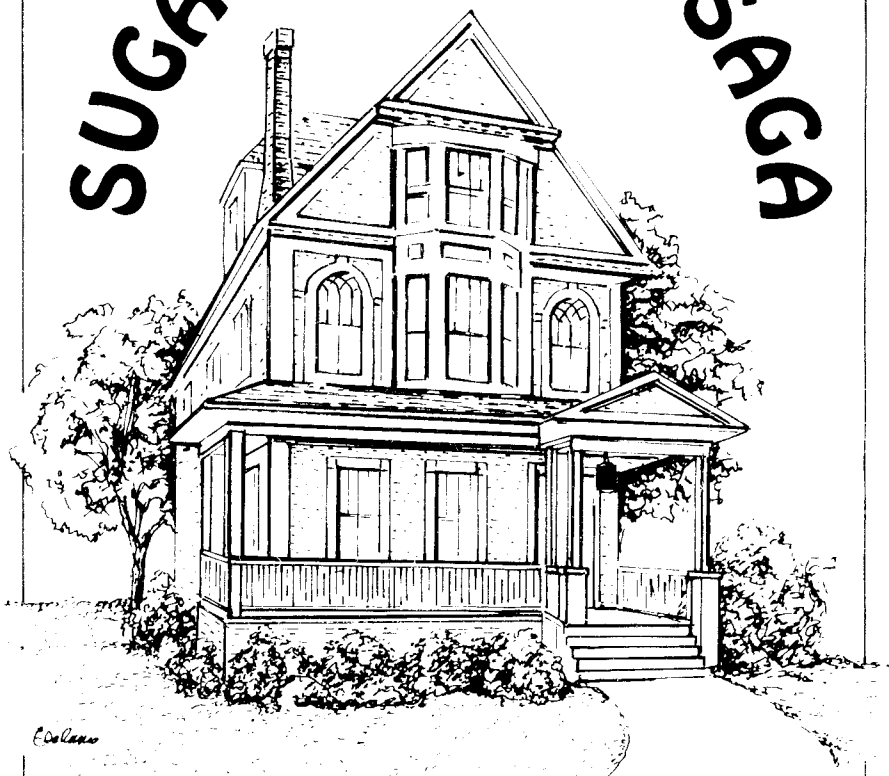


SUGAR VALLEY SAGA



By America's Master of Literary Humor

**CARROLL
GAMBRELL**

AUTHOR OF THE KUDZU CHRONICLES

Sugar Valley Saga

Carroll Gambrell



Quotations from *THE WRECK OF THE HESPERUS*, by H. W.
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Dedication. . .

To my three aunts, the Ritter Sisters, who never allowed me to be
homesick:

Bertie Mae, who loved me and gave me her spare change.

Frankie, the big sister I never had, who read to me.

Teener, who scrubbed me 'til the hide was gone, and told me tales I never
forgot.

Eternal love and gratitude . . .

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The Houghton Library, Inc. for permission to quote from H. W. Longfellow's immortal *THE WRECK OF THE HESPERUS*.

Special Thanks:

To Charlie Rudder, Professor of Philosophy at the local college, who set out to help—and did; who meant to be a friend—and is; and whose words and deeds are one.

And . . .

To Rich Oliver for his timely comments and skillful editing.

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Dramatis Personae . . .

In The Valley

Elwood Larkin Floyd Bates' friend & cousin
Floyd Bates Elwood Larkin's cousin & friend
Minnie Larkin Elwood's aunt
June Bates Floyd's mama, Elwood's aunt, Minnie's sister
Charlene and Darleen Daggett Twins, Vamp and Victorian
Chico Alvarez Y Scalia O'Keefe Proprietor of Chico's
Charley Foster Sawmill Owner, Bootlegger
Bobby Sue Foster Charley's daughter
Aaron Ledbetter Hound Dog Man
Mitch Harris another one
Eli Watts Parsimonious Deacon
Reverend Ossie Knowles Pastor of Saint's Delight
Reverend J. P. Waddelston, Jr. Visiting Preacher
Alphonse "Big Al" Scarpelli "College Professor"
Michael "Red Nose" O'Kelly another one
Duke Burton Texas Oil Well Flunkey
Shortoff Elwood's hound
Prucilla Ugly Red's blue tick
Cyclops Buzzard's one-eyed goat

In Luthersville

Judge Howland M. Friday County Judge
Jake Crabbe, M. D. Country Doctor
Loney Adams, R. N. Nurse Midwife
Sam Hundley Sheriff of Keowee County
Raleigh Gates Chief Deputy
Tiny Bohannon Genial Strong Man
Rooster Bohannon Tiny's older brother

In Vulcan City

Bo Burroughs, M. D. Internist, Chief of Staff

Maggie Mae Orr Secretary to Dr. B.
 Penny Parker, R. N. Nurse
 Mortimer Maxwell Money, M. D. Ambitious Incompetent
 Madame Zarelda Gypsy Queen and Palmist
 Mischa Son of Madame Z
 Mrs. Gideon Vanderwort "House Mother"
 Wilfred Dillard Big City Police Chief
 Solly Goldstein Kosher Deli Owner
 Durward P. Hicks ex-PFC, US Army, WWI
 Reuben C. Finchert "Congersman"
 Sgt. Gunther "Gunboat" Wiggins Veteran Cop
 Patrolman Norby Finch Station Cop
 Sgt. Liam O'Doul Jailer
 Lt. Harry Cain Homicide Detective
 Alderman Julius Caesar Dorf Crooked Politician
 Sonny Dorf Alderman's Son
 Angel Thug
 Augie Thug
 Baldy Thug
 Rodin, The "Professor" Counterfeiter
 Slick Rick Unlucky Hood
 Arthur Sudds Chairman CGP
 Marsha Fritts Vice-Chairperson CGP

The Swamp Buzzards

Rock Top Radley Leader, Lead Guitar
 Ugly Red Wilkins Harmonica, Piano
 Bucksnot Bailey Drums
 Night Rider Robinson Bass
 Mikki "The Mouse" Oshahara Kamakaze Banjo
 Abdul "Camel Driver" Rothchild Rhythm Guitar

The Girls

Valerie Redhead
 Carlotta Brunette
 Hildegard Bleached Blonde
 Claudette Copper-Blonde
 Natasha Dark russian
 Roxanne Shirley Temple Blonde

Preface . . .

Mountains have a tendency to shape the people who live among them. This is certainly true of the southern Appalachians. We have had the honor of knowing some of those folks, and moving among them. We have enjoyed their wit, eaten their food, heard their tales, and joined in their music-making; and we might, in a weak moment, have sipped just a little of their white lightning—which they assured me was just “tuning oil.”

A good many adjectives come to mind in describing these folks. Witty, clear-eyed, hard working, self-reliant, intelligent, independent and innocent are a few. You might throw in stubborn, conservative and “sot in their ways,” if you like; however these are not always negative characteristics. They know right from wrong, and what works and what doesn’t.

The Blue Ridge and Smokies have given us doctors, jurists, writers, teachers, bootleggers, soldiers, statesmen, music and art. The nation and the world are richer for it.

A word of caution should you ever cross Stumphouse Ridge above Luthersville and find yourself in Sugar Valley: never mistake lack of letters for lack of learning, or an abundance of innocence for an absence of intellect.

Carroll Gambrell
Near Luthersville
August 1992

Prologue

AARON LEDBETTER'S old blue tick, Maggie, bayed across the hollow in answer to Mitch Harris' big Plott hound, Rolly. The crisp still air carried sound well, and the news of a full moon rising was telegraphed up and down the valley. Hound dogs at each cabin site took up the chorus in ululating cadence and sent it on.

Smoke from the cabins and stills hung low over Sugar Valley, reflecting in velvet tones the bright moonlight that outlined the Blue Ridge from Rabun Bald on the west to Hogback on the east. There would be frost in the morning.

From Molly's Nose above the valley, an observer could spot at least a dozen cabin sites from the pinpoints of light that filtered through the thin layer of smoke; and several more, hidden by trees and the undulations of the round hills, could be located and identified by the peculiar voices of their respective hounds.

The brightest light of all came from a place where no hound dogs bayed. It was from Saint's Delight Church, established in 1783 by the Valley's first settlers. From its spire, piercing slightly above the haze, pealed the ancient bell, announcing the fourth night of its annual two-week revival meeting. At this place gathered the most pious souls, mostly women, old men and reluctant children, as well as the guilt-ridden seeking a cleansing through public confession and the visiting preacher's thundering exhortations, which were calculated to scare the hell out of anybody.

Notably absent from the congregation were various stalwarts who found the primordial baying of the dogs more compelling than the summons of the church bell. Having already either taken care of their sins at previous meetings, or not being particularly conscious of any, they chose to gather that night at Molly's Nose.

First to arrive was Floyd Bates, dark, wiry, khaki-clad, and in his twenties; he was soon joined by a tall ginger-headed young man his own age. "You're runnin' late, Elwood," the dark man spoke softly. "I'd about decided you were gone to Revival."

"Not with that moon out," his friend answered. "Rest of 'em will be here shortly. Let's get up a fire."

They gathered up fire wood and had a roaring fire going by the time the others arrived. It was a night for hunting. Not a 'coon in the Valley could hope to pass the evening unmolested.

1

Bears, Boars And Blue Ticks

WAKE UP, ELWOOD! It's gettin' daylight. The milkin' ain't been done; you got hogs to slop, an' Floyd's done been by to tell you they're gonna run the sawmill today."

Elwood wanted nothing more than to burrow into his goose down mattress and sleep the rest of the day—or maybe forever—but he knew he couldn't. Aunt Min wouldn't let him. She didn't sound much like she would allow even ten more minutes, which wouldn't do him any good anyway.

Outside his window General Jackson crowed. Elwood cracked one eye and sat up. The figure of Aunt Min loomed in the doorway but Elwood couldn't quite bring her into focus.

She was a large strong woman in her early sixties, with greying hair that had once been flame-red, a granite jaw, a mouth that had laughed a lot, and frosty blue eyes with merry crows-feet wrinkles at the corners. Those eyes had a way of peering at you on a dead level, giving the impression she wouldn't back away from a Russian bayonet charge. That would have been a correct assessment.

"Come on," she said. "Old Jackson's done crowed. Sun's comin' up."

Elwood put his feet on the floor and looked out the window once again. It was pitch dark. The early moon had already set.

"How's that dang chicken know what time it is?" he muttered to himself.

"Same way earthworms know it's dark, an' time to come out of the ground," she called from the kitchen.

"That woman's got ears like a fox," Elwood thought. He had better sense than to say that out loud, but figured Aunt Min would probably hear him thinking it anyway. He was right.

"If'n you don't want me to hear it, don't say it," she called. "Come on. Breakfast is ready."

The smell of chicken frying and hot biscuits in the oven made the prospects of the day seem maybe not quite so bad. Elwood buttoned a flannel shirt over his long-johns, pulled on his overalls, stuck his feet in his brogans, and dragged himself to the kitchen where Aunt Min was dishing up the gravy.

"Grits in the pot," she said, motioning toward the wood-burning range.

Elwood drank a dipper of water from the well bucket before helping himself to a breast and drumstick, four biscuits and a couple of big spoonfuls of grits. Covering it all with gravy, he sat down and began to eat. He still couldn't focus too well, and he ached in every bone in his body.

"Elwood, are you hung over?" Aunt Min asked not unkindly, but matter-of-factly.

"I ought not to be, Aunt Min," Elwood said. "I ain't had that much. Charley Foster had a jug with him but there was seven of us pullin' on it. Weren't enough to get us drunk."

"A jug of the stuff Charley makes would put a herd of buffalo on the ground," Aunt Min huffed.

"I only had a couple of pulls before the dogs struck. After that I didn't get no more," Elwood replied.

"You sure?" Aunt Min said skeptically.

"Aunt Min, I wouldn't lie to you," Elwood said, a little hurt.

"No, you wouldn't," Aunt Min said, satisfied, but still puzzled why Elwood was feeling so bad.

"Sides, them dogs was carryin' on so, I forgot all about Charley's jug. They got plumb outta hearin' 'fore they turned an' we heard 'em comin' back. Me an' Floyd took off after them, but I couldn't keep up."

"You must of been drunk, then," Aunt Min said. "You could always stay ahead of Floyd."

"I know, but I had to stop and pee every ten minutes; and I was so thirsty I near 'bout drank Spangler's Run dry."

"That stuff of Charley's must of been more powerful than I thought."

"I finally sat on a stump awhile; then I came on home an' went to bed. I was wore out."

"I wondered why I never heard you come in," Aunt Min said. "You got home 'fore I did."

Elwood looked up from his nearly empty plate as if he had just thought of something. "Where's that preacher, anyway?" he asked. Since Aunt Min boasted of having the best spare room in the valley, it was her proud duty to act as hostess to the visiting clergy, much to her rival, Sadie Brewster's, chagrin.

"He's wore out, too," Aunt Min said. "I thought he ought to sleep late."

"What's he wore out from—passin' the collection plate?" Elwood said. He thought that since the preacher always got the biggest piece of chicken, he ought to at least slop the hogs.

"Hush! You'll wake him up an' he'll hear you," Aunt Min cautioned. "'Sides, he worked harder than you did last night."

"What did he do that was harder than runnin' up the side of a mountain through a laurel thicket?" he asked indignantly.

"I don't know about no laurel thicket, but he flat ran through a briar patch," Aunt Min said.

His curiosity piqued, Elwood asked, "What are you talkin' about, Aunt Min?"

"If you'd a-gone to meetin' with me last night like you oughta, instead of chasin' a pack of hounds all over the country, you wouldn't have to be askin' so many questions."

"Well, for cryin' out loud, tell me why he ain't up a-sloppin' the hogs 'stead of snoozin' away on our best mattress," Elwood said with a touch of asperity.

"In the first place, he threw hellfire and damnation at them what needed it most but weren't there to hear it—on account of they were out listenin' to dogs agitate critters what's better off left alone durin' preachin'," she retorted. "'Fore he got done he was wringin' wet, his shirttail was out, his coat and tie done got flung off, his pants was a-hangin' on by one suspender, an' he was a-standin' on six inches of one britches leg. That's just one thing you missed."

"That still don't 'splain why he ain't sloppin' the hogs," Elwood maintained, not quite as firmly as before.

"You ain't heard it all, yet," Aunt Min said. "He had just come to the Judgment Day part, yellin' 'Gabriel, blow your horn!' when some dum fool blowed a foxhorn right in front of the church door."

"That must of been Floyd. He had his Pa's old cowhorn," Elwood said.

"Well, it dum near emptied the church," Aunt Min said seriously, but her eyes twinkled. "He couldn'ta blowed it at no worse time, but the preacher finally got 'em settled—that is, all 'ceptin' Deacon Watts. He went out the window and up that big tall white pine, an' wouldn't come down. I guess he

figured if'n it were the Judgment Day, he'd have a head start on the rest of us up that tree."

"Floyd was tryin' to turn them dogs," Elwood said, excusing his friend.

"Well, he turned 'em all right," Min said. "They come straight to him—both packs."

"Both packs?"

"Yeah, both packs. It seems the front dogs jumped, then the dogs that was behind 'em jumped somethin' else afore they caught up to the first ones, and took off after it."

"No wonder they was so scattered."

"They might have gotten scattered, but they come together time they hit the meetin' house door," Aunt Min said.

"Hit the door!" he exclaimed.

"Took 'em right off the hinges," Aunt Min said, "yessir, clean off."

"Oh Lord! Did they get the 'coons?"

"You think just 'cause you ain't thinkin' nothin' but 'coons, that's all them dogs'll chase?"

"I know they won't chase squirrels or rabbits when they're after 'coons, but they might get after a deer if they hit one," Elwood said, defending the honor of the pack.

"They weren't no deer, squirrels nor bunny rabbits come a-bustin' through that door," Aunt Min said. "I wisht it hadda been. The preacher might be sloppin' the hogs now."

"Aunt Min, what had they jumped?"

"Well, first thing come through the door was about a five-hundred-pound bear—"

"A bear!"

"Don't interrupt me; right behind it was one of them Rooshin' boars—"

"Rooshian bo—"

"—an' about twenty-five bayin' hound dogs with a bunch of no-good drunken sinners a-shoutin' an' a-runnin' after 'em," Aunt Min said, with just a faint note of enjoyment. "It was purty excitin' for awhile, I'm tellin' you. That bear flattened those doors like pancakes. Bam! I liked to of jumped outta my skin."

"A bear!" Elwood said.

"Yeah, an' a hog," Aunt Min chuckled.

"And a hog . . ." his voice trailed off.

"An' they shot up that aisle with all them dogs after 'em right when the preacher had just give the invitation for the sinners to come down the aisle an' get Saved."

"Down the aisle?" Elwood said weakly.

"Yeah, but the preacher didn't hang around long enough to offer 'em his hand, ner pray for 'em either."

"What did he do?" Elwood asked.

"What would you of done?" Aunt Min said. "He bolted out the back way fast as he could."

"Aunt Min, that meetin' house ain't got no back way," Elwood said, hoping she'd been pulling his leg all along.

"It does now," she said. "He went slam through the back wall, splinters a-flyin' everywhere, and lit out down the holler with that bear and hog, forty yowlin' dogs, and a pack of drunk yenas right on his tail; but by the time they got to Squire Hadley's pasture fence, he was a-runnin' third, with yo' dog, Old Shortoff, a-nippin' at his heels. The fence woulda probably stopped him if the bear hadn't of flattened it when he went through. As it was, he didn't stop 'til he hit that big briar patch just this side of Hogan's. That's where Old Shortoff caught 'im, an' we like to of never pried that durn dog a-loose from the preacher's shin-bone."

"Yeah, that Shorty is a little bit slow about catchin' on sometimes," Elwood admitted.

"Slow! If'n he was any slower you'd have to catch him backin' up," Aunt Min said. "Anyway, I brought Brother Waddelston back here and patched him up. He was a mess. It took some stitches, but I give him a couple of slugs of Charley's panther juice an' he never felt a thing. I'll patch his britches for him 'fore meetin' tonight. You comin'?"

"I ain't sure I could take it," Elwood said.

"It'll be a heap tamer tonight," Min promised. "All them heathens will be there askin' forgiveness."

"I hope the bear and hog don't decide to come back."

"They won't. Last time anybody seen them, they was headed for the Big Laurel where they'd be safe."

"In that case, I might come. I'd hate to miss seein' the boys get straight with the Lord."

"You want me to get the preacher up to slop the hogs?" Min asked.

"No, let him sleep. He needs it worse'n I do; but don't give him no more panther juice—he might decide to go have it out with that bear."

Grabbing the bucket, he went out to slop the hogs and do the milking before hitching up the mule and heading for the sawmill. He had some questions he wanted to ask Floyd.

2

Floyd and Elwood

BY THE TIME he stopped the hogs, hitched up the mules and got to Sam Fentress' place where Charley had set up his portable sawmill, the sun was well up, and Elwood was feeling a little better. He would have walked and led the mules because he didn't want them worn down by the time they got there, but his vision was still fuzzy so he rode Kate and led Jake. They had to skid logs that day, and skidding was hard on man and beast.

While Old Man Fentress and his boys were skidding the big hardwood out of the swamp with their ox teams, Elwood would skid the pine and hardwood off the hill with Kate and Jake. Floyd was tailing slabs and feeding the boiler.

"Time you got here, old man," Floyd greeted him as he slid off the mule and headed for the water bucket. "If I'da knowed Aunt Min was gonna let you sleep 'til noon, I'da gone home with you instead of my place. Ma rolled me out to go wake up the chickens. Where'd you go last night, anyhow?"

Elwood gave him a wan grin and said, "I didn't have time to go chasin' no preachers through a briar patch, ner bears neither— not to mention hogs."

"You know about that, huh?"

"First thing Aunt Min told me. In fact, it was only thing she told me 'cept when you blew your bugle at the church Deacon Watts bailed out the side window thinkin' Judgement Day was here."

"He don't know who blew that bugle, yet," Floyd said, "and if I want him to know, I'll tell him myself."

"You might have to climb a tree if you want to talk to him personal. Aunt Min said they couldn't get him to come down last night," Elwood chuckled.

"Well, he can stay there 'til Judgment Day as far as I'm concerned," Floyd said. "Say, how come you fagged out on me last night, old buddy?"

"I just got to feelin' so bad I couldn't keep up," Elwood said. "What you reckon is the matter with me?"

"You been hangin' 'round Charlene Daggett too much, that's what," Floyd said, digging Elwood in the ribs. Charlene Daggett had been characterized by Aunt Min as being a female Will Rogers: she never met a man she didn't like.

"I ain't been hangin' 'round her a-tall," Elwood denied.

"What about last Saturday after the dance?" Floyd jeered.

"That weren't exactly 'hangin' around'," Elwood replied, "she needed a ride home."

"I bet she got it, too," Floyd said with a leer.

"I'm serious, Floyd," Elwood said, "I ain't felt good in a long time. I'm afraid somethin's wrong with me."

"You think you better go see the doc?" Floyd asked, getting serious. He had never, in the twenty-four years of their growing up together, heard Elwood talk like that and it alarmed him.

"If Aunt Min's yarbs don't cure me, I reckon I'll have to," Elwood said. "Right now I got to get in the woods. You're 'bout out of logs." Picking up the reins, he clucked to his team and followed them up the skid trail into the woods. Floyd watched until he was hidden by the trees, then went back to tailing slabs as they came off the saw.

Sawmills are not conducive to conversation. They are too noisy; even small "ground mills" like Charley's that produced most of the lumber for the nation from the dawning of the Steam Age until the middle of this century. Communication was by a sign language as formalized and universally understood as that used by Indians of different tribes since time immemorial. Nothing much had changed during that time, and a sawyer of 1850 would have had no difficulty establishing his trade in 1950.

Conversation was out of the question, anyway. Sawmilling was a team effort. Each job depended upon the other, and if one wasn't done, all the others ceased. The machinery was dangerous, too, and everyone knew it. A man who allowed his mind to wander for even a moment was apt to come up minus an arm, a hand, or fingers. There was hardly a sawmill crew in the country that didn't bear ample evidence of this truth.

Floyd was reminded of this when, reaching for a slab, his left hand came too close to the head saw; the glove was snatched off his hand and thrown about a hundred feet out into the log yard. That is the way accidents happened

in sawmills—like lightning. It was do or don't in a split second. Floyd was lucky he wasn't pulled into the saw and he knew it.

"Go help Elwood in the woods," Charley said as Floyd came back from retrieving his glove. "Billy'll off-bear the rest of the day." Floyd was all too glad to obey.

"What happened? You look worse'n I do," Elwood said when Floyd joined him.

"Like to of tangled with the saw," Floyd said. "Charley thought I better come out here before I made a two-by-four out of myself." Floyd sat on the log Elwood was about to skid and tried to roll a cigarette with shaking fingers.

"Most of you would probably have ended up on the slab pile, and the rest wouldn't fetch much at the lumber yard," Elwood observed, eyeing his lanky cousin. "You're too knotty. Might use your head for a doorknob, though."

"Tain't funny, El," Floyd said as he twisted the end of the cigarette he'd finally succeeded in rolling. "Truth is, I was thinking 'bout you havin' to wet the bushes every time you turn around. I was afraid there might come a flood down the mountain and wash the mill away."

The jabbing and jawing back and forth with Elwood was calming Floyd down some. He wasn't the type to worry too long about things that didn't happen, and as the only thing that did happen was the destruction of a glove, the possibilities of what might have occurred began to take their places in the file labeled, "Experience and Close Shaves."

"I ain't had to wet the bushes quite as much today, an' I can see better, too," Elwood said, "least I ain't tripped over no mules lately."

"Has it been that bad?" Floyd asked.

"Yeah, it's been like looking through a sheet of isenglass. Everything's fuzzy."

"How you feel?" Floyd asked.

"'Bout like a flat tire," Elwood said.

"Well, get your flat tire fixed before Saturday night. We got some jukin' to do," Floyd said, his spirits restored at the thought.

"Who's playin'?" Elwood asked.

"Rock Top Radley and The Swamp Buzzards," Floyd replied.

"I ain't gonna miss that!" Elwood said. "They still got old Red playin' the pi-anner and harp at the same time?"

"You mean Ugly Red Wilkins?"

"That's him."

"If Sam Hundley's let him out of jail, I reckon he'll play," Floyd said. "He got drunk last Monday and picked a fight with a deputy."

"That boy ain't too smart. Why don't he get drunk on Saturday nights like everybody else? Any idiot ought to have better sense than to pick a fight with a deputy," Elwood said.

Floyd replied, "He says last time he got drunk on Saturday he liked to of swallowed his harp; an' since deputies is always the ones a-putting him in jail, he figgers if they do it often enough they'll get tired of it and leave him alone."

"Boy, is he dumb," Elwood said. "Don't he know they'll wear him out 'fore he wears them out? 'Sides, every deputy I ever knowed liked puttin' people in jail—'specially ones what picks fights with them."

"Can't fault him with lack of tryin'," Floyd observed. "They didn't even have to come get him this time. He just went right up to the jailhouse and started throwin' rocks and yellin' at deputy cars when they came out of the parkin' lot."

"Sounds more like he ought to be put in the Booby Hatch," Elwood said. "He's so crazy, how can they tell when he's drunk?"

"He don't fight with no deputies when he ain't drunk," Floyd said.

"Jus' the same, he can make more music on that little French harp than the rest of the band put together," Elwood said. "I'm gonna be there if I have to hitch up to old Jake and let him drag me."

"Charlene's going to be there," Floyd teased.

"That don't matter, I'm comin' anyway," Elwood answered, deflecting the dig.

"Say, did old Shortoff ever get home?" Floyd asked, changing the subject.

"I hadn't seen him, if he did," Elwood replied. "Sometimes he don't come in for two or three days after a good chase."

"Well, he had a good one last night," Floyd said. "I reckon he was the only one in the pack that actually treed—that is, if you count preachers as fair game."

"Hush. Don't even talk about it," Elwood said with a wince. "The preacher thinks it was the bear that got 'im, an' I'd just as soon he don't find out no better. He can brag about the Lord savin' him from a bear, an' show the scar where Aunt Min sewed 'im up, but there ain't no glory in gettin' hound bit."

"You know, I didn't never think too much of old Shortoff at first, but I'm beginnin' to think right smart of him now," Floyd said. "Tell you what, I won't tell the preacher about Shorty if you don't mention to Deacon Watts about who bugled him up that tree."

"You got a deal," Elwood agreed, getting up. "Take the axe and start limbing that tree over there while I take this pull to the mill. I don't want to 'splain to Charley why we let him run out of logs."

* * * * *

Charley shut the mill down about four o'clock so the hands could get home and feed before dark. Floyd and Elwood rode the mules home. Kate and Jake weren't too tired that day; they hadn't skidded many logs.

The gravel road they traveled wound through the heart of the valley past fields of corn already harvested, pastures not yet browned by heavy frost, and burly tobacco ready to cut and cure. Foliage still clinging to trees shimmered in yellows, golds, ochre, and deep scarlets. Smoke drifted up from cook stoves and warming hearths. A squirrel with a fat hickory nut in its mouth bounced across the road in front of them and up a large white oak that heralded the fork in the road where the friends would part.

"Come on home an' have supper with us," Floyd said. "Ma's got plenty."

"That's mighty temptin'." Aunt June does know how to roll a biscuit," Elwood said. He knew Floyd was serious. Aunt Min and her sister, June, were famous cooks—even in a valley where every woman learned her way around the kitchen before she was old enough to attend the one-room school. "But I guess I'd better get on to the house and let Aunt Min doctor on me," he demurred. "She won't be satisfied 'til she runs every yarb in the valley through me. I done had enough apple and sauerkraut juice poured down my throat to drown Jonah's whale."

He took Kate's lead rope as Floyd slid off her back. Motioning toward the smoke rising from the cabin hidden by the bend in the road that Floyd would take, he said, "I see the Deacon's home. He must have climbed out of that tree. Reckon you'd better slip through the woods by his house in case he wants to talk about bugles?"

At that moment there was a rustling in the bushes and old Shortoff stepped into the road with one of the Deacon's chickens in his mouth. Floyd and Elwood stared at him; Shorty stopped and stared back, then he wheeled and trotted back into the woods with his prize trailing feathers in his wake.

Floyd looked at Elwood for a moment and then, picking up his lunch pail, he sauntered down the road that passed in front of the Deacon's house. Over his shoulder he said, "I reckon he's more likely to want to talk to you about chickens."

3

Ugly Red

SAM HUNDLEY was a peaceful man. That's why he was a peace officer. Sam was not just dedicated to his job, he was dedicated to peace and quelling the disturbers thereof. More often than not he found a bop on the head from his ham-sized fist to be the most direct manner of assuring peaceful tranquility. After sleeping off Sam's therapy in one of his cells, very few felt a call to repeat their offense.

The miscreant, who stood with his grimy cap in hand before the judge as Sam and Deputy Raleigh Gates looked on, was different. His red locks might have been shoulder-length had they hung as any normal locks should, but his stood out in frizzes as if he had been pardoned just seconds after the switch had been thrown. Head aching from a combination of Charley Foster's tiger tonic and Sam's counseling, the man was uncommonly attentive and more subdued than when first apprehended.

"How many windshields did you say he broke, Deputy Gates?" Judge Howland M. Friday inquired.

"Three, Your Honor," Raleigh responded, "as well as a headlight and one of the windows in the office."

Turning to the prisoner in the dock, the judge peered over his glasses and spoke, "Son, you are turning out to be a hard case. This is the fourth time you have appeared before me this year."

"Fifth, Your Honor," Sam corrected.

"Oh, yes. Fifth." the judge said as he re-examined the arrest sheet. "You seem to be a little slow on taking hints, Mr. Percival Oswald Wilkins."

Ordinarily, speaking the offender's proper name aloud would trigger another round of mayhem. However, with Sam giving him a hard look, and in deference to His Honor's august presence—and well known sobriquet "Howlin' Mad"—Percival Oswald merely shuffled his feet, hung his head and muttered, "Yessir."

"You know the taxpayers of Keowee County, which includes your Ma and Pa, will have to replace the windshields, headlight and window glass you so wantonly destroyed." Once again there was a muttered acknowledgment.

