Frank Planter. Happily, Helen Dwain had stayed away. Or so I thought.

But when the meeting was ended, I was surprised to see Helen sitting alone in the last row. She'd slipped in late, after we were in our seats. I was hoping she'd slip out the same way, but she didn't. Instead, she waited for Joyce and Betty at the head of the aisle and said, "I heard about Frank's accident. Too bad."

Joyce started to go past her without answering, but Betty was not about to let it pass that easily. I saw at once that I was witnessing the end of whatever friendship had once existed between Betty and Helen Dwain.

"You and your damned curses!" Betty stormed. "Why aren't you in church right now, praying the rest of us into our graves?"

Helen reached out a hand, as if to ward off the rain of words. But then she caught herself and took a step backward, eyes aglow with an inner fire. "Maybe you need the prayers now, Betty."

"Go ahead! Do your damnedest!"

Helen turned and walked quickly away. I would have thought her close to tears if such

a thing were possible. Perhaps even witches cried at times.

The session at the soda fountain was subdued that night. We all sat around, talking about Frank and what had happened, trying unsuccessfully to reassure one another.

"The police are still investigating the accident," Joyce told us. "He was doing some important electronic work, and it may even have been tied in with that."

Chuck snorted. "I do the same sort of work for the same company. Believe me, it's not worth getting killed over. Not even the Russians would be interested, unless they were setting up a rival factory down the street. When we talk about another car, and someone running him off the road, aren't we really saying one thing? That we think Helen Dwain did it, to make her curse come true?"

Betty shook her head firmly. "I'll believe a lot of things, but not that. I've never even known her to drive a car."

"We could believe she was a witch before we could picture her as a killer," Joyce Mancusso agreed.

A bit later, when Betty headed for home, I felt obliged to walk with her. Helen's threat was still too clear in all our minds.

"Worried?" I asked as we walked up the hill to her house.

"Why should I be? I only feel sorry for Helen."

But she was worried. When we passed the church, I asked, "Do you think she's in there?"

Betty stopped walking and started suddenly up the front steps.

"We'll see," she said, and her decision surprised me.

The front doors were locked, but we found an open side door. There, in the flicker from a hundred glowing vigil lights, Helen Dwain knelt by the altar in prayer.

"Don't go in, please," I cautioned Betty. "You can't help matters."

"There's something so obscene about it!"

We left Helen there at the altar railing, praying to her God for horrors we dared not contemplate. But the image of her remained in my mind for a long time after, until we'd reached the sanity of Betty's house.

"The girl's sick," I decided, trying to explain it.

"The world's sick, Tom. If it's going to happen to me, I want it to be quickly, so I don't even see it coming."

"Don't talk like that! Remember, you're the one who said you weren't worried."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll call you tomorrow night. Take care of yourself."

"Sure. Thanks for walking me home, Tom."

I started down the block, and when I reached the church I couldn't resist taking one more look. I opened the side door and peered inside, but now the altar railing was empty and the flickering colored flames played over a deserted church. Helen had gone home, wherever home might be.

THE FOLLOWING evening I phoned Betty's home, and her father told me she wasn't home yet. There was no reason to worry, but I worried anyway. It was starting to snow outside. I turned on television and watched it for a while and then opened a can of beer.

After forcing myself to wait an hour, I phoned her home again. This time the voice was different. A neighbor. Betty'd had an accident. Her parents had gone to the hospital. I hung up and ran downstairs. It took me twenty minutes to reach the hospital, and by that time Chuck and Joyce were there ahead of me.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice cracking.

Chuck Andrews shook his head. "She was walking on North Street, on her way home, and something fell on her from a building."

"Fell on her?"

"A brick. It missed her head, luckily."

I turned to Joyce. "What does the doctor say?"

She was close to tears herself. "Her shoulder's broken and she's in shock. But he says she'll be all right."

"Do you think it's possible—"

"I gave up thinking after Frank's death," Joyce said, shaking her head.

We waited there till after midnight, when Betty's parents came downstairs and told us she was resting comfortably. Then we went home, quietly.

The next morning I went to the church and found a priest, Father Logan. He was one of those who'd spoken at an Aquinas Club meeting, and I asked if I could talk with him in private.

"Certainly," he said, smiling a bit. "Step into the rectory."

He listened with growing interest while I told my story, and when I'd finished he sat in silence. "What do you think about it, Father? Can such things be?"

He lifted his eyes to me. "I've heard stories about this Dwain girl, of course. They're difficult to believe when I see her at Mass every morning."

"Father, I have to know. I have to know whether or not Helen Dwain could have caused those accidents through her

prayers. If she could have, then I'm going to kill her."

"Kill her?"

I nodded. "Before she harms anyone else."

The priest blinked and said, "The ways of the Lord are strange at times, but I can safely say that Helen Dwain's prayers are not being answered. You cannot pray for evil, even if your ultimate purpose is good."

"Then how do you explain those three accidents?"

Father Logan shrugged. "Simple coincidence."

"One could be a coincidence. Not three."

"Then someone caused them. Perhaps they weren't accidents."

I rose to leave. "Thank you, Father. You have a logical mind."

"Remember, killing her will solve nothing."

"What if she's the person who caused the accidents?"

"There are laws to deal with her. Laws of men and laws of God."

I left him with his laws. I had my own.

Over the weekend the police came to see me. One was a burly cop named Younger, and he did all the talking. "You heard Helen Dwain make these threats, Mr. Gaines?"

"I heard her."

"Do you have any reason to believe she carried out her

threats? That she caused these accidents, and killed Frank Planter?"

"How else could it have happened?"

The detective smiled. "That's what we're asking you, Mr. Gaines." He dug into his brief case and came out with some large glossy photographs of footprints. "Know anyone who wears sneakers that leave tracks like these?"

I studied the pictures. They showed a line of shallow tracks in the snow, with the right foot firmly impressed and the left one a bit blurred. There was no way of telling if a man or woman had made the tracks."

"They don't mean a thing to me," I said honestly. "Where did you find them?"

"On the roof where that brick fell from. The one that hit Betty Barrigan."

"I see."

"It wasn't an accident, Mr. Gaines."

"I didn't think it was for a minute."

"Then who do you think caused it?"

"The same person that killed Frank Planter."

"A girl named Helen Dwain?"

"Maybe."

He nodded. "We're looking into Miss Dwain."

"How is Betty?"

"Coming along fine. She

should be ready to go home in a few days. In the meantime, let us know if Helen Dwain tries to contact you."

The police visit depressed me, for a reason I couldn't quite pin down. I thought about it all day Monday, and by Monday evening I was ready to skip the Aquinas Club meeting. But I forced myself to go, and found Chuck and Joyce waiting for me outside.

"Have the police questioned you yet?" Chuck asked me.

I nodded. "They came by on Saturday."

"A couple of detectives are inside now, talking to people. They're finally convinced that it all ties in together, the attack on Betty and Frank's death."

"But *why*?" Joyce asked. "Who'd have a motive for harming them?"

Chuck Andrews shrugged. "You mean, who besides Helen?"

"I can't believe it of her, Chuck. I'm sorry, but I can't."

I glanced up then, and saw a familiar black figure crossing the street in our direction. It was Helen Dwain, coming out of the night to be with us once more. I tapped Chuck on the arm, and he turned to meet her.

"Hello, Chuck," Helen said. "Hello, Tom, Betty."

For a flicker of a moment I thought Chuck would strike her.



"Get out of here, Helen," he said. "We don't want you around."

Her eyes flashed the familiar fire, but she didn't challenge him. Instead, she turned and stalked away. Joyce Mancusso watched her go.

"I hope it's for good, Chuck," she said. I hope she never comes back."

"I hope so too," Chuck Andrews said, his breath condensing in the cold night air. "But you'd better tell those detectives she was here."

Joyce went inside, and I stood for a moment at Chuck's side, staring down at the scattered tracks in the light cover of snow. And suddenly I knew what had to be done. "I'm going after her, Chuck."

"Who? Helen?"

"Yes."

"What in hell for?"

"To tell her she didn't cause it. To tell her those prayers had nothing to do with what happened. You did it, didn't you, Chuck? You killed Frank Planter and dropped that brick on Betty."

I WAS close enough to reach out and touch him then. It was the closest I'd ever been to a murderer, but I wasn't afraid. No one could really be afraid of Chuck Andrews, in spite of what he'd done.

"Why did you do it, Chuck?" I asked.

Emotion crowded his face, and for a moment I thought he'd try to deny it, but then he seemed to collapse all at once. "God, I didn't think anyone knew! Tom, you have to believe me. I didn't mean to kill Frank Planter."

"Just bang him up a little, huh? And what about Betty? Was the brick supposed to miss her?"

"How did you know, Tom?"

"I knew as soon as I convinced myself that Helen Dwain wasn't doing it with her prayers. I started looking for a human agent, and that narrowed the field considerably. There were only five of us who heard Helen's threat to Frank. Helen herself, Betty, Joyce, you and me. I knew I was innocent, and Betty removed herself from suspicion when that brick hit her. That left Helen, Joyce, and you, Chuck. To our knowledge, neither Helen nor Joyce drives a car. That seemed to rule them out as far as Frank's killing was concerned. And when you dropped the brick on Betty you made the mistake of leaving your footprints in the snow."

"I—"

"Clear right prints and slightly blurred left ones. Somebody with a limp, Chuck. Somebody whose left leg had been broken.

What was it, Chuck, something at the office. Or did you do it just to get Joyce away from him? I'd bet on the office, because he said he was having troubles there."

Chuck Andrews nodded reluctantly. "I was selling some secrets to a rival electronics firm, and Frank found out. I had to shut him up somehow, before he told the big bosses. My broken leg was just a coincidence, but it gave me the idea for the rest of it. When Helen reappeared and threatened Frank, I decided to make the threat come true. I followed him that night and forced his car off the road. I thought it would put him in the hospital for a while and give me time. I didn't know it would kill him."

"And Betty?"

"I had to protect myself. When Helen made another threat, I had to carry it out again. I had to make it look like a pattern, so the cops wouldn't concentrate too much on Frank's death."

"But don't you see what you've done, Chuck? Not just to Frank and Betty, but to Helen Dwain as well? She believes in this power now. She believes God has been answering her demented prayers."

"I guess I didn't think about that."

"Tell them," I said. "Tell the police what you did."

But I didn't wait to see where he went. Instead I started off down the street after Helen Dwain.

I found her in the darkened church, where I knew she'd be. Kneeling at the railing by the vigil lights, just as she'd been on that other night. Kneeling and praying to some God unknown.

"Hello, Helen."

She turned to stare at me. "What do you want?"

"I've come to tell you how it was, Helen. Your prayers didn't harm those people. It was Chuck Andrews. He caused it all."

She had risen to face me, and the flickering candles played like moths about her face. "Chuck? What are you saying?"

"It's true, Helen. You didn't do it."

"I don't believe you," she rasped, backing against the railing.

"He's telling the police about it right now."

"I did it!" she insisted. "It was all me, not Chuck or anyone else! God heard my prayers and struck them down!"

"It was never you, Helen. Prayers like yours can never be answered."

"They can!" she screamed out suddenly. "I can kill you where you stand!"

"Helen, I've come to help you, not destroy you."

She could back away no

further, and now she lifted her face toward heaven and cried out, "Lord, strike dead this unbeliever! Show him your power!"

It was a measure of my belief to know that the twisted prayer would go unanswered.

"No, Helen," I said softly.

"Dead! Dead!"

"He doesn't hear you."

"Him or me, dear God!" she screamed out then. "Take him, or take me!"

And as she spoke those words the sleeve of her black coat brushed against the vigil lights behind her. In an instant the sleeve was on fire, the flames spreading until the whole of her coat seemed suddenly ablaze.

"You little fool!"

"He heard me! He heard me!"

I tore off my own coat and hurled myself forward at the flaming girl, toppling her before me to the stone floor. Then I was rolling her, beating at the flames, feeling them scorch through the cloth at my own flesh.

"He's not answering your

prayer," I gasped out. "Not even that one!"

"Let me go! Let me die!"

Then there were voices behind us and I saw Father Logan and others, attracted by the noise. I kept rolling her in my coat until the last of the flames was smothered. When they helped me to my feet I was gasping for breath, clutching my singed left hand.

And Helen Dwain stretched out on the stone floor in the charred remains of her black coat, staring up at the ceiling.

"You cheated Him," she said, no longer screaming but with a calmness that was worse than a scream.

"I didn't cheat anyone. Not even you, Helen."

I walked out of the church then, and back along the street to the old movie theater. I could see the police car in front, and the men talking to Chuck Andrews. I saw Joyce detach herself from the group and run forward to meet me, and Helen Dwain seemed a long way off.

In the Next Issue—

THE SISTERS

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

*She had the things every woman covets—
beauty, brains, an intangible thing called guts.
But she also had an ugly little sister—Death...*

NOTHING PERSONAL

His word was law and his law was absolute. Only one small thing was in the way—Murder!



by ALBERT AVELLANO

I BOUGHT a service station from one of the major oil companies. I received full title to both building and land for only a thousand dollars, but I could tell

the man behind the desk hated to take my money.

"Look, Mr. Spangler," he said, calling me by the name I had decided to use in Texas. "A new

interstate highway was put through. All traffic passes two hundred yards *behind* that property instead of in front of it. There's a cyclone fence along the highway and the nearest exit is two miles away. Even a talented young fellow like you can't repair or sell gasoline to cars that never get near you and don't slow to less than fifty miles per hour."

"Oh, I'll make out all right," I said stubbornly. "I'm a good worker and I always wanted a place of my own."

"All the other businesses along that old route have been closed or abandoned. About the only traffic you'll see will be from the El Grande ranch, but no one will stop. The ranch has its own gasoline storage tank and mechanics."

That was news. I hadn't known the El Grande had its own service facilities. However, that didn't really change anything. I had to have a legitimate reason for being around, it didn't have to be a sensible one.

"I'll make out all right," I repeated.

"Okay, okay," He threw his hands in the air, acknowledging defeat, and came out from behind his desk. "I can see your mind's made up. Tell you what I'm going to do—I'm going to throw in a pair of gasoline pumps. Not new ones, you

understand, but they'll save you the expense of leasing pumps, and they'll be as good as you'll need."

"Thanks," I said.

I got away from there before he tried to give me anything else. He was taking too much interest in me.

I hung around Dallas for a couple of days, buying a selection of used tools and garage equipment, then loaded everything into a rented trailer and headed southwest.

My first view of my new property couldn't have been more disappointing if I had actually expected to make a living from it. The building was a long, low cinderblock structure, housing two rest rooms, a large storage room, the station office, and three repair bays.

Unfortunately, the oil company had salvaged all it could. The plate glass was missing from the office windows, the overhead doors had been removed from the repair bays, and the white glass facing had been stripped from the cinderblock, leaving broken blocks and large black patches of adhesive showing.

The asphalt apron in front of the station was littered with a year's accumulation of wind-blown papers, weeds and rusting tin cans.

I slept in my car that night and got busy the next morning. I

NOTHING PERSONAL

arranged to have the utilities connected and began to clean up the place. A crew from the oil company arrived with the pumps I had been given and connected them, and a few hours later a tank truck delivered a thousand gallons of fuel to my underground storage tank.

When the truck left, I saw it turn a hundred yards down the road at the gate to the El Grande ranch. That confirmed what I had been told about the ranch having its own service facilities.

But I would have known the ranch had its own gas pump without being told or seeing the delivery truck turn. In the next week about the only vehicles that passed were fire-engine-red-jeeps and pickup trucks from the El Grande. Not once did one of them slow down, let alone stop.

I got a little business from one of the El Grande's small neighbors, but the red vehicles, even the occasional limousine and sports car, went by without so much as a curious glance to see who was fool enough to have opened the service station again. The level of my storage tank went down almost as much from evaporation as from gasoline sales.

I found myself in the embarrassing position of killing only time when I had traveled two thousand miles to kill a man.

I'm a professional assassin,



one of the best. Whenever possible I disguise my "work" to look like accidents or death by natural causes. If that can't be arranged, I try to make the murder appear unplanned as in the case of a hit-and-run victim or a person killed during a holdup. It is only as a last resort that I commit an obviously premeditated murder.

Of all the crimes, murder is probably the easiest to get away with. Of course, I'm talking about murder for hire, where the killer and victim don't know each other and where there is nothing personal between them.