"Do you know of any reason in the world why I shouldn't send you down to the Big House for awhile so that you may demonstrate your toughness to more hardened criminals?" While Percival Oswald was mulling that over with dire apprehension, Raleigh stepped forward. "You have something to say, Deputy Gates?"

"Yessir, I have, Your Honor," Raleigh said. "I've been talking with the prisoner, and I think I know why he has been going out of his way to pick fights with us."

"Carry on, Deputy. I'm interested to hear this," Judge Friday said, leaning forward.

"Last year, one of our officers ran over his dog while engaged in a high speed chase after a man who had just robbed a service station," Raleigh said.

"Mmm, that is interesting. Is that true, Mr. Wilkins?"

"Yessir, Your Honor. It is, sir. An' he never even came back to apologize. An' old Maude was just minding her own business," Mr. Wilkins answered, drawing himself up to his full five feet five and one half inches, and looking the judge straight in the eye.

"Mmm, yes. I see. We'll have to look into that; Sheriff, what about it?" the judge said, turning to Sam.

"It's true, Your Honor. I didn't know about it at the time but I severely reprimanded the guilty party when I learned of it, which has been only recently. Rest assured he will be more mindful of his civic duty from now on. I'd like to add, too, Your Honor, that we have made satisfactory restitution to Mr. Wilkins. Show 'im, Red," Sam ordered.

Reaching into the folds of his jacket, which would have hung loosely over even Sam's large frame, Red pulled out a ten-week-old Blue-tick puppy and deposited it in front of the judge. The puppy, unsure of itself, paused on trembling legs and looked around to get its bearings. "Her name's Prucilla, Y'Honor," Red announced proudly, "Raleigh—I mean Deputy Gates—give her to me."

"Is that true, Deputy?" asked the judge.

"Yes, sir. She needed a good home, and I thought Red— er, Perci— er, the prisoner would give her one. They sort of took to each other right off. He's done taught her to sing, Judge."

"Show him, Red," Sam directed, and Red was glad to oblige.

Percival Oswald Wilkins wasted no time in whipping a harmonica out of another pocket, and stood ready to perform. "Is it all right, Your Honor?" he asked, looking at the several people in the courtroom.

"By all means; why not?" said the judge. "We don't get much entertainment here," he commented, gesturing around the room.

"What would you like to hear?" Red asked.

"Whatever you and Pricilla like," the judge replied.

"It's **Pru**-cilla, Your Honor; named after my Aunt Pru," Red corrected.

"How about the 'Fox Chase'?" It's her favorite tune—the pup's, I mean. Aunt Pru don't chase no foxes."

Judge Friday stated, "I should hope not." He then nodded and said, "Go ahead."

His Honor, who was examining Prucilla closely, was momentarily diverted when Prucilla licked him on the nose; however, when Red cranked up, he gave his full attention to the concert. Red played the "Fox Chase" and Prucilla furnished the sound effects. It would have taken a stonier heart than Judge Howland M. Friday possessed not to have melted when Prucilla threw her head back and answered the primordial urge of her feral ancestors by howling as mightily as a ten-week-old puppy can howl.

Red's fate stood in some jeopardy when Prucilla, unimpressed with the dignity of the court, decided not to stand on ceremony and left a puddle on His Honor's blotter. But the judge, who already had been exposed as a dog lover (and was highly suspect when it came to coon hunting), heaved a sigh, drummed his fingers a time or two and reached for Red's harmonica. Fingering the instrument, with a somewhat bemused smile he asked Red, "Do you mind?"

"Not at all, Your Honor," Red replied. His countenance brightened and his hopes rose as Hizzoner belted out a more than fair rendition of "Red Wing." The courtroom granted rousing approval, and Red's vision of the Big House began to fade.

Nonetheless, His Honor was not to be put off. He still had a duty to perform; there was a verdict to render. Rapping for order when the courthouse crowd broke into applause, he once again peered sternly over his spectacles and faced a sober but now optimistic Red.

"Son, these charges are serious. You know that."

"Yessir," Red answered, trying to conceal the hope welling up inside, which he felt he had every right to harbor.

"The taxpayers must be compensated, and you've got to pay for it. You will have to reimburse the county for every penny of the damages you have caused. Do you understand?"

"Yessir, Your Honor," Red said.

"Then I sentence you to one year and one day in the County Jail at hard labor," the judge intoned, and Red's heart sank. "Sentence suspended," Judge Friday continued, "to one year's probation on condition of good behavior." Red's hopes rose again. "Furthermore provided you pay damages of \$213.43 within ninety days of this date."

That was a lot of money to Red, but he thought he could make it. "Yessir, Your Honor, and thank you, and—"

"I'm not through yet," His Honor interrupted, cutting Red off in mid-speech. "I'm placin' you in custody of this here hound puppy, Miss Prucilla," he said, handing her back to her grateful owner, "and to make sure you toe the line, I will be out at your place from time to time. I will make personal inspection visits to ascertain that you are usin' your time wisely, such as teachin' this hound dog puppy to trail among other things, which 'SPECIALLY includes housebreaking—even if she stays in the barn!"

"Yessir, I'll see to it, Your Honor," said a jubilant Red, as Sam and Raleigh grinned broadly.

"And one more thing. You been goin' to church regular?"

"Well, no, sir. Not exactly, sir. That is . . ." Red stammered.

"Well, see that you do. I'll check on that, too."

"Yessir, Your Honor," Red said.

"Bailiff, bring me a towel and a new blotter." The judge winked at Sam, and Sam smiled back but Red didn't see it. He was too busy stuffing Prucilla back into his pocket.

Judge Howland M. Friday had spoken and Justice had prevailed. The gavel banged. "Next case!"

* * * * *

Floyd and Elwood sat on the back pew that night, flanked by Aunt June and Aunt Min. They were surprised to see Ugly Red march down the aisle, take a seat on the front pew, and give his rapt and almost angelic attention to the two preachers seated either side of the pulpit ready to begin the services.

Brother Ossie Knowles, the beetle-browed regular pastor, was a man of the Valley who was thoroughly familiar with the habits of his flock. Brother J. P. Waddelston, Jr., the guest preacher, had come all the way from Honea Path, and although he could fling hellfire and brimstone with the best of them, was wholly ignorant of the ways of the Valley. Still recovering from the "bear attack", he was fated to broaden his education even more this night.

Floyd and Elwood spotted the bulge in Red's coat pocket when he entered the meeting house, and concluded it probably was a jug. And given Red's reputation, that could only mean trouble. But when Sissy Cates cut loose on the organ and the choir led the congregation in the first hymn, a little black muzzle popped out of the pocket and began to sing.

Aunt Min later swore she would have thought it was Sadie Brewster, who sat in the front row of the choir, except Sadie had never sounded that good. Aunt Min could be a little catty at times.

When the hymn, which droned on for five verses, ended, an outraged Deacon Watts jumped to his feet. "I demand that that beast be cast out of this sacred temple at once!" he yelled.

Deacon Watts, the richest and stingiest man in the Valley, and donor of the organ and bellows, reckoned himself to be *the* pillar of the church and a voice to be obeyed. This might have been true that night had the congregation not been packed with coon hunters, and had Brother Knowles not been one of them.

"Set down, Eli. That pup's one of God's critters, too," Charley Foster said, "an' she sings better'n most of us."

"That's right; an' she ain't gonna take a dime outen the collection plate, in case that's what you're worried about," Mitch Harris said. "In fact, I'll put in five dollars right now if we use it to help Red get square with the Sheriff. Ain't no better way to spend the Lord's money than to help a lost soul get right."

"I'll put in five, too, if Red'll let her run with my pack for a week after she gets big enough," Aaron Ledbetter put it.

"I will, too," somebody else yelled. This was followed by a chorus of "Me, too's!" which caused Prucilla to yap a time or two as the din swelled.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Brother Knowles roared from the pulpit. "What do you think this is? We can't have carryin's on like this. Do I hear a motion for a Business Meetin'?"

"I so move, Reverend," came a voice from the rear.

"That's more like it!" Brother Knowles thundered; thundering was one of the best things he did. "Now, how about a second?"

"You got it," came a voice from the side.

"All right, I hereby suspend services until the Congregation of the Valley Saints Delight Church concludes the business before it," the reverend said, bringing everyone to order. "As I understand it, there is a bunch of fools here what wants to bid on the future services of this little critter what ain't never even seen a coon.

"Miss Minnie, will you come down here and take the names of those poor misguided souls who want to pay for a night's hunt that won't even take place 'til next year? While you're at it, put me down for five dollars."

"I protest!" Deacon Watts shouted. "This is a disgrace. This ain't the Lord's business!"

"Sit down, Deacon. You're out of order!" Reverend Knowles glowered. "Me an' the Lord are in charge of these proceedin's, an' He ain't told me not to proceed."

"I protest! I protest! I'm agin' it," the Deacon shouted, not willing to give up so easily. "This is a sin and a disgrace."

There was a momentary pause in the clamor, and the room grew quiet as the Shepherd of the Flock and the Pillar of the Church faced off. The preacher faced a challenge to his leadership as well as the possible loss of his biggest tither. This was something to consider. But it took Reverend Ossie Knowles, coon hunter, man of God, and—as it proved—somewhat of a gambler, too, only a flicker to weigh the consequences and reach a decision.

"Tell you what I'll do, Deacon," he said evenly, "providin' Red, here, agrees," he nodded in Red's direction.

"I'll do whatever you say, Preacher," Red said.

"Bless you for your faith in the workin's of the Lord, young man," the reverend said. Then, turning to the Deacon, he continued, "If you'll agree to match—dollar for dollar—all the money these folks are willin' to put up to help save this wanderin' soul from a life of debauchery and violence, Red here will turn that helpless little puppy over to you to cast out, or do what you please. That right, Red?" Red nodded.

Upon hearing these words, more people immediately began to line up until nearly every member of the congregation had united in the effort to "save Red." Judging how the land lay, the Deacon gave in. "I wouldn't pay a dime for that beast," he said.

"Then sit down and hold your peace, or I'll consider your next outburst an offer and hold you to it before the Lord and every soul in this valley!" the preacher said.

The Deacon glared at the assembly, who paid him scant attention. He had lost and couldn't even threaten to remove the organ he had donated to show his wealth without running the risk of isolating himself from everyone in the Valley. He couldn't give it all up. He had plans, and he had to preserve a large degree of influence at all costs.

When the line had shortened, and most of the congregation had returned to their pews, Reverend Knowles declared the Business Meeting adjourned and then returned to the business of the Revival. Surrendering the pulpit to the rather shaken Reverend Waddelston, he took a seat on the front pew beside Red. Prucilla reached out her muzzle and licked his hand, then curled up in the pocket of Red's warm coat and slept the sleep of the innocent while Reverend Waddelston lambasted the Devil. Reverend Knowles basked in the warm glow that comes with full knowledge of having done the right thing at the right time in the right manner.

Recovering himself somewhat, Reverend Waddelston announced the subject of his sermon that night to be, "The Sin of Selling Your Soul to the Devil."

Deacon Watts sat silently through the entire service, iron-jawed and with lips pursed; he uttered not one of his customary amens while Brother Waddelston gave the Devil Heaven, so to speak. When each of the hound dog men stood and confessed to having strayed when they ran the bear and the boar through the church, the Deacon's thin lips were pursed even tighter, and his mouth took on a decided down turn as if he had bitten into a green persimmon, while he silently condemned each one to the gallows. Most especially did that apply to the fool who had blown the bugle at the moment the Deacon was in a state of rapture.

Aunt Min and Aunt June, assisted by Sadie Brewster, counted the money undistracted by the sermon. After the services, Elwood, accompanied by Floyd, Sam, and the other now-cleansed bear-chasers, met Red down front to present him with the collection.

"Here it is, Red," Elwood said, counting out the money in grimy, much-folded bills and a large handful of silver and coppers. "That's \$163.24. It ought to pay for a couple of them windshields you busted an' keep Sam Hundly from comin' up here a-lookin' for you."

Red's face reflected the gratitude he didn't know how to express, and the folks didn't expect much more than a "thanks," anyway. Anything more would have embarrassed them. Thanks is what they got.

"Thank you, all," Red said, putting the money down his shirt. "I'll get it to the Sheriff soon's I can get to town. How'd you all know about that, anyway?"

"I was in town today, an' went by the Courthouse to see if the judge was still givin' out justice," Mitch said. "He was. We was wonderin' how we might help you out, an' Deacon Watts gave us a perfect opportunity."

"But now Prucilla belongs to you all." Red looked down at the bright-eyed puppy who was peering out of his pocket.

"No, she's yours, all right," Charley said. "Not that a one of us wouldn't like to claim her."

"If'n you all let me hunt with you, I promise Prucilla will be the best dog in the pack," a grateful Red said.

"Son, we're countin' on it," Aaron Ledbetter put in.

"'Cordin' to Aunt M'n's records," Floyd said, "you an' Prucilla owe us about sixty years of huntin' right now."

"If you bring your French Harp, too, we'll 'scuse the time Prucilla owes us," Mitch said. "We get tired of hearin' Floyd and Elwood sing duets. It scares the coons off—not to mention foxes, bears, possum, bobcats, and various other varmints."

"Keep that puppy outen the road, an' don't get in any more scrapes with deputies," Charley advised.

"I ain't figurin' on doin' no more of that," Red said. "I mean, it was Deputy Gates what give me Prucilla in the first place. They're really a fine bunch of folks. Say, I just had a thought. What would you all a-done if that old Deacon had a-taken up the preacher's offer?"

"Warn't much danger of that happenin'. That parsimonious old toot ain't never put up no money he weren't goin' to get back forty times over, an' 'specially he ain't goin' to buy no hound dog what sings. Maybe if she'da talked . . ." Elwood said straight-faced.

"We'll work on that," Red said, grinning down at Prucilla.

4

Chico's, Saturday Night

CHICO'S was a long frame-and-log building with a low-pitched tin roof sufficient to shed the rains of spring, and strong enough to support the snows that sometimes fell heavily during the winter. A chimney rising from the center of the roof gave notice of the pot-bellied iron stove in the room below.

To gain the porch that extended across the front from corner to corner, one had to ascend four steps. The porch was furnished with a couple of rockers and a long oak bench, showing the grooves of many a keen Barlow, and the initials of little boys, many of whom were long since grown and gone; their names now etched on mossy headstones in the church graveyard. The bench had a satin-textured, polished patina from decades of buffing by lye washed sun-bleached overalls and heavily calloused hands.

Metal signs served the dual purposes of covering cracks in the ancient wall, while advertising Grapette, Orange Crush, Bruton's Snuff, Prince Albert, Nehi, BC Headache Powders, Carter's Little Liver Pills, Lucky Strike, Morton's Salt, and Camels. It was as near as the Valley had to a Great White Way.

During the week, Chico's was a rural precursor of the shopping mall, and functioned as bait shop, cafeteria, haberdashery, gas station, blacksmithy, feed mill, drugstore, local news center, and garage. Located at the junction where the Valley Road T- intersected with the main highway between Luthersville and Franklin, and Highlands and Cashiers, it was the perfect rendezvous for trout fishermen and deer hunters from the lowlands.

In the summer, Chico did quite a bit of tourist business. Sometimes the more aggressively curious tourist would turn onto the narrow gravel road that

ran past his establishment and through the Valley before disappearing over the ridge in the direction of Hungry Squaw Ford on the Chattooga, and on toward Clayton. The road got rough and narrow crossing the ridge. Most never got as far as Hungry Squaw, and the few that did rarely dared the ford.

The fishermen bought cheese crackers, worms and crickets. Hunters bought hot coffee, honeybuns and ammunition. The tourists browsed, poked, stared, shook and sniffed, and paid exorbitant prices for the little jars of his wife's pickled okra and the "wild mountain honey" he imported by the case from a supplier in Iowa. They asked directions in queer nasal accents, and made condescending remarks about the "quaint" mountaineers and the Valley. Chico would smile and say, "Yes'm," in his acquired Valley dialect as he rang up their purchases.

On Saturday nights, Chico closed the grocery store and opened the much larger room that extended from the back of the main building. It was entered through its own door on the side, and held a stage, a dance floor, a jukebox, and a bar. It became the weekend watering hole for Valley folks in need of rest and relaxation.

The proprietor sold beer, which was legal, and moonshine, which was not; he sold neither to minors. Chico had his principles. He also had a tacit understanding with Sam Hundley. Chico was practical, and knew Sam had to raid him from time to time or the peace officer would be out of a job. Sam was practical, too, and knew if he shut down Chico's place completely, someone of a criminal bent might try to replace it.

The Valley didn't need that kind of trouble—and neither did Sam—so Sam was content to pay the establishment an occasional visit as a reminder that the Law wasn't asleep. Chico, who wasn't asleep either, usually managed to hide his stock of illegal 'shine and look innocent by the time Sam got there.

The moonshine Chico sold was the kind made for drinking, not the sort that dissolved the brain and caused blindness. While not legal, neither was it lethal. Most of it came from Charley Foster, whose still would have passed a Health Officer's inspection as surely as it would have flunked the Revenue Department's.

Chico's ancestors had been the original settlers of the Valley, long before Columbus showed up. They were there when DeSoto came through, but a resounding defeat, which was actually a massacre, by Andy Pickens' Militia in 1787 opened the valley to Scots-Irish settlers who called it "Sugar Valley" because of the maples, sweet berries and apple trees that grew there. The Indians retreated further back into the hills where Andy Jackson eventually found them, and subsequently sent them to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears.

Chico's forebears didn't stay in Oklahoma. They just kept on wandering and meeting new people. Almost single-handedly, as it were, they seemed determined to absorb all the races on this continent into the crucible of their own make-up. By the time Chico came along, he could claim genes from a pool that included Mexican, Sicilian, runaway slaves', a British sailor's (who had jumped ship in Tampico), a French soldier's (from Maximilian's Army), and at least one itinerant Irishman. However, it was the blood of his Cherokee forebears that compelled him to find a home not far from the site of the cruel and bloody defeat his people had suffered more than two and a half centuries before.

It was as the sole representative of his aboriginal ancestors that he was accepted by the sixth generation of Valley interlopers; and with his wife, who was part Zuni and part Conquistador, he claimed his full birthright. Chico Alvarez y Scalia O'Keefe was pure American. Molded into his being was a harmonious concentration of native, invader, pioneer, immigrant, founder, explorer, and entrepreneur—all that makes America great. A further irony, not lost on Chico, was the fact that the wheel had come full circle. The Indian was now selling firewater to the white man for a profit, and its debilitating effects—from hangover to economic collapse—were in some measure symbolic vengeance for the misery and devastation that had been inflicted on his people. As compensation of a sort, Chico also provided his patrons with such prestigious entertainment as Rock Top Radley and the Swamp Buzzards.

When Happy Hank Head spotted Rock Top Radley and the Swamp Buzzards viewing the almost-like-new 1936 model potato chip van on his Used Car Lot, the "Great Rider Provider," as he was called, lost no time in providing that group with a ride. So inspired were they with the freedom afforded them by their new conveyance, they determined to launch themselves on a Triumphant World Tour, which carried them to such exotic places as Wartburg, Bean Station, and Sneadville in Tennessee, and Tuckasegee and Ridge Crest in North Carolina. At the last stop, they were met by such a howling mob of incensed Baptist preachers that they were persuaded to end their tour. The most triumphant part of the whole deal was that their van held together long enough to get them out of town. So much for triumphant tours. They were ready to play for friends for awhile.

In preparation for Rock Top Radley and the Swamp Buzzards, Chico had strung chicken wire across the front of the stage. Whether to protect the band from flying bottles, or his customers from the band, was a moot point. He deemed the measure warranted, and wondered if it wouldn't be wise also to stretch a little barbed wire between the stage and the dance floor—just for

good measure. Considering that not only might it be a bit radical, but also that it could be taken as a challenge by someone before the night was over, he opted instead to call on Tiny Bohannon to mind the door and keep the peace. Tiny was a genial giant whose very presence, in most cases, was sufficient to compel even the most belligerent of patrons to reconsider any rash action.

The Swamp Buzzards were a mixed bag that might have evoked visions of the U. N. had past experience of the group not been indicative of their tendencies toward breaching the peace. Besides Rock Top Radley, who was a wandering one-eyed Cajun from the environs of near Bunkie in Avoyelles Parish, and Ugly Red, a dyed in the wool Tunnel Hill local boy, there were: on drums, Bucksnot Bailey, late resident of the Crazy Horse Indian Agency and alleged direct descendant of that scourge of the Seventh Cavalry from whom the Agency drew its name; Willy "Night Rider" Robinson, former sparring partner of ring champions, on bass; Mikki "The Mouse" Oshahara, kamakaze banjo player whose World War II captors kept him and delivered him safely to relatives in Los Angeles after the Peace; and Abdul "Camel Driver" Rothchild on rhythm guitar.

This Brotherhood of Rhythm and Blues, when not held together by handcuffs, was cemented by even stronger bonds. Namely, an aversion to being supervised melded with a compelling need for self expression, which found an outlet in the wild variety of music inherent in their diverse cultural backgrounds. They banded together in unspoken fear of mutual extinction, and released their pent up hostilities in a blended torrent of unreproducible rhythm, harmony, chords and dis-chords. They also played Swing.

The sun was well behind Rabun Bald, and the silver and gold streaked clouds above the Bald were blending crimson into the blue fringe of the descending darkness of the lingering Indian Summer twilight. The hoot owl nesting in the hollow pine snag at the edge of Chico's pasture greeted the rising moon with a couple of inquiries before silently gliding across the soft night air in search of a plump meadow mouse.

As the evening star rose over the saddle between Rich Mountain and Poor Mountain, the first revelers began arriving. They came in pickups, in cars, by mule back, in wagons and on foot. The Swamp Buzzards suddenly came alive, and the strains of "Fire on the Mountain" wafted across the meadow and mingled with the chirps of tree frogs in the woods beyond.

The Swamp Buzzards were packing them in, and among the first of those packed were Floyd and Elwood, who had claimed a table in the far back corner away from the dance floor and close to the men's room. Elwood had more need for the men's room than the dance floor. His head ached, his feet hurt,

his vision was blurred and his joints were sore. He hadn't yet danced a single number nor drunk a beer, and wasn't sure he wanted to do either.

Now that was unusual for the young man who would have been known as the Arthur Murray of the Valley, had anyone in the Valley ever heard of Arthur Murray. Hidden in the darkness of the corner, he hoped that Charlene Daggett wouldn't spot him. It was a forlorn hope, and he knew it. She and her twin, Darlene, were Chico's waitresses, and they would be certain to check on that table sooner or later.

At the moment, it appeared the discovery would come later. Floyd went in search of one of the girls to bring beer to their table. Darlene was nowhere in sight, but he found Charlene flirting with a tall, angular, long-nosed and mustachioed gent who was wearing yellow, fake snake-hide cowboy boots and a ten-gallon, turkey feathered Stetson. A wide leather belt with a brass buckle that must have weighed at least four pounds held up his neatly pressed stove-pipe legged jeans. It took a pair of rainbow suspenders to hold up the belt buckle. His arm was around Charlene's waist, and he was teasing her with a ten-dollar bill.

Floyd, slightly put out at having to search for a waitress, and more than a little miffed at finding her wasting time with a stranger while regular customers were going thirsty, scowled and held up two fingers. Charlene wrenched free of the tall stranger and went to fetch the beers.

Misinterpreting Floyd's frown of impatience as the displeasure of a jealous boyfriend, the stranger smiled ingratiatingly and poked a long-fingered red hand toward Floyd. "Duke Burton," he said. "Folks around here call me Tex. I'm in oil and gas."

"Floyd Bates," Floyd answered. "Folks around here call me Floyd. I'm in sawdust and slabs, an' I got gas, too."

The hand that took Floyd's tightened in a grip that was calculated to put Floyd down on one knee begging for mercy. But Floyd had tripped too many slabs and juiced too many heifers to be caught in that old ploy. He returned the grip and watched the Texan's eyes widen. Burton quickly relaxed his grasp and removed his hand from Floyd's vise.

"That purty thing your girlfriend?" Burton asked, massaging his swollen hand beneath the table.

"Not tonight, she ain't," Floyd said. "I was just wantin' a beer."

"I'm glad to hear that. She sure is a looker," Burton said, staring in the direction Charlene had taken.

"You're right about that," Floyd observed, "Charlene's always lookin'."

"Friendly, too," Burton said with a broad smile that showed off a gold-capped tooth with a Texas Star.

Floyd agreed, "Oh, yeah, she's friendly, all right." Although he had no strong feelings for Charlene, he did recall with pleasure a couple of snuggling sessions in the Daggett barn loft after haying season one year.

"You don't think she would mind a little chin rubbin', do you?" Tex asked in obvious anticipation.

"Well, I can't speak for her, but I will say that she never has," Floyd said, thinking old Tex sure was hot to trot. Charlene probably would give him all the chin rubbing he could stand, especially if he kept flashing around fake diamonds like the one in the brass ring on his finger, and kept waving ten-dollar bills.

"An' you sure you don't mind?" Burton asked again just to make sure of his ground.

"Heck no," Floyd assured him. "When you see her, grab her and kiss her for all I care. I told you, all I wanted was a beer."

He then stepped aside to let the waitress pass by and said, "Be my guest."

At that, a grinning Tex reached out a rhinestoned brass-ringed paw, encircled her waist, drew her to him and planted a richly wet mustachioed smooch on her strangely unwilling lips. "How do you like them apples, baby?" he asked, puckering for a repeat.

To his surprise, horror and astonishment, she crashed the tray down hard on his head, converting his ten-gallon Stetson into a turkey-feathered porkpie, while glass shattered and five bottles of lukewarm beer spewed suds and foam in all directions.

"How do you like them apples, you mangy Texas octopus!" she exclaimed, fetching him another lick that stretched him out on the floor, knocking over a couple of chairs as he went down. Head spinning, Burton rose on one elbow and looked at Floyd in dazed disbelief.

"What got into her? I thought you said Charlene was friendly," Tex said, rubbing the knot over his eye.

"She is," Floyd replied. "That was her sister, Darlene. She ain't so friendly."

As Floyd departed, Tiny arrived and handed Burton a mop and a bucket to clean up the spilled beer, which was still dripping off the table and the ceiling. Giving the smiling 300-pound Tiny a long look, he struggled to his feet and began to mop. It seemed the polite thing to do.

"What was all that racket over there?" Elwood asked when Floyd rejoined him.

"Oh, that was just a stranger gettin' acquainted with the girls," Floyd answered.

"Sounded like he might've been goin' about it all wrong," Elwood said.

"Well, Charlene warmed him up, and Darlene just cooled him down."

"Can't he tell them apart?"

"He's workin' on it," Floyd said. "That racket was his first lesson."

"*There you are! I knew I'd find you somewhere!*" It was Charlene arriving with their beer. Spotting Elwood, she put her tray down and made a dive for him. Too late, he realized he was caught.

"Now, Charlene, I don't feel like dancin' tonight," Elwood protested valiantly, but in vain.

"Sure you do, El," she said, pulling on his arm. "Come on; they're playin' the 'Sugar Valley Boogie'."

"No, Charlene," he protested again, but by then she had him on his feet. "I really don't feel good. I can't do no kind of a boogie tonight. Why don't you get that old Texas boy to dance with you? He's dyin' to, I know."

"That ol' Duke? Ain't no use. I just tried, an' he turned tail an' ran when he saw me comin'. What you reckon got into him, anyway? Not ten minutes ago he was tryin' to get me to go to Texas with him."

By the time she made this speech, she had Elwood on the dance floor and had begun the gyrations loosely associated with the Sugar Valley Boogie—and a number of other popular dances of the era, each with a different name but the same motions. There were no steps to learn. It was all done with the arms and various other parts of the anatomy. Feet were not involved, except to keep things moving. Neither physical contact nor synchronization of movement between the partners was important. Emphasis was on either total freedom of the individual, or ridding one's body of a plague of bugs without applying hands to the itching spots. The Arthur Murray of the Valley could handle everything from a waltz to the Tennessee Toe Hop, and every square dance ever invented, but this didn't fall into any of those categories.

"Come on, Elwood, *Da-Yunce!*" Charlene shouted over her shoulder in the midst of a triple pirouette, arms flailing while her body contorted in places even a boa constrictor couldn't have bent.

Elwood's heart wasn't in it, even if his mind could have grasped it. "I told you I don't know how to do it!" he shouted to his partner, who was rapidly moving away from him into a boiling sea of flailing arms, bobbing heads and flying feet.

"The only thing you can do wrong," she yelled back, "is stand still!" Then she was completely submerged in the seething mass.

He took her at her word and, by faking a case of the St. Vitus Dance, worked his way through the mob to the edge of the dance floor and dragged himself back to the table. If Charlene missed him, she didn't let it show. When the number ended she was still dancing, lost in her own world. After a few extra beats—unaccompanied by the band, which was going on break—she regained her composure and returned to the table for her tray. She and Floyd arrived about the same time, where they found Elwood gasping for breath, nearly out of it.

"You all right?" Floyd asked.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Elwood lied.

"Some fun, huh, El?" Charlene asked.

"Yeah. Some fun," Elwood panted.

"We'll do another later, okay?" Not waiting for an answer, Charlene picked up her tray to go back to work. "I gotta find old Dude or Duke or whatever his name is."

"I know he's lookin' for you," Floyd called to her departing back. "He said he wants to take you to Texas and shoot cantaloupes!"

If Charlene heard him, she gave no sign. She had already spotted Tex in a corner feeding coins into the big Wurlitzer jukebox, mopping his head with a red bandanna and looking a great deal less self-assured than before. The turkey feathers in the Stetson were bent somewhat awry, and the crown wasn't as jaunty. Burton saw her coming and tried to become invisible.

"Why're you tryin' to hide from me, Dude?" she asked, grabbing him by the arm before he could get away. "I ain't gonna bite you."

"It's 'Duke'," he said, "an' you did worse'n bite me 'while ago."

"That was Darlene. She don't like folks kissin' on her when she don't even know 'em. I'm Charlene, an' I like kissin' just fine."

"How is she when she does know 'em," Duke asked, rubbing the bump on his head.

"Well," Charlene said, "she's not apt to conk 'em with a beer tray."

"I like kissin', too, but I don't want my head bashed in every time I pucker. That can get bad discouragin'," Duke said. "I'm gonna quit tryin' until I figure a way to tell you all apart. Ain't you got a mole or somethin' that she ain't got?"

"Not where you can see it," Charlene giggled.

"Well, I ain't stickin' my neck out no more. It's too dangerous," Tex declared.

"Try this, then," she said, removing her apron and hanging it around his neck like a bib. "I'm the one without an apron, an' here's a kiss that ought to

hold you 'til I get back." She pecked him on the end of his nose and darted off to wait on a table that was clamoring for service.

"Hot diggety dog!" Duke exclaimed. The bump over his eye wasn't throbbing nearly as much as it had been. "Now we're gettin' somewhere." Maybe the evening wouldn't be a total loss, after all.

* * * * *

Eyeing the retreating form of Charlene, Floyd was reminded of a sack of live rabbits. Pondering the sight for a moment, he turned to Elwood, who was slumped in his chair mopping his brow. "You gonna make it, old buddy?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"I'll be here when the sun comes up," Elwood declared gamely.

"You might be dead when the sun comes up," Floyd said. "Why don't we call it an evening and go on home."

"Aunt Min would faint if we came in this early," Elwood pointed out. "Besides, you got a lot of dancin' to do; you ain't even sweatin'."

"Oh, I'm purty wore out, an' old Red's done played his best numbers, anyway."

* * * * *

"Darlene, can you tend bar awhile? I gotta go bring up some more beer," Chico called.

"Soon as I get back from the sandbox," Darlene called back. Removing her apron, she handed it to Chico's oldest daughter. "Rosie, look after my tables 'til I get back. Take a round to the band, too, and watch that Radley. I think he's been sippin' some of Charley's wildcat."

Patting the wrinkles out of her skirt, she started toward the ladies' room just the other side of the jukebox, which was wailing away a number about Waylon and Willie and the Boys. Duke turned away from the jukebox and, seeing the apronless figure hastening toward him stepped into her path, swept her into a giant bear hug and planted a warm, sloppy, lingering kiss full on her lips. Finally releasing her, he stepped back, threw open his arms and announced, "That's the way we do it in Texas, Baby!"

Darlene was taken by surprise, initially, but quickly recovered. Grabbing him by the apron that hung loosely from his neck, she slammed his head down into the pinball machine, which gave a loud "ding!" and registered TILT as lights flashed and blue smoke rose from its mangled innards.

"*That's* the way we do it in Sugar Valley, you two-bit hog rustler!" Darlene shouted, as she stomped on the pointed toe of his yellow, fake snake-hide cowboy boots.

Once again Tex sank to the floor, his crushed Stetson falling to the floor beside him. The air was redolent with the acrid odor of singed and smoldering turkey feathers.

Darlene stomped her way past Floyd and Elwood, who were just then headed for the door. They paused for a moment to view the dazed Texan, who was stretched out beside the shattered and smoking pinball machine. Floyd prodded the inert form with his boot.

"Looks like he ain't makin' much progress in tellin' those girls apart," he commented.

"*You don't love me, anymore . . .*" the jukebox wailed.

* * * * *

Except for one more small incident, there was no more excitement that evening. Tiny kept the peace. Duke Burton tried one more time, and got it wrong. Charlene never was able to get within fifty feet of him again, and Darlene wasn't trying.

It was close to three in the morning when Chico paid the band off, after deducting for beer, and ushered the last of the die-hards into the night. He was counting the night's receipts when he noticed one of the bills didn't feel right as he handled it. It was a ten-dollar bill. Holding it up to the light and snapping it a couple of times, Chico realized there could be no mistake; it was a phony.

* * * * *

Dropping Elwood at the gate, Floyd asked him how he felt.

"Like I been pooped off a cliff," Elwood responded.

"You goin' to be in church in the mornin'?" Floyd inquired.

"Not unless Aunt Min drags me, or I feel a heap better than I do now," Elwood said. "this drag-assin' around is about to get to me. I'm either goin' to get better or die, one. I can't stand much more of this."

5

Jake and Loney

ELWOOD WOKE UP Sunday morning thinking it would be easier to get dressed and go to church than to explain to Aunt Min he felt too bad to go. He was surprised when she suggested he stay in bed, but he went on to church with her anyway. As it turned out, he might as well have stayed in bed. He slept through one of Reverend Knowles' best efforts.

Red was on the front pew again; this time without Prucilla. Deacon Watts and Miss Effie occupied their usual pew and, finding nothing else to disapprove, cast acid glances toward the slumbering Elwood, who remained oblivious to that and everything else.

Floyd punched Elwood a time or two when his snores showed signs of rivaling the thunder of Rev. Knowles' sermon, but even that failed to rouse him for more than a moment. From the expression on his face it was obvious that the Deacon had sanctimoniously concluded that Elwood had spent a night of debauchery, which ended in a sinful and monumental hangover. The "Serves him right" attitude adopted by the Deacon and his wife was very clearly understood by anyone who happened to notice their exchanged glances.

Floyd and Aunt Min, who knew better, were concerned.

Following the service, Elwood had to make a beeline for the woods to wet the bushes. When he came back, Floyd took him home while Rev. Knowles took Aunt Min and June to the Bates' for dinner. As soon as Floyd left, Elwood drank several dippers of water, then stretched out on the couch and slept until Aunt Min woke him for supper.

That was Elwood's routine for that entire Sunday. If he sat still, he went to sleep. If he stood up, he had to go wet the bushes. Whichever he did, he felt constantly as if any strong effort would do him in. Pooped off a cliff was about as accurate a description as he could give it; constant thirst, constant drowsiness, constant calls of nature, and on top of all that, his vision was so blurred he could hardly see where he was going.

He wasn't getting any better, and he didn't know what to do about it. Neither did Aunt Min. She was baffled. All of her remedies, which were calculated to cure everything from bangs to cholera, had failed. She had heard that there were granny-hags who could put a curse on people but she didn't believe in hexes—or, at least, she didn't want to believe in them. It did make a body wonder. But who would want to put a hex on Elwood?

He was a good boy; worked hard, never sassed her, and did all his chores. Of course, he did have some trifling ways, but mostly they were harmless. All the Valley boys chased coons and foxes, and on Saturday nights, they chased girls. That's just the way men were. Even the ones that had gotten Saved had all done it at one time or another; a lot of them still did. Aunt Min was wise enough to know that time was a more certain cure for temptations of the flesh than hellfire sermons.

Min didn't blow out the lamp by her bed that night. She said her prayers, and turned it down low so she wouldn't have to grope for matches in the dark in the event Elwood needed her. She heard him go out the back door three times in the night, but didn't get up to check on him. Once she heard him draw a fresh bucket of water. She thought she had done the right thing by having sent word to Chico to have Loney Adams stop by. Loney always stopped at the store to see who needed her before she made her rounds to check on all the Valley's mothers-to-be. Loney was the County Nurse/Midwife, and had spanked enough Valley bottoms in her nearly forty years of service to have filled a good sized stadium. Maybe she would know what to do. The Valley women trusted Loney.

* * * * *

The early edge of daylight had changed the dark to gray. Even had it been full daylight, Elwood's vision was so blurred he would have been unable to identify the form before him had it not spoken.

"Well, well, Elwood, what are you doing wallerin' around in bed 'til nearly daylight!" was Loney's hearty announcement of her presence as she bounced into the room. Aunt Min was behind her with a lamp, but it wouldn't

be needed for long. Old General Jackson crowed outside the window as if to add emphasis to Loney's remark.

Elwood struggled to sit up in bed, but his eyes still wouldn't focus. Miss Loney and Aunt Min were dim, fuzzy figures as if seen through an opaque window. "What are you doin' here, Miss Loney? Why aren't you over at Lem Abernathy's birthin' Elly's baby? I heard it was about due."

"I already done that while you were lolling around waitin' for Min to fix you breakfast, you sorry rascal," Loney said. "I come by here to check on you. I didn't even know you were pregnant."

"That ain't too likely. I ain't even been exposed, lately," Elwood replied.

"I can believe that," Loney said. "I heard you've been too lazy to even run around."

"Aunt Min's been talkin' again, I guess," Elwood said with a wan smile.

"I hear talk around," Loney said in a nonchalant tone. "Chico said you didn't even stick around for the fight over at his place Saturday."

"Hadn't heard about it. What happened?"

"Ugly Red came out from behind the chicken wire and punched out some stranger for getting fresh with Darlene Daggett. Reached up and socked him right on the thigh, I heard. Must have given him an awful charley horse. The cowboy picked Red up, and was about to shake the teeth plumb out of his head, when Red boxed both his ears. Tiny Bohannon put a stop to things before it got out of hand.

"Chico let the cowboy stay in his barn. He wasn't in much shape to go home. Anyway, when I looked at him a while ago, he still couldn't hear what I was saying. His head was a mess. I had to pick some turkey feathers out of his scalp. I wonder how they got there? You think Red might have hit him with a turkey?"

"Can't put all that off on Red. Darlene had worked him over pretty well herself, before me and Floyd left," Elwood said.

"I don't know what we're going to do with that boy. First it was Sam Hundley's deputies; now it's cowboys about four feet longer than he is," Loney said, shaking her head. "Well, anyway, I need to hear about you." She slapped a thermometer in his mouth and shot him a stream of questions, while she reached in her bag for a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff. When Elwood tried to answer, she told him not to talk and to be sure to hold the thermometer under his tongue. Elwood heaved a sigh and relaxed against the pillows.

After a brief time, Loney took the thermometer from his mouth and examined it with a little penlight she kept on a chain. "Mmmm," she said. Then she shook the thermometer down and returned it to its case.

"What's the 'Mmmm' mean, Miss Loney?" Aunt Min asked.

"It means he's running a little fever, but he probably won't die from it," Loney replied as she wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Elwood's arm. Adjusting the stethoscope to her ears, she pumped the bulb until the cuff tightened around his arm. This time, when the task was completed, and she had released the air from the cuff and removed the stethoscope, there was no "Mmmm."

"Blood pressure's up a little, too; but you aren't going to die from that, either," she announced.

"Miss Loney, I sure hope you find something wrong with me," Elwood said. "I hate to feel this bad and not be sick."

Loney was reaching into her bag again. This time she brought out a roll of yellow tape and a little bottle. Handing the bottle to Elwood, she said, "Here. Go pee in this and let me see it."

Elwood was puzzled, but glad to cooperate. He had been wondering when he was going to be given an opportunity to tend to that chore. "This little bottle ain't goin' to be near big enough, Miss Loney. I'm goin' to need a bucket," he said. Unaccustomed to being given such orders by a lady, he was a little embarrassed. However, Miss Loney's matter-of-fact directness made it easier, and he headed out the door to do as she said.

"That bottle will be a-plenty. Do what you want with the rest of it."

He returned in a few minutes with the bottle nearly full, and shyly handed it to Loney. "I was wrong, Miss Loney. It would've took two buckets."

Loney held the cup to the bright sunlight that was now streaming through the window. There was another "Mmmm" as Min and Elwood looked on questioningly. Then Loney tore off a piece of the yellow tape and dipped it into the liquid. Upon removal, the tape turned almost black where the urine had soaked it.

Turning to the pair awaiting the verdict, she said, "Well, there's some good news and some bad. The good news is that you aren't pregnant. the bad is that you got sugar in your urine and you probably have a kidney infection."

"Sugar . . . you mean he's got—" Aunt Min said.

"Diabetes," Loney announced, finishing her sentence.

Aunt Min's face dropped, and Elwood's heart sank. The only people he ever heard of having had the 'pissing disease', as the old folks called it, were

planted up on the hill beside the church. Loney read their thoughts and quickly set out to give them some reassurance.

"Wait a minute, now," she said in her best no-nonsense tone, "don't go laying out any funeral suits, yet. There's a lot of people out there who have been walking around with diabetes for years, and they aren't dead yet."

"What do we do now?" Aunt Min asked.

"Keep on giving him whatever you give to keep his kidneys flushed, and let's get him to Luthersville and let Jake take a look at him as soon as we can. In the meantime, don't feed him any pie or anything else with sugar in it," Loney said. "Better ease off on the fat, too," she added.

Loney stayed to have a cup of strong black coffee, while Elwood ate a couple of boiled eggs. "Just one piece of bacon," Loney cautioned. "Two biscuits will be enough, and easy on the gravy."

Elwood could tell already that living as a diabetic was going to take some will power. He wondered if he had it.

By eight o'clock Loney was out the door and on her way to check on her other patients. "I'll keep checking on you," she said. Min felt reassured; Elwood wasn't so sure.

* * * * *

"Hold still and it won't hurt as much," the little nurse said as she prepared to sink a needle into the vein where Elwood's left arm bent.

Elwood could have sworn the needle was at least a foot long. Standing nearby, Jake Crabbe, M. D., or "Doc" to most folks, read Elwood's thoughts and said, "It's only about an inch and a half. The rest is your imagination."

Elwood looked up and smiled wanly. As he did so, there was a little prick and he felt the needle enter his vein with hardly a pang. It was over in a moment. The nurse removed the syringe, applied a ball of cotton to the small hole, and bent Elwood's arm up to hold the ball in place.

"There we are," she announced. "You have great veins, Mr. Larkin. You won't have any trouble at all bleeding all the blood we want."

Elwood took scant pleasure from that bit of news. He had no idea how much blood she wanted, or how much he had to spare. After spending what seemed most of the morning filling specimen cups and bleeding for a pretty nurse who seemed pleased with his ability to do so, Doc called him into his office.

"Elwood, it looks like Loney had it pegged about right. You are diabetic, all right," he said.

"How long you reckon I'll live, Doc?" Elwood asked, fearing the worst.

"I'd say probably another sixty or eighty years, if you don't get snake bit or run over." Doc smiled. "Actually, Elwood, it depends mostly on how well you take care of yourself. You can live a long life if you want to, but you'll have to live by some rules."

"Aunt Min makes me live pretty close to the Foot of the Cross now," Elwood said. "I don't see how I can tighten down much more."

Doc pondered a moment, considering the young man sitting across from him. Elwood had finished the sixth grade, which was as far as the little school in the Valley went. He was a long way from dumb, but that was all the formal educational opportunity he had been offered. However, what he lacked in education was made up in lore, a lore much more rich, varied and profound than could be had in any university. Life in the Valley placed a higher premium on lore than on letters; survival often depended on it.

Doc considered Elwood a perfect product of—and well suited to—the rigors of life there, where honesty, hard work and trust were the norm. But what about in the city where other norms applied, and where honesty was at least rare, and misplaced trust could land you in a heap of trouble? Balanced against the ocean of naivete Elwood possessed was the fact that Elwood was a young man. The ravages of uncontrolled diabetes would grow worse in a short while and would weigh heavily against him. Doc felt that he could do a reasonable job treating Elwood with a list of "do's and don'ts," but concluded that, to live the long full life promised, Elwood would require some "whys" as well. That called for more specialized care than Doc was equipped to give him; nor was it available anywhere in Keowee County—or any other place close by.

"Elwood, can Aunt Min spare you for awhile?"

"I suppose so," Elwood said. "How long a while?"

"Probably several weeks, perhaps even a few months," Doc responded.

Elwood thought about it for a moment. This was something he had not considered. "No more help than I've been lately, I guess she could do without me for a long time; but I'd need to talk it over with her before I could give you an answer."

"Sounds fair enough," Doc said. "Now, here's what I've got in mind. I've got a friend, a classmate of mine, who is Chief of Staff at a large hospital in Vulcan city. He has an excellent clinic that specializes in teaching diabetics how to live with this problem. He won't shoot you any bull, and he will work with you—not on you. He is a diabetic, himself, and believe me, he knows what the problems are."

"WHOOO! Vulcan City!" Elwood exclaimed. "I've never been there before. It must be a hundred miles."

"At least," Doc agreed.

"Unless he'll take a sack of 'taters and a bale of coon hides, I don't have enough money to pay for all that fancy stuff," Elwood said.

"I've thought of that," Jake said. "I'm going to write him and ask if there is any way he can arrange to let you work it out after he gets you straightened out."

The prospects of getting better and seeing the sights of a city appealed to Elwood; but the idea of leaving the Valley and parting with friends and kin fostered some misgivings. Still, if he didn't have to feel so bad all the time—

"Doc, I don't think I've got bus fare to go that far, if it's a hundred miles like you say."

"I've thought of that, too," Doc said. "Look, you got some hogs you're fattening for kill this fall, don't you?"

"Well, yeah. I got them eight pigs of Lucille's born last spring," Elwood replied.

"All right, I'll take a sheat and pay you in advance."

"You get your pick."

"I'll let Floyd pick it for me. He'll look after your interests, and I'll probably get the skinniest one of the bunch."

"If I know Floyd, he'll give you the fattest one and throw in the sow, to boot," Elwood smiled.

"All right." Jake rose, indicating their business was finished for the day. "Talk it over with Aunt Min and let me know next week when you come back. I want to see how this diet affects you." He handed Elwood some papers. "It's all written down here, and it's stuff she already has. It won't be any trouble. Don't forget to take those pills I gave you, and drink lots of water. That'll clear up that infection. By the time you get back, your vision should be clear, too."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll see you next week." Elwood already felt better.

Floyd picked him up in the lumber truck after he had delivered a load of rough lumber to the planer mill next to the Blue Ridge tracks down in West Union. On the way back to the Valley, Elwood filled Floyd in on what might be in store for him. Floyd was brightened by the prospect of Elwood's not dying right away as he'd first feared, but thinking of Elwood being far away in a strange town was a sobering thought.

That night, Floyd and June, Aunt Min, Loney and Elwood sat around Aunt Min's big table discussing the problem. It took some hard thinking and

straight talking, but it all boiled down to what was best for Elwood in the long run. They took a vote, which was final, decisive, irreversible and proper; they left it up to Elwood.

He rose and looked at the family and friends he would have to leave behind, if he chose to go. They all shared a concern for his welfare; they cared about him. He couldn't imagine waking up without the rich smell of bacon frying and Aunt Min's graham biscuits fresh out of the oven. It was hard to imagine what he would do with nights when he and Floyd couldn't go hunting with Charley and the boys. What would Shortoff do? That dumb dog. Named after the mountain whose shadow shaded the kennel where he was born, he would miss old Shorty; and who would keep the Deacon from shooting him for stealing a few scrawny chickens? It was a tough thing to think about, but a decision had to be made. Elwood swallowed hard and made it.

"I'll go," he said.

6

Goodbye Valley, Hello Vulcan City

THEY HEARD IT COMING long before it came into sight.

"Here she comes, Elwood!" Mitch Harris made the official announcement when the big coach rounded the curve a half mile away, and the wide-spaced headlights cut through the early morning mist. About halfway along the straight-away it began slowing for the brief stop at Chico's.

Judging from the size of the gathering to see Elwood off, half the Valley must have been temporarily depopulated. The wisecracks and banter, a natural reaction, helped dispel the nervous tension, and disguise the funereal sobriety underlying the occasion. One of their own had contracted a dread malady, which experience had taught them usually ended in an agonizing decline and early demise. Now the victim was leaving the Valley to seek "the cure," which they hoped—though few believed—lay in the Big Town.

The final round of handshakes, good wishes and farewells began in earnest when the bus first came into sight. Charley Foster slipped a fruit jar of tawny liquid into the World War I vintage duffel bag Elwood was taking with him. The bag had been donated by Aunt June. It had belonged to her late husband, Uncle Horace.

"That's private stock, Elwood, just in case you get snake bit," he shook Elwood's hand and gave him a broad wink.

Bobby Sue, Charley's daughter, gave him a sisterly kiss, and blushed. Darlene gave him a hug and a kiss on the other cheek. Even Charlene was

more subdued than anyone had ever seen her, but she rose to the occasion by giving him a hug and a warm, wet smacker square on the lips, which made Elwood blush.

"There's some sugar that won't hurt you," she said, amidst a burst of applause and appreciation from the male contingent.

At the rear of the crowd stood the Swamp Buzzards; hairy, unkempt and solemn. They were always solemn, except Red, who was usually pretty bouncy, when not standing before a judge. As a group, they gave a strong impression of aliens, not from another country, but from another world—a world not lost, but merely misplaced.

The bus pulled up and, with a hissing of air, the door swung open and the driver stepped out. "Five minutes!" he called, and then strode inside for a quick cup of coffee while Chico loaded the mail and took off a sack for the Valley.

"I'll take care of old Shortoff, El. Don't worry," Red called. "If I can't find him, Prucilla will."

The band began to warm up for the farewell number they had planned. Problem was, they hadn't all planned the same song. While they were deciding, Prucilla, grown almost too big for Red's pocket, jostled her head out and began warming up with the band.

Elwood hugged Aunt June and Aunt Min, who were fighting back tears. He didn't remember ever having seen either of them cry except at funerals. Aunt June gave him a Bible, with an admonition to be good. Aunt Min handed him a shoebox tied with a string. "A few biscuits," she said. "It'll hold you 'til you get there."

He shook hands last with Floyd, who could hardly look him in the eye. "Take care, old son," Floyd choked and his eyes filled. "Write sometime, and be careful of them Big City women."

"I will," Elwood said. "And you keep these Valley gals in line."

"That's too big a job for one man, old buddy," Floyd managed to smile. "But I'll do my best."

"I won't worry about that," Elwood responded. "You'll get all the help you want." That brought a cheer from the boys, and a big "Yaaaa!" from Charlene.

Reverend Knowles held up his hand, and prepared to deliver a long benediction, but was cut short by the driver's return. He managed to get out an "Amen" just before the driver called, "Board!" and stood at the door waiting for his passenger.

Elwood gave Aunt Min a quick kiss on her wet cheek; then, catching the lump in his throat, he hoisted the duffel bag by its strap, waved a last farewell to all, picked up the suitcase and boarded the bus.

There were few passengers. Not many people had cared to depart Asheville at three a.m. Sylva and Cullowee were still sleeping when the bus came through, and Elwood was the first passenger to board the bus since it left Waynesville. He slid the duffel bag under the empty seat behind the driver, stashed the suitcase in the rack overhead, and took his seat. The door sealed shut as the bus pulled away in a cloud of diesel smoke, a flurry of waving goodbyes, and the strains of "Aloha Oe" rendered by the Swamp Buzzards and Prucilla.

Winding down the mountain highway in the graying dawn, the only sound above the engine and gears was someone at the back of the bus who was snoring. The sharp curves and steep grade kept the driver concentrating on his driving. There was no conversation.

They passed Tunnel Hill, and a full view of the Piedmont Plain began to unfold as they approached Dead Man's curve on the last descent before leaving the mountains. When they rounded the curve, if he had looked, the driver might have caught a glimpse of Issuqueena Falls in the rearview mirror, but he was too busy negotiating the sharp turn.

The distant church spire, cushioned in the early mist, identified Luthersville as it caught the fresh morning sun and reflected the first rays. Far out on the smoky fringe of the horizon were a few firefly lights that marked Fort Hill. Well to the left of those faint sparks, the rounded breast of Six Mile rose darkly and alone above the ground mist that covered the plain. The world was awakening to a New Day. Elwood was headed for a New Life.

Miles slipped by and everything Elwood knew as "home" receded in their wake. As the distance grew, the Blue Ridge was revealed from horizon to horizon. From Rabun Bald in the west to Caesar's head in the east, Elwood had never seen them from that angle, nor at that distance.

The driver pointed out Rabun, which at a distance of thirty miles, seemed to rise straight out of the plain. Elwood had never seen a circus tent, but if he had, he would have compared its shape to that of Rabun, with its high peak squarely in the center, flanked by two lesser peaks equidistant either side. Strangely, from a distance, it appeared higher than it did from the Valley. Elwood could only imagine he could see the fire tower that topped the highest peak.

Rich Mountain, Poor Mountain, Stumphouse and Tamassee were the first wrinkles in the blue blanket of undulating ridges, each higher than the other,

that culminated in the crest at the shark's tooth of Satula, which seemed to be poised to rip the vitals out of the sky. Falling away to the east of Satula were Whiteside, with its sheer rock cliff; Shortoff, which started out to be something but ended abruptly; and the long reclining mountain known as Hogback.

Elwood drank it in until the sight became etched in his brain forever, and he remembered the Bible quotation, "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills whence cometh my help . . ." The old Psalmist was right; the hills were his strength. He then turned his eyes ahead toward a new world that was unfolding.

* * * * *

The silver coach slid into its slot and docked smoothly with a cushioned stop. The interior lights came on as the door swung open.

"Vulcan City! One hour for supper, then this coach continues on the Columbus, Meridian, Jackson and New Orleans," the driver called as he positioned himself outside the door, ready to help his passengers disembark.

Elwood kept his seat and waited while the other passengers grabbed coats and bags, and pressed each other toward the exit. Although he had been awake since well before Old General Jackson had flown down from the roost to crow his harem awake, he had not closed his eyes the entire journey. Toccoa was alive with shift change at the LeTourneau Plant. He marveled at the Big Apple in Cornelia. He remembered having heard about Lula when a train engine blew up there and killed some people. He looked, but there was no sign of the explosion, which had happened during the war, anyhow. Some folks thought it was the Fifth Column that had done it; Elwood couldn't see—no more than was there—how Hitler could have gotten much advantage from blowing up Lula. Elwood thought Gainesville would have been a much more tempting target, with its cotton mills and its chicken processing plants.

Gainesville still had a shiny new look from having been rebuilt after the tornado of '38 tore it apart. After Gainesville came Buford, then Atlanta. In his wildest dreams he had never imagined anything like Atlanta could exist. It was Sodom, Gomorrah and Babylon rolled into one, with Rome and Athens thrown in for good measure.

He knew he would be expected to relate every detail when he got back home, and he didn't want to disappoint anyone. He kept his eyes open and tried to absorb it all, which was no easy task.

During the lunch stop in Atlanta, he had eaten a couple of Aunt Min's ham biscuits and gnawed an ear of corn before leaving the bus and exploring the street in front of the bus station.

People hurried by without seeing or speaking. He would have to get used to that. But not everyone was unfriendly. A man approached him in a warm, confiding manner, welcomed him to the city, and offered him a wonderful deal on a watch. Elwood considered that to be a very thoughtful gesture, but turned him down with many thanks. He already had a fine, gold pocket watch, which had been willed to him by his grandfather. When the man seemed skeptical, Elwood showed it to him. The man admired it greatly and agreed that Elwood certainly didn't need a watch.

It was good that Grandpa had willed him the gold chain, too, because when the man turned to leave he jostled Elwood slightly and, without Elwood's noticing it, the watch chain had somehow gotten tangled around the stranger's fingers. It might have been lost entirely had the chain not been securely attached to Elwood's trousers. With many apologies, which Elwood assured him were unnecessary, the man quickly disappeared and Elwood returned to the bus. The experience gave him a warm feeling of something to look forward to. Perhaps big cities weren't so cold and indifferent after all.

The aisle cleared. Elwood shouldered the duffel bag, retrieved his suitcase from the rack, and fell in behind the last passenger at the door.

"Well, I guess this is where you leave us, son," the driver said, offering Elwood his hand. "Best of luck to you, and you be careful; there's a lot of slick folks in this town."

"I'll watch out for 'em," Elwood assured him. Thanking the driver for his many kindnesses, he shouldered the duffel once more, picked up the suitcase and walked through the station out to the street.

There was a lot of traffic, both cars and pedestrian. Elwood looked around to get his bearings, then moved to an alcove next to the building, out of the path of passers-by. Setting his burden down, he reached into his pocket for the envelope Doc Crabbe had given him to deliver to Dr. Burroughs. He read the address:

Brookfield Diabetes Clinic
3400 South Broad Street
Vulcan City

There was a rather coarse-looking woman, wearing men's trousers and a black cap with a plastic bill, who was leaning on a post next to the curb. She was eyeing Elwood expectantly, but not in any sort of flirty fashion. Elwood looked up and nodded in his usual friendly manner.

"Cab?" she asked, reaching for the bill of her cap to adjust it.

"Cap? Oh, no, thanks; I've got one in my duffel bag," Elwood smiled. "Got a gold watch, too, so I won't need one of them, either."

"What?" the cabbie said, a little confused.

"I don't need a cap," Elwood repeated. "I got one."

"I mean a taxi," the cabbie said. "Where are you going? Do you need a ride?"

"I'm going to Broad Street," Elwood replied. "Do you know where that is?"

"This is Broad Street," she said.

Elwood grinned happily. "Then I guess I'm 'bout there," he said. "Ain't that a piece of luck, though!"

"I don't know about that," she said. "This is a long street. Let me see that address."

Elwood handed her the envelope, which she scanned and handed back to him. "That's at the Medical Center," she said.

"Which way is that?" Elwood inquired.

"That way," she pointed. "But it's a long way."

"How far?" Elwood asked.

"Well, we're at the corner of Third Avenue, so that would make it over thirty blocks," she replied. "Hop in." She reached for Elwood's bags.

"Oh, no, Ma'am," Elwood said. "I wouldn't think of putting you out any. It's not that far. I'll just take shank's mare."

"Shank's what?" the cabbie asked, drawing a blank.

"I'll walk," Elwood clarified.

"Are you crazy?" she said. "That's nearly three miles! You can't walk that far with those bags." She held the cab's door open.

"Oh, Ma'am, it's most kind of you, an' I do appreciate it, but you ain't even headed in that direction; and I wouldn't think of puttin' you out any."

"Put me out . . . ?"

"Yes'm. I just wouldn't think of puttin' you out of your way just to take me what's not as far as my house to Floyd's, an' I walk that nearly twice a day, sometimes."

"But I'm a cab driver . . ."

"Yes'm, an' I'll bet you are a good one, too; and—if you'll pardon me, ma'am—you do look like a fine woman, an' all that, but Aunt Min tol' me not to accept rides from no strangers. I better do like Aunt Min said," he said, bowing politely and starting off in the direction she had pointed. "But I do appreciate it!" he called over his shoulder.

Elwood moved off down the street, and swung along in fine fashion for several blocks. He stopped and peered in store windows and marveled at how skinny the mannequins were; and he wondered how any woman could milk

the cow or hoe a garden in one of those dresses. He was scandalized by bikini-clad models, but stopped to gaze anyway. Surely no mama would let her daughter go out in public in anything like that, let alone get it wet. If it shrank, it would disappear altogether.

Farther down in the next block, he passed an Italian grocery store next to a delicatessen. The pungent and spicy aromas mingled to remind him in overwhelming fashion that he hadn't eaten since Atlanta, and he was beginning to get a little shaky.