It's surprisingly easy to kill someone you've never met and whom you know little about. It's comparable to stepping on an ant or swatting a fly.

It's only when the killer knows and hates his victim that he's in danger. Then he may become suspect and could possibly make an emotional error. That's why I've always worked through a third party, accepting my contracts by phone and my payment in cash sent to general delivery. I don't want to know the person I'm being paid to kill, the person I'm working for, or why I've been hired. I don't want my job complicated.

In this case my target was John Woodley Vinger, former U.S. Senator, who owned the El Grande ranch and a respectable amount of real estate in downtown Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth. He had oil, natural gas, and water wells; and where he didn't have cattle or thoroughbred horses grazing, he was cultivating cotton or lettuce or melons. No one can become that rich and powerful without making enemies, and he must have made one too many or I wouldn't have been in Texas.

From my seat in the station office, I had a fine view of the El Grande's main gate. Even if no one stopped at my place I was able to oversee all the comings and goings at the ranch. It was

just a matter of time before I'd know enough about John Woodley Vinger's schedule to devise a workable murder method.

This might have been a routine murder, like all the ones that came before it, if I hadn't bought a soft drink cooler. As it was, I had the cooler setting in front of the office for everyone to see. I was in the first repair bay, getting ready to rebuild my car's motor to give myself something to do. I had just poured a gallon of gasoline into a flat pan, preparing to wash the parts, when I heard a car stop.

I went out and found a flaming red sportscar parked near the office. It was the same color as all the El Grande vehicles, but this wasn't the kind of car a hired hand drove. I looked for the driver and found her standing at the soft drink cooler with a bottle of Coke in her hand.

She was tall for a woman, five-nine or five-ten, and couldn't have been a day over twenty-five. She had a full figure under divided skirt of suede with matching gloves and a sleeveless, V-necked blouse.

Except for her low-heeled shoes she was attired more for horseback riding than for a high-powered sportscar. She had dark hair tied back in a ponytail, and her eyes were so dark the pupils and irises merged.

It was like magic. That's the best way I can describe it. I had never been affected that way by a woman—never! Call it chemistry, electricity, biology, whatever you like. I was attracted to her more strongly than I had ever been attracted to any woman and, more amazing still, I could see she felt the same way.

Standing there in front of the station, I was suddenly very conscious of my own appearance. I was bare to the waist, as a defense against the August heat, and my boots and Levis were caked with dirt. My hands were greasy and there were oil smears mixed with the sweat on my chest. She was looking at me, but she seemed to be seeing something else.

Her lips parted and her tongue darted out to moisten them before she spoke.

"I'm Carole Vinger," she said. Her voice was every bit as musical as I had expected it to be.

"Pete—Pete Spangler," I answered. "Come inside out of the sun."

We sat together in the office, talking nonsense for a few minutes; then, at some unspoken signal, we went into the room I had converted into living quarters and made love. When she left me two hours later, I was sure she would return. If she didn't, I knew I would go looking for her.

When I returned to my motor in the repair bay, the gasoline I had poured out had all evaporated, leaving nothing in the pan except the residue of the blue dye used to mark leaded gasoline at the refinery.

I had once known an arsonist who was discovered because he hadn't known about the dye placed in some fuels. I wiped the pan clean and poured another gallon of gasoline without giving the dye another thought.

After that first visit Carole Vinger returned regularly, though she never drove. Every two or three days I'd hear the sound of hooves at about ten o'clock at night; and then Carole would come strolling from between the abandoned buildings across the street. She apparently left her horse tied at the El Grande property line.

This went on for over three weeks and it was decided that she would be leaving with me when I gave up the service station fiasco. Then one night a few minutes after she had left, a flame-red limousine pulled into the station, followed by a red jeep with four men in it. I recognized the gray-headed old man in the limousine from his photographs. He was John Woodley Vinger. He didn't get out of his car; he just sat and watched through the window.

The four men gave me a

thorough beating. While two men held me, the other pair took turns pounding on me from neck to knees. It was a professional job, and I was able to detect Chicago and New York in the men's accents. They weren't local talent.

The worse thing a man can do in a situation like this is try to fight back. If he does, he may get hit harder than is meant in a place it wasn't intended. The wisest thing I could do was take the beating and hope I wasn't crippled. I was sure they had handed out far more beatings than I had taken, so I let the professionals call the shots.

Even though they were prolonging it intentionally, the beating didn't last more than ten minutes. By then the swingers were arm weary and the other two were tired of holding me up. They all stepped back suddenly and let me crumple to the asphalt.

Vinger stared at me lying there for a few moments, then signaled his chauffeur to pull out of the station.

I watched him go and then struggled to a sitting position. The four strongarm men were standing there looking down at me. I gave them a wry grin.

"He sure takes his daughter's activities serious, doesn't he?" I said.

"She's not his daughter, fella.

She's the old boy's wife," one of them said. "You'd better start thinkin' about leavin' this part o' the world."

I crawled to the doorway of the station office and sat with my back to the door jamb. I didn't feel much like standing up. I wasn't sure I could.

Three of them climbed back into the jeep, but one hung back. He had been regarding me speculatively during the working over.

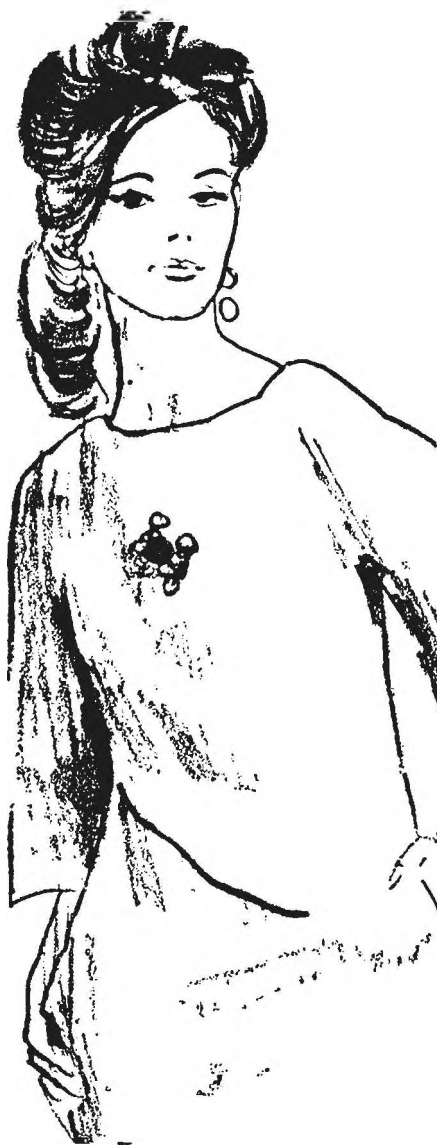
"No hard feelin's, fella. We're just doing a job. Nothing personal, you understand?"

"Sure," I said. "I understand."

He nodded. "I thought you did," he said.

It took me three days to recover to the point where I could flex my arms or touch my torso without wincing. I was covered with the most livid bruises, but there wasn't a mark on my face. Thank the gods for small favors.

However, if my body was in bad shape, it was nothing compared to my mind. My thoughts were in turmoil. Although it hadn't been intentional, I had attracted far too much attention to myself. I hadn't yet figured out the best way to kill Vinger, and I had made my job far more difficult than it should have been. It was one thing to be a harmless



stranger in the area; it was quite another to be a stranger who is hated and has reason to hate in return.

Then, a week after the beating, Carole complicated things further. At six o'clock one morning her sports car slid to a stop in front of the station and she awakened me by pounding on the door.

"I'm frightened," she said when I let her in. "I told John I want a divorce, and he laughed at me. He told me he didn't get where he is today by letting garage mechanics take things from him. He told me what they did to you and told me I could expect worse if I persisted in wanting a divorce. He's insane. He said, 'I get what I want and I keep what I get!'"

Now I think he may be trying to kill me. I looked out the window at about two o'clock this morning and saw him crouching at the front of my car. Then he came to my room and told me to get dressed and drive to Dallas. He said he wants me to stay at our apartment there until you leave here, but I think he did something to the car."

"That's easy enough to check," I said.

I drove the car into the second repair bay, the one with the hydraulic lift, and raised it so that I could examine it carefully. While I was going over the car, I

had Carole draw a layout of the ranch buildings and a floor plan of the ranch house.

"Maybe if I go out and talk to him he'll be more reasonable," I said. She looked dubious, but agreed anything was worth a try.

I found nothing wrong with the car. Nothing. It was a new vehicle and everything, tires included, was in factory-new condition. I even removed the wheels and checked the hub nuts and their cotter pins, but found everything in perfect order. If the car had been sabotaged, which I doubted, Vinger knew a trick I didn't.

I lowered the car and went back to the office where Carol was waiting. She gave me the drawings she'd made and her keys to the ranch house. Then she gave me the last kiss she ever gave anyone.

"I have to fly, darling. John expects me to telephone him as soon as I reach Dallas, and he knows exactly how long the trip is supposed to take."

She never reached Dallas. The evening news broadcast carried the flash that Mrs. John Woodley Vinger, wife of the former United States Senator and well-known Texas rancher and businessman, had been killed in an auto accident on the Fort Worth-Dallas Turnpike. No details were given.

Within an hour I had packed

me the few things I wanted to take with me and abandoned the service station. When I drove away, a red jeep followed me to the entrance to the interstate highway.

No one in the Dallas or Fort Worth areas wanted to give me information about the accident. I could get neither the rangers nor the sheriff's deputies to tell me what had happened. Then I learned which wrecking company usually towed disabled vehicles off the road where the accident happened and drove over there.

The red sportscar was such an attention-getter that they had left it in front of their office. It looked as though it had run into something solid at about sixty miles per hour. It was only about half its normal length, and the engine was in the driver's seat.

While I was standing there looking at the car, a man came out of the office and stopped beside me.

"A real mess, ain't it?"

I nodded.

"A woman driver. Had a blowout, lost control and—Pow!—drove smack into a concrete abutment. It made me sick watching 'em pry her out of the wreck."

Both front tires had blown out, but one seemed more torn and twisted than the other, so it had probably gone first. It hung halfway off of its rim. I squatted

on my heels so I could examine it more closely, then ran my hand inside the tire, feeling for sabotage. When I removed my hand I had a blue stain on my finger tips.

Carole had been right. Vinger *had* sabotaged her car, and he had done it in a way I had never thought of. He'd simply poured a few ounces of raw fuel into one of her front tires, probably through the valve stem, and sent her on a trip after putting air back in the tire. He knew that as the day grew warmer, the gasoline would vaporize, and the pressure within the tire would rupture the casing. If Carole were speeding at the time, a blowout could result in a fatal accident, and that's exactly what had happened.

I waited until a week after Carole's funeral before going to see Vinger. I parked my car off the road a mile from the ranch house and walked the rest of the way.

It was three in the morning, but there was still quite a bit of activity. I circled the house to avoid being seen and, using Carole's keys, let myself in through a side entrance. Within minutes I was in John Woodley

Vinger's bedroom, listening to his heavy, even breathing. There was moonlight coming through the window and I could see Vinger clearly.

I slipped on a pair of surgeon's rubber gloves and removed a thin glass ampule and a few squares of gauze from my pocket. I wrapped the ampule in the gauze and approached the bed. When I was next to him I held the gauze at arm's length and broke the ampule. Then I lowered my hand until the gauze was in front of Vinger's nose and held my breath.

Prussic acid is a nerve poison. One whiff and the entire respiratory system becomes paralyzed. The symptoms it produces are not unlike natural heart failure. Even if murder were suspected, it's unlikely that normal autopsy procedures would reveal the method used.

Vinger began to choke and thrash about in the bed. I turned on his bedside lamp so I could see him better and so that he could see me. His face was almost purple and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

"Nothing personal," I said.

But I was lying.

The Devil's Spawn, they called him, the man even the killer warlords feared. Bugsy Siegel, his name was. He loved to kill and feared nothing that walked the dark alleys of the Mafia. Until the day even the Syndicate knew that they had created a monster that must go from the earth—and made the final hit. Meet—

BUGSY SIEGEL: GANGSTER, LOVER, KILLER.

by DAVID MAZROFF

ON NOVEMBER 5, 1933, one month before the repeal of the Prohibition Law went into effect, eight of the toughest hoods in America gathered in a suite at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to attend a meeting arranged by Johnny Torrio, self-exiled Chicago boss of the underworld.

Torrio the brain, the giver of the laws that ruled the Mafia, snatched from violence and death by the devil himself. He was at his very best at this moment and would have succeeded in attaining the goal he

wanted except for one man. Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel.

At the meeting besides Torrio and Siegel were Lucky Luciano, Frank Costello, Joe Adonis, Louis "Lepke" Buchalter, Abner "Longy" Zwillman, and Meyer Lansky, Siegel's partner in the infamous Bug and Meyer mob. Conspicuous by his absence was Dutch Schultz, Bronx and Harlem gang chief, who was on the lam.

The most dangerous man at the meeting was Bugsy Siegel, tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed, handsome, dapper, a creature of

THE AMAZING TRUE STORY that couldn't be told
until THE SYNDICATE DIED.



violence who killed not in pursuit of life but of death, slowly, harshly, with deep thrusts of a razor-sharp blade that penetrated into vital organs, or by shattering hammer blows on the head with the butt-end of a heavy pistol, before shoving the barrel of the gun into the victim's ear and blasting out his brains.

He was a malevolent, hostile threat to all men.

With the end of Prohibition, bootlegging of liquor and the manufacture of bathtub gin, illegal beer and wines was over. The mobs had to find other sources of income. This was one of the purposes of the meeting; the other was to put an end to warfare.

"The idea I have in mind," Torrio said as he called the meeting to order, "was to bring about cooperation. Each of you controls everything you've got now, and nobody can take it from you. If anyone tries, then the others will get together to prevent it, by common consent."

"By majority vote?" Luciano asked.

"No," Torrio answered. "I'll explain that in a minute."

Siegel rose from his chair, stared hard at Torrio. He exploded, "I don't need anybody to protect me!" He pointed a finger at Lansky. "Neither does Meyer. We take care of our own

troubles. Also," he added pointedly, "we've been taking care of a lot of troubles for all of you guys here."

He looked around the room. "How many contracts have I taken care for you, Lepke? Ten? Fifteen? I've lost track. And you, Lucky. How many?"

Luciano didn't raise his voice but spoke in measured tones. However, there was no mistaking the authority in his voice, with a calm that had in it frightening implications. "Why the hell don't you wait until Johnny finishes, Ben? You just might learn something about organization."

"I know all I need to know about organization, Lucky," Siegel retorted. "Torrio ran out of Chicago like a scared rabbit when Bugs Moran and Hymie Weiss shot him. He ran all the way to Italy and stayed away for three years. He comes back and appoints himself Mr. Big, the guy who's going to lay down the rules for everybody. Not for me, he isn't!"

"Give him a chance, Ben," Joe Adonis said. "You just might like what he has to say."

"Come on, Ben," Lansky said in a conciliatory tone, "just listen for a few minutes. What have you got to lose?"

Siegel rubbed a hand over his mouth, looked around the room with angry eyes and sat down. He stared malevolently at Torrio.

"This group," Torrio said, "will comprise the board of directors. Each one will have the same say as the other. Before any measure can, or will be, taken against anyone in any of your groups, there will have to be not a majority vote but a unanimous vote, a full agreement. This means that if anyone in any organization steps out of line, on his own, that is, the vote to punish him will have to include the head of his organization. In that way, there can be no chance of any five outvoting three in order to dispose of a member of a family for any but valid reasons."

Siegel muttered under his breath. "Crap. Crap."

Luciano shot him a tight look of contempt. Their eyes met for a fleeting instant, were caught in each other's gaze; then Siegel turned his head away and settled back in his chair.

Torrio continued: "This will stop a lot of unnecessary killings which arouses the public. That's what finally brought the feds into Chicago. You all know Legs Diamond brought a lot of pressure on this town with his crazy capers. He shot Simon Walker and Red Cassidy in a drunken brawl in his Hotsy Totsy Club. The club was closed. He caused Charlie Entratta to stand trial for those killings. The papers gave it a big play."



BUGSY SIEGEL

"Entratta was acquitted!" Siegel yelled at Torrio.

"Sure," Torrio agreed, "but it brought on the heat and everyone had to slow down until it cooled off. Every cop in this town isn't on the take. There are some honest ones. I can tell you about a few. 'Honest Dan' Costigan, Lewis Valentine, Vincent Sweeney, Dan Manger, and some others.