There was still half of the lunch Aunt Min had packed, but the sight of fresh fruit in the store baskets, and the odors of roasting meat coming from the deli were too much.

He bought a strange-looking succulent fruit at the store, and peered through the window of the deli at fat, juicy Kosher wieners broiling. He bought one from the smiling and bouncy proprietor, who steamed a bun, dressed it with sauerkraut, mustard and relish, and topped it with a huge Kosher dill. "No charge for the pickle," he said. "Come back to see us."

Elwood resolved to do just that. It wasn't easy to manage a fresh mango, a Kosher hot dog, a shoebox lunch, a duffel bag, suitcase and a pickle, but he got out on the sidewalk with it all intact. However, there was no way he could walk and eat. He had to find a place where he could sit down and enjoy his supper.

At the corner, beneath a street lamp there was a bench intended for use of City Transit patrons. It was occupied by only an elderly colored lady with a shopping bag. She was glancing over her shoulder at three youths bouncing a ball off the wall of the building. Apparently they made her nervous, as she kept looking at her watch and peering anxiously up the street, hoping the bus would hurry. She seemed greatly relieved when Elwood put his bags down and sat on the bench beside her.

"Could you tell me the time?" she asked, looking at her own watch.

"Seven forty-four, accordin' to Granpa's watch," Elwood said.

"My watch mus' be runnin' fas' again," she said. "I'm gonna haf to get me a new one. 'At bus won't be here for seven minutes yet." She glanced at the youths again, who had stopped bouncing the ball, and were looking in the direction of the bench. "A body could be done in by that time," she rolled her eyes. There was a little tremor in her voice.

The sound of the ball bouncing resumed, but in a moment an errant bounce landed it on the bench beside Elwood, who was just unwrapping the pickle.

The biggest and obviously the leader of the trio, flanked by the other two, approached the bench. Elwood tossed him the ball and returned his attention to the pickle, which he eyed with anticipation. The youths didn't go back to their ball game, but crowded menacingly around the bench.

"Hey, man," the leader said, "how 'bout that watch."

"Yeah, it's a nice one, all right," Elwood said, still regarding the pickle. "But it ain't for sale. It come from my Gran'daddy."

"Hey, man, I don't want to buy it, see." He came a step closer. "I got this knife, see?"

"I knew it! Oh, Lordy, save us!" the lady said, clutching her purse and ducking her head behind the shopping bag.

Elwood casually tossed the pickle into the air. When it came down, it was neatly halved longways by the four-inch blade that had materialized in his hand.

"I got a knife, too," he said. "It came from my Uncle Angus. I don't care about tradin' it, either. Uncle Angus would skin me good if I let something happen to it."

The youths stood transfixed and pop-eyed.

"Want a part of this pickle?" Elwood asked, holding out half.

"Naw, man. You kiddin' me! I don't want no pickle." Backing away, they vanished as the bus pulled up. The lady smiled at Elwood, and he helped her heft her shopping bag as she boarded the bus.

"Thank you, mister," she said. "You have been a lifesaver."

"Oh, it weren't that heavy," Elwood said, handing her the shopping bag. He waved goodbye and went back to his unfinished meal. He felt much better after he finished the hot dog, but he was awfully thirsty. Picking up his load, he returned to the deli and got a large paper cup of tea, which he sweetened with saccharin.

"I saw those punks running away while ago. What did you do to them?" the owner asked.

"Oh, they were just a-funnin'," Elwood said.

"Funning, schmunning! They're vicious and dangerous little monsters that belong in cages! They are a poison to the neighborhood; snatching old ladies' purses, painting up the walls, robbing stores. always hanging around pilfering and bullying people. You don't dare turn your back on 'em for a minute. If you do, you're a goner."

"I guess they heard their Mama callin' 'em, an' went on home," Elwood said. "Say, that's good tea; can I have some more?"

"I doubt they got a mama, and if they do, she's probably out on a street corner hustling. And I KNOW they ain't got a papa," the deli owner observed sourly. "I'm Solly Goldstein," he said, sticking out his hand. "The way you handled those thugs, you can have all the tea you want, no charge. Want another hot dog?"

"Elwood Larkin," Elwood offered, shaking the man's hand. "I'm really not from around here."

"Oh, is that so? I never would have guessed," Solly smiled. "Now, how about that hot dog—on the house," he added.

"Couldn't hardly handle another one, but I will say that was the best hot dog I ever et."

"Come around in the morning. I'll feed you a good Jewish breakfast," Solly offered.

"Probably can't in the morning, but I'll take you up on it soon. Goin' to the clinic for a check-up in the morning, and I guess I'd better be gettin' on that way," he said, shouldering his duffel. "See you soon, and thanks!"

"You be careful of those punks," Sol reminded him.

Outside, Elwood set the duffel on the sidewalk. Unzipping a side pocket, he removed a small corked medicine bottle, sniffed it and made a wry face. "That's it, all right," he said. "Don't want to get it mixed up in my smelly goods." He made sure the cork was snug before slipping it into his coat pocket. Then, shouldering the duffel again, he continued up the long grade leading toward the hospital.

A block from the hospital, the sidewalk skirted the edge of a dimly lit park. He was about halfway past it when several shadowy figures emerged from the shrubbery bordering the park and the sidewalk. Three of them faced Elwood, while two others tried to circle around behind him. The figure in front of Elwood was obviously not that of a youth.

"That your man, Honeyboy?" the figure growled.

"That's him, the Hillbilly Honky," Honeyboy said. "Better watch him, he's got a knife."

"Knife ain't gonna do him no good this time," the dark figure said and hulked forward.

"Howdy," Elwood said, placing the suitcase on the sidewalk. Slipping his free hand into his coat pocket, he got a good grip on the medicine bottle. "I'm just on my way up to the hospital."

"You got that right, boy!" the hulking bear said, and made a lunge. The others jumped at the same time.

Elwood stepped aside to dodge the rush of the big man, and swung the duffel into one of the attackers from behind, knocking him into the other one. At the same time, he uncorked the medicine bottle and slung the contents into the faces of his assailants.

There followed a coughing, spitting, vomiting, clawing, gagging and cursing scramble as five would-be assassins tangled with each other in their haste to get away and find a breath of breathable air.

Elwood stood alone on the sidewalk examining the medicine bottle. "Dang," he said, "took every bit of it. Maybe I can get old Floyd to send me some more. Ain't nothing like pure, concentrated skunk oil to keep 'skeeters off, or clear up your sinuses."

From the sidewalk, where they had been dropped by the departing quintet, Elwood retrieved three knives, a set of brass knuckles, and a Saturday Night Special. He stuffed them into the duffel and continued on to the hospital.

The front door was locked, but a sign directed latecomers to the Emergency Room at the rear. He was greeted there by a rather laconic nurse, whose baggy, watery eyes and swollen red nose bespoke a monumental cold. She was the only attendant on duty at the time. "Dogdor's oud on gall," she sniffled.

"That's all right, I just need a place to sleep 'til mornin'," Elwood said, handing her the letter to Dr. Burroughs.

"You seeid Dogdor Burroughs id the bornid?" she asked.

"Yeah, an' if I could just sleep on one of these cots, I'd sure be much obliged," Elwood said. "I'm kinda tired."

"I guess id be ogay," she said, wiping her eyes with a tissue. "We ard very busy tonide iddyway."

She ushered him to a cubicle that was furnished with a gurney cart, tossed him a blanket and a hospital gown, the pulled the curtain and disappeared. Elwood undressed to his underwear and tried the hospital gown several ways before giving up. It felt backward either way.

The nurse returned to her desk, where she was working on charts. Before long, she noticed her sinuses were clearing some. An hour or so later, the young intern returned with the ambulance driver who had been on call with him. As soon as they came through the door they stopped as if they had hit a brick wall.

"My God, Sally! What is that smell?" the doctor exclaimed.

"Whad sbell?" she asked. Her sinuses obviously hadn't cleared entirely.

"Jimmy, go check the exam rooms!" the doctor ordered, running to obey his own command. "Somebody's died around here and we forgot about 'em!"

There was no doubt about the source of the problem when they found a reeking Elwood sleeping peacefully on the gurney. His snores assured them he was not dead. Donning masks, they gently rolled him into the maintenance shed and closed the doors.

When Elwood awakened the next morning, he had a difficult time getting his bearings until his eye fell upon an old sign someone had stored in the corner. It read:

WELCOME TO VULCAN CITY MEDICAL CENTER.

He was in the Big Town.

7

The Sugar Blues

A WEEK AND A HALF had passed with no word from Elwood. That in itself wasn't too remarkable. Allowing for the journey to Vulcan City accounted for more than a full day. It would take another two or three days to get settled. Add another day or two in which to write a letter, and three or four more for delivery. Throw in a weekend when nothing much moved, and the next thing you knew, a fortnight had passed.

When that much time had elapsed, Aunt Min, who had been patiently awaiting news, was becoming a little anxious. People were beginning to inquire as to what she'd heard from Elwood. On the tenth day after his departure, she was in the kitchen canning beans, when the insistent honking of a pickup truck's horn at the mailbox told her something was up.

It was Grover Harkins, the mail carrier, holding up a letter and sitting on the horn. By now, everyone in the Valley who could hear knew Aunt Min had gotten a letter from Elwood. Quickly drying her hands on her apron, Aunt Min hurried out to retrieve the letter before Grover had a heart attack.

"For cryin' out loud, Grover, will you hush that infernal racket! Everyone will think the barn's on fire!"

"Letter from Vulcan City, Min," he said excitedly. "I come straight out here with it. Now I got to go back and do the whole durn route again. Old Eli Watts is goin' to have a chicken fit. He was out standin' by his box a-waitin' on his new mail-order suspenders when I come by so fast it liked to of blowed his britches off! Let me know what El says. Gotta go—see ya!"

"Thanks, Grover!" Aunt Min waved and backed quickly out of the way of flying gravel. "I'll let you know when you come back by!"

She went back into the house and sat down at the long table in the kitchen, wiped her hands on her apron, adjusted her specs and, with the sun streaming through the window over her shoulder, she read the letter written in Elwood's broad hand.

Dere Aunt Min,

I hav arrived here OK with no unusual incidents. The docs hav looked at me and declared me to be helthy, accept of course, I do hav the dibectous. I spend most of my time lying up here in bed, altho I ant sick, as I hav alredy said. They just want to be abel to find me wen they want me on account of they always either want to stick a needel in me or get some pee in a dixy cup.

I culd not go nowhere anyhow on account of they taken my clothes to be steme clenel to get the skunk juice out wich I will ex-plain later. Anyways, I hav nothing to wear accept hosspiddel clothes wich is very funny. Hosspiddels don't put no backs in there clothes, an I don't crave to show my behind to the world so I stay in bed. I like Dr. B a lot and the folks here too. I wil write often to let you kno how I am.

*As ever your loving nefew,
Elwood P. Larkin*

Aunt Min folded the letter and put it in the box she had saved especially to keep Elwood's letters in when they arrived. Given the efficiency of the Valley grapevine and Grover's shenanigans, she was pretty sure word had gotten all around the Valley by now that she had gotten a letter from Elwood. People would begin casually dropping in soon to get the latest.

Grover delivered one addressed to Floyd the very next day. This time, thanks to the Deacon's threat to "turn him in," Grover made the rounds and delivered the letter in the usual official fashion. Nevertheless, long before nightfall, everyone who cared to know was aware of Floyd's letter, too.

Floyd drew a bucket of water, drank a dipperful, and sat in the shade of the wellhouse to read his letter.

Dere Floyd,

Not much to tell yet accept life is sure difrunt in the Big City. But let me tell you wat has happen so far in the hosspiddel. Furst thing they do is take you in this room with a long tabbel where there is a old docter and a lot of yung docs. I think the yung docs is still

in docter school, but they calls one another docter anyway even tho they ant real docs yet.

One was a red hed gal with lots of frakels. Look like Harold Bottses dotter. The one wat sings in the kwier. Purty as a pichur. Anyhow everone starts by askin kwestins lak how often you haft to go to the bathroom, and does everone else in the family haf to go too. I tol them we dint hav no bathroom an I got tired of going to the woods all the time in the middel of the night wich was why I just peed out the winder til Aunt Min made me quit on account of it was goin in the ranebarl and she washed her har in the ranewater. But I gest we all went some time, but we dint all haft to go at the same time but if we did it was alright because there was plenty of woods besides the regular outhouse wat everbody in the Valley has one.

I dint lak to be talking abt those things in front of that purty gal with the frakels but it dint seem to bother her none accept wen I got to that part about the ranebarl she had to drop her eyes and turn away. In fact it must of made ever one of them sad because they all turn there faces and old Doc drop his hed and shook lak folks does at funerals. I dont want to talk about ranebarls no more. It made them too sad.

Say, old buddy, can you send me some more polecat juice? I done use up all I had. It come in mitey handy.

*Your friend,
El*

Floyd folded the letter back into the envelope and stuck it in his pocket. He wondered how in the world Elwood managed to use up that much skunk oil in one week. It didn't take much skunk oil to go a long way. There was enough in that bottle to last for years. Big City mosquitoes must be pretty fierce.

* * * * *

Bo Burroughs assumed two things about his patients: (1)that most of them were reasonably intelligent, and (2)most of them wanted to learn to cope with their malady. That wasn't always the case, but when it was, Bo wanted to give the patient every chance of success. His technique was to involve the patient in his own treatment program. To accomplish this, proper instruction was vital; Bo saw to it the patient was instructed on whatever level he wanted,

from very basic to medical school equivalent, if the patient was capable of absorbing it. Whatever the level, Bo made sure that no one ever talked down to a patient.

A skilled team of residents, interns, specially trained nurses, specialists and med students gathered and analyzed information and data as applied to that particular patient. The patient was brought into the discussions so that he might understand what was happening to his body and why. The patient became a central member of the team, and everyone worked together.

This concept, however successful, was not universally accepted by all members of the medical profession. But in spite of interference and professional jealousy, most of Dr. Burroughs' patients went home to lead productive lives, if they so chose. Because of this technique, the patient went away with a better understanding of the problem and how to cope with it. If something related to their diabetes went awry, they usually knew why and what to do about it.

His clinic had its own kitchen, where patients made their individual choices within the caloric strictures and food group requirements of the American Diabetes Association Exchange List Diet. The approach was positive, and based on what the diabetic *must* eat, not upon what he *couldn't* eat; and it was all tailored to the individual needs of the patient and how his body metabolized the food he consumed. Elwood quickly noted that the diet was what folks ought to be eating anyway.

Pretty, perky Penny Parker, R.N., CDE, was the nurse charged with working with Elwood in his education as a patient. that is what the CDE stood for: Certified Diabetes Educator. Penny moved with the confident grace of the dedicated professional. She was always careful not to allow personal relationships to develop beyond a certain limit, which she prescribed. However, she was forced to acknowledge that Elwood put a strain on that limit. He was so confident and self-reliant, uneducated but far from dumb. There was an abundance of poise and character born of trust. He was in many ways a Bambi who could somehow take care of himself. The combination was extremely compelling. She had to remind herself that *she* was in charge.

"Need some more blood, Mr. Larkin. Let's have a finger."

"My fingers have been stuck so much they are about down to rags. How 'bout a toe?" Elwood suggested.

"Toes don't bleed like fingers," Penny said, taking the hand he offered and selecting a finger.

"I've bled for near 'bout everybody in this hospital," Elwood said, "and peed for most of them, too."

Penny blushed a little in spite of herself. he was always coming up with things that, in spite of her training, got her a little flustered. She didn't know for sure if it was deliberate, but it happened more often than she wanted. Well, he was going to have to do better than that to get her goat.

"So? You're feeling better, aren't you?" she asked.

"Say, you've got a nice touch. That didn't hurt at all."

"I haven't stuck you yet."

"Maybe that's why it didn't hurt. Have you ever delivered a baby?"

That last was right out of the blue, and caught Penny off guard so that she reacted slightly. "I've helped a few times . . . I got it. Why do you ask?"

"Got what?"

"A baby—I mean blood. I stuck you."

"Have you got a baby?" he asked innocently.

"No. I'm not even married. Where is that darned tube? I've lost the tube."

"That's good," he said.

"It is *not* good," she said. "Keep bleeding until I go get one."

She returned in a few minutes with a container of test tubes, and Elwood said, "Keep tryin'; I'm sure you'll find one."

"I've got a whole bunch right here," she said.

"Husbands?" he looked incredulous.

"No! Not husbands—test tubes! I'm not looking for a husband. Oh, you've quit bleeding. We'll have to do it again."

"Sorry, I tried. Guess I'm just about bled dry. Sure you don't want me to just pee in a cup?" he offered. "I can do that easy."

"No, just give me your other hand, and we'll try again," she said. Elwood willingly complied; this time they were successful and the test strip indicated a sugar level in the normal zone.

"You're not nearly as sweet as you were, Mr. Larkin," Penny said banteringly, for which she was immediately sorry. Elwood had kept a straight face, and it made her feel compelled to explain. "I, er uh, that is I—I didn't mean that the way you think," she stammered. "I meant your sugar is good—I mean" It wasn't getting any better for Penny. The more she tried, the worse it got. Penny had to admit he had gotten her goat again. "How does he do that?" she wondered.

Elwood took in the whole elaborate explanation with a controlled look and a slight protrusion of tongue-in-cheek. "Why, Miss Penny, I've never even given you any sugar," he said. "How do you know if it's any good? 'Course we could remedy that anytime."

"Mr. Larkin!"

"I was just tryin' to cooperate."

She was saved by the entrance of Dr. Burroughs, followed by a retinue of interns and students, including the red-headed girl with freckles. They surrounded the bed, looking down at the patient, waiting for the doctor's lead. Bo Burroughs noted the rosy hue of Penny's cheeks and smiled behind his professional mask.

"Patient doing all right, Miss Parker?" he asked.

"He's—" Penny began, but was cut off by Elwood.

"She says my sugar's pretty good." Elwood beamed.

Catching the double entendre, Bo couldn't resist a little needling of his own. "That so, Miss Parker?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"I was referring to his glucose level, Doctor. Here," she said coldly, handing him Elwood's chart. "See for yourself."

Burroughs examined it for a moment and nodded his head seriously. "She's right. You aren't nearly as sweet as you were."

"You were eavesdropping!" Penny exclaimed.

"Now, now, not at all, Miss Parker," the doctor soothed his star nurse. "You were handling it so smoothly, I just thought it would be a good opportunity for these folks to get some expert instruction on how to deal with a difficult situation."

"Well, thanks a lot," Penny said dryly, tossing her head. "Next time I'll teach them how to get blood with a hammer and a ten-penny nail." She threw a menacing look toward the patient, who acknowledged the threat with a most angelic smile.

"I have other patients to see, so if you'll excuse me, Dr. Burroughs." She turned toward Elwood. "I will visit you tomorrow, Mr. Larkin," she said, then mustering her remaining dignity, which wasn't much, she left the scene.

Surveying the group surrounding his bed, Elwood said, "Doc, if you brought all these folks to be pallbearers, you're gonna have to bring 'em back later. I ain't dead, yet."

"From the look of these charts, you aren't going to be for a while. One thing, though. Does it burn when you pee?"

"How'd you know?" Elwood asked.

"Urine's cloudy, and you still have a fever. Probably bladder infection. Happens a lot when the sugar gets high," Bo replied.

"Make a note of that, Doctor," he said to Amy, the freckle-faced girl, "and we'll send him down for a work-up." To Elwood he said, "You're looking good. See you tomorrow, and take it easy on Miss Parker. She takes her work very seriously."

"I'll try," Elwood said as the doctor and his retinue left the room.

A few minutes later, Amy poked her head back in the room. "Mail for you, Elwood," she said, handing him two envelopes. When Dr. Burroughs and the other students weren't around, she dropped the ritual "Mr." with Elwood. Very often she and some of the other med students would drop by Elwood's room early in the morning before classes began. Their mission was simply to chat. They were learning a lot about the Valley and its folk. "News from home?" Amy asked.

"One from Aunt Min, and one from old Floyd," Elwood beamed. It was the first he had heard from the Valley since leaving.

"Tell me about it in the morning," Amy said, and left him to enjoy his mail at his leisure.

He opened Aunt Min's letter first.

Dere Elwood,

I take pin in hand to tell you all the news I can think of since you left. You may be glad to know that Red is taking care of Shortoff wich may be a blessing as Dekin Watts has swore to shoot the suck-egg hound wat has been stealing his chickens, if he ever finds him. I am sure he means Shortoff.

Speking of the Dekin, he come by the other day sweet as pie, with two men he says are perfessers down at the ag college wat wants to rent the upper field to rase some new kind of tobacco. They pay cash rent so I told them to go ahed since you want be here to work that field any how. I thot we wuld get some good of it.

I must caution you not to mention this to anyone as I was told by them that this was a secret government project and the Rooshins must not learn of it. I must say I hav never heard of secret tobacco. Do they have Rooshins in Vulcan City?

So I wil close for now and hope you wil soon be back and well. We miss you very much and look forward to wen you wil be restored to us. Dont forget to write ever chanct you get.

*Always your loving aunt,
Minnie Larkin*

Elwood folded the letter back into its envelope and wondered why the "perfessers" wanted to rent that rough old high field rather than one of the better bottomland fields. It was also hard to get to, and if you didn't already

know it was there, you would miss it entirely, because it was hidden from the road. Elwood thought Aunt Min was lucky to rent that old rocky strip.

Putting Aunt Min's letter aside, he opened Floyd's and scanned it before concentrating on the contents.

Dere Elwood,

Your letter arrived and I was glad to here from you. I was glad to here that you got to the Big Town and not had no trouble. I hav not ever seen no girl docter, but she culd cure me any time, ha ha.

I gess Ant Min has told you that Red is taken ker of old Shortoff for you. It was not easy to round him up. Wat happen was that Charley hired Rooster Bohannon to hep out since you are not here, and me and Rooster spotted a coon den in a old tree hanging out over the branch. The tree werent fit to mak a log, so we dint cut it but we did decide to climb up and take a look in the den and sure anuff he was in there snoozin away.

So wile Rooster helt the sack wich he werent too keen on doin, I rech in and grab him by the tale and come out with him. Bout the time I got him out he woke up and started snarling and a scratching. That old Rooster was a yellin for me to put him back and I kep yellin for him to hold the sack steady.

Well he whurl around and bit old Rooster on the thum and Rooster dropped the sack and fell out of the tree smak on his back in the branch. The he rech around and bit me in the fleshpart just over my knee and I dropt that rascal right down on top of old Rooster before I fell on top of both of them.

I gess old Shortoff was hiding back in the woods cause he come a running out when he herd that old coon a yowling and he jump right in the pile of us and started grabbing for the coon wat got up and run off. But that dint stop old Shortoff from gettin ahold of whatever he culd wich turn out to be the seat of old Roosters pants. Rooster like to of drown't before I culd get up and mak old Shortoff turn him aloose. We tied him to a tree and Red come and tuk him home.

Rooster he ain't ben to work for three days but the saw mill is still runnin. Hope you are the same.

Your friend,

Floyd Bates

*P.S. How did you use up all a that polecat juice in one week?
I wil send mor wen I can round up anuff skunks.*

Elwood was pondering whether or not he should tell Floyd what happened to the skunk oil, when there was a knock on the door.

"Came to get you for another test, Mr. Larkin," said a kindly voice. The door opened and a pleasant-faced nurse Elwood had never seen before pushed a wheelchair into the room. "Taxi?" she said.

He could never understand why they insisted on making him ride all around the hospital in a wheelchair when he was perfectly capable of walking, but he had long since ceased to argue about it. "Hospital policy," was the only answer he ever got, and it would have to suffice. Elwood climbed aboard.

"What is it this time?" he asked over his shoulder.

"We're going to Urology," she announced, stopping the wheelchair at the elevator door.

"Where is my Ology?" Elwood asked as the elevator doors opened. He would soon learn.

* * * * *

His position as Chief of Surgery at Vulcan City Medical Center Hospital gave Dr. Mortimer Maxwell Money certain privileges. Any that weren't granted, he was quick to assume, unless Higher Authority decreed otherwise. At the moment, Higher Authority was not aware that Dr. Money stood before a file cabinet in the business office.

Mortimer Maxwell Money wanted to be that Higher Authority, himself. He ached for the job. He burned for the power. By all rights, he should be Chief of Staff, but that would never happen as long as Dr. Burroughs stood in the way. The solution was simple; Bo Burroughs would have to go.

Dr. Money smiled to himself. He seldom smiled at others unless it was to ingratiate himself to a wealthy patient, or to someone whose assistance he needed at the moment. He closed the file drawer, gathered up a stack of copies, put them into a briefcase, and strode through the outer office ignoring the clerks at work there.

Department heads would be having their monthly meeting with the Hospital Administrator and Board of Directors next week. He thought he had enough ammunition to file a report with the Hospital Administrator and Board of Directors that would make Bo Burroughs squirm. Sooner or later he would have to fold. Sooner or later the Board would have to choose a new Chief of

Staff, and what better choice than a man of vision who always placed the best interests of the hospital above all else—especially in fiscal matters.

In the meantime, Dr. Money had a variety of other business interests of his own to promote. No one ever accused him of neglecting his own best interests.

* * * * *

The arrival of Elwood's letter perked up an otherwise drab day for Floyd. He tore into it eagerly.

Dere Floyd,

I have told you of all the purty nurses they is in this hosspiddel. It seems they cant do anuff for a body, even things a body culd do for itself if they wuld let it. I fear I want be worth much wen I get bak home, but then I gess I never was, ha ha.

But Floyd I hav got to tell you of wat happened today and you have got to promise not to ever reveal it to no one on account of they will think I have lost my marbels. You know how Rev Knowles talks about them Bible places like Soddum and Gamorrah? Well I culdnt hardly ever beleve it was real, but Floyd it is a going on rite here in this hosspiddel and I seen it!

Wat happen was they wheel me plumb across this hosspiddel wat is near as big as Dekin Wattses cornfield and down into the basement to wat they said was my Ology. They werent nobody there but this one woman wat was rite purty herself and the first thing she told me rite off the bat was to tak off my clothes! And she dint look lak that kind of woman. I gess you cant never tell.

I dint know wat to do at first but she dint ack like she wuld tak no for a anser, so I did it, and she must not of liked wat she saw at all because she dint smile none. But let me tell you wat happent next. You aint goin to beleve it, but she just come over and grab my privates and commence stuffing a tube down it! Floyd I like to of died rite there and next thing I knew I gess I past out.

Wen I come to myself she had done hooked that tube up to a little motor pulley thing and it was a pulling that tube back out wile she was a looking at some meter thing wat I gess told her how far it wuld stretch.

I gess I must of past out again cause wen I woke up this time I was back in my room and I dont remember nuthin else wat mite of took place. If it were good I hate I missed it.

Floyd, wen the preachur told about Soddum and all, he dint say a word about horehouses wat had pekker stretchers, nor yet hosspid-dels wat had horehouses and even if he had no one wuld of beleved him. I sure wuldnt of if I hadnt seen it with my own eyes.

And I will tell you this, too. Wen a docter pukkers up and frowns and looks at you all serious like, it means you mite be going to die but you aint going to hurt. But wen he jus easy like out of the side of his mouth tells somebody to take you to your Ology it means you aint going to die, but you can bet yore boots you are a fixin to hurt!

Always your friend,

El

8

Mr. Bates Goes To Town

HAS THIS PATIENT gotten any sweeter, Nurse?" Dr. Burroughs addressed the question to Penny in a serious tone, but with a glint of humor in his eye, and tongue in cheek. She ignored the obvious reference.

Elwood had just opened a letter from Floyd when Dr. Burroughs and Penny walked into the room. "Not that I could tell, Doctor," she replied in her best nurse-to-doctor-in-front-of-the-patient manner. "And the charts bear me out."

"Glad to hear that," he said, glancing at the chart she handed him. "Looks as if his infection is clearing up, too. Is your vision improving?" he asked Elwood.

"Clear as a bell," Elwood said.

"Taking your insulin regularly?"

"Just like Penny showed me," he said. "Nothing to it. Just a little jibby-jab with the needle. Don't hardly feel it."

"Don't let him kid you," Penny said. "The first time he gave himself a shot in the leg, I thought his leg was going to run away by itself before he caught it."

"I can't help it if my leg's a coward," Elwood said. "It's got used to it now."

"You're going to be getting out of here just in time for Thanksgiving," Bo said. "Not much more we can do. You didn't die, and it doesn't look as if you're going to, so we can't bury you. Have you made any arrangements for a place to stay when you leave here?"

"Well," Elwood said, "Penny said I could move in with her."

Penny hastily cut in to correct the false impression, "The Nurses' Dorm needs a maintenance man, and El—Mr. Larkin can fill in until Mr. Hicks gets well again." Bo and Elwood exchanged winks. Penny continued, "There is a room and a bath in the basement where he can stay *temporarily* until he can find something better."

"Hicks been on a toot again?" Bo asked.

"I suppose so," Penny said, allowing her professional manner to lapse a little. "He's at the VA Hospital getting dried out now."

"That suit you all right—to live in a basement 'temporarily'— Elwood?" the doctor inquired, knowing full well what the response would be.

"Sounds fine to me."

"When Hicks comes back, *then* you can move in with Penny," Bo said.

Penny was speaking and almost missed the doctor's last comment, "... and I have invited him to have Thanksgiving with us. We'll see that he doesn't overdo." Then the remark registered and she exclaimed, "He will *not!*" as her cheeks turned slightly pink.

"Can you handle that, Elwood?" Bo asked. "I'm sorry, Penny, I misunderstood."

"I'll do my best," Elwood said.

"Okay, I'm glad that's settled," Dr. Burroughs said. "You go stay with the girls and help them out. When Hicks returns, let me know. We've got a job waiting for you over here." Elwood nodded his agreement. "Heard any news from the Valley lately?"

Elwood held up his mail, "Got a couple of letters just today."

"Good. We'll get out of here and let you read them," the doctor said. "See you tomorrow."

Elwood returned to Floyd's letter.

Dere Elwood,

We have now had several frosts and a little bit of snow done fell. That Rooshin hog what treed the Dekin come bak and just went plumb loco. He got to chasing chickens and the livestock and made a pass at Grover's pickup when he stopped at Mitch Harris's mailbox. Grover blowed his horn and Mitch ran and got his gun, but time he got loaded and finely got off a shot that old hog was hedded bak to the Big Laurel.