"You're not going to buy these cops. If a killing happens the honest cops will work on it till someone goes to the chair for it. Valentine went after Big George McManus and Hymie

Billor for the Rothstein killing."

Torrio paused to look at Siegel. "I know McManus was acquitted," he said pointedly, "but there was heat, and again everyone had to slow down until it cooled off. Then Judge Samuel Seabury's investigation of crime and corruption. That almost tore the town apart. Seabury forced Mayor Jimmy Walker out of office. That's what heat will do. There was the killing of Vivian Gordon. That brought heat."

"She was a stool pigeon, a whore, and a madam!" Siegel declared. "She was going to testify against a lot of cops. Andy McLaughlin of the Vice Squad was one of them. She paid off to him and was going to talk about it. You got the picture?"

Torrio answered calmly. "Yes, Ben, I've got the picture. I also remember the picture of Harry Stein on trial for the killing. Pictures? There were pictures in every newspaper every day during the trial. And stories of police corruption and payoffs by the underworld, that's the way it was written. We don't need that kind of heat."

"I agree with that," Meyer Lansky said. "It's bad for business. The less the newspapers have to write about our organizations the better it will be for all of us."

"I'll go along with that, too," Lucky Luciano said.

"Count me in, too," Longy Zwillman put in. "We had plenty heat in Jersey and it cost us a lot of money until it died down. Ain't that right, Joe?"

"Yes," Adonis agreed. "Heat is very bad."

Lepke nodded his head. This diabolical genius in crime who, combined brains with force and directed the killings of some ninety men through his chief Lieutenant, Jacob "Gurrah Jake" Shapiro, a hulking hoodlum, as the head of Murder, Inc., now wanted peaceful methods.

Siegel burst out laughing. He pointed a finger at Lepke.

"Louis," Siegel taunted, "you—you who invented the word 'hit' now want to soft-pedal a killing. Boy, that's a hot one." He gave a short, harsh laugh. "You never told me to act pretty when you gave me a contract. All you wanted was to have the guy iced, any way. What's with you?"

Lepke stared at Siegel stonily for several seconds. This small, seemingly undernourished gangster with the sad eyes, whose brilliant criminal mind made all others in the room appear as insignificant dullards by comparison, disliked loud mouths as much as he disliked the child's play of sticking a gun at a man's head and blasting out his brains.

He liked things done orderly. Just as a housewife would put

things in order for the coming spring and summer, Lepke would, in his soft voice, and with careful language, order the final solution of loose-talking hoods in his own organization or those who did not pay tribute to his vast empire of crime.

He said: "You talk too much, Ben. Too much and far too loud."

Lucky Luciano allowed a quick grin to cross his face. "You got the message, Ben?" he asked in a low tone.

No one in the room really understood Siegel's attitude, his animosity toward the plan Torrio was offering. Siegel did his own removing of guys who stepped on his toes, or those he was paid to remove. He killed with bloody wantonness, with contempt, cunning, cruelty, and a sadistic pleasure. His psychotic temper could flare up in an instant and explode in a heat-wave of violence.

In the end, he fell in line with Torrio's proposal because Meyer Lansky accepted it, and so the plan of the Syndicate, the Mafia, the Cosa Nostra, call it what you will, was born. No killings unless authorized by the Board of Directors, a group of hoods, gangsters, and killers who could, and did, order a murder with no more compunction or qualm than an ordinary citizen orders a hamburger sandwich.

WHEN CUNNING Dutch Schultz beat the government rap and returned to New York he got the whole story of the meeting and what had taken place during his absence, the double-cross by Bo Weinberg, his lieutenant, who had turned over Schultz' gang and territory to Lucky Luciano, Joe Adonis, and Longy Zwillman. Schultz burned for vengeance. Always friendly with Bugsy Siegel, he got in touch with him and asked him to come to his Newark, New Jersey hideout.

"Ben," Schultz said, "I gave you a lot of breaks when you were coming up. I need your help now. Bo double-crossed me."

"I know all about it"

"I want him hit. I'll give you twenty-five grand to slam him, but good. I want him busted all up so that his own mother wouldn't recognize him."

"You got a deal. Count out the money."

Siegel knew he would be breaking the rules set up at the meeting, but he had never agreed to them anyway so he couldn't be held to account.

After several days search, Siegel located Bo Weinberg, lured him into his car on a pretext that Lucky Luciano wanted to see him.

"He's out in Jersey with Adonis and Zwillman," Siegel

said. Jersey was Zwillman and Adonis territory so the story sounded plausible to Weinberg. He got into the car without question.

"You know what they want to see me about?" Weinberg asked.

"No, they didn't tell me. But you know Schultz is back in town, don't you? Maybe it has to do with something about the Dutchman."

Weinberg thought about that a moment and suddenly he became wary. What was there to talk about concerning Schultz and him? He had turned over to the mob and all the details of Schultz' many operations. He was promised protection against Schultz just in case Schultz returned and decided to take vengeance.

"Lucky has my phone number," he said. Why didn't he call me instead of sending you, Ben?"

"Things are a little hot now and he didn't want to take a chance on a phone call. You know how Lucky is about phone calls?"

That sounded plausible too so Weinberg relaxed. "Yeah, I know. He always sends messengers to guys he wants to talk to. You think maybe they got a better deal for me, Ben? I gave them a really big setup. They should give me a better deal."

"Yeah, I think so. I think you're going to get a real good deal, Bo. The best." He couldn't stop the smile that crossed his face. He'd give him a deal all right.

Siegel drove to a lonely street where there were a few isolated houses. As they got out of the car, dusk was beginning to settle, and in the eerie light of a dying sun, Bugsy clubbed Weinberg over the head with a pistol. Bo fell, was still conscious although stunned. Siegel drew a knife from a sheath inside his coat pocket.

"This is your deal, you double-crossing bastard!" Siegel snarled. "This is for the Dutchman. Your payoff!"

A muffled cry spun off the into the quietness of the street and Bo Weinberg raised his hands over his head to protect himself from the coming thrust, but he was too groggy to move quickly.

"Don't, Ben!" he cried. "Don't kill me! Don't! I got five grand. I'll give you all of it. I'll get out of town. Don't kill me, Ben. Let me live. Let me live!"

Siegel's laugh was harsh. He raised the knife and plunged it straight into Weinberg's throat. Weinberg opened his mouth to scream but the blood that filled his mouth strangled the cry, and the horrible sound of death came instead.

Siegel then plunged the knife

into Bo's chest, stood back a moment, his eyes opaque and his face twisted with a strange mixture of pleasure and hate. He raised the blade again and drove it several times into Weinberg's belly. Blood covered Bo's face and body, ran from the wounds in gushes.

Siegel looked down at Weinberg and a sneer twisted his features. He thought then of what Weinberg had said about having five grand. He went through Bo's pockets, found a roll of bills, put the money in his own pocket. Now, what to do with the body? He looked around. Sure. The Hudson River.

He reached down, picked up Weinberg's dead form, tossed it into the trunk of the car, and drove to a hilly point overlooking the Hudson River. He took weights from the trunk of the car and some heavy wire, tied the weights around Weinberg's neck, middle, and legs, then threw the body into the river.

He knew it wouldn't come up because the holes in Weinberg's belly would let the gas escape and he would remain at the bottom forever, and that's where Bo Weinberg probably is now. For he was never seen again from that day on.

Siegel went home, changed clothes, wrapped the clothes he had worn when he killed Weinberg in a paper bag, drove to



MEYER LANSKY

a field out in Long Island and burned the bag and its contents. He then washed out the trunk of the car, drove back to Manhattan, parked the car and went into Lindy's Restaurant, where he ate a hearty meal. On Broadway and 50th Street he picked up a good-looking young blond and took her to his apartment, where they spent the night.

That was Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel. Gangster. Killer. Lover.

Siegel was born in Brooklyn, in the Red Hook section, and ran away from home when he was ten to live by his wits. Hot-headed even at that age, he

was feared by all the boys in the neighborhood. Mothers would yank their sons off the streets when they saw Siegel there. He would steal anything he could get his hands on, muscle the other boys out of their pennies and nickels. Even then, at the tender age of ten, he knew why little girls were different from boys, and what to do about it.

When he was fourteen, Siegel was king of a solid square mile of New York's Lower East Side. Behind Siegel as his personal flunky stood little Moey Sedway, a homely, skinny kid with a long nose and watery eyes, two years Siegel's senior.

Along two blocks of Lafayette Street were lined shops with outdoor wooden stands on which lay piles of every imaginable kind of apparel. These goods were seconds, purchased at below the manufacturer's cost and sold at bargain prices to the thousands of shoppers who came from all over the city.

On this day, Siegel approached one of the merchants. "Gimme five dollars," he demanded.

The shopkeeper started for the inside of his store but Siegel caught him by the sleeve of his jacket and jerked him back.

"I said I wanted five dollars, you little bastard! Now!"

The shopkeeper turned to his wife, a stoutish woman with a

prayer shawl over her head. "*Er's a bissel meshugah*," he said in Yiddish. "He's a little crazy."

Siegel flared up, the psychopathic temper that was to make him feared all his life turning his face red and his blue eyes cold with hate.

"No, you lousy bastard, I'm not crazy!" he yelled. "Five dollars!" Siegel held out his hand.

The merchant pointed an angry finger. "Go away, you bum. You want five dollars, go to work. I'm not your father."

The shoppers who thronged the street paid no attention to the dispute. Arguments, haggling over prices between customers and merchants were commonplace and this was presumed to be another such incident between the youth and bewhiskered merchant. The people paid no attention even when Siegel turned to Moey Sedway and said:

"Okay, Moey, pour the stuff on this junk."

Sedway unscrewed a quart jar and emptied the kerosene contents over the clothes the stand held. Siegel dropped a lighted kitchen match on the soaked pile of merchandise. It instantly caught fire. It happened so quickly that the merchant had no time to prevent it.

Siegel stood back and yelled defiantly, "I'll be here tomor-

row. You better have my five dollars!"

He strode away quickly through the crowd with little Joey Sedway trailing him.

After several more fire incidents along the street, the merchants decided it would be better to pay tribute to this little gangster than to suffer losses of hundreds of dollars. Siegel made a deal with them. He suggested that the payoff would be less painful if they realized they would receive more in return than mere relief from his harassment.

"I'll stop all the punks from stealing from your stands," he promised. "Ain't that worth five bucks a week?"

He was met with a shrugging of shoulders and a heavy air of resignation, and with it an agreement to pay the weekly protection fee. One of the merchants suggested that perhaps attendance at a synagogue would be more beneficial to his character than preying on poor merchants.

"Sure, sure, Pops, I'll go to one, Where do they keep the money they collect from all you poor jerks?"

The merchant threw up his hands in a gesture of horror. "You would steal from a synagogue?"

"I'd never steal from anybody. I'm a poor little Jewish

orphan. I need money, not prayers. You pray for me next Saturday. Free. No fees." He laughed. "Okay, Pops. Don't forget your Talmud, prayer shawl, and skull cap. I'll see you next week for my five bucks. Don't keep me waiting. I'm very busy."

He walked away with Moey Sedman and left the merchant gazing after him and muttering to himself.

Siegel kept his word on keeping the punks from stealing from the merchants' stands. He patrolled the street daily, and whenever he caught one of the kids stealing from a stand, he chased him, beat him unmercifully, and told him, "Pass the word, punk. This is my territory. I'm protecting it. The next time I catch you here I'll break both your arms and legs!"

The thefts soon stopped but not before Siegel had beaten a dozen or more youths, some so viciously they were hospitalized.

BEN SIEGEL prospered, roamed the neighborhood like a victorious Roman gladiator and made a play for all the pretty girls in the area. He was generous with them, bought them pieces of jewelry, watches, necklaces, rings, and if they needed clothes he merely walked up to the stand of a merchant on the street and took what he wanted.

"This is for my girl," he would say, picking up a sweater or a dress. "She's poor and cold. Put it on my account."

The merchants did nothing to stop him. What was the use? The little gangster would not only burn up a stand but very well could burn up the whole store in the dead of night. What they did deplore, and talked of it among themselves, was that Siegel was destroying the girls of the East Side.

"An animal," one of the merchants said to a group. "And the girls, they chase him like maybe he's a god. No! He's a devil!"

It was true. Not only did the young girls chase him but some of the married ones in their twenties sought him out. The Lower East Side was poor. Few of the young married women could boast a watch, bracelet, or other costume jewelry adornments, and many of them lacked pretty clothes. Besides, wasn't this Benjamin Siegel handsome!

About this time, Siegel was approached by another young hood named Meyer Lansky, who was to become one of the most powerful men in the criminal hierarchy.

"I hear you got a sweet thing going, Ben," Meyer Lansky said. "I've got a few good boys with me. We could do a lot of things if we joined up, you and me."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Expand. Move over the area. Take in more territory. Take all the shops and stores on Delancey, Rivington, Houston Streets, all over."

"I could do that on my own. Why do I need you?"

"You can't cover the territory with the guys you got with you. Takes more boys. I've got six guys in my gang. All tough. Big boys. They follow orders."

Siegel looked Lansky over. "You're pretty small to give out orders to big guys. What do you use for muscle?"

Lansky tapped his forehead with a finger. "Brains. Most guys got heavy fists but light brained. There are a dozen more ways to pick up money than the protection racket you're running."

"Yeah? Like what, for instance?"

"The punks around here rob the delivery trucks every time a truck stops to make a delivery. We sell the truck companies the same kind of protection you're selling the merchants. You know that the drivers are responsible for the goods on their trucks, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure." Siegel didn't know but didn't want to appear ignorant of the fact. "Who's going to proposition the drivers and the trucking companies?"

"I will. You and I will go

together and talk to the bosses. Also, there's a lot of punks in the neighborhood who burglarize stores and apartments, the ones on Park Avenue, Madison Avenue, and Sutton Place. They don't know where to drop off the stuff, We'll take over that end of it. We'll take anything and everything the punks steal and we'll lap up the gravy. How's that hit you?"

"Okay, if you can do it."

"We'll do it." Lansky stressed the plural pronoun.

"Okay, partner, you got a deal."

Thus was born the infamous Bug and Meyer mob. Siegel and Lansky branched out to other streets on the Lower East Side until they had taken in a square mile. Then a cop collared Siegel on the corner of Delancy and Ludlow.

The cop pushed Siegel up against a building. "You and Lansky got a real nice racket going, eh, kid? And a nice little mob of dirty punks behind you. I got news for you. You're guilty of arson, assault and battery, mayhem, and extortion. That's just a few of the things I can think of right now. But it's enough to throw your butt in the can for about ten years. Unless—"

Siegel understood immediately. "Twenty-five a week."

The cop gave a short, jeering



LEPKE BUCHALTER

laugh. "You guys are shaking down at least five hundred a week, the way I figure it."

"We got expenses."

"So have I. But you won't have any if I throw you in the can. Make it fifty a week."

Siegel thought a moment. Police protection was very important. And this guy was no harness bull but a plain-clothes detective who could pull strings.

He said, "I'll make it sixty a week if you'll keep the fuzz off our tail."

The cop smiled. "You're a pretty smart kid. It's a deal. Sixty a week. Right here. Every Saturday at noon. Now you go

into that store, fold three twenties together and bring it out to me. Nice and easy like. Get it?"

"Sure. What's your name?"

"Why?"

"Just in case I get a bust I'll want to get in touch with you."

The cop grinned. "If you take a bust I'll be the first to show it. This is my beat. So far as you're concerned, my name is *East Side*. Just that. *East Side*. Okay, now run in that store and bring out that sixty fish."

This was Siegel's first experience in buying police protection. He sought it throughout his life, and it paid off because it kept him from doing time.

When he was twenty years old in 1925, some half-dozen years before the advent of Murder, Inc., he had been involved in every crime in the book—dope, rum-running, hi-jacking, mayhem, rape, robbery, burglary, and murder. He killed mercilessly, by every conceivable means. The very hoods who hired him to do their killings came to fear him, and Joe Adonis gave him his nickname.

"He's a bug," Adonis said to Luciano. "The man likes to see blood and a guy die."

"So long as I don't have to see it," Luciano replied, "I don't care how the bastard kills."

"He's dangerous," Adonis offered, thinking when he said it

that Siegel was dangerous to both friend and foe alike.

"No, not to us, Joe. If he gets too far out of line we'll take him out of the picture."