Those fellers wat rented Ant Min's bak field has been goin round renting other folks bak fields. I wonder about them sometimes. They dont look much lak college perfessers, tho the Dekin says so.

You know not to tell no body about them cause it is suppose to be a govment secret from the Rooshins, but it look lak the Rooshins is done found out about them. You think that Rooshin hog mite of been a spy? Ha ha.

You mite lak to know that old Texas dude is bak makin eyes at Charlene. Hes learnt to duck better and is willin to chance it aint Darlene hes grabbin. He still dont get it rite ever time but he keeps a tryin.

Got to go chop Ma some firewood. It is cold. Hope you are the same and wil soon be bak.

Your old buddy,

Floyd

Aunt Min's letter was full of preparations for the big Thanksgiving Feast and All-Day Singing to be held at the Meeting House. The Reverend Wadleston was to be the Special Guest. He had become famous on the Circuit as The Preacher That Had Been Saved From The Jaws Of The Bear. Sadie Brewster was baking cakes and making cranberry sauce, but Min was in charge of the turkeys.

Elwood would have liked to have been in the Valley for Thanksgiving, but being the only man at an all-girl celebration wasn't too bad an alternative. He didn't suffer from a lack of attention or from overeating. Penny wouldn't allow either.

A few days after the holiday, Floyd got a letter. He had been feeling particularly sorry for Elwood because he was missing the special days in the Valley. Surely it must have been a lonesome time for him. Floyd opened the letter and read.

Dere Floyd,

You must know by now I am out of the hosspiddel and feel fine. I have moved into the Nurses House wich is ful of nothing but purty girls. Penny, who was my special nurse, and about a dozen of her friends fixt Thanksgiving dinner with turkies they bot at the store since there aint none in town to shoot. And they cooked up a lot of other stuff 'cludin a lot of sweet things wat they made without no sugar but used somethin just as sweet wat dont hurt people with the dibeetous. But none of them pyes was near as sweet as those nurses.

My job here is to keep a fire in there furnases (ha ha) tak keer of there plummin wich is all inside. Not much to it accept sometimes

*wen I go to fix somethin the girl wat anser the door dont always
hav on all her clothes. It dont seem to bother them near as much as
me but I gess I will hav to get use to it. Ha ha.*

*You can keep writin to the hosspiddel. Penny wil bring me the
mail and I will be bak over there workin out my bill as soon as the
old man wat is suppose to hav this job gets hisself dried out.*

*I wil not be abel to be bak to the Valley for Xmas. It cost too
much but the nurses say they wil tak good keer of me then too.*

I hope that Rooshin bore stays in the Laurel thicket.

Your old sugar time buddy,

El

* * * * *

"Mort the Mortician came by to see you," the secretary said.

"Miss Orr, I've told you a thousand times, we do not speak disrespectfully of doctors on this hospital staff. Please do not make me have to warn you again. Now, what did Dr. Money-bags want?" Dr. Burroughs asked as he shuffled through his message slips.

"He didn't say," she answered, not abashed in the least. "Just wanted to chat, was all he said."

"Dr. Money never 'just wants to chat,'" Bo said. "He had something on his mind. I'll give him a call and find out what it is."

Strangely enough, the call did seem to be about nothing much. A few questions about budgetary matters and about a new anesthetist, but nothing specific.

"I see you discharged our Hillbilly," Dr. Money observed.

"Mr. Larkin was a good patient," Bo answered noncommittally. He didn't discuss patients with other doctors on a non-consultive basis.

"Must have run up a big bill," Dr. Money said. "He was here nearly a month."

Bo didn't comment directly and the small talk soon drifted, then petered out leaving Dr. Burroughs wondering more than ever and still suspicious as to Dr. Money's purpose in contacting him. Money was not in the habit of wasting time with idle chitchat, and he was never cordial to anyone unless he had an ulterior motive.

Bo was to discover that purpose at the Board Meeting.

* * * * *

Dere Elwood,

That durn Rooshin bore done come bak agin the other night and rooted up the turnup patch. Then he got over in the hog lot and bred two sows fore I culd get out there. I burnt him good with both barls, but dint have nothin but birdshot, so insted of jumping the fence he went through it and all the hogs got out and scattered. I spent the rest of the night and most of the next day lookin for hogs. I finely found them gess where. In Dekin Wattses corn crib, thats where. That is, all of them accept old Sukie, my best sow wat done tuk up with the bore and hedded for the Big Laurel.

Now old Eli is demandin I pay him dubble for the corn they et and I cant even pay him onct let alone dubble, but if I culd get my hands on that old bore I'd hang him in the Dekins smokehouse in a minit, or better yet around his nek.

You awt to see that Prucilla. She is growin lak a weed. If she grows to fit her feet she wil be the size of a bear. She got a good nose too. Red says she wil be the best dog in the pak. At least she will be the best singer.

That is all for now.

Your old buddy,

Lonesom Floyd

P.S. Dont plummers need helpers?

* * * * *

The chairman of the Board rapped the gavel.

"Is there any further new business?"

"Yes, Mr. Chairman," Dr. Money rose from his seat. "I would like to have clarification of hospital policy with reference to indigent patients."

"That has been clearly stated before, Dr. Money," the chairman said. "There should be no question regarding that policy."

"May I have it restated, sir?" Dr. Money persisted. "I want to be sure it is clearly understood by everyone here."

"Very well," the chairman sighed, "briefly stated, it is that no person of any race, color, creed or sex will be turned away at the peril of that person's life or limb; but that once stabilized, that patient shall be transported to a suitable hospital where he or she may receive treatment at public expense."

"Is that policy being enforced?" Dr. Money asked.

"I would presume so, yes," the chairman answered.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have prepared a report that indicates the policy is, perhaps, not always followed, and I will pass a copy to each of you," Dr. Money said.

The purpose of the chitchat call became clear. Money had wanted to learn all he could about indigent patients in general and Elwood Larkin in particular. Elwood was going to become a "horrible example" of a breach of policy. It wouldn't cost Dr. Burroughs his position as Chief of Staff, but it would be part of Money's program of undermining Bo in order to gain the position for himself. Mort the Mortician just kept pecking away.

In his worst nightmares, Dr. Burroughs could not imagine that incompetent, money-grubbing hacker becoming Chief of Staff. He never would have become Chief of Surgery had his father not been a heavy donor and a large shareholder. On second thought, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. If there was adequate assurance it would keep Money away from slicing up patients and sending his mistakes to what was euphemistically referred to as the 'Eternal Care Unit,' Bo decided he might consider stepping aside.

"Fat chance of that happening," Bo thought. "He would never stay out of the operating room. If he ever became Chief of Staff, we would have a fool directing the staff, and Attila the Hun in the operating room." On the positive side, the poor and needy were in no danger from Dr. Money; he operated only on well-to-do or well-insured patients. Shaking off his reverie, Bo turned his attention to reality.

"... if you will notice, most of the indigent patients who have stayed over three days have been admitted through the Diabetes Clinic," Money was saying. "I call your attention to Case A on page five." There was a shuffling of paper as everyone turned to that page. "This patient was admitted from out of state. He was uninsured, and gave no financial information. He was allowed to stay twenty-four days, and was discharged last week."

There was a pause as everyone scanned the sheet, which had a breakdown of medical charges and the treatment given. "You were the admitting physician, Dr. Burroughs," the chairman said. "Would you care to make a comment?"

Bo thought a moment before answering. "Yes," he said. "The patient came here in bad shape; temporary impairment of vision, early stages of keto-acidosis, and unable to work. He left in good shape, knows how to take care of himself, and is ready to earn a living. We must have done a pretty fair job; I doubt we see him again as a patient anytime soon."

"You bet we won't," Dr. Money exclaimed. "He'll head back to the hills as fast as he can go, where we'll never find him, and the hospital will be stuck with the bill. I remind you, Dr. Burroughs, that this is not a charity hospital."

"Might I remind you, Dr. Money, that collection of the hospital's bills is not a concern of the Chief of Surgery," Bo answered.

"Gentlemen!" The chairman rapped the gavel. "I think a legitimate question has been raised as to adherence to hospital policy with regard to indigent patients. Would you care to comment further, Dr. Burroughs?"

"Not at the present time," Bo said. "I would suggest that the matter be referred to the Finance Committee for further study."

"I agree, and hereby refer the matter to the Finance Committee for further study, and request they submit a written report to the Chairman prior to the next quarterly meeting. If there is no further business, I declare this meeting adjourned. My wife is waiting for me to take her to a concert. The Harmonicats are in town and I don't want to miss them."

The gavel rapped, chairs scraped, and the meeting ended.

Dere Floyd,

It is hard for me to beleve that they axually pay me for doing wat I am doin since I aint axually doin anything you culd call work. I feel like a mule pullin an empty wagon. I dont even have to cook. Each night a different set of nurses feeds me and they ack lak it just tikkels them to death to do it. I can tell you it sure tikkels me.

It was hard not being home for Christmas, but the girls that dint get to go home thereselves all got together and had a big party and dinner. After that they dressed me up in a red suit and we all went over to the little childrens wing of the hosspiddel and I was the Sandy Claws that past out the gifts. It wuld bring a tear to your eyes to see those happy kids.

I hope old Sandy Claws came to see everbody in the Valley.

Always your friend,

El

P.S. Penny, thats my special nurse friend I may have wrote about, says she wuld lak to visit the Valley some time. If she does, you wil hav to put on your tie before you meet her as she is a city gal. Ha ha.

Dere Elwood,

Wen you left for the City I was feelin mitey sorry for you, but now it seems lak ever since you left here all I hav done is work, feel sorry for you cause you had the dibeetous, and chase hogs.

I am glad to know you have fallen into good hands and feel better, but here is how matters stand here.

The dam bore done ate up all the turnups. We aint got a single one left. Last night he nocked a hole in the fence, run off with another sow, and the rest of my hogs got in the Dekin's corn crib agin.

The thirty gallons of cider I made last fall done turn to vinegar. The big New Year's party at Chicos ended up in a fight with a bunch of those gas line flukeys from Texas. Somebody hit me with a chair and nocked me into Bucksnot Bailey's base drum. I woke up in jail with the rest of the Buzzards cept Red wat tuk off for the Big Laurel an I gess he is still there unless that old bore done got him too.

Charlene and Darlene both done run off to Odessa, Texas with Duke Burton. Billy has fooled aroun and got Bobby Sue pragnet and it made Charley so mad he swore to shoot Billy, an Billy done left the country, an Charley done shut the mill down.

I aint got no job. I aint got no girl friend. I aint got no turnups to go with that 30 gallons of vinegar wat use to be cider. The Dekin is dunnin me for the corn them hogs et and my head still hurts from bangin into Bucksnots drum.

Another thing I aint got is the dibectous, but seein as to how you are gettin all the sugar in more ways than one, I'm comin to Vulcan City to see if I can catch it.

Your old buddy,

Flunked out Floyd

9

Mrs. Vanderwort's Rooming House

NOW JUST WHAT do you fellers think you're a-doin'?" said the rheumy-eyed character standing in the doorway. Elwood raised up from the cot where he was sleeping, and Floyd stirred where he was trying to sleep on the pile of cardboard boxes in the corner.

"I knowed it," the rheumy-eyed gnome continued, "the minute my back is turned I not only get replaced, but they hired an assistant, too." He looked at a bewildered Floyd. "Wouldn't hire one for me. Didn't care how hard I worked. Took two to replace me—Ha!"

"What's he talkin' about, El?" Floyd asked.

"I reckon that's Mr. Hicks," Elwood said.

"Durn right, it's Hicks," the little man replied. "Ex-Private First Class Durward P. Hicks of the U. S. of A. Army Infantry, and I got the papers right here to prove it," he said, pulling a sheaf of documents out of his pocket. "See!" He offered them to Elwood.

"I was in doubleyew-doubleyew uno—the Big One, you know. Eighty-second Infantry Division. Sergeant York's old outfit. In fact, it was me that said, 'Alvin, you circle around there and capture them machine guns while I hold off the rest of the German Army,' and that's exactly what we done. 'Course, Alvin got the medals and the glory and all that; but I didn't mind, long as we won," he said modestly.

"Wow," Floyd breathed, "a real hero, El."

"And here they done turned me out and give my job away, just 'cause I got sick," Hicks moaned. "It ain't fair, I tell you. It just ain't fair."

"No, it ain't," Elwood agreed.

"Who'd take a job away from a genuine hero, anyway," Floyd asked.

"Y'all did, that's who!" Hicks exclaimed.

"Wait a minute!" Floyd said. "I just got here. I don't even know you."

"That's even worse!" Hicks complained. "Took my job away and give it to a complete stranger!"

"I ain't a stranger!" Floyd shot back. "He knows me," he said, pointing to Elwood.

"Is that so!" Hicks retorted. "That's worse'n ever, 'cause I don't know him, either. You're both nuthin' but a couple of claim-jumpin' job-stealin' strangers, and you done put me out on the street when my back was turned an' I was in the hospital gettin' over a war wound. But you ain't a-gonna get away with it! I'll go see my Congersman. Me an' him are buddies, and we'll see what happens when Reuben C. Finchert gets through with you."

"Reuben who?" Floyd asked.

"C. Finchert of the Congers of the Yew Ninety States in Washington D and C," Hicks informed him.

"Oh, that Reuben," Floyd said. "Ain't he the one what liked to got put in jail last year?"

"They never proved nuthin'," Durwood P. Hicks was quick to point out. "And his secretary could type, too, just not very fast."

"Hold it, hold it!" Elwood said.

"Well, she coulda typed, if she'd a-wanted to," Hicks maintained.

"I know, but that's not what I'm—"

"Reuben told me that hisself," Hicks cut in, not to be deterred. "And ain't I dandled leetle Rube on my knee when he was just a youngun? And don't he call me 'Uncle Fizz'? He calls me Uncle Fizz on account of I was the one what bought him his very first Coke. And Reuben C. Finchert always tells the truth, too, 'cause I taught him."

"I know, but—" Elwood tried again.

"You still don't think so, huh. Well, I'll have you know he sent me a picture of the very typewriter she could of typed on, if she'd a-wanted to," Hicks continued. "Now, if you can't believe that, what can you believe?" he concluded with the confidence of one who has irrefutably proved his case.

"Oh, I guess that proves it all right. Wouldn't you say so, Floyd?" Elwood nodded his head vigorously at Floyd.

"I guess so," Floyd replied, not really convinced, and still sore at being labeled a "stranger" and a "claim-jumper."

"Durn right, it does," Ex-PFC Hicks said. "Now, do I get my job back, or do you want to go up against the likes of Reuben C. Finchert and the Congers of the Yew Ninety States?"

"We wouldn't think of d'privin' a genuine hero and a friend of a Congersman of his job, now would we, Floyd?"

"Oh, no. I agree, hands down, absolutely," Floyd said, catching Elwood's drift. If Hicks wanted to think he had won a great victory, well let him. It wouldn't do any harm.

"Well, I think I'll just call Reuben anyways, just to make sure," Hicks said, pressing his advantage.

"Oh, no! Don't do that," Elwood pleaded in mock alarm.

"Aw, you don't need to beg. I weren't goin' to get him on you boys," Hicks said magnanimously. "I know y'all didn't have nothin' to do with it. You all just took the job 'thout knowin' the consequences. I just want to teach a lesson to that fool what give you the job in the first place."

"Now, Mr. Hicks, can't we just talk this thing over?" Elwood said, reaching into the duffel for Charley's jar.

Hicks spotted the ancient duffel bag. "Was you in the Big One, too?" he asked, eyes lighting up. "You look mighty young to of been in that one."

"No," Elwood answered, gesturing toward Floyd, "this old duffel belonged to his Pa. He was in the Big War. Floyd's Ma just lent it to me." Elwood brought out the fruit jar, Hicks' eyes lit up even more and, for a moment, he forgot all about the Big One.

"Well," Hicks said, his eyes never leaving the jar, "since it belonged to his Pa what was in the Big One, maybe we could talk things over a bit, and I'll see to it Reuben don't go too hard on anybody—'specially you boys. What was your Pa's name, boy? Maybe I mighta knowed him."

"Horace Bates," Floyd said, passing the jar to Hicks.

"No, I never knew him. 'Course it was a mighty big army and a mighty big war. I coulda missed him, I guess," Hicks said, taking a swig. There was a pause while he swallowed hard and blinked to clear his vision. "Whewee!" he gulped, "That's like swallerin' a tomcat back'ards an' him a-clawin' all the way down!" He wiped his lips and took another pull, not quite as much this time. Handing the jar back to Floyd, he said, "That's better. Ohhh! Mmmm, that's sippin' stuff."

"Smooth, ain't it?" Floyd said. "That's the best there is in the Valley."

"Whoop, where is that valley?" Hicks asked, reaching for the jar again. "I want to go there when I die." He took another long pull and then said, "Come to think of it, I'd like to go there before I die."

Several more sips, and Hicks' rheumy eyes were beginning to unfocus. In fact, they were crossing, and he was definitely becoming rubber-legged. "How 'bout if I go there to die?" He asked, groping his way toward the cot. "Where'd you shay it wash, again?"

"Long way from here," Floyd said, taking him by the arm.

"Sho's Arkingshaw; but that don't mean you can't get there. Hee, hee," Hicks was pleased with his witticism. Charley's best was working fast. "Whoops! That floor's gettin' a mite uneven," he said. "Gesh it's gettin' to me. I don't really drink mush, you know. Doctor shays it's not good for me, only a little one once in a while. Jush a little one," and he measured a "little one" between thumb and forefinger, and giggled.

Floyd and Elwood helped him to the cot, where he lay with an angelic expression clutching the jar like a child with a Raggedy Andy. Elwood removed it, and set it on a nearby shelf. Hicks drifted off without protest.

"Man! He done sipped near half of it," he said.

"Let him have it," Floyd said, "I brought a whole jug."

"That ought to last a while," Elwood said.

"Not if it goes like that skunk oil," Floyd replied. "You never did say what happened to it."

"Sometimes you need it just walkin' down the street around here," Elwood said.

"Are the skeeters that bad?" Floyd asked.

"The kind that jump out of the bushes and stick knives in your ribs are," Elwood said. Then he told Floyd what had happened that first night.

"I think they were just a-funnin'," he added, "but they were a mite too rough about it, an' I felt kinda bad that night. They didn't have any business a-scarin' that lady, either. She was right nice."

"Well, I brought a couple more bottles of skunk oil, too," Floyd said.

"Can't never tell when you might need it," Elwood said.

"We goin' to leave him there?" Floyd asked, gesturing toward the limp form on the cot.

"Reckon so," Elwood replied. "I'll stop by the hospital and tell Penny he's back. Then we'll go look for some place to stay."

"Where you got in mind?" Floyd asked. "We ain't got much money."

"We'll look for a roomin' house," Elwood said. "There's bound to be some around here somewhere."

"What time you got," Floyd asked, shaking the watch on his wrist. "My bran' new watch done quit runnin'."

"Seven thirty," Elwood replied. "We got plenty of time. Where's you get that watch?"

"Bought it from a feller at the bus station in Atlanta," Floyd answered. "Nice feller."

"Yeah, I think I met him, too," Elwood said. "Tell you all about Atlanta?"

"Yeah. Musta been the same man," Floyd said. "Makes you feel good to know all Big City folks aren't so stuck up they don't have time to talk to you."

"That's what I thought, too. Small world, ain't it?" Elwood said, hoisting the duffel and picking up the suitcase. "I guess we might as well get moving."

"See you, Old Timer," Floyd said to the peacefully snoozing Hicks. "I bet it'll take a week after he wakes up before his eyeballs start lining back up with the holes in his head."

"It might take him a week just to wake up," Elwood said. "Charley's mule done give him a kick."

* * * * *

"Hospital Administrator called while you were out," Miss Orr said.

"Did he leave a message?" Dr. Burroughs asked.

"He just wanted to know when Mr. Larkin was supposed to start work."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth, of course."

"I thought you knew better than that," he said.

"Not when it helps. I told him Mr. Larkin came in this morning and would be ready to go to work tomorrow," she said.

"I thought you said you told him the truth," Dr. Burroughs said.

"I did. Mr. Larkin did come in. Hicks is back, and Mr. Larkin will be ready to start in the morning, just as I said."

"That's great! Why didn't you say so?"

"I did. You just weren't listening," she replied dryly.

"That ought to let some of the air out of Snortin' Mort's balloon," Dr. Burroughs said.

"Dr. Burroughs!" Miss Orr said stiffly. "We never speak disparagingly of members of this hospital's medical staff."

"Touche, Maggie Mae, touche. Sometimes we slip," he said, then jauntily disappeared into his office. In a moment, the intercom buzzed. "Get me Dr. Jake Crabbe in Luthersville, will you?"

* * * * *

Out on the street, Elwood and Floyd milled around a few minutes trying to make up their minds which way to look for a rooming house. One way looked as promising as another.

"I guess there is only one sure way to know, El," Floyd said.

"Never fails," Elwood agreed, and spit into his hand. Floyd did likewise.

"Ready?" Floyd asked.

"Go!" said Elwood, and they simultaneously smacked two fingers onto their palms.

"Mine went this a-way," Floyd said.

"Mine went a mite to the left, but that's close enough," Elwood said, and they moved off in the direction the spit had flown.

"How far you reckon we'll have to go?" Floyd asked after a couple of blocks.

"I don't know, but it never fails," Elwood assured him.

They were walking down a street past warehouses, some seedy looking stores, and a few empty lots. Up ahead the street became tree-lined, with garbage cans on the curb signifying the presence of houses. As they approached that area, they could see the sign on the corner house that proclaimed it to be the "Alta Vista— Rooms to Let."

"You were right; it never fails," Floyd said.

"Wait a minute," Elwood said, grabbing Floyd's arm. "We can't stay in that place."

"How come?" Floyd asked, puzzled. "It plainly says, 'Rooms to Let'."

"Let what?" Elwood said. "That might mean they 'let' anything go on in there."

"I never thought of that."

"Besides," Elwood continued, "with a name like Alta Vista, and the Hospital bein' only about ten blocks away, there's no tellin' what they'd charge."

"I never thought of that, either," Floyd repeated, amazed at how quickly Elwood had picked up Big City savvy. "We'd better keep goin'."

Eight or ten more blocks took them past several more large, old houses situated off the street, but on lots so narrow there was only a slit of an alley between each house. Some bore signs announcing that they took in boarders, but Elwood thought they were still too near the hospital to have favorable rates. They kept walking.

On one such block, after they had continued on another thirty minutes, they spotted a large, white two-story house that stood directly across the street from a sprawling brick structure with a big neon-lit sign in front that proclaimed it to be the "Heavenly Rest Funeral Parlor." Crossing the street to the white house, which bore a sign over the door naming it, "The White Peacock," Elwood looked it over and pronounced, "This is the place."

"You sure?" Floyd asked. "It looks kinda fancy to me."

"This is the place, all right," Elwood said confidently, "and it won't cost too much, either."

"How can you tell?"

"You see that light bulb over the door?" Elwood pointed.

"Yeah," said Floyd, "but so what? Lots of houses got lights over the front door."

"Not *red* ones," Elwood said.

"It's red all right," Floyd agreed. "What's that mean?"

"It means they still got the Christmas Spirit, and they won't overcharge us."

"By Dog, I'll bet you're right. I've gotta start watchin' for things like that if I'm ever goin' to learn how to get along in the city," Floyd said.

"We won't have any noisy neighbors, either," Elwood said, indicating the funeral parlor across the street.

"Boy, that's for sure."

"Let's leave our bags behind those bushes," Elwood said. "We don't want them to see how many clothes we got; they'll think we're well to do, sho 'nuff, if they do."

Parking their bags in the shrubbery, they stepped up on the porch, crossed the broad veranda, and rang the bell. After a few minutes, the door opened revealing a large buxom woman with a dyed-red upswept hairdo.

"You're early," she said to Floyd. "I wasn't expecting you for at least another hour."

"Oh, no, ma'am," Floyd said, "it's not early; it's . . ." he looked at his watch and shook it. Putting it to his ear, he listened a moment, then said, "Elwood, what time is it? My watch has stopped again."

"Nine-thirty," Elwood said.

"Nine-thirty," Floyd echoed to the woman.

"My, you boys do get out early," she said. "Well, no matter. I like that. You will find the lawnmower and the ladder in the shed out back. When you finish the lawn, and cleaning the gutters, you can prune the shrubbery. Let me

know when you're through." With that she closed the door and departed, leaving the boys standing at the door gawking at each other.

"What do we do now?" Floyd asked.

"I'll get the lawnmower, and you get the ladder. Then we'll flip to see who prunes the shrubbery," Elwood answered.

About an hour later a ragged pickup, with two very shaggy looking men inside, pulled to a stop at the curb. Surveying the two men hard at work, one of them turned to the other and said, "Somebody's done beat us to it, Irving."

"Big Bertha's workin' the hell out of 'em, it looks like," Irving said. "Let's get outta here, Sydney, before they quit and she comes after us. I bet money she'll have 'em doin' windows for nothing before long, just by promising them a peek now and then."

"I'd want more'n a free peep-show for doin' those windows again," Sydney responded. "There must be a hundred of 'em." With that, he gunned the engine and, muffler and tailpipe missing, five of eight cylinders hitting, they pulled away and disappeared from sight—if not sound—around the corner.

At noon the boys were sitting on the front steps eating sandwiches and drinking tea that had been served to them by a pretty peroxide blonde who had rather hard-bitten features. The figure displayed by her loose-fitting dress, cut high at the hem and low at the neck, had caught the boys' attention so that they had a hard time concentrating on what she was trying to tell them.

It was one of those clear winter days down South when the thermometer climbs into the low seventies. They were both mopping sweat. Whether it was due to the unseasonably warm day, or the cut of the girl's dress, neither could say for sure.

"Did you see that woman?" Elwood asked.

"Well, to tell the truth, I never got much higher than her neck," Floyd answered.

"She must be rich," Elwood said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Can't nobody but rich women run around dressed like that this time of day. And how 'bout the way she smelled?"

"She stunk pretty, all right," Floyd agreed, closing his eyes and breathing in. "I caught my breath and never blew it out again as long as she was standin' there."

"You're right," Elwood said, "and I ain't seen a calf like that since old Daisy dropped twin heifers."

"I was thinkin' 'bout old Daisy, myself, when she bent over to hand me this sandwich," Floyd sighed.

"I never got that high," Elwood said.

"El, you think this place is goin' to be as cheap as we thought? If rich women stay here, they're gonna expect to soak us a lot."

"Well, I don't know," Elwood said. "They's two ways of lookin' at it. In the first place, that gal is probably the old woman's daughter."

"That's true," Floyd agreed, "but what's the other way?"

"Well, if she ain't the old woman's daughter, how you think she got rich?"

"I don't know," Floyd answered.

"Well, it weren't from *spending* money, that's for sure; it was from *not* spending it," Elwood reasoned. "That's the way old Eli Watts got rich."

"That's right," Floyd said. "You can bet your boots if old Eli was in town, he'd be lookin' for the cheapest place he could find. Maybe we done found it, after all. That was an expensive lookin' woman. She'd probably spend all your money, but I bet she don't spend much of hers."

"That's the way I'm hopin' she figures it," Elwood said.

"Makes sense. Let's finish this and talk to that old woman. I want to sleep in a bed tonight."

"I'm gettin' wore out. I'd 'bout as soon try to mow bobwire as that dum winter-killed grass," Elwood complained mildly. "I bet this lawn ain't been mowed since June 'cause they ain't wanted to spend the money."

"What was it that rich gal said to us?" Floyd asked.

"I think it was somethin' about washin' windows," El replied.

"I'd better get started, then," Floyd commented. "I left the ladder around back; I'll just start there."

Elwood had finished mowing and was busy pruning shrubbery when he heard the crash. Rounding the corner on the run, he spotted Floyd stretched out on his back in the begonia bed, trying to sit up. "What happened!" he exclaimed. "Are you hurt bad?"

"Well, it don't feel too good," Floyd moaned, "but I don't think nothin's broke. Those bushes broke my fall, and these begonias ain't no feather bed but they're softer than cement."

"You gonna be all right?" Elwood asked.

"I think so," Floyd said, stretching. "Let me see if I can stand up." Elwood helped him to his feet and Floyd tested his legs. "Yeah, I think I'm fine."

"You're not goin' back up there, are you?" Elwood asked.

Floyd put two hands on the ladder and made as if to climb, then, thinking better of it, backed away. "You think we could just talk to the old lady now and get a room, and she'd just let me finish this tomorrow?"

"You sure you want to finish at all?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sure, all right," Floyd stated positively. "But I'm not sure I'm up to it right now."

Elwood cocked his head, looking askance at his friend. He couldn't imagine why he was so determined to wash windows. "Floyd, you sure you didn't hit your head on something?"

"No, my head is clear as a bell; it's my legs that are sort of wobbly."

Elwood peered up the ladder at the bedroom window Floyd had been washing when he fell. A look of suspicion crossed his face.

Floyd shook his head, and said, "Honest, El, I wasn't peekin'. I was busy washin' away when that rich gal and two others came in that room and started undressin' and changin' clothes right there in front of my eyes! I guess it kinda surprised me, 'cause that's when I fell. I don't think they ever saw me."

"Well, I won't tell if you don't tell," Elwood said.

"I won't tell."

"Let's go see if we can talk to that old lady about a room," Elwood suggested.

"Suits me fine," Floyd said. "We done mowed her lawn, pruned her bushes, washed her windows, and I plowed her begonias. I'm wore out."

"Me, too," Elwood agreed.

This time they were admitted to a large opulently decorated parlor by a tall brunette in a flowing silk gown of robins-egg blue, and bade to wait while she went for "the Madame." They remained standing.

"That one's got a mole on her fanny," Floyd whispered to Elwood after the girl had departed.

"Hush, Floyd! Somebody's gonna hear you, and we'll have to go somewhere else," Elwood cautioned.

"I'm not goin' anywhere else," Floyd said. "I can't hardly walk."

"Did you get finished?" The buxom lady with the dyed-red upswept hairdo swept into the room, dressed in a long, flowing, turquoise gown. "Thank you, Valerie," she called to the girl who had let them in.

"Well, no, ma'am, not entirely," Elwood said. "We might have if Floyd hadn't fallen off the ladder."