Adonis shrugged. "Okay Lucky, if you say so."

This was Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel at twenty, a man constructed of a torturous blood-hot violence and a demanding hunger to kill. The twisted emotions and surface hatreds of his makeup had no form or reason.

Contracts for hits came to Bugsy Siegel from all the gangs in New York and New Jersey. The list was long, and no one can say for a certainty how many men Siegel killed. They were slain in the streets, on the lonely beaches of Long Island, or sealed in bag and barrels and tossed into the Hudson or East Rivers. Contracts given to the Bug and Meyer mob meant always that Siegel would do the hits. His efficiency was dramatic and terrifying.

One day, a pusher held out on Luciano, and Lucky called for Siegel. "Ben," Luciano said, "I got a hit for you. I know your fee is two grand but this guy is tough so I'll up it to three."

Siegel shook his head. "That's not necessary. Nobody is is too tough for me. My fee is two grand. I got a reputation to keep up. Who's the jerk?"

Luciano named him.

Siegel laughed. "Hell, the guy's a friend of mine. I'll do it for nothing."

Luciano forced a smile to his face. "Okay, Ben. You gave me a laugh. Here's the two grand."

Siegel's utter lack of fear, his recklessness to the point of insanity, his contempt for the big games of hoods and gangsters, men who could have him killed as he killed for them, came out in an incident with a popular chorine in the Ziegfeld Follies.

Siegel went ape about show girls and actresses. Vain about his good looks, he always dressed immaculately, was a free spender, and attractive to the chorus cuties and the principals in the Broadway shows. He wined and dined one chorus girl, a pretty redhead, then took her to his apartment.

She had dated Joe Adonis and Longy Zwillman, the two kingpins in the rackets in Jersey City, men who were connected nationally with every gang chief in the country. They wanted her to confine her favors totally to them alone. She had done just that. She accepted dates with other men but never let it get past a good-night kiss. She didn't know Siegel. When he got amorous she pulled away from him.

"I'm sorry, Ben. It's late and I want to go home. I've got an early rehearsal."

"Whatsa matter, I got elbows on my chest or something?" he demanded. "Listen, don't hand me any baloney. I know you put out. So don't play any games with me."

"Please let me go home. I'm really tired."

"Listen, bitch," he exploded, "I don't want to hear no short con."

He reached for her but she twisted away and snatched up her wrap from a chair. Siegel grabbed her arm, spun her around, slapped her viciously across the face, clutched a handful of her dress and ripped it from her.

He gave her a hard shove toward the bedroom. The force of the push sent her sprawling to the floor.

"Get up," he yelled, "or I'll kick your guts out!"

The girl arose, terrified and weeping hysterically, but it didn't move Siegel. He kept her in the apartment all night.

The next day, Siegel received a telephone call from Adonis.

"I hear you've been a bad guy, Ben," Adonis said, his tone cold.

"What're you talking about, Joe?"

"You know goddam well what I'm talking about. The girl you beat up and raped!"

Siegel exploded. "You calling me to beef about a broad? I

know all about her. She puts out for every guy in town."

"You don't know a thing, Ben. That's just an excuse for what you did. But even if it's so, you still made a bad move. Suppose she went to the cops with the story? Can you stand a rape rap?"

"If she goes to the cops I'll get her. I'll cut her heart out. Tell her that."

"Listen, Ben, and listen good. That girl is right-o and won't go to the cops, even though you gave her a helluva pushing around. But she's got friends that don't like what you did."

"Yeah? Friends? What friends?"

"Me!" Adonis retorted. "And a couple of others. So stay in line from now on. Understand?"

Siegel was silent for several long seconds. "Okay, Joe. I'll make it right with her. I'll send her some money."

"Ben, stick the money. Just keep your nose clean from now on. That's the best advice I can give you. I'll tell you one more thing. If it wasn't for the fact that Lansky spoke up for you today you'd be in a lot of hot water. You still may have to answer to the Board at the next meeting."

"Don't stretch it, Joe," Siegel said. His tone was icy. "Just tell the girl I'm sorry, and let's drop it."

"I was waiting to hear you say that. Okay. I'll drop it."

Later that afternoon, Meyer Lansky called Siegel. "Ben, what the hell's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me. What's the beef?"

"Listen, Ben, we're riding to the top, you and me. We can't afford to step on people's toes that are in a position to help us or hurt us. That was Joey A's girl you beat up."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I got the message this morning. It's all straightened out. Don't worry about it."

"I have to worry about it. Joey A was plenty burned about it. You didn't have to beat her up, did you? She's had a doctor with her all day. And there's a nurse with her now."

"I'll pay for it."

"Ben, it isn't always money. Joey and Longy will take care of her no matter what it costs. Call Joey and apologize to him."

"What the hell for? I told him to tell the girl I was sorry and he let it go at that."

"That's fine. But I'd like you to apologize to Joey too. Will that kill you?"

"Yeah, it will."

"Ben, are we partners?" Lansky asked.

"Aw, what the hell are you talking about now?"

"Ben, there's nothing wouldn't do for you. I expect

the same from you. That's fair, isn't it?"

Siegel grinned. "You want me to apologize, eh?"

"Yeah. As a favor to me. No. As a favor to us."

"Okay, okay, I'll give the spaghetti bender an apology."

"Ben?"

"Now what?" Siegel asked testily.

"Ben, they don't refer to you as a sheenie so don't refer to them by anything but their names. They don't get out of line with people. They expect the same in return."

"Okay, okay, Meyer. I'll be a good boy and I'll apologize to Mr. Joe Adonis. Satisfied?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Ben."

BUGSY SIEGEL had a penchant for getting into innumerable jams that tried the patience of the Syndicate. Shortly after the affair with the chorus girl he heisted about two pounds of heroin slated for delivery to Al Capone in Chicago. It was a big score. The Syndicate had then, and has now, a better spy system than the CIA. In no time, Capone called Luciano.

"Lucky," Capone said, "a boy in your town named Ben S. has some merchandise that belongs to us. We'd like to get it back. No questions. No beefs."

"I'll see you get it back, Al.



LUCKY LUCIANO

I'm sure the man didn't know it was your merchandise."

"Okay, Lucky. Let's leave it at that."

Luciano called Siegel. "Ben, you have some merchandise that was on its way to Chicago. I want you to take it there, personally."

"What merchandise? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ben, don't play games with me. The people in Chicago know you've got it. They don't make mistakes. Get on a train and take it back to the Big Guy, at the Lexington Hotel. It's on Michigan Boulevard and 22nd Street. There'll be no questions. The boys will show you the town,

and you'll meet some good people."

"Lucky, I'm not too good at kicking back anything once I get it. That's not how I do business."

"Ben," Luciano said cryptically, "you don't do business by stepping on people's toes, people who can do you some good. I promised the Big Guy you would return the merchandise. That was my favor to him. Now, you do me a favor and take it back."

Siegel was about to blow up but for once common sense took hold at the proper time. "Okay, Lucky, like you say. A favor to you."

It turned out to be a break for Siegel because he met Capone and Al's cousins, Charlie and Rocco Fischetti, who were later to come to his aid when he needed it.

When he returned to New York Siegel called Luciano and told him he was given the royal treatment in Chicago. "Charlie and Rocco Fischetti are two of the greatest. We had one helluva time."

Siegel, eight years younger than Luciano, could summon up all the zest and enthusiasm over certain things, especially parties with dozens of beautiful show girls on hand, and, as the Fischetti's honored guest, it was "Take your pick, Ben."

Siegel stayed in line from that time on, which meant that he

didn't do anything that would anger any of the top men in the Syndicate or force them to bring him up before the Board for censure.

He did, however, do a lot of things on his own, without the approval of the Syndicate. He heisted gamblers who didn't have the protection of the Syndicate, took contracts from outsiders for hits, and became the number one hit-man for Murder, Inc., when they had a special job.

Things ran smoothly for him and he was living higher than he had ever lived before. He had a plush apartment, a bevy of the prettiest show girls and models in his little black book, and was rolling in money.

And then, in 1937, Lucky Luciano was convicted by Thomas E. Dewey on vice charges in a sensational trial and sentenced to a term of thirty years in Dannemora Prison, the Siberia of New York. The Syndicate then decided to send Siegel to Los Angeles.

Los Angeles was virgin territory. Jack Dragna, an independent operator who was nevertheless on good terms with the Syndicate had control of the town. Dragna had a sizable organization but against the combined power of the Syndicate he was a boy in a man's game.

"Move Dragna into line," Joe

Adonis told Siegel, "and you can lock up the Coast. We want it. You can play it as hard as you want, but with judgment. Understand, Ben? No rough stuff unless you absolutely can't do it any other way. This is a trial run for you. We want to find out if you can move in smoothly and then run things the same way. You'll get all the help you'll need from us. Okay?"

"Sure, Joe. Like you say, smooth." Adonis' words were music to Siegel's ears. The boss of Los Angeles. Move in and take over. All the help you'll need from us. Los Angeles. Hollywood. Movie stuff.

"This will be your operation, Ben," Adonis said. "Lansky is not in on this. We've got other plans for him. He knows about this and agreed to it. He's glad for you."

"Sure, Joe. Thanks."

Some time before, Siegel had married Estelle Krakower, an extremely attractive blue-eyed blonde from the lower East Side. She had given him two daughters, more beautiful than most of the movie stars. He took Estelle and his two daughters, Millicent and Barbara, to Los Angeles with him. They moved into a \$200,000 mansion.

Siegel's good looks, big money, and a willingness to spend it, soon made him the darling of the movie crowd.

Gangsters were a fad then, made famous in roles enacted by George Raft, John Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, Humphrey Bogart, and Paul Muni, all Warner Brothers stars. A wag had once scrawled on the wall alongside the gate of the Warner studios:

*"Pray, all ye who enter here.
Home of the Mafia."*

The characters depicted by the "gangsters" of Warner Brothers, dangerous, daring, handsome, ideal lovers, and big spenders, may well have been a composite of Bugsy Siegel, although he was unknown to the script writers who penned the stories.

Siegel changed that little matter in quick time. He was soon seen with Raft, Cary Grant, Carole Lombard, the beautiful Norma Talmadge, the very rich Barbara Hutton, the Countess Dorothy di Frasso, and Wendy Barrie, the lovely British movie star.

Wendy Barrie later had several hair-tearing battles with Virginia Hill when the "Barefoot Contessa of Bessemer, Alabama," who was the girl friend of every top hood in Chicago and New York before she came out to Los Angeles and became Siegel's mistress. Virginia Hill had been sent to the Coast to pick up the Syndicate's share of the take.

When she saw Siegel she fell

hard. That was right up Bugsy's alley. Virginia, hot-headed and with the Southern hot blood, stood for no nonsense. She gave her all to Siegel and demanded as much, and to hell with his wife, daughters, and all the movie stars. It was quite an alliance. The scenes between them were not lovers' quarrels but more like Sicilian vendettas.

Business, however, was the first item on Siegel's agenda, and he lost no time in calling a meeting of California's gang bosses and gamblers to advise them of the new plan of operation. Jack Dragna fell into line immediately because he knew it would be foolhardy to buck the Syndicate. Les Brunemann, A Redondo Beach gambler and bookie, refused.

"Count me out," Brunemann declared in a fit of anger. "I run my own operation. I don't need any New York wise guys to tell me what to do, how to do it, and then to take a piece of my action. I'm out!"

"Let me finish," Siegel argued, and gave Brunemann a cold look, and at that moment he was reminded of his own argument when Torrio presented the plan for syndication. "We will consolidate all the bookie joints, gambling joints, all the whorehouses, everything else," Siegel went on. "You will keep what you have. . ."

He paused. There was a dramatic silence in the room. Siegel glanced at each man, his eyes cold. "Except," he went on, "that you will turn over 40% of your gross take to me, and in exchange for that you will get the wire service."

"What wire service?" Brunemann asked.

"Trans-America!" Siegel snapped.

"Trans-America?" Brunemann retorted. "I've never heard of Trans-America. Who the hell is Trans-America?"

"Me!" Siegel shot back, and jabbed a thumb into his chest to emphasize his statement. "I'm Trans-America!"

Brunemann rose from his chair.

"I don't need your wire service, and I don't need anybody to help me run my business!" he declared hotely. "Count me out!"

Siegel stared hard at Brunemann, his lips a thin line, his cheeks red with anger. "Sit down, Brunemann." It was an order. Determined. Deadly. Unfortunately, Brunemann didn't know the man at the head of the table.

"I'm not sitting down! I'm leaving. And you can tell all those guys in Chicago and New York, or wherever the hell they are, to drop dead!" At the door, Brunemann paused, pointed a

forefinger at Siegel and said, "You can drop dead, too, Siegel!" He walked out and slammed the door behind him.

Siegel had learned something from Luciano. He smiled, gave a short shrug of his shoulders, and said, "Sure thing, men, we can all drop dead, eh? Well, any questions?"

There were a few and Siegel answered them. When it was over, everyone fell into line. They all never doubted for a minute that it was fall in line or die.

Three weeks later, while dining in the Roost Cafe in Redondo Beach, Brunemann was shot three times by two men who came into the restaurant, walked calmly to where he sat and leveled their guns. He was rushed to a hospital in critical condition but recovered.

Siegel was furious at the ineptitude of the gunmen.

"What the hell kind of shooting do you call that?" he raved. "You had two guns. Why the hell didn't you empty them? You go to kill a guy, a dirty donkey bastard, then kill him, don't play with him!"

"We'll get him next time," one of the gunmen promised.

"Next time? There isn't going to be any next time for you guys. I'll send somebody who can do the job right. Get out of here!"



JOHNNY TORRIO

Some three months later, after he was fully recovered, Brunemann foolishly went into the same restaurant, accompanied by a nurse with whom he had become acquainted while recuperating in the hospital. Five gunmen strode into the place, four toward Brunemann and the fourth hood shot Brunemann at point-blank range with .45 caliber automatics, killing him and a bystander, and wounding the nurse.

That was Bugsy Siegel's message to the reluctant bookies, hoods, gamblers, madams, and the rest of the underworld on the West Coast. Get in line or die!"

IN THE next two weeks, bookies, gamblers, madams, dope pushers, even prostitutes were beaten with rubber hoses, tire chains, and gun butts, clubbed insensible, chest crushed, arms and legs broken.

Siegel spread havoc and death, and the conquest of the West Coast was complete.

After Brunemann's murder, Siegel took over everything at Redondo Beach, sought out one of the top men in the detective bureau, a man he was told would listen to reason. From his own experience, from the lessons taught him by Lansky, Luciano, Adonis, Zwillman, Costello, Lepke, and Gurrah, he learned not to argue with fuzz about price if it concerned protection.

"Three hundred a week," he told the detective. "On the dot, every Monday."

"You must be kidding, Siegel," the detective retorted. "We don't play for peanuts here. I'm not the only one you're going to have to take care of. There are some other people. At the top. The proposition is twenty-five percent of the take, and no skimming off the top. Take it or leave it. If it won't be you it'll be somebody else, see?"

"That's pretty steep but okay. You got a deal."

Redondo was the last rung on the ladder. Now he had it all. He had protection in Los Angeles,

Burbank, Berkeley, Glendale, Pasadena, Fresno, up and down the Coast.

With Jack Dragna and Mickey Cohen as his lieutenants, and a furtive pimp named Dandy Don Kurner, who set up a rotation system for whores, prostitution, bookmaking, and gambling were fully controlled.

Kurner, a rat from the word go, soon feeling the big-shot role, shook down a few madams on the pretext that Siegel had ordered it. The madams complained to Siegel. Shortly thereafter Kurner disappeared, never to be heard from again.

Things ran smoothly for a time but Siegel's domineering attitude, his violent explosions of temper, caused a break in his relations with Jack Dragna.

"I agreed to work with you," Dragna declared, "because the boys back East were behind you, and I understood I would lose nothing. But—"

"You haven't lost a thing!" Siegel retorted.

"The hell I haven't! I was a boss. You're trying to make me into a punk, a second-hand gunsel. I'm not putting up with that crap at all, Siegel!"

"No? What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm pulling out, that's what I'm going to do about it!"

"The boys won't like it," Siegel said threateningly.

"I've already sent word. You can take it from there."

Shortly afterward, Harry "Big Greenie" Greenberg, one of Murder, Incorporated's trigger-happy gunmen, blew into town. Greenberg was one of nine men, along with Siegel, who were arrested in a 1933 raid at the Hotel Franconia in New York, when Lepke called a meeting for the purpose of furthering the labor racketeering in which Murder, Inc., was engaged.

All was peaches and cream between Greenberg and Siegel then. Now, Siegel learned, Greenberg was in town to kill him, a hit arranged by Dragna and approved by Lepke.

Siegel called Joe Adonis in New York. "Greenberg is in town. You know about it?"

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Yes, I know why. What I want to know now is why you didn't call me."

"I don't have to call you. Someone called you, didn't they?"

"Yeah, someone in town."

"That's the way it's done, Ben. Now, you just handle this any way you think best. Anything else?"

"No. That's it."

On Thanksgiving Day, 1939, Greenberg drove up to his apartment building, parked his car, and got out. At that moment, a sedan cruised by, slowed down.

Two machine-guns were poked through the front and rear seat windows and blasted Greenberg down. He was all but cut in half by the barrage of heavy slugs.

Siegel, Mickey Cohen, and Frankie Carbo, a fight promoter and underworld figure, were picked up and thrown into jail on suspicion of murder. Cohen had an airtight alibi and was released. Siegel and Carbo were held, stood trial but were acquitted.

Siegel now wanted to kill Dragna and called New York for approval. He was turned down.

"You be a good boy, Ben, and keep things going like they are. No more heavy stuff."

"But that bastard brought—"

"We know all that. The matter has been straightened out at this end. Dragna is going to stay in line. You, too."

A strained peace reigned between Siegel and Dragna, mainly because Dragna had the backing of the Chicago Syndicate which had requested New York to make peace between the two men.

By 1945, Siegel had everything running smoothly and turned his attention to a project he had dreamed about for several years—a gambling palace that would rival anything on the European continent. The place he wanted to build it was in Las Vegas, where gambling was legal.

He had sent Little Moey Sedway to Vegas on several occasions to scout for a good location. Sedway found it.

Early in 1946, Siegel said good-bye to Mickey Cohen and left him in charge of all operations. Estelle Siegel said good-bye to her husband and went to Reno, taking Millicent and Barbara, their two daughters, with her.

Siegel didn't shed any tears. He had been unfaithful to her from the onset, and more so since the day they had arrived in Los Angeles, when he began romancing movie stars, startlets, wives of producers, directors, and anyone else that looked good to him.

At the moment he was carrying on romances with the Countess Dorothy di Frasso, Wendy Barrie, Marie "The Body" McDonald, and Virginia Hill, the tempestuous Alabama sexpot, who was violently jealous and threatened to kill all of Siegel's girlfriends or else commit suicide.

When Siegel arrived in Las Vegas with Sedway he found many of the bookmakers there whom he had chased out of Los Angeles. One of them, Chuck Addison, sought him out.

"Ben," Addison said, "I'm going to lay it on the line with you. There's quite a few of the boys who left LA when you

moved in. Guy McAfee, Bill Curland, Farmer Page, Tutor Scherer, Jake Katleman, and a few others. They asked me to talk things over with you."

"Go ahead and talk, Chuck. I'm listening."

"Well, we figure the Syndicate sent you to organize us here. We know you own Trans-America wire service."

"So? What does all that mean?"

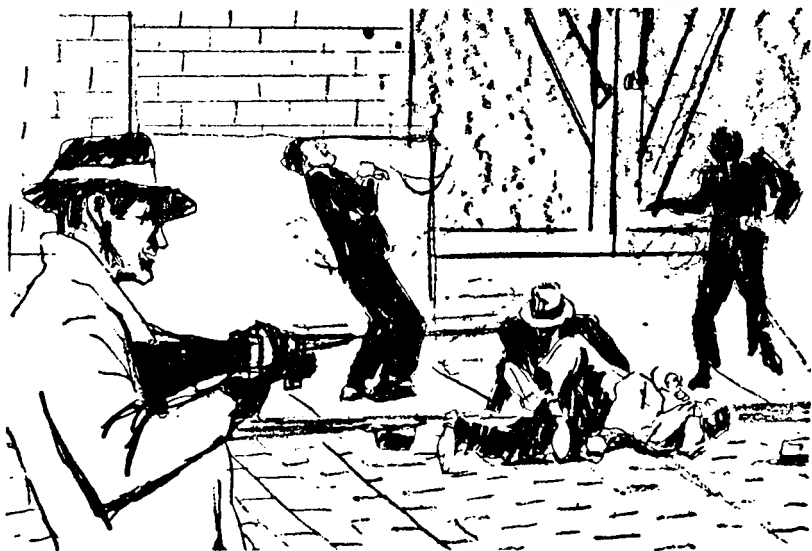
"It means we don't want you to sell us the service. We don't want it because we're using Jim Ragen's Continental Press Service. We don't want any part of the Syndicate. We're doing okay and we'd like to be left alone."

Siegel looked hard at Addison, his eyes narrowing. Addison didn't flinch.

"Chuck," Siegel said at last, "you go back and tell your friends they are going to use only one service in this town, and that's Trans-America. Tell them that order comes from New York, right from the top."

It didn't because Trans-America was strictly Siegel's baby. It was a lucrative performer and he wanted it to grow. He hadn't thought of selling the service in Las Vegas, only to build his dream gambling palace, but when Addison brought it up he made a quick decision.

Siegel had about a million dollars in cash when he arrived in



Las Vegas. He consulted Del Webb, who owned the Del E. Webb Construction Company of Phoenix. After discussing the plans Siegel had for his gambling palace, Webb told Siegel that the cost would be about \$2,000,000.

"Go ahead. Start building."

Construction was begun on a site in the desert, several miles from the city of Las Vegas, the center of the town, that is. Work went ahead smoothly for weeks, and then Siegel wanted changes made, innumerable changes.

"That ain't classy enough!" he yelled when he saw the wood that was to be used for some of the walls. "Get imported wood! This is gonna be the classiest

place in the world. Don't you dumb bastards understand that? Tear it out!"

Costs rose and rose, and finally the million dollars was gone. Siegel raced to Los Angeles and sought out friends for loans. He got \$100,000 from George Raft, another hundred grand from Dorothy di Frasso. Fifty grand from Virginia Hill. Smaller sums from others.

He flew to New York, Meyer Lansky gave him an undisclosed sum. He offered blocks of stock to other members of the mob. Some bought. Others didn't. He flew to Chicago. He sold the Fischetti brothers on the deal and they handed over, in the

next six months, sums totaling \$300,000. It wasn't enough. They gave him additional sums until the total reached three million dollars, a million of their own, the rest from other members of the Chicago Syndicate.

IN JUNE 1946, while the hotel was being completed, the boys in Chicago gunned down James Ragen, owner of Continental Press, and took over. The Chicago Syndicate doesn't play silly boy games. They take over. Completely. They sent word to New York that they wanted Trans-America. There would be only one wire service, a national setup, coast to coast.

New York called Siegel and told him to hand over Trans-America to Chicago.

"Like hell!" Siegel exploded. "You can't do this to me," he stormed. "I need the service. I need the money. I've got a big hotel that isn't finished yet!"

"Ben," Adonis said, "Trans-America is out. Once and for all. It's out. Hand it over to the boys in Chicago."

Siegel flew to New York and asked for a meeting of the board of directors. They agreed to hear him even though they knew what he wanted, and that they wouldn't agree to it.

"I'm not gonna give up Trans-America," Siegel told the

Board. "I built it. It's mine. You guys want it, then it'll cost you two million dollars. That's it!"

He stood back and waited for an answer. None came. He stared back at each member, men he had known over the years, men with whom he'd stolen, maimed, killed. It wasn't the same. There was a wide gap between them, a difference that amounted to an order given and a refusal to take it. Defiance. An unforgivable sin.

Siegel, however, was a man with an inflated ego. He feared no one, certainly none of the Syndicate's gunmen, all of whom he knew and regarded as punks.

He returned to Las Vegas and pushed construction on the hotel, yelling at the workers, cursing them, forcing them into overtime hours. Meanwhile, the bookies in LA and Las Vegas were screaming bloody murder. They were forced to pay double rates for each phone installed in their horse-rooms, \$150 a week to Siegel for his wire service, and the same amount to the Syndicate for Continental. Something had to give.

Finally, on December 26, 1946, Siegel opened the fabulous Flamingo Hotel. It wasn't entirely completed but he couldn't wait. He chartered planes from Los Angeles to bring in a host of movie stars for the opening and insisted on formal attire. That night he also introduced the era

of big-name stars for the entertainment of the guests.

On the bill were Jimmy Durante, Eddie Jackson, Tommy Wonder, Baby Rosemarie, the Tunetoppers and Xavier Cugat and his band. Waiters in shining tuxedos hovered around the tables in the dining room. Bartenders in tuxedos, stood behind shining mahogany bars, courteous, attentive. In the casino, pretty girls in very brief and revealing costumes served free drinks to the players, such as there were.

Siegel, in an elegantly tailored tuxedo, stood in the lobby with Virginia Hill waiting to greet guests.

The night was a fiasco.

The elements were against Siegel. Bad weather grounded the planes in Los Angeles and only a handful of the invited stars showed up. Sonny Tufts, George Raft, Vivian Blaine, George Sanders, and a few lesser lights.

Virginia Hill looked up at Siegel and said, "Well, Big-shot, what now?"

Siegel grabbed her by an arm, pulled her into a corner of the lobby and slapped her across the face. Wendy Barrie, Dorothy di Frasso, and Marie McDonald, all of whom were installed in separate expensive suites, looked on, a little in dismay and a little with satisfaction.

Virginia covered her face with

one hand and ran from Siegel. When she got to Wendy Barrie she stopped, uttered several curses, then grabbed a handful of the blond movie star's hair and yanked. A cat-fight followed. Siegel broke it up, and Virginia dashed to her room and took a handful of sleeping pills.

The debacle of opening night lingered for days, and to make matters worse, the casino was nicked for almost a hundred thousand dollars the first three days. Siegel's dream faded and died. He decided to close the Flamingo indefinitely, until it was finished. Moreover, he needed money desperately.

At this time, Lucky Luciano, by devious routes, had made his way to Havana, after being deported to Italy when he was released from prison under rather unusual circumstances. Lucky was holding a council meeting in the Hotel Nacional, where he had taken a double suite. All the top men were present. Charlie and Rocco Fischetti, Joe Adonis, Albert Anastasia, Frank Costello, Tommy Luchese, Tony Accardo, Vito Genovese, and about a dozen others. Siegel heard about it and fumed. He took a plane for Havana.

Luciano greeted him cordially but the dark eyes didn't smile. They talked of inconsequential matters for a short time and then

Siegel broke the big topic, the Flamingo.

"I know all about it," Luciano said. "It's a real big thing."

"Yes, it is."

"For you, Ben. For the boys, it's about six million fat American dollars. That's how much you're in hock to them. I know you've been wining and dining four women at one time at your hotel. I know you've been tossing money around like it's confetti. Those are expensive girls you've got around you. Virginia alone can break a millionaire. Now, listen to me. You go back to Los Angeles, clean up your house there. Do the same in Las Vegas. I want you to be a good boy. Understand?"

"No, I don't understand," Siegel answered belligerently.

"I mean for you to give the wire service to the boys in Chi, and I don't wanna hear no more bull about it."

"Lucky, don't do that to me. Give me another year. One more year so I can pull outta the hole I'm in and I'll give up the wire service. That's all I need. One year!"

"No," Luciano replied firmly. "No more time. The boys are getting fed up with you, Ben. You get no more time. That's all."

The wild temper rushed up

and took over Siegel's common sense. "The hell with you, you lousy spaghetti-bending bastard. Who the hell do you think you are? You think you can dismiss me like some gungel. I made you! I put you where you were, made you the top man. I killed for you. You forget that, you bastard!"

Luciano's eyes were dark, opaque with hidden shades of death. That soft voice of his was even softer as he said, "That's all, Ben. No more time. No more talk."

Back in Las Vegas, Siegel found builder Del Webb waiting for him in the Flamingo.

"I know what you want!" Siegel snapped. "Well, I ain't got it, so don't push me. I don't like being pushed!"

Webb was taken aback by this outburst and retreated several steps. Siegel looked at him for a moment, then smiled.

"Don't worry, Del," he said reassuringly. "I'm not gonna kill you. *We only kill each other.*"

On March 27, 1947, the Flamingo opened again. Everything was in its favor, weather, movie stars who were between pictures, an unusual influx of tourists, and Lady Luck. The Flamingo netted over \$300,000 the first week.

Siegel was his charming self again, even careful to keep Wendy Barrie and Virginia Hill

apart, far enough, that is, so they wouldn't be able to get at each other. Virginia Hill, who had been passed from hood to hood like a plate of hors d'oeuvres, nevertheless was not one to take a back seat for any other woman. She was going to be Number One so long as she was with a man or walk out. That was Siegel's fatal mistake. She could have saved his life.

Early in June, she packed her twenty trunks, took a plane to New York, and then to Paris. She didn't even bother to say good-bye to the man for whom she professed affection. Schooled thoroughly in the ways of the Syndicate, whose members had poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into her lap for the services she had performed as a courier and confidante, she knew better than to drop a word of caution to any man, even a man with whom she had lived for years, but especially because he had openly flaunted other women in her face. In a way, it was her payoff to him for his infidelity.

On June 20, 1947, Siegel was

back in Los Angeles. He had moved into a Moorish mansion at 810 Linden Drive in Beverly Hills, where he had kept Virginia Hill.

Allen Smiley, a close pal for years, was with him. Smiley sat on a divan in the living room whose windows faced a garden. Siegel came down from the upstairs rooms, settled himself on the divan alongside Smiley, picked up a newspaper.

At that instant a shot rang out and shattered the window, and then several more shots split the quiet of the night. Smiley dived for the floor at the sound of the first shot. Siegel had been hit in the face, over his left eye, in the chest, belly, and groin. The blood poured out of him in streams. He was very dead.

At the precise moment that Siegel died, either coincidentally or by the most exquisite timing ever employed in an underworld execution, four men, Little Moe Sedway among them, walked into the manager's office of the Flamingo Hotel.

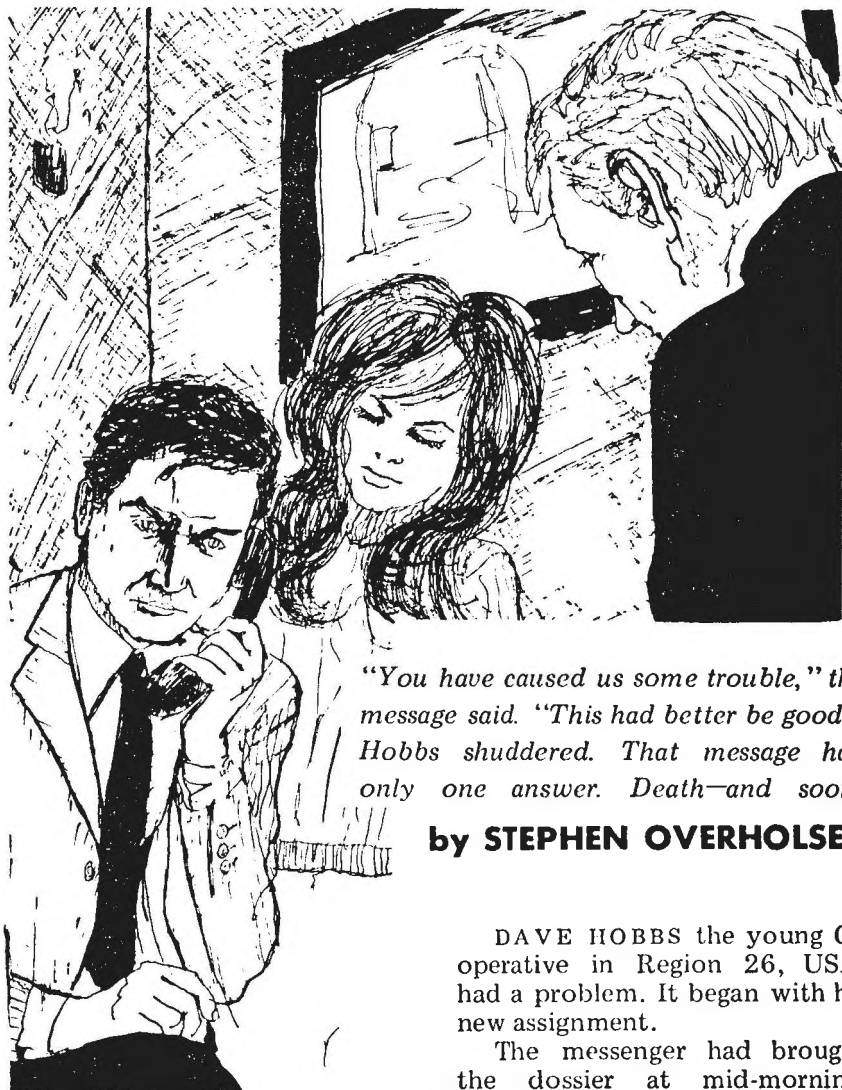
"Move out!" Sedway ordered. "We're taking over!"