"Oh, I'm sooo sorry," she said. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, ma'am. I landed in the begonias," Floyd smiled and shuffled his feet.

"Did you break anything?" she asked, looking him over with deep concern.

"I'm afraid a few of them got mashed pretty bad," he said, "but not too many got broke. They'll probably straighten out by spring."

"I meant bo—oh, well. I'm glad you weren't hurt," she said. "Will you be able to come back tomorrow and finish?"

"Well, ma'am," Elwood said, "we figured if we could trade on a room, Floyd could finish up tomorrow. I got to go to work at the hospital, but Floyd doesn't have a job yet."

"Room . . . ?"

"Yes'm, that's what we came here for," Elwood paused as voices were heard in the hall. Five girls came down from upstairs and headed for the dining room.

"I hope, ma'am," Floyd spoke up, "that you don't mind us sayin' that you have the most purty daughters we've nearly ever seen."

"Daughters . . . ?"

"Yes'm. They are your daughters, aren't they?" Elwood asked.

"Oh . . . yes, I suppose you might say that," the Madame replied. She was beginning to understand that the two gentlemen before her did *not* understand.

"Now, just 'cause Floyd ain't workin' yet don't mean we can't pay the rent, if it's not too much," Elwood said, steering the conversation back on track.

Big Bertha Vanderwort was a businesswoman—a successful one—and she didn't become successful by sleeping at the switch. She thought she saw opportunity standing before her, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

"Can you boys handle plumbing?" she asked. Her plumbing bill in that huge old house was atrocious, and the plumbers wanted overtime paid for in trade, which kept her "daughters" from more lucrative pursuits.

"I never had much to do with indoor plumbing," Floyd said, "but I can pipe a steam engine."

"Close enough," Bertha decided. "How about wiring?"

"Can't say much about that, but I'm willin' to learn," Floyd assured her. "I'm a fair carpenter."

"All right, boys. Tell you what I'll do. You keep the plumbing going and help me keep the place up, and I'll give you a room and two meals a day plus walkin' around money."

"You mean you're goin' to pay us to stay here?" an astounded Elwood asked.

"Best I can do. Take it or leave it."

Looking at each other in disbelief, the boys nodded and said simultaneously, "We'll take it!"

"Good," Bertha said. "My name is Mrs. Vanderwort. Most folks call me Bertha. You can get your bags out of the bushes where you hid them this morning, and Valerie will show you to your room. Supper is ready; you can eat in the kitchen."

* * * * *

"That old gal is pretty sharp, El," Floyd said from his cot. "She saw us hide our bags."

El was changing into a fresh shirt after a shower he had almost had to share with one of the daughters. "All the same, she gave us a mighty good deal," Elwood said in Bertha's favor. "I told you she still had the Christmas Spirit."

"Let's go find the kitchen. I'm hungry," Floyd said.

After several false turns, they finally made their way to the kitchen. When they got near enough, odors coming from it unerringly led them the rest of the way. "Smells like home, huh, El?" Floyd said with a pang of homesickness.

When they entered the kitchen, they saw a young woman standing at the range stirring a tangy stew in a large kettle. She turned as she heard them come in, and suddenly ceased stirring. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open.

At the same time, the boys got a good look at her and froze.

"Darlene!" they exclaimed at once.

10

Tricks

FLOYD! ELWOOD!" Darlene cried excitedly, dropping the stirring spoon and rushing over to greet the two astonished boys.

"What are you doing here!" Floyd exclaimed as the three of them wound up in one big bear hug.

"What are *you* doing here?" Darlene countered. "Am I glad to see you!"

"I thought you had skipped off to Texas with that Burton dude," Floyd said. "So I decided to come join El."

"I wouldn't skip across my Pa's back pasture with that phony dimwit," Darlene's face registered her disgust. "It was that dippy sister of mine he talked into running off with him, and I took off after them to bring her back. This is as far as I got."

"Boy, am I glad to hear that!" Floyd said.

"What? That my sister is a dingbat?"

"No, I already knew that; I meant I'm glad you didn't run off with them."

"You didn't think I was that much of an idiot, did you?" Darlene asked indignantly.

"Well, old Burton was waving around an awful lot of money and actin' the Big Shot," Floyd pointed out. "That could turn lots of girls' heads."

"Not mine!"

"You never know what a high roller like Burton might talk a girl into," Floyd said.

"High Rollin' Big Shot, my hind foot," Darlene snorted indelicately.

"He's nothing but a big hat, big boots, big talk, and no cows. Those ten dollar

bills were as phony as he was, but my dumb sister didn't know it. I've got to get her away from that crummy faker before she lands in Big Trouble."

"What?!" Floyd exclaimed.

"Phony bills?" Elwood asked.

"That's right," Darlene said. "Chico spotted a couple of them, but kept quiet about it until he was sure of where they came from. Then he tipped off Sam Hundley."

"Why didn't Sam come pick him up?" Elwood asked.

"He told Chico just to stay quiet until he had done some investigating. I guess old Duke caught wind of it somehow, or maybe he was just plain lucky. Anyway, he grabbed Charlene and beat it before Sam could arrest him."

"You mean all that happened and I didn't know it?" Floyd asked. "Why didn't you say something?"

"You weren't around," Darlene pointed out. "You were always off chasin' hogs or something. Besides, I didn't know all this myself until the last minute. Chico told me."

"You took off alone," Floyd asked, amazed, "to the City?"

"I had to get after them before the trail got cold, and there wasn't time for much planning."

"How did you end up here?" Elwood asked her.

"I'll get to that," Darlene said. "First of all, it wasn't too hard to trail a nine-foot cowboy wearing a Stetson full of busted turkey feathers, and a pretty girl. The bus driver remembered them well. Duke paid for the tickets with a phony bill."

"Then what happened?" Floyd asked.

"Well, when I got to Vulcan City," she continued, "I asked all the cab drivers at the bus station if they had seen them. One of them was a woman, and she remembered them right off. She had taken them to the hospital. They didn't come to see you, did they, El?"

"I was probably out by then," Elwood said.

"Anyway," Darlene picked up her story, "I lost track of them at the hospital. Then I had a stroke of pure dumb luck—"

"You found a turkey feather!" Floyd guessed.

"Close, but not quite," Darlene said. "I got hungry and went into a little place on Broad Street where they make the best sandwiches I ever tasted. The guy who runs it—"

Again she was interrupted, but by Elwood this time. "That would be Solly Goldstein. He's a friend of mine."

"El, for somebody who's been in the hospital ever since he's been in town, you sure do get around," Darlene commented.

"Don't interrupt, El," Floyd said impatiently. "Go on, Darlene."

"Anyway, this little guy, Solly, thought he recognized me. I knew right off Charlene had been in there. I told him pretty quickly what the situation was—without going into too many details—and asked if he knew where they went."

Floyd was wide-eyed. "Did he know?"

"Floyd, will you hush and let her tell it?" Elwood admonished.

"Well," Darlene continued, "he didn't know exactly, but he told me they caught a bus at the corner, and he even knew which bus because they run on a pretty close schedule, and he remembered the time."

"I caught the same bus and checked it out with the driver. Sure 'nuff, he remembered them, and let me out at the same stop where they got off. But that's six blocks from here. All I knew was that they came to this neighborhood."

"Have you heard anything since?" Elwood asked.

"Not hide nor turkey feather," Darlene said. "All I know is that unless they've left town, they must be somewhere in this area. I wanted to stay close, but the trail and my money ran out about the same time. I started knockin' on doors, thinking that some of the rich folks in these big houses might want a cook. This was the first door I knocked on and Mrs. Vanderwort hired me right off."

"Yeah, she put me and Floyd to work, too," Elwood said.

"Did she ask you if you wanted to do tricks?" Darlene asked.

"No, she didn't say anything about doin' any tricks; just mow the lawn, trim the bushes, and wash the windows," Elwood said. "That's when Floyd fell off the—unngh—"

Floyd silenced him midsentence with an elbow in the ribs. He wasn't too anxious to have Darlene asking questions about why he'd fallen.

"Anyway," Elwood recovered, "she put us to work before she would even talk about a room; but she didn't ask us to do no tricks."

"That's funny. The first thing she asked me was if I'd ever done any tricks. I told her I could swing across Turkey Hollow Creek on a grapevine, good as any of the boys, if that would do. She said that was probably a pretty good trick, but it wasn't exactly what she had in mind."

"Then I told her about how we filled a paper sack with cow manure, lit it on Deacon Watts' front porch, then knocked on the door and watched him stomp it out. She said that was a real rouser, but still wasn't what she meant."

"That's a funny thing to ask somebody," Floyd said, "but I've heard rich people are kind of peculiar sometimes."

"I was afraid she wouldn't hire me if I couldn't do tricks, but she didn't act like it made that much difference," Darlene said. "In fact, I think it sort of surprised her, the way she laughed. Anyway, she gave me the job. Told me if the cooking was good enough I wouldn't have to do any tricks, and not to worry about it."

Darlene pondered for a moment, then said, "Do you think maybe these are circus folks, and she might have been lookin' for somebody to do magic tricks or something?"

"Judgin' from the way they dress, they could be show folks of some kind," Elwood said.

"And you're livin' right here in this house?" Floyd asked. "I can't get over it."

"Yes, Mrs. Vanderwort let me have this little room off the kitchen—I think it used to be a pantry—and a little 'walkin' around money' she calls it, and you got to walk 'cause it's not enough to ride. But for no more cookin' than I have to do, it's not a bad deal. 'Cept for Mrs. Vanderwort, who eats like a starved grizzly, these women don't eat enough to keep a cat alive," Darlene said.

"I guess they gotta stay skinny to do their tricks," Elwood said.

"What did she hire you to do, Floyd?" Darlene asked. "She doesn't have a sawmill to run."

"No, but she's got pipes to fix, walls to paint, grass to mow, bushes to trim, and plumbing to keep going, and I guess about anything else she can think of," Floyd replied. "If you run out of somethin' to do, Darlene, you can help me wash the windows."

"Yeah, Darlene, you can stand under the ladder and catch him when he falls," Elwood teased. "Now, that's a pretty good trick, Floyd."

"On second thought, I'll do the windows by myself," Floyd said.

* * * * *

When Elwood reported for work the next morning before daylight, he found that his job would consist of pushing patients in wheelchairs to different parts of the hospital for tests, X-rays, and other purposes. When he took patients to "Their Ology," he discreetly waited out of sight around the corner until summoned by the "woman" who ran the lab. Otherwise, he avoided her like the plague.

He also wheeled discharged patients to their vehicles waiting at the curb, and bade them farewell. New mothers and their offspring were his favorites.

All in all, it was not a difficult job, after he learned his way around, and it gave him the opportunity to see Penny fairly often. Elwood liked that. So did Penny. Although she tried to conceal her pleasure, she wasn't very successful.

A good chunk of Elwood's pay went toward his hospital bill; however, because Floyd and Darlene were working to keep a roof over their heads—with their meals being part of the deal—Elwood shared his remaining pay with them so they had a little left over for pleasure.

"Jukin' tonight, Penny?" he said after his first payday.

"How about a movie, instead?" Penny suggested.

"John Wayne?"

"Why not?" she agreed.

"Your place at seven?"

"It's a date."

Floyd, Darlene and Elwood caught a bus that dropped them near the Nurses' Dorm, and were standing in the lobby at five minutes to seven. Floyd thought they were forty-five minutes early, but it turned out his watch had stopped. They walked to the theatre, bought popcorn, and sat in the balcony. John Wayne and the cavalry arrived in the nick of time—The Duke's watch hadn't stopped—and the wagon train was saved.

Afterward they dropped in at Solly's. Penny and Elwood shared a lean roast beef on wheat. Darlene and Floyd had Solly's Special Kosher Sausage on Pumpernickel with Sauerkraut. Penny and Darlene became instant friends. Solly beamed at the foursome and said, "Pickles on the house!" Floyd ate three big, fat ones.

That night Elwood dreamed of a smiling face and copper hair.

Penny dreamed of a tall cavalry officer who kept turning into Elwood.

Floyd dreamed of a watch that kept turning into a pickle.

Darlene didn't dream at all for a while. Kosher sausage, sauerkraut and a pickle kept her awake until she finally found her flat side. Then she dreamed of finding a mustard-drenched Charlene all tangled in a net of sauerkraut in the basement of a Jewish deli.

Big Cities weren't all bad.

* * * * *

In certain circles, the fame and glory of the White Peacock was known far and wide. The quality of its product was viewed favorably, and regarded as a community asset—if not an outright necessity—by certain high-ranking members of the political, as well as the business and the professional, worlds from which the clientele derived. It was an attitude studiously fostered by Mrs. Gideon Vanderwort. Each party to the arrangement carried the favor of the other. Each held an ace that, if played, could ruin both.

If the politicians could have, they would shut her down; Big Bertha held enough documented information in her private files to spell doom to political careers and reputations, young and old; or to marriages, the termination of which might drive corporations into bankruptcy. Mutual trust was reinforced by a mutual grasp of reality.

As mentioned before, Bertha Vanderwort was, among other things, an astute businesswoman. She knew exactly where the bread was and on which side to apply the butter. The game would endure as long as neither side tipped the balance. Over the years the White Peacock had become entrenched as an institution, and its proprietress more or less a legend. When the occasion demanded a gala celebration, no establishment—East or West—was better prepared to stage Bacchanalia than the White Peacock.

Such an occasion was now in the offing, and because it involved “important men from Washington,” Mrs. Vanderwort decided to involve her newly acquired “house staff.” Accordingly, Floyd and Elwood were suitably outfitted in waiter’s formal attire, and Darlene was tailored into a maid’s costume, which did more to display her considerable charms than disguise them. All were schooled in the proper manner to serve, pour wine, bow, and above all, *not* to speak.

Had it not been for the clandestine nature of the affair, it undoubtedly would have graced the Society Section of the Sunday edition. One needed only to consult the guest register for proof of the color, if not the outright social brilliance, of the occasion. The list, which included a Mr. White, Mr. Black, Mr. Grey, Mr. Green, Mr. Blue, two Browns and a Mr. Redd. To round it out, a female member of the establishment named Violet draped in a low-cut, flowing gown of mauve complete the spectrum. The other ladies of the house presented a glittering array of the shades in between.

Smiths, Does and Joneses made up the balance of attendees. Big Bertha herself, bangled, spangled, and clad in a flowing dark green velvet gown, sat at the head of the table directing traffic and dominating the scene. A feathered rhinestone tiara graced the upswept red-dyed coiffure, and a diamond and pearl brooch rested upon her ample bosom. It was truly a severe test for the

corseted supports beneath—a marvel of engineering and a testimony to the remarkable resilience and tensile strength of whalebone and latex.

The soiree began sedately enough with polite conversation. In no manner would Mrs. Vanderwort tolerate coarse language, other than her own, at her table or in her presence. Gentlemen, of course, were permitted the pursuit of the ribald pleasures to which the House was dedicated, and for which they paid dearly. However, foul language was the mark of a boor, and a boor was something up with which she would not put. Thus it was, that while the activities in the bedroom were strictly between the client and his partner for the evening, the bathroom was not permitted to intrude into the drawing room.

“Does anyone know what this shindig is for?” Floyd asked.

The three of them were back in the kitchen getting ready to serve the party that was about to begin.

“It must be the Smith-Jones Family Reunion,” Elwood said. “Most of the folks out there are named one or the other.”

“And near ‘bout every one of them is named ‘John’, too,” Darlene noted. “Least that’s what all the ladies call them.”

“Darlene, what are you doing?” Floyd asked. Darlene was pulling off her apron and trying to rearrange her costume.

“I’m tired of everyone craning to look in every time I bend over, so I’m tying my apron around my neck,” Darlene explained. “If this outfit was cut any lower, I’d have to hold it up with a garter belt. This frilly little apron is so dinky, I can tell Mrs. Vanderwort I thought it was a collar. How does it look?” she asked, making a turn.

“Oh, fine,” Floyd said, deciding against telling her that the skirt was cut at least as high in back as the front was low. No need to cause unnecessary anxiety. Besides, he rather enjoyed the view.

She picked up a tray of drinks and Floyd followed her out the door with a tray of hors d’oeuvres, assorted fruits and other goodies for the health-minded. Elwood stood against the wall holding a towel-wrapped bottle of cold champagne ready to pour on demand, and demand was high. The party was beginning to warm up.

It was while Floyd was holding the tray for a slightly inebriated Mr. Blue that a minor accident occurred. An olive rolled off the top of a cheese sandwich at which Mr. B was pawing, and lodged neatly in the well-exposed cleavage of one Miss Roxanne, who reacted with appropriate surprise.

“My dear, I believe I have your olive,” she said.

“I believe you do,” he answered. “Would you be so kind as to allow me to retrieve it?” he inquired, making an elegant bow.

"By all means, do; but watch your hands," she said, positioning herself so as to offer him at least a fair shot at the errant delicacy.

"Very well, my dear, I shall use no hands," he said to the demure Roxanne, placing his hands behind his back. The assembly leaned forward for a better view, and Roxanne giggled in anticipation of the expected display of delicate labial dexterity. A good bit of free advice was offered and ignored.

It would have been a neat piece of work, indeed, had his toupee not landed in her lap as he bent to the task; and had his ill-fitting, bargain-priced lower plate not fallen out, joining the olive in her décolletage, to the merriment of the onlookers and the discomfort of Roxanne. It was, however, an occasion for back-slapping, rib-digging and congratulations on a noble effort.

Roxanne hastily removed the foreign objects from her bosom, and presented them to their embarrassed owner.

It didn't turn out as he had planned; but a red-faced Mr. Blue replaced the treacherous teeth and fickle wig while acknowledging the kudos with a wave of the hand and a sheepish smile. He then returned rather heavily to his chair.

Floyd and Elwood were more than a little startled, but chalked it up to the eccentric behavior of the rich. Nevertheless, they were glad Darlene was in the kitchen and wasn't a witness, even though—being a matter-of-fact type of person—she took things pretty much in stride.

One of the Smiths, a youngish swarthy gent whose name was John, was sitting near the entrance to the kitchen and had hardly taken his eyes off Darlene all evening. Darlene's waitressing days at Chico's had inured her to such things, and she scarcely gave it a thought until Mr. Smith reached out and grabbed her as she emerged with a full tray of cocktails, nearly causing her to spill them.

"Careful, mister, you almost had a lap full of drinks," she said, deftly removing herself from his grasp. "I'd appreciate your not grabbing me."

"How about doing a trick with me tonight, baby?" he suggested.

"What kind of trick are you talking about? I told Mrs. Vanderwort I didn't do any tricks, except swing on a grapevine."

"A grapevine! I never heard of that one. That must be something!" he exclaimed, wide-eyed.

"It's fun, all right," Darlene said, puzzled by his interest in a childhood diversion, "but you've got to be careful not to fall off."

"I suppose that could be a problem," he said, "but I'm willing to take my chances. How do you get started?"

"I guess the first thing you have to do is find a grapevine," she said, wanting to get away from this oddball, but not wishing to offend him. "Excuse me, I've got to go pass out these drinks."

"I'll go get one right now, if you'll wait," he said.

"Since I live here, I don't guess I'll be going anywhere," she said.

"Hot diggety dog!" he said, rocking unsteadily to his feet. "I'm gone!" He paused at the door and called back, "Say! Where do you find grapevines, anyway?"

"Try looking up a tree," she suggested.

"Right! Back in a jiff," he said, reeling slightly as he disappeared through the front door.

"Boy, these city guys sure are pee-culiar," she said under her breath before dismissing him from her mind.

* * * * *

"Sarge, I think we got a problem," patrolman Norby Finch said.

"That's why they pay us the big money, Finch. If there weren't any problems, we could all go home, which is exactly what I'm going to do in thirteen more minutes. Now, what makes this problem anything special?" Sergeant Gunther "Gunboat" Wiggins made these remarks in a tired monotone. With twenty-nine years and ten months on the force, retirement was just around the corner, and he was pretty confident he had seen just about every kind of problem that could arise.

"You know that peeping tom we picked up hanging off a limb outside the mayor's bedroom window?"

"You mean the 'John Smith' that claimed he was just looking for a grapevine for a girl to do a trick on, and that it was a matter of life and death?"

"That's the one."

"I told you to put him in the birdcage, and if he started chirping, call the cookie wagon," Sergeant Wiggins said.

"I did, Sarge," Finch said.

"So, what's the big deal?" Wiggins asked.

"I also checked his I.D., and you'll never guess who 'John Smith' turned out to be."

"Well, are you going to tell me, or do I have to check it out myself? I can hardly wait to hear," the sergeant said drily.

"He's Sonny Dorf," Finch said.

A sudden weight made up of equal parts of gloom, despair and misery, tempered with a sudden shot of panic, descended upon the head of the good sergeant; it then flowed immediately to his stomach. "You mean . . ."

"That's right, Sarge. Son, heir, and apple of Alderman Dorf's eye. The Alderman just called threatening to sue everybody in sight, and fire the rest of us, if we don't spring his baby boy right away."

"And only thirty-six days 'til pension," Wiggins moaned. He was patently aware that Alderman Dorf was a powerful figure in City government, with more connections than a six-mile freight train. Among his many offices was that of Chairman of the Police Oversight Committee, which had a great deal to say about hiring, firing, pensions and investigations.

"Why me, Lord?" he asked, casting his eyes Heavenward; but the cracked ceiling of the station house gave no answer, and offered little in the way of sympathy.

"I reckon you shouldn't have tapped Sonny on the head quite so hard, Sarge," Finch said, intending to offer what solace he could. The remark, however well-meant, afforded Sergeant Wiggins scant comfort.

"Thanks a lot, Finch," said the veteran, raising his head and cocking a jaundiced eye toward his informant, while stifling the ancient urge to shoot the messenger.

* * * * *

For many reasons, customers, clients and patrons of the White Peacock preferred to settle the tab in cash. Bertha Vanderwort certainly had no objections. She loved the feel and smell of cash, which was why she was alerted immediately when a couple of the bills didn't measure up to the usual standards as she counted the night's receipts. They didn't look quite right, either.

"This will never do," she said to herself. "No, this simply will never do."

But she had no idea which of her guests had stuck her with the phony bills. They all paid in cash. Removing the two counterfeit tens from the rest of the stack, she slipped them into the strongbox and locked it in the safe.

There were too many well known people at last night's festivities to risk making any false accusations. She would bide her time and keep quiet until she knew more than she did at present. In the meantime, she would keep her eyes open.

* * * * *

Darlene was tired and a little puzzled as she prepared for bed that night. No fewer than seven guests had asked her to do tricks, and all seemed disappointed when she told them she was just too busy and didn't have time. A couple of them got downright insistent until Mrs. Vanderwort herself intervened.

City life and city folks had some mighty strange ways. She supposed she would get used to it in time. Meanwhile, she was anxious to find Charlene and get back to the Valley. Meeting up with Floyd and Elwood was a stroke of fortune. If Charlene was still in Vulcan City, she felt with their help she could find her. She liked Penny, and Floyd was beginning to grow on her in ways she hadn't anticipated.

She flicked out the light and was asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. Hers was the sleep of the truly innocent, which was highly unusual in that particular domicile.

11

Operation Vagabond

POLITICIANS LIVE BY THE VOTE and die by the vote. The policy for some is if you can't win them, buy them; if you can't buy them, steal them; and if you can't steal them, manufacture them. They believe that if you get caught the consequences are minimal: you go to prison, get reformed and write books. It's the American Way.

Alderman Dorf, scarred veteran that he was of many a campaign, was facing a tough election—an election he might lose in spite of everything he might reasonably expect to do. The stirrings of a grassroots reform movement were unmistakable, and were becoming more and more loudly vocal. “Throw the Rascals Out!” was the watchword of the reform movement embodied in the Clean Government party.

Dorf could feel a chill in his political bones, and he could sense a change in the political air. His support was rapidly eroding in the tide that was beginning to turn. He was a scared fox—but still a fox, for all that.

What would he do if he were thrown out? Politics was the only trade he knew. What did that young pup of a sociology teacher the Clean Government crowd had put against him know about governing? Nothing, that's what! Governing should be left to those who know which palms to grease, whose arms to twist, how to stuff ballot boxes, and how to use the office to perpetuate themselves in it. That's what government was all about.

That was the Dorf Theory, and it was shared by virtually every office holder in City Hall—or “City Haul,” as the Clean Government crowd insisted it should be called. Now the Dorf Theory was facing a major test. Irrationally, people were demanding honest government. To stem the tide, he needed to

generate something spectacular. He had patched every pothole and paved every pig path in his precinct. That was small potatoes. He needed something *big!*

It had helped not at all when Sonny got pinched for peeping in the Mayor's window. Of all windows to be peeping into, why in the world had the young idiot picked the boudoir of that overstuffed windbag of a mayor and his scrawny wife, the Alderman wondered; she didn't have the shape that forty feet of rusty barbed wire had, and was even less sexy.

Sonny's only explanation was that stupid "grapevine" thing, and that only made matters worse. Where had that juvenile ass come up with that cockamamie yarn, anyway? The newspapers had gotten wind of it and were having a ball referring to Sonny as "Alderman Dorf's Swinging Son."

The Clean Government bunch was gaining fast. He didn't need an expensive poll to tell him that. He could hear the thunder of voter's hooves as they ran to join the other side. What he needed was a cause that would stem the tide of desertion, and he needed it fast.

He was proceeding toward his office in this mood of sour reflection and desperation, when his eye fell upon a sign over the one neat, white storefront in a particularly seedy row of run-down buildings.

MADAME ZARELDA

Fortunes Told

Advisor, Healer, Future Revealed

"That's it!" Dorf thought, excitedly, "Gypsies! Gypsies don't vote, they steal—everyone knows that. I'll blame them for all the crime, and run them out of town! No one will protest, and I'll even get crossover votes! That'll put an end to the Clean Government nonsense and their sociology-teaching busybody."

Whatever else one might say about Alderman Julius Caesar Dorf, no one could accuse him of inactivity when a vote was to be won. Less than twenty minutes after the revelation had hit him, he was on the phone to the Police Commissioner plotting action on the "Gypsy Situation." It hadn't taken much to get his attention. The Commish had his own political problems and thought it a thumping good idea.

It was an old political adage proven almost infallible: When treed and cornered, drape yourself in your nation's flag, and blame the country's woes

on someone else. This scheme had proven its worth from the days of Marc Anthony.

Since this particular plan didn't blame the opposition for the troubles, they wouldn't have a chance to deny, answer, or claim credit. All they could do would be to say, "Me, too." It was clever; it was diabolical. It was pure Dorfmanship. The sufferers would be a few swarthy violin players and some fortune tellers, but mostly the opposition. Best of all, it was strictly in the best American tradition, according to Dorf.

A closed door strategy conference was held involving high-level officials whose fate lay in the hands of the voters, and also—quite naturally—the Chief of Police and his lieutenants and staff.

Orders were cut covering every contingency, including press conferences that would distribute credit to those who stood most in need. Every joint in the Long Arm of the Law, and every knuckle in its hand, were to be coordinated in one vast sweep. Helicopters and the Riot Squad were not omitted, nor were the mounted police and the crowd control sections. This was serious business that required maximum exposure.

Recognizing that a gypsy never stole more than he could run with, speed was essential in preventing the escape of the quarry, who might otherwise vanish in a second. To prevent leakage of information, all members of the Planning Conference were sworn to secrecy—as was duly reported on the Channel Six Evening News. However, the word "gypsy" was not used in the report, only the term "criminal element" was spoken.

As a result, it failed to alert the gypsies, who did not consider themselves part of the "criminal element" anyway, while the real criminals drew comfort from the knowledge that they were under the aegis of, and in some cases in league with, the politicians who were instigating the operation. If anything was in the wind that affected them, they would have heard from several different sources. None had reported. Thus it was that as the people of Johnstown slept on that fateful "day of the flood," so to speak, the gypsy population slept as well, blissfully unaware that the flood waters were gathering to sweep them away. Woe be unto the gypsy—or he who might be mistaken for a gypsy or be in close proximity to one—when the net was cast. Either Madame Zarelda's tea leaves had forsaken her in a crucial moment, or she had felt no need to consult them.

Floyd and Elwood were in town the day of the Big Sweep, and attracted to the sirens and clamor, drew nigh to observe. Alas, they drew too nigh and became entangled in the same coils that netted Madame Zarelda and her whole band, and included a man wearing a red wig, false dark mustache, slouch hat,

trench coat and Polaroid shades, who innocently had entered the chambers of the good Madame Z for the sole purpose of gaining advice, solace and a badly needed reading of his future, which seemed to be very clouded at the moment.

He had been telling the good Madame Z how he had recently become an embarrassment to his old daddy, who had threatened to cut him out of his will if he so much as stepped one inch out of line before the election. To this end, the young man had endeavored, indeed, to "live at the foot of the Cross" as it were. It was to thwart the scrutiny and avoid the notice of a sensation-seeking press that he had donned his disguise before he sought the advice of the secess. Alas. Red wigs and false mustaches are not the stuff of which low profiles are made.

The front page of the *Evening Chronicle*, organ of the opposition and pride of the reformers, with billowing headlines and four-column wide color photos, bellowed the news: **SWINGING SONNY SWEEPED UP AGAIN**. The subhead below, which was in slightly smaller—but still attention-grabbing—size type, read: **"DANGLING" DORF IN DISGUISE DEFIES DADDY**, and: **SOME SPECULATE SONNY SEEKS TO UNSEAT SIRE!**

* * * * *

When the paddy wagons unloaded their catch at the Police Station Floyd and Elwood, along with Madame Zarelda, her erstwhile client and her small band, were shoved into a large, noisy holding cell, which was already crowded with a couple dozen other offenders. Operation Vagabond, as the venture had been named, had already been dubbed, "Operation Bag-a-Bum" by a wag in the Editorial Room of the *Evening Chronicle*.

Floyd and Elwood were making the best of the situation trying to figure out not only how they had gotten into this mess in the first place, but also, how they were going to get out. Madame Zarelda told them, "Oh, not to worry. I weel tell theem you are not Gypsy. They weel lat you go."

"You think that will work?" Elwood asked doubtfully.

"Eef not, you can call your good freend, Dr. Burroughs, who will vouch for you," she said.

"Dr. Burroughs!" Elwood exclaimed. "How did you know—"

"Eet ees my beesiness to know," Madame Z said mysteriously. "Besides, you are wearing green scrub shirt that says, 'Property of Diabetes Cleeneek'. You must know zee good Dr. B."

"Can you really read palms and tell the future?" Floyd asked. "Dumb question," she answered. "Come, I weel show you."

Leading them to a table near the center of the cage, she shooed away a couple of teen-aged gypsy boys, and bade Floyd and Elwood to sit. Taking Floyd's hand first, she stroked the palm and examined the lines and crevices at length. Noting the splinters from the ladder still in Floyd's hand, she began, "You have recently had accident." Floyd nodded in amazement, and she continued.

"I see you surrounded by beautiful women," she intoned while watching Floyd's eyes, which flickered slightly. "But you have eyes for only one of them." Floyd remained impassive. "And she has eyes only for you." Floyd's hand gave an almost imperceptible jerk; and his palm was slightly clammy when she traced over his lifeline, so she knew she was on the right track. The reading ended with a declaration of Floyd's lucky number, seven, which, she declared, was the number of children he would sire. Floyd blinked. Someone else might have something to say about that.

Elwood's reading wasn't a reading at all. Taking his slightly shaking hand, Madame Z stroked the palm, which was very clammy. Correctly diagnosing the problem, she said, "You are diabetic. Here; eat this and your life weel be longer." She promptly produced a candy bar from the folds of her blouse and handed it to him.

Elwood knew what the problem was, but he hadn't known what he could do about it. Being put in the pokey had made them miss lunch. It was now mid-afternoon, and they hadn't eaten since breakfast. Missing a meal can be fatal to diabetics.

"No beeg deal," Madame Z stated matter-of-factly. "My Rom, he was diabetic before he die, too. Blood sugar geet low; you shake; you sweat. Eat candy bar. Feel better."

While Elwood sat recovering, she produced a deck of tarot cards and continued to cast his fortune. "Ahhh," she said, "I see you weel marry nurse weeth copper hair, and she weel geeve birth to many babies."

Elwood gulped at this news. "How many?" he asked.

"More than you would beleeve," she answered. "Also, I see many adventures and a clash weeth evil men for you all before you find what you seek."

"You saw all that in those cards?" Floyd asked.

"Mostly," she replied, "but see copper hair on scrub suit; that helped."

It was true; Elwood had gone by to see Penny that morning, and had been warmly greeted. "What about all those babies?" he asked.

"Must wait and see," she said. "Cards do not lie."

Taking advantage of the small crowd of non-gypsies who had drawn near during the reading, Madame Zarelda quickly set up shop and was soon doing a brisk business. A short while later she took a break and, jingling a heavy bag of coins, said to Elwood, "Have done more business today than all last week." As a noisy crowd was ushered into the station, she commented, "Ahhh. More customers." Apparently, Operation Vagabond was still in progress.

"Wait 'til Congressman Reuben C. Finchert hears about this!" a voice yelled.

"I didn't know Hicks was a gypsy," Floyd said.

"I didn't know we were, either, until they put us in the pokey," Elwood said.

Spotting Floyd and Elwood shortly after being thrust into the cage, Hicks smiled broadly through a somewhat thick alcoholic haze and made a beeline toward them.

"Don't worry, boys," he said, "Old Rube is in town, an' as soon as I can get word to him, he'll come get us out. Jus' you wait. You don't have no more of that panther juice on you, do you? Boy, that was good stuff. I sure could use a little nip right now. It's my stomach, you know. Acts up bad sometimes."

"Nope, don't have any on us," Floyd said.

"Too bad," Hicks said, disappointed.

The haul that had netted Hicks in his favorite haunt was the last of the Vagabond raids. Chief Dillard, Alderman Dorf, and various other interested officials anxious to inspect the latest in the War on Crime in the City, and if possible, reap the publicity certain to accrue, entered the Station with quite a bit of fanfare close on the heels of the final haul.

"Look, Elwood, there's Mr. Blue," Floyd said, pointing toward the chief, who was staring at them in horror. The last thing he wanted was to be recognized in front of TV cameras by employees of the White Peacock who had been caught in a round-up of criminals.

"And there is Mr. Redd," Floyd indicated a distinguished gentleman he recognized from the party of a few evenings back. He, too, was blinking in astonishment and trying to avoid recognition.

"That ain't no such of a thing Mr. Redd," Hicks informed them. "It's Reuben C. Finchert of the Congers of the Yew Ninety States."

Alderman J. C. Dorf, whose brainchild the infamous raids had been, failed to get recognition from any of the three inmates; however, his eyes bulged in disbelieving horror upon meeting those of the unfortunate lump of jelly cowering in the rear of the cell beneath a red wig and false mustache—half of which had dropped off. The Alderman, torn between homicide and

suicide, opted for immediate retreat instead, offering no solace whatsoever to the erstwhile object of his filial affection.

Shortly after these puzzling episodes the jail warder, good Officer Liam O'Doul, came to the cell and called the names of Bates and Larkin, to which at least nine of their cellmates responded.

"Chief wants to see you," he said when he had finally established proper identities. During the confusion that occurred as the real Bates and Larkin were being sorted out from the impostors, the warder's keys disappeared, causing no little concern to the jailer.

"All right, Mischa, let's have them," Madame Zarelda said. A young lad of no more than nine years shuffled forward with head bent, and from the folds of his baggy trousers produced the keys.

"And the wallet," she demanded.

"Criminy!" said the jailer.

"And the watch," she said firmly.

The jailer gasped and stared as the watch came forth.

"The rings," she insisted next.

"Oh, Ma," the child wailed in protest as the good Officer O'Doul examined his empty fingers where the rings had been only moments before. The child gave up the rings.

Madame Zarelda held out her hand expectantly and said, "Now the gold pen and pencil."

"Ye little thief! I oughta run you in, tyke though ye be," O'Doul glowered as his goods were restored to him.

"And where are you goeing to 'run him in' to, Offisair?" Madame asked pointedly. "The electreek chair, perhaps?"

Officer O'Doul snorted to hide his embarrassment. "If we did, he would probably steal the fuses. He ought to be home with his mither," he said.

"I am hees 'mither' and he ees weeth me," Madame Zarelda said. "And we would like very much to go home now, if you please."

"I would like that very much, too, Madame," he said fervently, "but in the meantime, I've got to deliver these two gents to the chief."

"Theen you had best have these, also," she said, handing him his badge and a St. Christopher's medallion.

"Begorrah," he said softly. O'Doul reached inside his pants and felt around.

"Meesing anytheeng eemportant?" Madame inquired sarcastically.

"Just being on the safe side, Madame. At least I've still got me underwear, and—er, everything else that counts," O'Doul said with obvious relief.

"Maybe so," the child breathed to himself, "but I still got your whistle." He fingered the silvery treasure that had once been securely attached to Officer O'Doul's uniform.

* * * * *

"My name isn't really Mr. Blue," a sheepish Chief Dillard explained, after offering Floyd and Elwood cigars, which they accepted along with a light. He motioned them to a seat in the plush leather chairs that graced his office. "You see, that's just a code name, heh heh. A *secret* code name. Understand?"

"Well, not exactly," Elwood said, looking at Floyd.

"Me, either," Floyd said.

"Well, let me put it another way," the chief said. "It would be a bad thing to let anyone know you saw me at the White Peacock the other night. Now do you understand?"

The boys continued to look blank.

Perspiration was beginning to bead on Dillard's high forehead. "Look boys, that thing with the olive and being drunk and all was just part of the plan so they wouldn't know I'm really the Chief of Police."

A glimmer of understanding began to dawn of the countenances of the two young men he faced. "You mean it's like spies?" Floyd asked.

"Yes, yes! That's it!" the chief said, seizing the opportunity.

"You mean you're spying on enemy agents at Mrs. Vanderwort's Boarding House?"

"You might say I was there doing, er, uh, undercover work," Dillard said truthfully.

"Wow," the boys breathed, impressed. Floyd refrained from mentioning the spy work he had done from the ladder.

"Which one of them rich women is it?" Elwood asked.

"I bet it's the one they call Natasha," Floyd guessed, "she looks like a Rooshin. And I know she ain't one of Mrs. Vanderwort's daughters."

"Rich women?" Dillard looked puzzled. "Daughters?"

"Yeah. Mrs. Vanderwort's daughters," Elwood said. "Ain't they rich?"

"Oh, daughters. Yes," the light was beginning to dawn for Dillard. "No, it isn't any of the daughters. It's the bunch across the street. You know, the bunch at . . ." here he paused and looked around furtively, "the Heavenly Rest."

"At the funeral parlor!" Elwood exclaimed.

"Shhh. Not so loud," the chief said. "We don't want anyone to know we suspect them."

"Right," Floyd whispered, and Elwood lowered his voice.

"Man! Right across the street!"

"That's right," said Dillard, "and I want you boys to help me."

"Help you?" Elwood asked.

"How?" Floyd breathed.

"I'm making you boys Special Undercover Detective agents for Operation Boarding House Reach, we call it," the chief said in a conspiratorial manner. "I want you to keep an eye out over there and report anything suspicious."

"Do we get to wear badges?" Floyd asked.

"Well—" Chief Dillard began.

"Of course not, Floyd," Elwood interrupted the chief. "Do you think he wants us to advertise that we are Secret Agents? What they do is write your name down and give you a number. Right, Chief?"

Dillard gave a sigh of relief and responded, "That's absolutely right."

"What about Darlene?" Floyd asked.

"Darlene?"

"Yeah. She works with us," Elwood said. "See, she's from the Valley, too, and we're trying to find her sister, Charlene, who ran off with a dude named Burton to Odessa, Texas; only this is as far as they got, we think, and he passed some phony money to Chico and a bus driver."

"Charlene and Darlene? Burton, Odessa and Phony money? Chico and—" it was coming too fast to digest, but the chief decided it would be just as well if he pretended to understand, so he nodded. "Yes, I see; and Darlene?"

"She's the cook at the Boarding House," Elwood explained.

"You saw her the other night. You even tried to get her to do a trick, but she can't do any—except swing across the creek on a grapevine, which ain't too bad. None of the other girls in the Valley can do it," Floyd said proudly.

"Grapevine? Is that where that came from?" Dillard mused. Then he shuddered as Sonny's problem came into better focus.

"You mean she isn't a—er, uh, one of Mrs. Vanderwort's 'daughters'?"

"No sir, she's the cook," Floyd said. "Do you want to work undercover with her?"

"Indubitably," the chief said. "Er, that is, yes."

"Just give us the numbers, then," Elwood said, "and we'll tell Darlene all about it when we get back."

"Numbers . . ." Dillard was visualizing the image of Darlene's lovely legs in that skimpy maid's costume. "Okay, here they are: Darlene is C-38; you, Floyd, are W-24; and Elwood is H-36. Got that? 38-24-36."

"Aren't you going to write it down, Chief?" Floyd asked.

"I assure you, I will remember it forever," said the chief.

The boys were given cigars "for the road" and sent on their way. The chief breathed a deep sigh of relief and poured himself a generous dollop of Tennessee Sour Mash. He was pleased with that piece of work. Sworn to secrecy, the boys would never tell; and there is no quieter place in the world than a mortuary. Keeping tabs on stiffes in that funeral parlor ought to keep them too occupied to get into any other mischief. His secret was safe.

He might not have felt so confident had he known what was going on in that gloomy sanctuary.

* * * * *

"Hey, Elwood, how much do you reckon they pay secret agents?" Floyd asked.

"I'm not sure," Elwood said. "I guess that's a secret, too."

The lobby of the Station was quiet when they passed through. Reuben C. Finchert had had a belated change of heart and secured the release of Uncle Fizz when his press agent reminded him it would be good politics to be seen as a "friend of the poor." Uncle Fizz had not been elated at the delay, and was still fizzing when he was released to an underling from the office of Reuben C. Finchert of the Congers of the Yew Ninety States.

The American Under-employed Lawyers Union had seized the opportunity to take up the cause of the gypsies, who were now safely back in camp celebrating with a large contingent of the press and the Clean Government party.

Mischa was showing Sonny Dorf his new whistle. Sonny was trying to decide whether to join the gypsies or the Clean Government party. When the Party offered him its nomination and full backing for mayor, he accepted.

Credit for inspiring the raid, which netted no criminals, but rounded up twenty-four gypsies and sixty-nine assorted drunks, bums, and other vagrants (not counting our friends from the Valley), went to the Clean Government party for having exerted "unrelenting pressure for action." Blame went to the Powers that Be for having missed the "real criminals who haunt our society." Sonny was rapidly becoming the darling of the Clean Government party.

Alderman Julius Caesar Dorf was unavailable for comment.

12

Operation Boarding House Reach

FOR THE NEXT several days Secret Agents C-38, W-24 and H-36 kept close tabs on activities across the street at the Heavenly Rest Funeral Parlor. There did seem to be more activity than one would suspect around a mortuary, but none of the kind that would ordinarily arouse suspicion. There were funerals, of course, with lots of cars and people coming and going, but that was the business of funeral parlors.

All in all, to W-24 and H-36, things appeared to be in order over there. Not so to C-38. Darlene had detected an inconsistency that called for closer scrutiny.

"I've seen that car come and go ever since we've been watching that place," she said.

"What's wrong with that?" Floyd asked.

"Maybe nothing," she said, "but it always comes and goes at night. It pulls into the garage, and the door comes down before I can see who gets out."

"If the car belongs to the funeral parlor, where else would you keep it?" asked Elwood.

"Elwood, funeral parlors don't haul people around at night in little red, convertible sports cars. If they are alive, they use a big, black limousine; if they are dead, they use a hearse," Darlene pointed out.

Elwood acknowledged the logic of that statement.

"I wish we knew who was driving it," Floyd said.

"Let's try to get the tag number next time he turns in," Darlene suggested. "He generally comes about the same time every night."

"We'll need some spy glasses," Floyd said.

"Mrs. Vanderwort keeps some little bitty ones in that table drawer in the hall. I can slip them into my pocket when I dust that table, and no one will ever know we've borrowed them," Darlene said.

That evening, in the best secret agent tradition, C-38 and W-24 hid in the shrubbery in front of the White Peacock, armed with Mrs. Vanderwort's opera glasses. H-36 was on duty at the hospital and had to miss this part of the operation.

Peering at the foreboding brick pile that was the sprawling form of the Heavenly Rest, there was little activity to note. Dim lights on the ground floor, diffused and yellowed by lace curtains, mingled with the washed-out blues cast by the flickering neon of the sign out front and failed to disperse the gloom. Another light came from a shaded, second-floor window at the rear of the house. The rest of the second floor was dark, but a bright light seeped through a crack in the shuttered front windows of the garret.

"What do you suppose goes on in the attic of a funeral home at night?" Floyd asked.

"Why don't you climb up that tree and find out?" Darlene suggested.

"I'm not that curious right now," Floyd said.

Darlene looked at her watch. "He'll be here in about ten minutes," she said to her shivering and somewhat doubtful companion.

"We better get ready."

"I hope he's early. I'm gettin' cold," Darlene said, huddling closer to Floyd. There was a moment of silence, then Darlene voiced a thought that had been foremost in her mind since they had met there at the White Peacock. "Floyd, do you think we'll ever find Charlene?"

"I guess she'll come back when she gets tired of Texas," Floyd said.

"I don't think she's in Texas," Darlene said.

"But that's where Burton said—"

"I don't care what that louse-ridden varmint said. If they were going to Texas, why did they stop off in Vulcan City—and why this neighborhood? Why did they stop at all? It doesn't make a lick of sense."

"Charlene is around here somewhere. If there is something really going on over at that funeral home, I just have a hunch it has something to do with Charlene. I can feel it in my bones. *We are* twins, you know; and I've just got this strong feeling."

"Do you think something might have happened to her?" Floyd asked.

"I don't know, Floyd. I just know if she was free to come and go, we would have seen her. Think about it. Do you really believe Charlene could be in this town and we not hear of it, if she could come and go as she pleased?"

Floyd had to admit that whatever else Charlene might be, she definitely was *not* a low profile type. Just standing in one spot she could attract more attention than a four-alarm fire in a skyrocket factory. He looked at Darlene and saw large tears reflected in her eyes from the street lights and the dim lights across the street. She pressed her head against his chest and he held her close. She made no noise; he held her without speaking.

A car turning the corner a couple of blocks away interrupted the thoughts racing through his mind, and brought them back to the business at hand.

"Here he comes," she said. "I know the sound of that engine. Get ready."

She held the opera glasses in readiness, while Floyd, poised with pad and pencil, got ready to write as she called out numbers. The car turned smoothly into the drive.

"M, M, M dash one," she said.

"M, M, M dash one," Floyd echoed. "What else?"

"Nothing—that's it."

The brake lights flashed as the car swung into the garage, and the door started down before the car had come to a full stop. It was fully closed before the driver stepped out.

"I wish we could see who was driving," Floyd said.

"We could wait until he leaves," Darlene said, "but I doubt we could see him then. It's too dark to see into the car."

"I'll call the chief in the morning and get him to trace this number for us," Floyd said. "Let's go in; it's freezing."

"I'll make us some hot cocoa," Darlene said, squeezing his hand.

"That'll be just the ticket," he said as he helped her to her feet. "I guess we've done about all we can do tonight."

"Not quite," she said, turning her face up to his. She kissed him hard, full and long, and he returned it. After a lingering moment, she stepped back.

"Thanks," she said softly.

"Oh, any time," he said calmly, although his head was spinning. "Any time."

* * * * *

The man who stepped out of the car was grim-faced, unsmiling and humorless. He ran briskly up the stairs inside the garage and disappeared

through a doorway at the top of the steps as if on an urgent mission. To him, anything that involved money was an urgent mission—and this involved money. Ultimately, everything he did involved either money or power, or both.

A small elevator delivered him smoothly to the top floor. He stepped across the hall and through a door into a lighted office. Three men awaited him there, and stood when he entered the room. He motioned them to sit and took a seat behind the desk. The men sat silently and waited while he read the report on the desk. Placing it down after he had scanned it, making note of its contents, he spoke.

"This looks good. The press is running fine. The plates are perfect. What's the problem?"

"The dame wants more money," said the swarthy, bald man with a mustache.

"How much?"

"She didn't say," the bald man answered. "Told Angel she wanted to see you."

"Anything else?"

"She left this. Show him, Angel," the bald man directed.

A cadaverous form in a dark suit rose and handed the man behind the desk a manila envelope.

"You know what's in here, Angel?" asked the man behind the desk.

"I didn't open it, but my guess is it's trouble," Angel replied.

The man behind the desk slit the envelope open with a letter opener, and removed its contents, which were half a dozen glossy eight-by-tens with a note attached. It read:

*Thought you might like to see these. There are plenty more
where these came from. Smile, you're on Candid Camera.*

C

"A real comedienne," he said; but he didn't smile. In some of the pictures, he was shown looking at plates or a small printing press. Other shots were close-ups of plates and press. Not necessarily the kind of proof a good lawyer couldn't refute; but certainly enough to spark an investigation and raise questions. It was most assuredly the sort of material that would interest the Secret Service or an ambitious District Attorney. The pictures were obviously taken with a small camera, and had not been posed.

"You want us to take her down, boss?" asked Baldy.

"No, not yet," he replied. "I want her to talk first. She's got somebody inside helping her, and I want to know who it is; and I want the negatives. She didn't take those pictures herself. If she won't talk sense to me, we'll let Augie and Angel reason with her."

The rat-faced man, who had spoken not a word, looked up at Angel; the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. There was menace in his face, but no mirth.

* * * * *

"You're who?" said the voice at the other end of the line, which belonged to Patrolman Norby Finch.

"Secret Agent W-24," Floyd repeated. "I want to talk to the chief."

"Hang on a minute, I'll get the sergeant."

"I don't want the sergeant," Floyd said, "I want the chief." But the voice was gone.

Floyd overheard some discussion at the other end, but as the receiver was being muffled in Finch's hand, he could catch only a word or two every now and then. Two of the words he caught were "crank" and "tracer". Then another voice came on the line.

"This is Sergeant Wiggins; can I help you?"

"This is Agent W-24. We're on Operation Boarding House Reach, and I need to speak to the chief," Floyd explained again.

"You're on what? And what's this 'we' stuff?"

"Me an' C-38 an' H-36 are on Boarding House Reach," Floyd answered, "and I want to speak to the chief."

"C-38, W-24 and H-36, huh?" his tone was that of a person who suspected his leg was being pulled. "Sounds like a real looker."

"That's all we've been doin' for a week is lookin' at that funeral parlor," Floyd said. "I need to speak to the chief."

"The chief ain't here," Wiggins said. "Can't you just tell me about it?" He was sure it was a joke, but he couldn't imagine what the punch line was.

"I don't know about that," Floyd said. "The chief didn't say anything about reporting to anyone but him. We're new at this undercover stuff."

"Undercover, huh? Where are you doing this undercover work?" Wiggins asked.

"We're at the White Peacock," Floyd answered.

"Oh, ho! You're undercover at the White Peacock?" He thought he had discovered the punch line and had bitten.

"Right," Floyd replied.

"Well, I guess if you're goin' to do undercover work, that's as good a place as any," Wiggins chuckled. "That's pretty good, fella. At least it's better than the old, 'Do you have Prince Albert in a can?' routine. Don't bother us anymore, now. We're busy." He hung up.

"Never mind the trace on that call, Finch," Wiggins said. "It was just a joker."

"I got it anyway, Sarge; here it is," Finch said, handing the sergeant a slip of paper.

Wiggins glanced at the piece of paper and said, "Well, I'll be da—dumbed. He was at the White Peacock. The chief will get a kick out of that one."

* * * * *

"Let me get this straight, Elwood," Penny said. "You say the chief made you all secret agents to keep an eye on the Heavenly Rest Funeral Home?"

"That's right," Elwood said, "but he didn't say exactly what was going on over there, just that he suspected skulduggery of some sort and that was why he spent so much time at the boarding house."

"Elwood, what is the name of your 'boarding house'?" Penny asked.

"They call it the White Peacock," Elwood said. "Seems like a strange name for a boarding house."

"It is, believe me," Penny said, the truth beginning to dawn on her.

"I was thinkin' it was because Mrs. Vanderwort had mostly all those rich women there, and they wanted it to sound sort of refined-like, to keep out the riffraff. Some of those women are her daughters, you know. We decided they must be show business people, because they kept askin' Darlene to do tricks."

"I'm sure it's something like that," Penny said. "I'll explain it to you sometime, but it isn't important right now."

"Anyway, the chief said he was doin' undercover work there, which is what he was doin' at the party," Elwood said.

"Makes sense," Penny said dryly, "and he let you out of jail, gave you a special assignment watching a funeral home, and told you to keep quiet about seeing him at the White Peacock?"

"Yeah, he said if word got out, it would blow his cover, and he would be in trouble," Elwood said.

"I'm sure that is true," Penny remarked. And he's keeping you occupied watching dead people, so you won't cause him any more trouble, she thought.

"But when we found out about the car and tried to report it to the chief, they told us he wasn't there," Elwood said.

"What car?" Penny asked.

"The little red, sports model that C-38—that's Darlene, you know—noticed comin' and goin' in the middle of the night."

"Little red sports car?" Penny repeated, lifting her eyebrows.

"Yeah. We got the license number, but we never have been able to see who's driving," Elwood said. "See, here it is. We want to get that number traced, but we haven't been able to get a hold of the chief."

"Let me see that," Penny said, reaching for the slip of paper. "MMM-1! Elwood, do you know whose car that is?"

"No. That's what I've been telling you. We can't get it traced, because the chief is in Miami Beach at a chief's convention, and won't be back until next week."

"That's Dr. Money's car!" Penny exclaimed.

"Dr. Money?" Elwood asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I've seen it a hundred times. It's probably out there in his parking space right now, if you want to check," Penny said. "that triple-M is his initials, and number one is how he rates himself. I know that's his car."

"What's he doin' at the Heavenly Rest every night?" Elwood asked.

"Probably checking the books," she said.

"Why doesn't he want to be seen there?"

"He doesn't want anyone to connect him with a funeral home. It would be bad for his practice. We've been calling him 'Mort, the Mortician' for years, because his lack of surgical skills is matched only by his ability to get rich patients. Now it looks like mortician was a better name than we knew. He just sends his blunders to the Heavenly Rest, and collects for surgery and the funeral. What a racket! Talk about hedging your bets."

"Is that against the law?" Elwood asked.

"No, but it's definitely a conflict of interests; although Mort wouldn't consider anything that made him money to be a conflict," Penny said. "He has a well-developed tendency to be kind to himself."

"If it's not against the law, why would the chief want us to spy on the place?" Elwood asked.

"Maybe he can explain that better than I," Penny said.

* * * * *

Peter Possum, a.k.a. Slick Rick, wasn't playing possum when he heard the footfall on the stairs outside the garret room he occupied in the Heavenly Rest. He was napping, but he was a light sleeper—especially when he was worried, and he had been worried lately. But that was one of the problems of running a “hazardous opportunity,” which was what he preferred to call a common, ordinary double-cross. He had done it before, and had got away with it; but this one was a bit more hazardous. The brain behind this operation knew what it was doing. The operation was big, well organized, and ruthless.

A perceptive British Prime Minister once said words to the effect that, “Nothing concentrates the mind so wonderfully as the sight of the gallows.” Peter Possum's mind was concentrated. He had been living in the shadow of the gallows ever since he had allowed Carlotta to talk him into joining her scheme to blackmail the boss.

All he had to do was take pictures and turn the film over to her; she would do the rest. Although there was no reason to suspect that his part had been detected, you could never be sure, and he didn't trust dames.

For whatever reason, there must have been something about the sound of those approaching footsteps that alerted him. Perhaps it was because there was a pair of them—one soft and one heavier. Ordinarily, even that wouldn't have set off his mental alarms. He had heard footfalls on those stairs before that meant nothing. Whatever it was, the mental red flags waved and he came instantly awake. All of his senses were tingling, and he was in the process of making a dive for the window when Augie entered the room with Angel right behind him.

Augie whipped the silenced automatic out of his shoulder holster, and fired off a shot that took the shutter off the window frame outside, but succeeded only in adding wings to his quarry's flying feet as he scampered across the roof. Augie cursed and ran to the window just in time to snap off another shot at a pair of heels disappearing over the peak of the roof. He cursed again and shouted for Angel to head him off at the back. Augie climbed out the window and took off on the same path the fugitive had taken.

The ponderous Angel was too slow to make it down two flights of stairs and out the back door in time to corner the prey. Augie didn't realize he was afraid of heights until he was out on the roof and looking down. He froze for a long moment before inching his way up to the peak of the roof. By the time he reached the peak and peered over, his target had leaped for a limb on the huge oak at the rear of the establishment and was sliding down the trunk to safety.

Angel had gained the lower floor and was legging it toward the rear exit, but he was a great deal less than an Olympic sprinter. Peter Possum had made it to the ground and was flying down the alley to freedom. He probably would have made it had not a car turned into the alleyway and blocked his path. It was Baldy returning from an errand. Car and quarry slid to a stop. Baldy sized up the situation in an instant, and leaped out of the car, drawing his weapon.

Peter Possum froze for an instant. He started back up the alley, and froze again when he heard Angel slam the back door. In a flash he jumped for the fence that defined the alley, and vaulted over just as Baldy loosed a shot that caught him in the left leg, shattering the shin bone. He hit the ground heavily on the other side, and looked around wildly, frantically seeking some refuge in which to hide. There was an old fifty-gallon drum in the weeds, and dragging his wounded leg, he burrowed into it. A few minutes later, after he had lost consciousness from blood loss and shock, his pursuers found him and made sure the career of Peter Possum, a.k.a. Slick Rick, had been ended permanently.

"What are we going to do with him?" Augie asked.

"Since he was nice enough to crawl into that barrel for us, pour some concrete in it and drop him in the lake," Baldy ordered. "That's the last we'll ever hear of that rat."

* * * * *

"Did Carlotta say why she was leaving, or how long she would be gone, Valerie?" Mrs. Vanderwort asked.

"She was in an awful big hurry, ma'am. All she said was that she was leaving for her health," Valerie said.

"Didn't she say where she was going?"

"No, ma'am," Valerie shook her head.

Bertha thought of the bogus money she had secretly stashed in her safe. "Trouble with the police, you think?" This was directed at Natasha, a sultry, dark-haired girl.

"Could be, I suppose," Natasha said in a distinctly mid-western accent. "But none of us knew anything about it, if it were."

"Thank you, girls. That will be all," she nodded. The girls turned to leave, except one, a bleached blonde with a Gallie bob, who lingered a moment.

"Yes, Hildegard?" Mrs. Vanderwort prompted.

"We were just wondering; since Carlotta left all her clothes, could the rest of us divide them?" Hildegard asked.

"I think not yet," Bertha decided. "Carlotta may regain her health and come back. We'll wait awhile before we do that."

"Yes'm," Hildegard said, and left to join the others.

* * * * *

Carlotta didn't return. Three days after her disappearance, the police fished a body out of the City Reservoir. It had a wound in one leg, three large holes in the torso, and another hole in the head. It was wearing expensive Gucci shoes, size 7½ D, and little else. It wasn't Carlotta. It wasn't even a female. The police weren't interested in Carlotta. They didn't even know she was missing. The weren't searching for this body, either; it just floated in on them, in a manner of speaking.

Sergeant Gunther "Gunboat" Wiggins was in charge until the homicide boys could take over, which would be well before his Retirement Day. "Take him over to the morgue, boys," he told the ambulance crew. "We'll get an autopsy for the crime lab guys."

"What do you think he died of, Sarge?" Finch asked. he had a decided weak stomach, and had avoided looking too closely at the corpse.

"He leaked to death, Finch," the sergeant said.

"Leaked to death? Really?" Finch asked; he had never heard of that as a cause of death.

"Yeah. Nobody could swim with that many holes in him. He leaked like a sieve. Must have sunk like the Titanic."

"I guess that's it, all right," Finch said, still not convinced he had been given a straight answer.

"What'll the Department come to when I'm gone," Wiggins muttered, shaking his head. "Take him away, boys," he motioned to the ambulance crew, who had finished loading the body. "Tell Doc I'll be over this afternoon to make out my report after he finishes cuttin' him up. Tell him not to throw away anything vital, heh heh."

"Yuck!" Finch said, turning a light shade of green.