Coming Soon:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

MYSTERIOUS MEYER LANSKY by DAVID MAZROFF

Supersecret C4



"You have caused us some trouble," the message said. "This had better be good." Hobbs shuddered. That message had only one answer. Death—and soon!

by STEPHEN OVERHOLSER

DAVE HOBBS the young C4 operative in Region 26, USA, had a problem. It began with his new assignment.

The messenger had brought the dossier at mid-morning.

Hobbs had pulled the blinds on the windows that looked out onto the sidewalk and the street, locked the door, and returned to his desk.

He switched on the high-intensity lamp and methodically read the documents enclosed in the government folder.

It was a Find-This-Man assignment. But there was an unusual complication. The man to be found was an active C4 operative, a male named White.

White's record with C4 made good reading. He was brilliant, a chemist as well as a demolitions and weapons expert, and his achievements in the last decade were very impressive. White apparently never failed. His most recent overseas assignment had been in Area 57—Hobbs looked it up. It was Poland—where he had extracted an internationally known writer named Anoleski from a prison, deposited the man in England, and had come home.

The fact that Anoleski was in the West had created a public sensation, but, ironically, only a few persons in the higher workings of C4 knew that the operation had required a genius like White to make it successful.

Then, according to information in the dossier, White had taken a new assignment in C4, his last. Hobbs looked up the coded job description. White had been working in a department

that organized and catalogued microfilm.

Now, that made a lot of sense. A secretary with a fairly low security clearance could have done the work. Hobbs felt disgusted. White had completed an operation that could well have been described as impossible. His reward? Secretarial work.

That was Hobbs' problem. Before beginning the search for White he must know what was behind that last assignment. Hobbs went through the dossier once again, to be sure that he had missed nothing. Then he telephoned his superior.

"Is there trouble?"

"Yes," Hobbs answered.

"Of what magnitude?"

Hobbs took a breath, then said, "One." That meant the operation could not proceed until the problem was solved. Hobbs hoped that he had not overreacted.

"All right. Be ready in thirty minutes."

In half an hour Hobbs left his basement apartment and stepped out into the hard sunlight that reflected off the sidewalk and off the windshields of passing cars. He climbed into the back of a waiting sedan.

The driver took Hobbs to Morton Air Base on the outskirts of the city. There he boarded a small military jet, a four-seater. In less than twenty minutes the

jet touched down at Andrews Air Base outside Washington, and in another half an hour a black, unmarked Plymouth brought Hobbs to the covered driveway of an apartment house on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was, in fact, almost in sight of the White House.

Hobbs was met at the tall double doors by a middle-aged woman dressed in white. She led him inside. The foyer smelled vaguely of mothballs. Hobbs followed the woman up a carpeted staircase, and into a large high-ceilinged suite. There behind a large desk sat a fat, blank-faced man. His puffy hands lay on the shiny, empty desktop and there was no movement in them. The man himself was perfectly still.

"This way, please," the woman said.

Hobbs followed her through another doorway that led into another suite very similar to the first. A man behind a desk cluttered with papers stood up.

"Thank you," he said to the woman. He held his hand out to Hobbs. "I'm Gerald Smith. Call me Jerry."

Sure, Hobbs thought. I'm Sam Jones. Call me Sammy-boy.

"How was the flight?"

"Good," Hobbs said.

Smiling, Jerry Smith sat down and said, "Your superior instigated emergency procedure to

bring you here. He did so at your request. How come?"

Beneath Smith's pleasant tone of voice and smiling face Hobbs detected another message: *You are a young C4 operative. You have caused us some trouble. This had better be good.*

"It's about White," Hobbs said, trying to organize his thoughts.

"I know," Jerry Smith said. "He's gone. Your assignment is to find out where and to bring him back as soon as possible. So what's the problem?"

Hobbs did his best to politely suggest that it was an incredible waste to have a man of White's genius doing secretarial work in a microfilm office. It didn't make sense.

Jerry Smith was silent, unsmiling when Hobbs finished. Hobbs had the sudden thought that there may be some very simple answer to this, something that any idiot could figure out, and here he was, wasting Jerry Smith's time.

But Smith opened his copy of the White dossier. He turned the pages slowly. "I read White's recent history, but I must confess that I didn't notice the discrepancy. Sometimes the most obvious things escape us, don't they?"

Hobbs did not smile.

Jerry Smith said, "Now, are you suggesting that White was

unhappy with this menial labor and he decided to take his skills elsewhere? That he may have defected?"

Hobbs shook his head. "I'm suggesting that I had better know what is behind this before I start looking for him."

"I see," Jerry Smith said, nodding. "You need more information, don't you?"

Yes, yes, Hobbs thought. But he remained silent.

Jerry Smith picked up the telephone. "Let me speak to Joseph, Region 12." He tapped his fingers on the folder that contained the White dossier. "Joe, this is Jerry. I'm fine. You? Good. Say, about this White case. What? No, we haven't found him yet. I want to know why he was in secretarial work. His abilities were slightly above that, weren't they? Yes, I read the dossier. Yes, Poland. Yes. Oh—well, the report doesn't say that. Why didn't you simply extend his vacation? Oh. I see. Sure, Joe. Okay. Say, did your boy come out of that dose of chicken pox all right? Good. I'm glad to hear it. He's a good kid. Sure. Okay. Good-by."

Jerry Smith put the receiver back on its cradle and looked at Hobbs. "White was the operative who got Anoleski out of Poland. He's a novelist who is in London now."

Hobbs knew that.



Jerry Smith said, "But what you don't know is that the operation was very tough. There was gunplay, some deaths. Well, the upshot is that after White got Anoleski into England, he came back here and reported to Joseph, his superior. And White was a wreck. He shook, he couldn't concentrate, he couldn't even remember his date of birth. Joseph sent him to a psychiatrist, of course. This kind of extreme fatigue is not unheard of.

"And in a month White was back. The psychiatrist prescribed work, good simple work to begin with. Then he would go on to more difficult tasks as his mental prowess increased. It was a matter of building his confidence. So it was for six weeks. Then, five or six days ago, he disappeared. so there you are."

Where? Hobbs thought.

"Are you thinking that he simply ran away?" Jerry Smith asked.

Hobbs didn't like to be second-guessed. He shook his head.

"Oh," Jerry Smith, disappointed. "Well, maybe that's why I never made it as an intelligence operative. I'm too quick to judge." He aimed an index finger at Hobbs. "I'll bet you're thinking about six different things right now, and you're not believing any of them. That's the way a good operative has to work."

You bet, Hobbs thought. I don't believe anything. If I did, I'd probably be promoted.

"Well, now," Jerry Smith said. "We cleared that up. What else can I do for you?"

Hobbs stood, extending his hand.

"Nothing," he said, forcing a smile. "Thanks for your help."

"Think nothing of it," Jerry Smith said. "By the way, Hobbs, what are you thinking?"

"I was thinking that it is going to be rough if the wrong people find out White is gone."

"Oh, yes," Jerry Smith said, "of course. There are some agents who would consider him a fine trophy now, aren't there: Well, good luck, Hobbs."

When Hobbs entered the next suite he was met by the middle-aged woman. She led him

toward the carpeted staircase. But before passing through the second doorway, Hobbs looked back and saw the fat man sitting behind the large desk. He had not moved.

On the return flight Hobbs attempted to recall biographical details contained in the White dossier, but he couldn't keep his mind on it.

Instead he thought about C4—Communications, Section 4. It wasn't the way it was supposed to be. C4 was not a smooth, humming machine. C4 was a government agency. C4 was where the big brass skipped over the simple, obvious things, left pertinent information out of dossiers, and inquired about each other's kids.

All of Hobbs' intensive training when he had first been schooled, physically and mentally, in the skills of espionage now took on the appearance of a joke, a cruel one, and only the lowest ranking members of the agency were unaware of it, and they continually played out the dangerous comedy for the benefit of their superiors. The big brass sat behind desks, got fat, and accomplished nothing.

Hobbs could not bring himself out of this depression. The more he thought of C4, the deeper he sank. And finally in his thinking, he arrived at this question: *Is this what I want to do with my life?*

Hobbs had never known the answer to that. He had always rephrased the disturbing question this way: Given the known alternatives, given what you consider the practicalities of this time and place, is what you are doing now the job you least dislike?

And the answer was yes. C4 operatives led exciting lives. They traveled all over the world. They were well paid. There was no time limit on vacation. Whenever an operative felt he needed a rest, he simply notified his superior.

The little jet touched down, taxied to a hanger, and stopped. Hobbs stepped out of the low cabin and descended a small ramp held steady by an airman.

Crossing the concrete strip on his way to the waiting sedan, Hobbs thought, *White, where are you?*

By noon the next day Hobbs had designed a course of action. The dossier, committed to memory now, listed a woman named Sara Rhodes as White's last known female acquaintance. He would locate her and work from there.

But now he felt some doubts about the accuracy of the dossier. What if the name is misspelled? That possibility had never occurred to him before. And how long ago is 'last known?'

These nagging doubts, Hobbs knew, were the effects of that little jaunt to Washington. For he had learned that mere humans ran C4 from an apartment house on Pennsylvania Avenue. The more knowledge you have, the more doubt you have. His professional life had been much simpler when he had thought that the higher workings of Communications, Section 4 were super-secret and perfect.

Little more than an hour after lunch, Hobbs was on commercial flight to Denver, Colorado, the home of Sara Rhodes. After landing and deplaning Hobbs took a taxi to the last known address of Sara Rhodes.

It was a townhouse complex on a thoroughfare named Colfax. Hobbs spoke with the manager, a grey-haired man who looked like a fox, and learned that Sara Rhodes no longer lived there. She had moved out one week ago with a man.

Hobbs was convinced there would be no forward address. For it was only eight days ago that White had disappeared. But Hobbs was wrong.

Mountain Paradise Chalet was the address she left. It was in Grail, Colorado, a ski resort. The manager went into some detail about the rich folks that went there.

You had to spend money every time you turned around.

Hobbs thanked him for the warning.

Grail, Colorado, Hobbs discovered, was an imitation Swiss village. The lodges and gift shops were built of gingerbread and decorated with candy. So they looked. A gaudy, busy place it was, with music permeating the crisp mountain air, drowing out the sounds of breezes in the pine trees.

The parking lot was full of smoking commercial buses first, then colorful cars topped with ski racks, so that looking back from the raised porch of the Mountain Paradise Chalet, Hobbs' rented sedan with no ski rack looked out of place, looked nude.

Every shop, every lobby, every carefully rustic chair was crowded with people, the beautiful ones. They wore stretch pants, ski boots, and sweaters. Skis and ski poles were carried over shoulders. Hobbs heard the whisper of a nylon parka whenever someone passed by, or the crunch of dry snow underfoot, or the music issuing from gingerbread speakers that were suspended from wires to make you want to knock them down like *pinatas*; but there was never silence.

That evening Hobbs ate a five-dollar hamburger, and began to wonder if White were here after all. Hobbs thought it

unlikely. It would make a great deal of sense to leave a phony trail behind. White, being the professional that he was, would know that the trail would have to be followed. He would gain a small amount of time.

Hobbs finished his coffee. So he had followed the trail. If White wasn't here, he would start over again. He would catch him sooner or later. But first, Sara Rhodes.

Hobbs passed through the lobby of the Mountain Paradise Chalet. Nearly everyone except Hobbs looked alike. And they spoke alike. From snatches of conversation Hobbs had detected the same phrases, the same descriptive terms again and again. And always the music lurked in the background.

Hobbs climbed the stairs of rough-cut lumber, turned down the hall, and glimpsed a woman going into a room across the hall from his own.

It was not until Hobbs unlocked and opened his own door that he felt a terrifying instant of recognition and knew that he had walked into a trap. His stomach went into knots.

I've been set up!

The woman spoke from behind. "Please go in."

"You're Sara Rhodes," Hobbs said, not turning around.

"Go in," she pleaded.

Hobbs felt the gun barrel

pressing into the small of his back. He was surprised at the tone of the woman's voice. It was as if she were saying, *You'll die if you don't do as I say, and please don't die.*

Hobbs went into his room. He turned on the overhead light; and there in a rustic chair beside the bed sat White.

"Are you the only one they sent?"

Hobbs barely recognized the man from the photograph in the dossier. White took a drag from his cigarette, his hand shaking so much that the ash fell to his lap. The ash was nearly the same color as the man's face.

Hobbs felt Sara Rhodes lift his automatic out of his holster. He was confused and his pulse was still pounding. He had never walked into a trap before.

"Talk to him," Sara Rhodes said. "Remember what we said."

"Okay," White said, exhaling a grey haze of smoke. "Listen. I'm getting out of the trade. I've had enough. Too much, I mean. I've been through too much. So I'm getting out."

Hobbs did not speak.

"Don't you understand?" Sara Rhodes asked.

Hobbs looked at her. She was a tall, dark-haired woman. She was lovely.

Looking back at White, Hobbs cleared his throat and said, "C4 will take care of you."

"Yeah," White answered. "They'll put me behind a desk in a padded room."

"You'll get medical help," Hobbs said, but even as he spoke, he remembered the fat man in the apartment house on Pennsylvania Avenue. Was he a former agent who had become a human dummy?

"I got their medical help," White said. "That's not what I need now. I need rest. I need the sun. I need love." He glanced at Sara Rhodes.

"Take a vacation," Hobbs said. "A long one."

"Yeah," White said. "And C4 will give me two little red capsules to swallow when enemy agents catch up with me. Look—what's your name?—look Hobbs, I have no government secrets. I know my superior's code name and telephone number, but that will be changed as soon as C4 knows I'm gone. It's probably been changed already. That's no sweat. The point is I have to disappear. Poof." His fist closed and opened quickly, like a magician's. But the fingers quivered.

White fell silent. He looked tired. Hobbs thought he had lost track of what he was saying.

Finally Sara Rhodes said, "Go on, dear."

White looked up. "I'm asking you to not find me. I'm asking you to fail this time. Sara and I

plan to leave the country. All we ask is to be left alone. I've served my country to the best of my abilities, but now I'm tired and I want to live my own life. All that stands in our way is you. You are the long arm of C4."

Hobbs shook his head. "They'll never close the book on you. You know that."

"No matter," White said. "What I need now is time. All you have to do is go back to your home base and tell your contact that you hit a dead end and you are starting your investigation over again. That's routine. You give me that much time and I promise that you'll never find me. You wouldn't have caught up with me this time if I hadn't arranged it."

Hobbs had to admit that was true.

"Chances are," White said, "that within a week you'll be off on another assignment. C4 will have another man looking for me."

Both Sara Rhodes and White were staring at Hobbs.

Hobbs said, "I don't think you're doing the right thing. Besides C4, there will be enemy agents after you. You need protection."

"Two agents are already here," White said. "I spotted them while I was watching for you. But you're right, I need protection. I'm going to dis-



appear. That's the best kind of protection."

Again Hobbs remembered the fat man behind the desk. Hobbs said, "I'll do it."

Sara Rhodes hugged Hobbs.

White didn't show much emotion.

"Let's drink to it," he said, motioning to Sara.

Sara returned the automatic pistol to Hobbs. She left the room. When she returned, she carried a tray with three drinks.

They drank to the future. White's hand shook as he lifted the glass to his mouth. While Hobbs drank, he wondered if White would spill it.

That is the last thing Hobbs remembered.

At first Hobbs thought the pounding, pounding was deep inside his skull. But it wasn't. He began to realize that someone was knocking at the door. It was loud and annoying. Then he

heard a key slide into the lock on the door—to Hobbs' drugged senses it sounded like a hacksaw on steel—and the door opened. There loomed the desk clerk.

"Hey, buster, why didn't you open the door?"

Hobbs tried to straighten up in the rustic chair and he thought he was smiling politely, but it must have been a silly grin. Everything was far away and too close at the same time.

"What's the matter with you?"

Hobbs wished he knew. He felt all right. His thoughts were clear. But he couldn't speak. And his hearing was too clear. The desk clerk sounded like he was speaking through a megaphone.

When Hobbs moved his head to one side, he saw a whiskey bottle on the night stand. *Thanks, White, thanks a lot.*

The desk clerk snorted. "Look, buster, you can go on all the binges you want, I could care. But since you didn't make arrangements with me, I got to have the rent in advance. You owe a day's rent."

Hobbs didn't owe anything. He tried to speak up, but couldn't.

"I'm giving you half an hour to get yourself together. I don't want to be hard on you. There was a woman asking about you the day you checked in. Maybe she pulled out on you, I don't

know. Was she your wife? Anyway, you got to pay, hear?"

When he was gone, Hobbs started to move. It was difficult. His legs were slow to obey. When he first stood up and took a step, he fell to the floor. Lying there, he thought, *White wasn't taking any chances, was he?*

Hobbs got up again and this time it was easier. The drug was wearing off. He went into the bathroom, looked into the mirror, and did not like what he saw. He said, "Hello, ugly," just to hear his own voice again.

After a shower he shaved. He was surprised at how heavy his beard was. Hobbs dressed and went downstairs.

"Well, you look better," the desk clerk said, "much better."

"Thanks," Hobbs said meekly.

"I know how it goes," the clerk said, holding up his hand. "No need to apologize or anything. Now, let's see, you owe us for two additional days, technically. But I'll only charge you for one day extra."

Hobbs almost protested. But then, remembering how heavy his beard had been, he asked, "What's the date today?"

The clerk failed to suppress a smile. "The 17th," he said.

"I came here—"

"On the 15th," the clerk said. "Say, I wouldn't have let you get behind like this, but since those

people got killed there has been nothing but turmoil around here. This is the first day I've had a chance to get caught up. That's how I found out you were so far behind."

Through a wave of dizziness Hobbs asked, "Who got killed?"

"You must have been out cold, buster," the clerk said. "Nobody knows who they were, not yet. Some man and woman. They got into their car and boom, it blew up. Sky-high. What a mess. It was the Mafia, if you ask me. They're always—say, you don't look so good."

Hobbs didn't feel so good.

"What you need is a good steak," the clerk said.

"Yeah," Hobbs answered. He paid the bill for his room, then tipped the clerk a five-dollar bill.

White. Sara Rhodes.

Hobbs got a steak and a milkshake in the adjoining chalet restaurant, but he didn't eat much of either. He kept thinking of White and Sara. They had plans; they had dreams. And they knew they were going to be happy together.

Hobbs felt responsible. White had left a trail for him to follow. Then White had met with him, had appealed to his decency. But someone else had followed the trail, too, someone who was assigned to eliminate the agent who had embarrassed the Polish government.

Hobbs knew he was going to have to live with those two brutal deaths.

"Uh, Mr. Hobbs?"

Hobbs turned around to see the desk clerk.

"There's a phone call for you." Then he bent down toward Hobbs and whispered, "Maybe it's your wife."

Hobbs left money on the counter and followed the desk clerk back to the lobby.

Hobbs stepped into the booth.

"I'm glad I caught you, sleepyhead."

It was Sara Rhodes!

"We thought you might like to know that we took care of a couple of enemy agents on our way out of Grail. We're okay. We hope we never see you again."

Hobbs heard the sounds of an air terminal. "How did you—"

"Goodbye, love. Thank you."

Hobbs heard the dial tone.

The desk clerk appeared beside him.

"How did it go?"

"What?" Hobbs asked.

"With your wife. Is everything going to be okay?"

Hobbs smiled. "Yeah," he answered. "Everything is going to be okay."

But that isn't what he was thinking. Hobbs, the operative in Region 26, USA, was thinking, *I wonder if I'll ever find myself in White's position?* It was not a good thought to pursue.

*She was lovely. Too lovely
for just one man or even her
last love of all — Death*



winner

take

nothing

by

D. C.

MacLAUGHLIN

IT WAS about nine-thirty on a quiet Saturday morning when a sleek blue Pontiac Catalina drove up the municipal parking ramp behind the Community State Bank of Mapleton. The driver pulled into a parking stall, got out, and deposited a dime in the meter.

He was a husky, handsome young man with dark touseled hair and brilliant blue eyes. His

face was tanned. It was the face of a man sure of himself, sure of what he wanted and his ability to get it. He wore an expensive black suit, a white button-down shirt, and a black tie. Except for the faint scar nicking his right cheek he looked like an affluent lawyer or a rising executive. Or he could have been a professional athlete. It was hard to tell.

He smiled as he walked down

the ramp to the sidewalk and into the lobby of the bank building on West 3rd Street. Most of the offices in the bank building were closed on Saturday. But he knew the man he sought would be working as he had every Saturday morning for years. The young man scanned the bulletin in the lobby until he found the name, *J. MILLER . . . INSURANCE . . . 810*.

Then he stepped into the self-service elevator and whistled softly as the elevator took him up, stopped at the eighth floor and the metal sliding door opened. He got out and walked down a long narrow corridor to a door with a frosted glass window panel and the name, *J. MILLER, INSURANCE*, under the number: *810*. Adjacent was another door of metal, stating in red letters: *EXIT*. He tried that door first.

It opened on a stairway landing, cool, dim, and deserted. He closed the door.

Suddenly there was a noise at the far end of the corridor. The young man looked in the direction of the sound and saw an old janitor emptying waste baskets into a cart on wheels. Silently, he slipped into a men's washroom across the hall from Miller's office until the janitor had gone. While he waited he put on a pair of gloves. The hall was deserted when he came out a few

minutes later and opened the door of the insurance office.

A thin, nervous looking man with thick glasses and a cigar in his mouth was sitting in a chair behind a paper littered desk.

"Hello, Mr. Miller," the young man said.

The thin man, obviously quite a few years older than his visitor, looked up. A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"Good morning." He looked at the young man more closely. "I don't know you, do I?"

"I don't imagine so. I know you though, Miller. My name's Joe Kramer."

"I see. Well, I'm glad to know you, Mr. Kramer. Now if you'll excuse me I have work to do."

"But you don't understand do you, Mr. Miller? I came here this morning specifically to see you. Or more specifically, to kill you!"

Miller laughed uncertainly. "I don't appreciate your sense of humor, friend. If this is some kind of joke, I wish you'd come to the point."

The young man grinned. "I'm not joking. You see, Miller, there is this woman I'm very much in love with who quite unfortunately happens to be your wife."

Miller's jaw dropped open. The color seemed to drain out of his face.

"You didn't know anything about it did you, Miller? Of



course not. We've been quite careful. But I'm afraid the long and short of it is that you're standing between us, old man. And so I don't really have any other choice than to dispose of you."

Miller stiffened. A surprised, incredulous expression of terror crossed his face and the cigar fell

on the desk, scattering sparks and ashes amid the papers.

Kramer slowly walked closer.

Miller pleaded. "Please, please give me a break. You won't gain anything by killing me!"

"On the contrary, Miller," the young man replied frankly. "I have everything to gain."

Miller tried to make a run for it but the younger man was quicker. He caught Miller by the collar with his right hand and at the same time clipped him a left hook in the stomach.

Miller bounced back off the wall and doubled over, raising his arms to protect himself. Kramer quickly grabbed Miller from behind, one hand over his mouth, the other around his waist and dragged the struggling insurance man over to the window. In the process Miller managed to pull Kramer's hand away from his mouth.

"Wait—wait, Kramer!" he screamed. "Don't be a fool! It's no—"

With one violent push, Kramer sent Miller hurtling through the window, spinning and turning over in the air until he smashed down on the pavement eight stores below.

"Sorry about that," Kramer said without emotion.

He walked out of the office, down the stairway and out a back entrance. A few minutes later when he drove past the

bank a small group of excited spectators had gathered around the body. He didn't stop. Now to wait for word from Sandra. As soon as it was safe, she had said.

Joe Kramer spent the rest of the day in Dell City, a small town about twenty-five miles west of Mapleton. He knew people in Dell City and he used most of the day looking up one acquaintance after another in the event that he might need an alibi. About six o'clock that evening he walked into a bowling alley. It was a nice place, owned and operated by his old friend, Tom Delany. Delany was behind the bar.

"Hi, Joe," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Whiskey sour, Tom."

When Delany came back with his drink, Kramer, sitting with both elbows propped on the bar and a bored look on his face

asked: "Well, what's new with you, Tom?"

Delany shrugged. "Oh, nothing much. That deal over in Mapleton today was really something, eh?"

"What deal?"

"That Miller business. It's been on the news two or three times this afternoon."

"What Miller?" Kramer asked nonchalantly.

"Some insurance guy. You knew him, didn't you?" the bartender asked him.

"I know of him," Joe Kramer replied. "I don't know him."

"This is one for the books pal," Delany said. "It seems Miller found out his wife had been playing around with some guy. So this morning he put six slugs into her and then went down to his office and jumped out the window. Eight stories up. Can you beat that?"

Next Month—

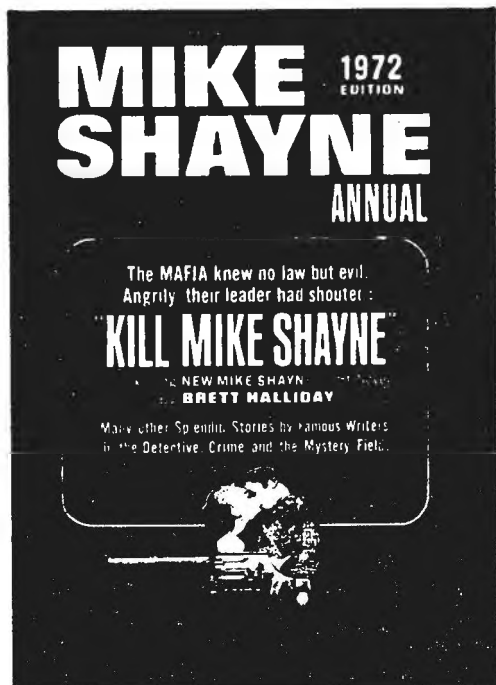
MAJORCAN ASSIGNMENT

by BILL PRONZINI

He was only a kid, but the evil of ages was in his eyes. I saw the girl beside him freeze when I came near. "We need the bread," the kid said. Real bad, man." He turned then and I saw his persuader, the long knife he held...

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A TRULY HONEST MAN

by TALMAGE POWELL

Money, trust, reputation—all these he had stolen from me. Now it was my turn to laugh—and he'd never live to see it.

AS SOON as I got wind of the coming calamity I drove out of Comfort a lot faster than a fellow of my age should. My

destination was a few miles west of Comfort, which is a nice hamlet nestled in the gentle folds of the Smoky Mountains.

The narrow road snaked toward the heights in dizzying hairpin curves. The scenery was something else; wooded peaks, sheer cliffs, blue-misted valleys that seemed depthless with their gossamer veils of wispy cloud swirling below the level of the road.

But right then, I was contrary to the beauties of my native mountains. My recent suspicions of Mr. Randolph P. Fogarty lumped in a painful pulse between my temples.

I gunned my dusty sedan to the upper rim of a miles-long valley. It dropped breathlessly away on my right. To my left, Spurgeon Mountain strained its steep, thicketed slopes on toward the sky. The towering peak was as primitive as in the day of the Cherokee, except for the raw earthen scars Randolph P. Fogarty would leave as painful reminders to us ignorant natives.

I braked the sedan, turning it onto a vast muddy stretch that bulldozers had gouged as a beginning for a huge parking area. I jounced along slowly, twisting the steering wheel to avoid boulders and ruts. From the side window I glimpsed the naked incision that slashed straight up to the mountain's

distant crest, the clearing for the proposed chairlift.

Straight ahead, and already sprouting a few young weeds, were the humps of concrete forms and stanchions, foundations, supposedly, for a building that showed, on paper, as a large souvenir shop and restaurant.

I beaded my eyes on the small travel trailer that had served as a construction site office for Fogarty Enterprises. Fogarty's gun-metal gray Continental was parked beside the office, and my pulse tripped a beat of thanksgiving. At least I could have a private, man to man talk with him before the boom was lowered all the way.

I risked the welfare of the sedan's springs, covering the last fifty yards of ruts, humps, and slits the rains had cut.

I was out of the sedan almost before it stopped pitching and rearing. Getting from under the wheel, I flicked a glance over the scars the 'dozer had made. The mountain seemed so dismal now, so silent with the small crew and machinery trucked away when the work was barely begun. It all added up to a brutish bequest by Fogarty, a disdainful mockery of the big-deal dream he'd painted—

Fogarty must have heard the sedan's engine in the mountain silence, seem me coming. But he chose to ignore me, even when I'd stood a few seconds outside

the trailer-office doorway. He continued to stand imposingly at his desk, gathering up papers and stuffing them into a gold-monogrammed attache case.

A good way to get a mountain man riled is to make out like he isn't there, and I was more than a little riled already.

"Fogarty," I said, stepping into the confines of the low-ceilinged trailer, "I want a few words with you."

He glanced at a couple more documents, slipped one in the briefcase and dropped the other in the general direction of the overflowing trash basket. He shifted his two-dollar cigar with a movement of his lips.

"Make it a few," he said in his stentorian baritone. "I'm busy."

I faced him across the desk. We were sure a mis-matched pair. I was scrawny, gray as a mountain winter from sixty years of living, a little rumped in my store-bought suit, squint-eyed, and red-necked.

Fogarty was about the furthest contrast you could imagine, big, robust, exuding the air of a Philadelphia banker or Wall Street tycoon. He wore an English suit, Italian loafers, a Madison Avenue shirt and tie, and a big, glittering stone on his manicured pinkie. But his stock in trade was his affable, honest looking face, with just enough gray at the temples to give him

the final touch of dependability and last-notch respectability.

It was sure the perfect con man's cover, that face, inspiring instant trust and confidence in even the experienced and wary.

"Fogarty," I said, "I just had lunch with a member of our legal bar, Judge Bine. He mentioned something that kind of posed some questions in my mind."

Fogarty picked up a paper, studied it briefly. "Such as?"

"Are you figuring on a quick action for bankruptcy?"

He smiled. It wasn't like the hearty, genuine looking smiles he'd worn for Comfort. It was a little ugly. "Do you believe every bit of lunch table gossip that comes your way?"

"As head of the Comfort Savings and Loan Association I'm concerned with anything you do with our depositors' money," I reminded him.

He gave me the impatient look of a really big man dismissing a worm.

"I'm sure," he said with mild scorn, "that you've spent every night biting your nails since you made the loan."

I leaned toward him and gripped the edge of the desk. "I didn't loan you a hundred thousand dollars of other people's money entrusted to the care and keeping of the Comfort Savings and Loan Association. It was the board that you conned

into the loan, Fogarty. The poor, pitiful group of hillbillies you bedazzled with your manner, your talk, your wining and dining, your fancy plans for turning Spurgeon Mountain into a sure-fire gold-mine tourist attraction."

Our eyes locked. His lost a little of their calm self-assurance. Every word I'd said was true, and Fogarty knew it. He'd despised me from the start because I'd glimpsed behind his front. I'd held out, but he'd turned the savings and loan board against me.

I remembered their joshing just before the vote was taken: "You getting old and cranky, Lemuel?"... "Catch up with the times, Lemuel. The Spurgeon Mountain development as a tourist playground can't miss."... "Sure, Lemuel, look at what they've done around Blowing Rock and Maggie Valley near Asheville."... "Not to mention Gold Mountain and Tweetsie Railroad."... "We'll have 'em by the station wagon load when Mr. Fogarty completes the chairlift, the mountaintop golf course, the frontier village, the open air amphitheater."... "Every summer, Lemuel, Comfort will bust at the seams with tourists and their money."... "It ain't like he was asking us to foot the whole bill."... "That's right, Lemuel,

he's just asking us for a piddling hundred thou."

So, it had gone. Piddling hundred thou, my foot! I'd looked about the board room table at their faces, struck a little dumb at the way Fogarty had shifted their way of thinking.

"Fogarty," I said bluntly, "what have you done with our money?"

Neither of us let our eyes waver or drop. His fancy cigar had gone out, but he hadn't noticed.

"Unfortunately, Lemuel, I made some bad investments." Pointedly, he hadn't called me. Mr. Hyder, but Lemuel, in the tone of a man permitting a mountain hooger to shine his shoes or carry his golf bag.

"Or some mighty good investments," I suggested. "Maybe in a numbered Swiss bank account?"

That little shot in the dark got to him. He couldn't quite hide the flicker deep in his eyes.

"What makes you say a thing like that?" he probed.

"You," I said. "You, being what you are. I think it was your goal from the beginning. You staked out yourself a bunch of naive hillbillies with a nestegg who were ready for the taking. I don't think you ever intended to go further on Spurgeon Mountain than you've gone." I jerked a thumb toward the window.

"And you sure haven't gone more than five or six thousand out there. Just some motions, to pave the way for the next act, a bankruptcy action while the loot is safely salted away somewhere out of reach."

He studied me a moment. Then he reached with his soft right hand and nudged my splayed hands from the papers on his desk. He did it like he was picking up a dirty bug.

"I don't like you, Lemuel Hyder," he said, "but I'll have to admit I admire you more than I do the rest of them."

"Then you're admitting the truth of what I say?"

Towering over me, his eyes crinkled with a sort of warped pleasure. Not liking me, he was enjoying this moment and the chance to rub it in.

"Why not?" he said. "It's salted away, all right. But not necessarily in a numbered Swiss account. There are any multitude of choices where to tuck money if you know the angles."

I felt even sicker at heart. Somehow, I'd hoped in the back of my mind that he would tell me the bankruptcy caper wasn't really true. I'd wished for him to say that the setback and work stoppage was just temporary, that Spurgeon Mountain would blossom and glitter and show a neon face to happy crowds.

He rolled his cigar in his lips,

savoring the grayness of my wizened face more than the taste of expensive tobacco. "Does knowing help, Lemuel? Or hurt, perhaps?" He bent his head to look at me a little closer. "You poor fellow, it does hurt! And not a thing you can do about it, is there? If you repeated my admission, I would simply deny it. You've no witnesses. Just you and me up here on Spurgeon Mountain. Your word against mine."

I couldn't talk for a little while. I guess we both ached with his sense of victory, only in totally different ways.

"Fogarty," I pleaded gently, "it isn't as if you were conning some rich kid. Comfort can't afford what you've done."

"My heart bleeds, Lemuel."

"Comfort ain't much of a town, Fogarty. But it's people. nice, quiet people."

"Sticks and clods," he said.

"Ain't a soul in Comfort wouldn't help you fix a flat or give you a meal and lodging if you lost your wallet."

"Suckers," he decided.

I moved around to the back corner of the desk. "Fogarty will you really be able to enjoy it?"

"I always enjoy fat living," he assured me with a big, maddening smile.

"Maybe I ought to tell you how it was," I said.

"I'm really not interested, Lemuel."

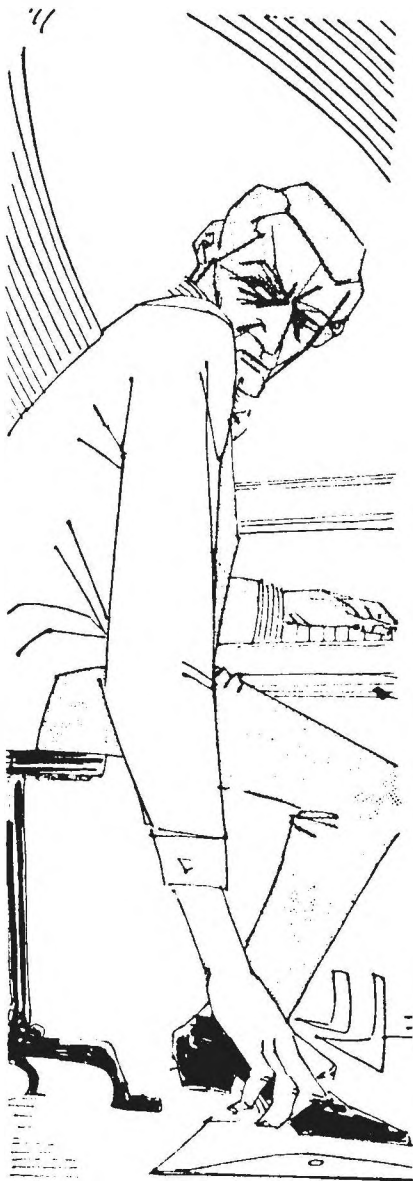
"It was depression times," I said, "and I started the savings and loan because Comfort needed it. Thirty-five or more years ago, I started it. With a few dollars of my own and the trust of good people, Fogarty."

"If a woman eked out an extra dollar selling eggs, she trusted it to me. A man plowed a neighbor's field for a fiver he could scrimp by without and he would put it on deposit where it would grow a little and do some good. We loaned money to a man to buy a milk cow, a tractor to replace a mule, seed corn to change a fallow hillside, and houses. Not mansions, Fogarty, but small, decent houses to people who needed them."

I paused to take a breath. "That's Comfort Savings and Loan, Fogarty. That's the outfit you're robbing, the little back-stop for the people of Comfort that'll go under itself the day you go bankrupt. A hundred thou is a great big passel of money to us, Fogarty."

"If you're quite finished, Lemuel, I've other things to do," Fogarty said.

"Nope," I said. "I came here to collect the people's money, and that's what I aim to do. Me and the rednecks of Comfort, Fogarty, we never let each other down yet. And I don't fancy that



today is the proper date to start doing so."

His eyes became dark, wholly nasty. "Get out of here, you paltry little ass!"

"That's your last word, Fogarty?"

"You and the coon hunters of Comfort wouldn't know what to do with your hundred grand if I gave it back!" he spoke in rising rage. "And my last word is—get lost!"

He moved a hand toward his desk drawer. As he jarred it open, I glimpsed a revolver inside. A revolver is always a strong argument, but he'd had his say and I didn't see any point in further debate.

Before his hand could reach the gun, I'd already hauled off and let him have one on the side of the jaw. I was so small and quick he never saw it coming.

He staggered back from his desk, his eyes suddenly bulging. I hit him three more times like a rattler, which is also small, striking. He never knew where the punches came from.

Big, soft fellow, I thought as I stood over his prone bulk. Big, soft bully, losing all his candy.

I hadn't even worked up a sweat, and Fogarty was lying there on his big, broad back, his mouth gaping, his jaws reddening where my fists had struck.

He groaned and tried to stir. I put a stop to that by picking up

a heavy quartz paperweight, which I'd noticed on his desk, and bending over him and banging him on the left temple.

He gave no trouble at all after that, except for his weight. It took me nearly thirty minutes to drag him across the parking area and on across the road and right to the edge of a precipice that overlooked the beautiful, serene valley.

Below the precipice, the cliff fell straight down for a thousand feet. I gave Fogarty the final push, kneeling beside his unconscious bulk. Still on my knees, I craned my head over the edge and watched him fall. Down and down. Turning, twisting. Through the wispy gossamer veil of cloud. Down a thousand feet to the stones at the base of the cliff.

Driving back to Comfort, I noticed that my lunch was settling pretty good. At my afternoon coffee break, I decided, I'd have a piece of that fine apple pie in Mom Roddenberry's restaurant.

My first stop of course was the sheriff's office. Gaither Jones, the lank deputy, was on duty.

I stood beside his desk, shaking my head sadly. "Terrible accident, Gate. One minute Mr. Fogarty, all excited, was running about, showing me where he planned a pavillion overlooking

the valley. And the next—pore fellow; the shale looked solid, but the edge crumpled under his feet, and a-fore I could reach him, Mr. Fogarty was falling.”

Gate, in the act of rising, was frozen for a second. “All the way down?”

“Plump to the bottom,” I said. “Gate, you better take a couple men out there and blot up what’s left of our friend Mr. Fogarty.”

Gaither reached for his hat, and bounded from the office.

I walked out, traded friendly nods with good folks I’d known a lifetime as I hurried along the sidewalk. A block further on, I turned into my own office. I had to pause a moment and look at the lettering on the front window: *Comfort Savings and Loan Association*. I must say that the gold leaf looked a lot brighter than it had when I’d driven out of town.

Business was moving along at its normal pace as I passed through the large outer room. An overalled farmer, stained with honest toil, was making his monthly savings deposit at the single teller’s cage. A young man and wife were discussing a loan with Jed Markham at his desk.

Jed started to rise and ask a question when he looked up and saw me.

“Later, Jed,” I said. “Got something else on my mind right

now. And you treat those young folks right, hear me?”

With a wave of the hand, I went through the doorway at the rear. It provided entry to my private office, which was wedged in a portion of the building beside the board room.

Miss Meffort, the tall, spare, no-nonsense woman who has been a most efficient secretary to me for twenty-five years, was busily typing. She greeted me with a short but friendly nod as I moved on to my old walnut desk in the corner.

I picked up the phone, rocked back in my swivel chair, and called Judge Bine. I told him to forget about Randolph P. Fogarty’s preliminaries for bankruptcy. “Just keep the whole thing under your hat, Judge. Fogarty won’t be petitioning, and sleeping dogs never bit anybody or howled any questions.”

I knew it was all I had to say. The judge would understand, at least a little of it, in due time.

Comfort, as Fogarty should have realized, is more than a town. It’s an organism, you might say. And the cells work together to fight a hint of cancer.

I put the phone down and sat there with my fingers laced across my flat, trim stomach, content to listen to the everyday music of Miss Meffort’s typewriter.

But there was still work to do.

"Miss Meffort, bring your pad, please. I have to dictate a letter."

A brisk flick of movement, Miss Meffort was seated in the secretary's chair beside my desk, pencil poised for shorthand.

"The letter is to Amalgamated and Consolidated Life Insurance Company of Dixie," I said.

That brought a startled look from her, a most unusual reaction, seeing as how Miss Meffort is a real cucumber when it comes to coolness.

"Yes, Miss Meffort," I sighed.

"Like any reputable institution loaning money we've insured every borrower for the amount of his loan over all the years. There has been, I fear, an accident. A fatal accident. So we

must file a claim for a hundred thousand dollars with ACLIC of Dixie to repay in full the loan which Mr. Randolph P. Fogarty took with us some weeks ago."

"My goodness!" Miss Meffort said. She'd have questions later, but she'd await them until the completion of business.

In the moment before I started dictating the letter that would put a hundred thousand back in our vaults, ready for usage by deserving customers, I experienced a strange flicker of fondness for Mr. Fogarty. Alive, he'd been a smooth con man, his front covering the dirtiest of crooks. Dead, he was surely the most honest man I knew, repaying to the final penny his indebtedness to Comfort Savings and Loan Association.

In the Next Issue—

THE CINDER MAN

A New Sam Culp Thriller

by JEFFREY M. WALLMANN

Once more a Sam Culp story of terror, the kind Jeffrey Wallmann can do so diabolically well. Follow him—if you dare—to where a charred horror that had been a man stared sightlessly into the dark as though seeking his ghoulish companion—Murder...



THE FRAME

She had seen a lot of life, that
faithless wife of mine. I
nodded. Soon—soon she would
see something of death.

by
M. A. KINGMAN

THE CROWD was already
gathering for the trial.

Murder—beautiful young wife
—husband arrested.

The morning paper quoted his
violent denials, alternating with
mute states of deep depression.
The picture showed Williard Lees
crouched in his cell, his hands
over his face, his head bowed. A
small man, of uncertain age,
surely years older than his young
wife, pictured in a teasing, or was
it a taunting mood, her bright
blonde head tilted, her smile
provocative.

Neighbors testified they often
heard angry voices from their
apartment, his pleading or
threatening, hers defiant.

"They always argued," said
the woman across the hall,
"about going out in the evening.
He wanted to stay at home, or go
for a quiet drive. But she wanted
to go out to eat, or to a show.
"Where the crowds were!", she
said. Men, she meant, if you ask
me!" But no one asked her.

The woman's husband said he
felt sorry for the little guy.
"Always puttering around, fixing

doors and windows, or pulling up weeds. Worked every day and got home on time every night. Always doing chores for her, like going to the store. He went to work by bus, leaving her have the car for beauty shops or drive-ins, or whatever. Like she said, 'Where the crowd was.' Where the action was, I'd say."

"No opinions," he was told, "just facts from actual observation."

"I worked with her before she got married," said a curb girl from the Tip Top Drive-In. "She got more tips than any of us. Fellows liked her but never got serious. Just wanted her for a good time girl. And she went out with all the wild ones."

"She wanted to quit work, she said, and have time on her own. With someone to work for her for a change."

"Did you know the man she married?"

"This little guy always came in for a sandwich and coke, and just sat and stared at her. Gave her big tips. And finally asked her if she had any regular boy friend. He knew they all liked her, and she went out a lot."

"Did he spend any money on her, besides tips?"

"He got to bringing her little gifts, like a bottle of cologne, or some flowers. Or a piece of costume jewelry. She loved ear rings and flashy pins. He always

parked where he could watch her, just sitting in the car. An old car, but in good shape. With the minimum mileage, I'll bet.

"But she built up his mileage, letting him take her to roadside restaurants and down to the beach, I guess."

"No guesswork," said the examiner. "Just what you saw and heard."

"I used to see her regular at the beauty shop," said the manicurist. "She'd use the phone or get a phone call when she was getting her nails done. And she'd take a lot of time on make-up. She got her stuff from us. But married to him, old enough to be her father, I couldn't blame her for going out with younger fellows."

"But you never really saw her with anyone else?"

"No, not really, but the other girl said she heard—"

"Stick to facts," the lawyer said.

Then the judge came, and after routine formalities, the trial began, with Williard Lees on the stand, where he writhed under the questioning of the district attorney.

"This man you saw running down the stairs, after you found the body of your wife! Was he dark or fair? Short or tall?"

"Medium size, he was. With kind of gray hair."

"How old?"



"Middle-aged, maybe." The prisoner stopped and stared with fixed and lusterless eyes. "I saw only the shadow of him running."

"Did you see his face?"

"Once. When he passed a window. Sideways."

"Were his features clean cut? Was he close shaven?"

"I don't remember." Lees faltered, his voice fading away.

"You're sure you wanted to catch this man?"

"I wanted to know why he did it," the prisoner cried, covering his eyes with his hands.

"How do you know he was the one who killed your wife?"

The prisoner's body shook with sobbing, as he answered, "I wanted to catch him. And ask him why. My beautiful wife, so little and so young."

"How much younger than you?"

"Twenty years. She liked older men, like her father." He shouted defiantly, "She loved me—only me!"

"This man running. Was he older than you?"

"I don't know. But he seemed to be afraid."

"How could you know that? When you couldn't see him?"

"The way he ran, faster and faster." His fingers drummed in a matching tempo, on the arm of his chair.

"When did you lose sight of him?"

"When I fell," the prisoner whispered.

"Did you black out? Or did you stumble and strike your head?"

"I don't know. My wife is dead. My beautiful wife!" Lees stopped and stared again. "And then I saw this man running."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"Some place. I don't know where." His voice grew thin and high. "I can't remember!"

"You know who he is! And you won't tell!"

"No! No!"

"You're protecting your wife and her young lover!"

"I'm not! I'm not!" he shrieked again. Suddenly his voice broke. "I'll try to remember. He shouldn't have done it."

His eyes blinked. Tears ran down his haunted face.

"Why did you leave your wife to run after this man? A doctor might have saved her."

"I can still see her lying there!" Lees covered his eyes, his hands shaking.

The attorney came close to

lean over his shrinking figure. "How did you know she was dead? What did you do when you found her?"

"I called her and she didn't answer. I shook her and she fell limp." As the prisoner swayed slowly back and forth, his hands suddenly seemed to form a compulsive rhythm.

"She was dead. So I ran—for help," he sobbed. "Then I saw this man, and I wanted to kill him," he shouted.

"Was *this* the man, *this man in the picture?*" The district attorney held it close to the prisoner's face.

"Yes! Yes!" screamed the accused, as he struck the frame from his grasp.

Williard Lees buried his face in his hands, as the mirror crashed to the floor.

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THE FAT MAN

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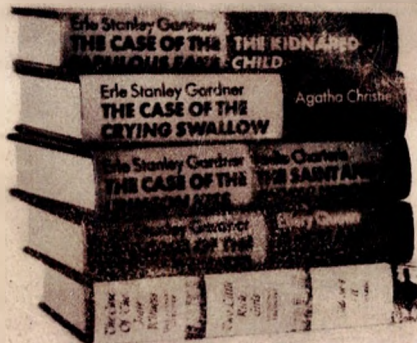
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