The ambulance pulled away; no lights flashing. It wasn't an emergency.

* * * * *

The car Wiggins drove to the morgue late that afternoon had seen about as much service as had the sergeant. Like him, it was slated for retirement soon, and was only in service due to a budget glitch that wouldn't allow replacement when it should have been replaced. The paint job was faded, and there were multiple scars, scratches and contusions on its body. It had only one hubcap, and the tires would never stand another high-speed chase— or even a low-speed chase, for that matter. Wiggins didn't care. It didn't matter now. Just a few more days and he would be basking in the sun at Gulf Shores on the Redneck Riviera. No cares, no Finch, no Dorfs, no duty, no nothing.

Wiggins thought he detected a slight pull to the right as he wheeled into the morgue's parking lot. "Must be that slow-leaking tire again," he thought. Nothing to worry about; he would be finished with his business here and back in the Police garage before the tire went completely flat. Observing him from the loading dock of the hospital next door were two young gentlemen who were waiting for their ride home after finishing their shift at the hospital. They, too, noticed the right front tire appeared to be a little slack. Being civic-minded young men, they saw it as their public duty to inform the officer of the problem. Wiggins steered the relic into a "Police-Reserved" space next to the door, slid out of the car, and disappeared into the building before Lamont Russells, a lab technician, and Tyrone Clemens, a physical therapy assistant, could get his attention.

"Doc get finished?" Wiggins asked the records orderly in the cubicle by the door.

"Yeah. Left the body out for you in Room 4, down the hall," the orderly replied.

"Thanks," Wiggins said as, with clipboard under his arm, strode down the hall in the direction of Room 4. He turned left into the room, which was dimly lit; two of the fluorescent bulbs were missing. Glancing around until his eyes became accustomed to the low light, Wiggins spotted the form lying on a gurney near the center of the room and went over to have a look.

The body cavity lay open and the various organs, which had been placed on a nearby tray, were labeled for inspection. However, there was a problem. Not only did the dim light prevent him from seeing as well as he would have liked, but also, the gurney upon which the body lay, was of a height that prevented the bandy-legged officer from getting the view he sought— namely, the path of the bullets through the body.

If there was one lesson Sergeant Wiggins had learned well during his long career as a peace officer, it was to be thorough in his reports. It was an ingrained habit. Where others might simply shrug and leave, Wiggins was of

a sterner mold. He would neither shrug nor leave. Dragging over a stool, he climbed upon the gurney and straddled the body. He pulled out a penlight, which he held in his teeth, and running his left hand into the body cavity, he probed a bullet hole with the index finger of his right hand. It was then that the two public-spirited young men caught up with him.

Peering uncertainly into the gloomy depths of Room 4, one of the young men rapped lightly. Upon receiving an acknowledging, "Unhh," which was the best Wiggins could do with a flashlight in his mouth, they rather tentatively entered the room, Lamont in the lead with Tyrone peering over his shoulder.

Lamont spoke first. "Uh, say, Officer; did you know your tire was . . ."

"Unhh," Wiggins said again, craning his neck to see who was addressing him, but not abandoning his position astride the corpse with his left hand inside the body cavity. The flashlight in his mouth cast weird reflections, and at the very least would have impaired his ability to give a succinct explanation—had he been inclined to give one, which, not perceiving a need for such, he wasn't.

There was enough light in the room, along with the darting beam of the flashlight, for the two youths finally to be able to take in the scene before them, at which moment their public spirit abandoned them entirely. Again, Lamont was the first to speak. "*Jeeezu*—" was about all he could get out before he rammed smack into Tyrone, who was a split second later than Lamont in catching on.

"*Yeceei!!!*" was his contribution, and the last translatable sound uttered by either as they met in a mad, tangled rush for the doorway. They were still in an inextricable mass, which somewhat resembled a wildly oscillating net of squids, as they took the door off its hinges and rolled into the hallway. A few seconds later the mass separated, turning into a windmill of arms and legs as they rocketed toward the exit and burst into the safety of the Great Outdoors. Their ride, who was then patiently waiting, was unable to catch them before they had winged it all the way home.

Back in Room 4, a startled Wiggins was still astride the cadaver with his hand inside the body cavity. He began to see the humorous side of the little vignette just enacted, and broke into gales of uncontrollable laughter. It was there that little Dr. Jimmy Wu, the pathologist, who was attracted by the noise and confusion of the previous few minutes, found Wiggins.

A quick look apprised him of the situation; obviously a lunatic had stolen a policeman's uniform and was on the loose. Being a practical man, Jimmy Wu sent for Security and the men with the wrap-around sleeved jackets. Sergeant Wiggins was still incoherent when they led him away. It seems he

was laughing and crying at the same time, and it was difficult to grasp the drift of his broken phrases.

The resident psychiatrist, who had been called to the scene, could only shake his head in extreme bewilderment as they led the babbling sergeant past the police car with the flat tire to the ambulance with the heavily padded interior.

"Only nine more days," Wiggins wailed.

"Yes, we know, Sergeant," the muscular orderly said.

"Without a blot on my record—'til now."

"We know, Sergeant."

The patient broke into a fit of laughter. "The funniest thing I ever saw," he gasped.

"Yes, Sergeant; we know," the orderly said soothingly.

"Only nine more . . ." he wailed again, "without a blot."

"We know, Sergeant."

"Then this . . ."

"We know, Sergeant."

The door slammed shut, and the ambulance pulled away.

* * * * *

That night, Carlotta's room was ransacked. Clothes were scattered. The lining of her mink coat was ripped out, indicating that the intruder was probably male as no woman would ever desecrate a mink coat. Nothing seemed to be missing.

Bertha decided not to burden the police with the problem right then. Locking the door to the room, she stowed the key in her ample bosom.

13

Springtime In The Valley

SHORTOFF RAISED UP and snapped at the fly buzzing around his head. Missed. Snapped again. Missed. Waited patiently for the fly to return. Snap! Got him! *Yuck!* He shook his head, making a canine version of *ptooie!* and gazed with sleepy yellow eyes across the Valley. His nose twitched taking in and sorting out the moist, rich scent of newly plowed land and bursting buds borne on the spring zephyrs wafting through the breezeway. Uninteresting. Snapping at flies was more fun. They tasted bad, but he couldn't resist doing it. They teased him into it.

Nothing to eat near at hand. Besides, he was full. His head drowsed back on the top step of the cabin porch, and he stretched out. It was a good time to sleep. He would find something to investigate later. *Bzzzzt.* Another fly. He'd get him. Snap! Missed.

Shortoff had a way of coming and going to suit himself. He moved more or less back and forth between the Wilkins' cabin at one end of the Valley, and Aunt Min's at the other, with appropriate stops in between. Sometimes it took several days to make the circuit. He seemed to have a sixth sense that told him who made gravy that night, who baked biscuits, or whose female hound was coming in heat. He usually showed up for either occasion well ahead of the pack. It was when the pack was on the trail of game that Shortoff was apt to run a little behind.

Aunt Min had thrown open the windows, dusted every stick of furniture, turned the mattresses and polished the big, carved walnut sideboard that her great-great-grandparents had hauled up all the way from Charleston. Ashes were carried out and dumped in the lye bin. Quilts, blankets and down pillows

were hung on the line to air out and drink in sunshine. The mountainside was white with dogwood blossoms, and choruses of birdsong cascaded from bush and cove where males staked out territories and trilled for mates.

Spring had come to the Valley.

* * * * *

Dave Daggett looked at the letter from Charlene and shook his head. "I don't like it, Martha," he said. "It don't sound one bit like Charlene, and it's the third one we've gotten."

"It's in her hand, though, Dave," Martha said, although she had to agree it didn't sound at all like her daughter. It was too stiff, too formal, and spoke of things not likely to be of the slightest interest to Charlene. "Maybe she's finally got good sense and decided to settle down," she offered hopefully, but not at all convinced, herself.

"Martha, the most serious thought she ever had in her life was what to wear to catch some boy's eye. She never even dreamed about telling me how to run the farm. Now she's hoping I'll rent a field to those people from the College, because 'that new tobacco might be a good cash crop for the Valley.' Does that sound like Charlene?" Dave rested his case.

"I do wish she had put a return address on the envelope," Martha said.

"That's the only part of this whole thing that is typical of her," Dave said. "The postmark just says 'Railway Mail Service' and the date." Dave hung his head. "I'm worried, Martha."

"At least Darlene is all right," she said, trying to comfort him.

"That's true," he sighed. "As long as she's with Floyd and Elwood, they won't let any harm come to her."

Dave, of course, was not aware that Darlene and the boys had gone into the secret agent business.

* * * * *

Cows are apt to get out most anytime, but this is especially true in the spring. Perhaps it is due to a primordial urge to migrate. Maybe the grass is always greener—whatever the reason, some of Deacon Watts' cows got out and migrated up to Aunt Min's back field where they proceeded to graze on some of the new plants the "perfessers" had set out.

When Aunt Min spotted them, they were cavorting in a most unbovinely manner. Recalling the strange behavior of the wild boar, which had rooted up

some of the plants on his earlier raid, Aunt Min put two and two together and came up with the logical answer. That was some strange type of tobacco, and she wasn't sure it really was tobacco at all. She decided that not enough checking had been done to find out about this project or the people who were running it. They didn't appear to be professors any more than the plants they were growing were tobacco plants.

She voiced her suspicions to her sister after Prayer Meeting, and suggested that perhaps the College should be contacted and asked some questions. After all, no one had checked. They had simply taken Eli Watts' word for everything. That should have been sufficient, but then you never know . . . June agreed, but thought they should get an opinion from the boys before going much further. After all, they could be wrong, and they were getting good rent for marginal land. Unfortunately, ears other than her sister's had overheard their conversation.

As soon as she got home, Aunt Min sat down and began a letter to Elwood:

Dere Elwood,

*Your Aunt June and I were talking tonight abot how nice it wood
be to see you. Shortoff was here for a few days but must have gone
bak to Red's.*

At that point, the pen ran out of ink and, rather than look for the ink bottle, Min decided to go to bed and finish the letter in the morning.

When Min came in from milking the next morning about daylight, Shortoff was nowhere in sight. "Gone back to Wilkinses," Min thought, hanging her bonnet on a peg and setting the full milk pail on the table. Maybe she heard a slight noise, or maybe she just felt a presence. Perhaps she was unconsciously aware that her letter to Elwood had been moved by someone other than herself. A look of nervous concern shadowed her face. When she started to turn, a hard, sinewy hand was clamped over her mouth stifling any noise and nearly shutting off her air. Her arms were pinned to her sides by a force she could not resist. There was a strange, sweetish odor, and the world disappeared.

She never saw her assailant.

* * * * *

June read the note Tommy Ledbetter handed her. It was written on a piece of onionskin paper, and in Min's hand, all right; but June was still perplexed. The note was brief; it read:

*Dere June,
gone to see Elwood. Bak soon.
Min*

It wasn't the lack of a capital letter at the beginning. Min was always indifferent about punctuation and spelling. Mostly, it was because Min had left without telling her own sister. That was definitely not like Min. Still, there it was in Min's handwriting. You couldn't argue with that, but . . .

"Who gave you this, Tommy?" she asked the straw-headed youth with two new front teeth, who now stood before her expectantly.

"One of them perfesser fellers," he said. "I was on my way home from school, an' since I come right by here, he tol' me to give it to you. Said it was from Miz Larkin, an' he give me a nickel to bring it to you." He continued to stand before her as if expecting something.

"Was there something else, Tommy?" June asked.

"Yes'm. He said he thought you might have some fresh apple cobbler. An' he said to tell you that Deacon Watts said he'd take care of the milkin' and feed the stock 'til Miz Larkin come back."

Tommy got a big bowl of the fresh cobbler, and a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek, to boot. When he went on his way, June sat down to think. It all seemed genuine enough, but it didn't smell right to her. It wasn't at all like Min to jump up and go running off; and Eli Watts had never been neighborly enough to milk somebody else's cow—he didn't even milk his own, leaving that chore to his wife. It just didn't fit. No. Not at all.

June folded the note and put it in her sewing basket. "I'll write Floyd tonight," she said to herself, "and tomorrow I'll go over and check the house."

* * * * *

When the goat farmer tossed a bale of hay over the fence, the one-eyed billy goat in the center of the pasture lowered his head and charged all the way across the pasture from where he was standing. The charge ended with a resounding whack that shook the stout board fence in front of the little band of men there to witness it. The goat stood a moment, waiting for the cobwebs to clear, before taking another go at it.

"You said you wanted a mean 'un," the owner of the goat dairy said. "That's the meanest 'un I got. In fact, that's the meanest 'un I ever seen."

The one-eyed bearded man knelt down and got eye to eye with the one-eyed bearded goat through the fence. It took a moment for the goat's eye to focus. He had struck the fence a mighty blow, but when things cleared for him, he found himself eyeball to eyeball with a kindred soul. Not only was an understanding reached, a bond was established between man and beast. They became like unto brothers. "He'll do," said the big, bearded man without looking up. "We'll take him."

Rock Top Radley led the now-docile goat into the van and closed the sliding side door. The Swamp Buzzards had a new member, whom they promptly dubbed, "Cy," short for Cyclops.

Except for the fact that he smelled better than the other members, Cy fit right into the family. All things were shared equally in this commune—including chores. It was Cyclops' duty to stay home and protect the property when the band was called away to perform. That was the purpose in acquiring him.

He was a watch-goat. Anchored out front of the trailer, he proved a very effective deterrent to friends who came to "borrow" a jug of whiskey while the band was out. Three friends were found huddled on top of the trailer when the band returned from playing on the very first night after Cy had joined the group.

In celebration of this coup, the Buzzards shared a well-earned jug with the hero of the event, who proved to have a very low tolerance of, and an overweening fondness for, the liquid fire. Cyclops slept until noon the next day, and woke up under the trailer with a monumental hangover. It was nearly sundown before his good eye was once again lining up with the hole in his head.

In spite of the fact that Old Cy drank more whiskey than he saved, "borrowing" ceased, and harmony reigned in the Buzzard household.

* * * * *

Min's cabin was in perfect order when June inspected it early the next morning. The windows were shut, the dishes put away, and sure enough, the clothes and toiletries she would have taken on such a trip were missing, as was her old suitcase. Satisfied, but still puzzled by the abruptness of Min's departure, June was closing the front door when she had another thought.

Min's new blue dress was missing; what about the new blue hat she had bought to match it? She would have never taken the dress and left the hat.

Re-entering the empty house, she went to the closet in Min's room and poked through the contents. There, on the top shelf, she spotted the hatbox. "Please be empty," she prayed as she took the box down and lifted the lid.

Her heart sank. The prayer was in vain. The little navy blue straw hat with the daisy on the brim was securely nestled in the protective tissue paper.

* * * * *

Aunt Min awakened slowly. Her head ached fiercely. She was lying on a small metal cot in a semi-dark room that was lit only by a single, fifteen-watt bulb hanging from a rafter in the center of the room. Most of the room was in shadows, but she could see newspapers scattered around. There were bales of hay stacked in one corner, and a small table near the center of the room held an empty plate and a cup. Someone had been occupying the room.

Where was she? There was no immediate clue. No sounds could be heard other than the noise of a small gasoline motor somewhere outside. She sat up and dragged herself to her feet, and immediately had to grab a heavy timber pillar near the cot for support. Waiting for her head to clear and her legs to become steadier, she looked around once more. She was nauseated, too, but held it.

Electricity! Nobody in the Valley had electricity, except Chico, who was near the highway. She didn't think this was Chico's. If it were, she would have been able to hear cars on the highway, and she hadn't heard any. So, then where was she? Closing her eyes a moment, she remembered that the "perfessers" had hauled in a small electric generator. That was the noise she heard. If that was the case, she had to be in Eli Watts' old barn on the back side of his pasture. It was well off the beaten path. No one could hear her, no matter how loudly she yelled. If she did yell, she reasoned, it would only attract her captors.

She examined her prison, and satisfied herself there was no way out for a fairly hefty lady in her sixties. That old barn was stout, built of solid oak and heart pine, more than a century ago; well before the men of the Valley left to join Orr's Rifles and repel the Yankee invaders.

The room had been framed to serve as a tack and harness room, and for general storage. The door was sassafras, barred and locked from the outside; but the boards were spaced widely enough apart to be able to see through

them, and there was about a four-inch space between the sill and the bottom of the door. A cat could squeeze through, but not a woman of Aunt Min's left.

The floor was rough-sawn planks, worn smooth by a century of use, and as solid now as the day it was laid down. There was no window. Running water was piped to a sink and commode in what had been a large closet in a back corner. The water was piped through a gravity system from a storage tank supplied by a windmill pump. Eli had installed the system so he could remain at the barn all night during the calving season.

Min sat in one of the two chairs at the table to think. Okay, she was being held in Eli Watts' old barn, more than likely by those two "perfesser" fellows. But why? No doubt because they discovered she was planning to contact the College and check up on them. If they didn't want to be checked up on, they must be a couple of fakes. She had been suspicious all along.

And I'll bet that 'tobacco' they are raising isn't really tobacco, either, she thought. "What is it then?" she asked herself. "Dope; probably marijuana," she answered. That would account for the strange behavior of the animals, when they ate it. Min had never seen marijuana, but she had heard how a lot of people—"hippies" they were called—had been using it out in California and in New York; and they said it was spreading to other places. Now it had come to the Valley, and she didn't like it one bit!

She had to get out of there and warn the people. They were using Eli Watts. Persnickety old fool that he was, she didn't like seeing him being used by outsiders. She didn't like being used, herself; nor her friends and neighbors. These vermin were defiling the Valley, and she didn't mean to stand for it. They had to be stopped!

She paused in her ruminations and a nagging thought made her shudder. Why were they keeping her alive? She tried to push the thought aside, but it kept insinuating itself into the forefront of her mind. She could be of no use to them, but she could harm them. And she meant to, if she ever had the chance. The only reason she could think of as to why they hadn't killed her was that they were awaiting orders from someone—a Big Boss somewhere.

Pondering these thoughts, her hand unconsciously went to her throat, and she nervously fingered the gold chain she always wore. It had come with a small, cylindrical metal whistle that Elwood bought when he got old Shortoff. She had thought the whistle was useless, because it didn't make a noise when you blew it. Elwood had laughed and told her humans couldn't hear it, but dogs could. She thought he was teasing her until one day, she blew it at old Shorty when he was chasing a chicken. He had stopped and come over to her with his head cocked as if asking why she was making all that racket when

he was trying to catch a chicken. Then he went back to his task, but by then the hen was safe on her roost.

Elwood never used it, so she wore it along with a few other items of practical use and impractical sentiment. There was a little good luck charm that was also a screwdriver, and a silver medal she had won in school for reciting, "The Wreck of the Hesperus." She could still recite it without a hitch, if anyone asked; but no one had asked in quite a while. The screwdriver had come in handy several times. There was also a tiny pair of scissors that really did work. Maybe the screwdriver and the scissors would help her escape. She didn't know how, yet, but they were the only useful objects she possessed at the moment. An old medal and a whistle nobody could hear sure wouldn't be much help.

She thought of June, and wondered how long it would be before June discovered she was missing. She wondered, too, how long she had been unconscious; it could have been days. She was hungry. This brought thoughts of old Shorty. Strange dog, old Shorty. Came and went as he pleased. Seemed to hear the beat of a different drum. Definitely had a mind of his own, if he had a mind at all. When he got hungry, he caught a chicken. She was beginning to understand Shorty a little better. Right now, if she could catch a chicken, she was sure she would wring its neck and eat it raw—just like Shorty.

Were people searching for her now? Surely it wouldn't be long, but where would they look? How could they find her? The fact was, she couldn't wait to be found. That might be too late; she had to escape if she could. She had to find a way, somehow.

There was a noise outside the door. Someone was coming. Would it be rescue? "Who's there?" she called.

No one answered. The door wasn't opened. Instead, someone shoved a can of sardines and a box of soda crackers through the crack under the door. It was feeding time. The sound of footsteps faded.

It wasn't fried chicken, but it would do. At least they didn't plan to starve her to death, and apparently they didn't plan to kill her right away—unless this was to be her last meal.

14

A Day Of Discovery

HOW WAS THE FISHING TRIP, Chief? Catch anything?" asked Lieutenant Harry Cain of the Homicide Division.

"Lord, I hope not!" muttered the bleary-eyed chief, recently returned from the Land of Sunshine. He had passed up the traditional end-of-convention overnight fishing trip in favor of other overnight diversions.

"Here's the make on that body we got out of the reservoir." Cain placed a thin manila folder on Chief Dillard's desk.

The chief wished Cain didn't have to make so much noise shuffling that folder; and why did he have to talk a blue streak? "Lower that blind and close the window, will you, Cain?" Dillard requested.

"Sure, Chief," Cain moved to do as directed.

The chief winced when the window came down. He was sure Cain had slammed it on purpose.

"Anything else?" Cain asked.

"Yes. Close the door behind you." Cain followed this command and Dillard quickly added, "Softly." But it was too late; Cain was already gone. He winced again as the door slammed shut.

On this particular morning, a pair of kittens on a deep pile carpet would have been too noisy for the chief. Bright light hurt his eyes, and the noise of pigeons cooing on the window ledge annoyed him. Fresh air was something his lungs had to get accustomed to gradually, not all at once. Why did spring have to make so blasted much racket?

He adjusted his glasses and blinked eyes not yet accustomed to focusing on small objects—actually, they were not yet accustomed to focusing at all.

Maybe sunshades would help. He attached them to his reading glasses and took another look. Better, but not much. However, with a sigh and a screwing up of his resolve, he set out to concentrate on the contents of the folder, and after that he intended to deal with the accumulation of papers clogging his "IN" basket.

"Mmmm," he deliberated over the first page in the folder. A picture from an old "WANTED" poster showed a dark-complected pockmarked face accented by a sharp nose and a wide mouth, which was defined by a pencil-thin mustache; dark straight hair framed the face. Dillard began to read the report.

"FBI Lab identification:

"NAME: Pedro Ricardo Mangus Colorado Lopez;

"ALIAS: Ricky Rat, Peter Possum, Charlie Weasel, Mr. Red Sleeves, Slick Rick."

He read on, "... male, age 43, weight 145, hair dark, Caucasian-mix Indian (Apache), nationality Mexican, etc., etc., etc." The chief scanned the lines.

"IDENTIFYING MARKS: (there were enough scars and stitches described to make one think he must have resembled a patchwork quilt. Slick Rick had obviously lived on the edge).

"OCCUPATION: artist, bartender, waiter, racetrack tout.

"HABITS: Known associate of underworld characters.

"WANTED FOR: ..."

Continuing to scan the list, the chief discovered that Ricky Rat had served time in the Mexican Federal Prison for having stolen National Art Treasures in violation of the Mexican Antiquities Protection Act; and had once received a suspended sentence in Texas for an extortion conviction that was plea bargained to "illegal solicitation" by a shyster lawyer with a crooked judge. Convicted in Holbrook, Arizona for possession of stolen goods. Sentenced to three years in Yuma Prison, suspended to eighteen months. Wanted for parole violation.

He was wanted under outstanding warrants issued from Tampa to Tampico to Tuscaloosa to Tucson to Tijuana, charging embezzlement, flight to avoid prosecution for possession of stolen goods, illegal entry, possession of marijuana with intent to sell, bunko, possession of and passing counterfeit money, suspicion of arson, and finally, extortion and racketeering. He had several arrests listed, but had managed to escape incarceration for any lengthy period of time. They didn't call him Slick Rick for nothing.

Cause of death was put down as five gunshot wounds; one in the calf of the left leg at apparently long range, three close range shots to the chest, and

one to the head. Any one of the latter four would have been fatal. According to the ballistics report, at least three different weapons were used.

The victim was dead already before being consigned to the reservoir.

Under "REMARKS" was a notation that a substance found under the victim's fingernails proved to be ink (green), and that traces of building sand was found inside as well as adhered to the seams of his shoes. The victim had been dead at least seventy-two hours when discovered.

"What," the chief wondered, "was he doing in Vulcan City? And who around here would want to kill him?" Glancing back at the victim's file, Dillard decided upon reflection that, "With a record like that, probably a lot of people, and at least three of them caught up with him."

By the middle of the afternoon he had dug down through his "IN" basket to a slip of paper, which noted that a wiseacre calling himself "Secret Agent W-24" had called several times to report that undercover work was continuing at the White Peacock, and that they had identified the red sports car at H. R. Funeral Parlor as belonging to Dr. Mortimer Money. In the margin was the notation, "Call traced to White Peacock." The note was signed by Sgt. Gunther Wiggins.

When he read the note, Chief Dillard chuckled for the first time that day, before tossing the slip into the trash can. Leaning back in his leather chair, he congratulated himself. He had given himself a perfectly good excuse to be seen at the White Peacock, and as long as those three Hillbillies stayed on the job, he wouldn't have to worry about them blabbing everything all over town. If all went well, they would be watching funerals from now until St. Crispin's Day. He might even chance by the White Peacock that evening to give them a little encouragement.

It was too bad about Sergeant Wiggins cracking up just a few days before his retirement. The doctor had said there was still hope for his recovery, but it might be slow. He had been on edge as retirement approached, and the incident at the morgue combined with a "mid-life crisis" just sort of tipped him over.

In the meantime, the chief had a murder to solve. It wasn't that Vulcan City didn't have its share of killings. It had plenty. But this one smelled of a gangland hit. Those five bullet holes in Mr. Lopez came from three different weapons, implying three different killers. He had to get to the bottom of this. Wilfred Dillard didn't intend to have the Big Boys coming in and messing things up in his town.

Maggie shook her head at the naivete of her boss. "There are some skunks that can make some people think that a polecat is peeing Chanel Number Five; I'm telling you this guy is a master."

"This is hard to believe," Burroughs said. "Listen to this:

"There are several of us who agree with you that this hospital would be better off if a weak leader was replaced. More respect would be shown doctors if there was more discipline among the staff, particularly nurses, aides, orderlies and technicians."

"With your permission, I will prepare a petition to be circulated among those of us who would support a change of Chief of Staff in favor of you."

"JCB"

"End quote," Dr. B. said emphatically.

"Who is 'JCB'?" Maggie asked.

"He's that jackass urologist, James C. Barnes, that gets his kicks out of bellowing at orderlies and bullying nurses," Bo said. "He yelled at the wrong one in front of a patient last month. The poor nurse was reduced to jelly. The patient complained, which got him hauled in front of the Board. I wanted to revoke the s.o.b.'s privileges; we don't need that kind of mess in this hospital, or even in this profession, for that matter. But his fellow polecat convinced the Board to let him off with a warning."

"A slap on the wrist," Maggie said.

"That's about it," Bo sighed. "And now he's squawking about lack of discipline."

"What are you going to do?" Maggie asked.

"Get me the Administrator and the Chairman of the Board, while I write a little cover note for this memo. We are going to send it on to where it should have gone in the first place," Bo ordered. "Oh, and make us a couple of copies for our files," he added.

"Always," Maggie said.

* * * * *

Dr. Money read the memo from JCB and smiled. Then he scanned the neatly typed note attached and stiffened when he recognized the signature.

*This came to me by mistake. JCB may wish to go by and deliver
petition to Hospital Administrator on his way to the Board Hearing
for this breach of ethics.*

Burroughs.

Money fumbled in his desk drawer for a package of Tums. His stomach suddenly felt sour.

A few minutes later, the phone on Maggie's desk rang. "Yes, he's in, Dr. Money. Wait one moment," she said sweetly. Putting Money on hold, she buzzed Dr. Burroughs. "Damage control," she said.

"He's three minutes late," Bo said with a chuckle. "Put him on."

The next several minutes were taken up with Bo nodding his head to Money's professions of loyalty and denials of knowledge of a petition. Bo assured Dr. Money that he was confident Dr. Money had nothing to do with JCB's little plot; and that, yes, a loyal staff was vital to the running of a hospital; and, again, he was indeed confident of Dr. M's fidelity. "Don't give it another thought," he said. "I've never doubted the quality of your loyalty and dedication a single moment." He hung up.

Maggie, standing in the doorway, heard every word. When Bo hung up, she moved over to the sideboard and took out a bottle of scotch. Pouring him a stiff one, she said, "You had better gargle with this. Your mouth is bound to taste bad after all those lies."

"Tarzan always tell truth," Bo said.

"Tarzan get his grapevine greased after that one," she said, handing him the glass. "Here, take this."

"Is it after five?" he asked.

"Close enough," she said.

"You're an angel, Maggie," he said, sipping the smooth twelve-year-old Highland single malt.

"And you're a hypocrite," she said over her shoulder, just before the door closed.

* * * * *

A wily old politician once said that to win an election, a candidate needed to have gray hair to make him look mature, and hemorrhoids to make him look concerned. Whether or not that was a winning combination in this case, Alderman Dorf was blessed with both, and the one designed to give concern was giving him concern—a great deal of it. The smile he had worn since early that morning seemed frozen on his face. His head hurt from bagpipe music, but he couldn't stop smiling. His jaws wouldn't relax. His hands hurt from having been squeezed a million times.

It was St. Patrick's Day. Parades. Parties. Pressing the flesh. Posing for pictures. Puckering to kiss babies. Pumping paws. Proffering promises.

Pointing with pride. Pandering to reporters. Paying the piper. Papa Dorf was pooped.

Italians would embrace you and laugh and cry. Jews clapped you on the back and smiled. Afro-Americans laughed and slapped you with a funny handshake. But the Irish! There was never an Irishman who didn't judge a man by the firmness of his grip, and grips can remain firm through only so many thousand handshakes. Dorf's had long since grown limp.

His feet hurt from dancing too many jigs. His stomach hurt from a combination of Irish stew and Guinnesses Stout. Above all, his pride hurt. He had answered more questions about his son running for mayor on the Clean Government ticket that he had about his own campaign.

An Irish baby had thrown up on his new green tartans. If he never heard another skirling of the pipes, or dance another Irish jig, or heard another brogue, it would be fine with him. "I'm getting too old for this," he said, kicking off his shoes and sinking into the soft leather of his office couch.

There was a momentary glimmer of hope that the day was not a total loss when, late in the day, his secretary brought in the results of the latest poll. It showed Dorf inching up on his opponent! However, that soured a moment later when a closer look revealed that it referred to Sonny, who was gaining in the mayoral race.

Who cared about a fat windbag mayor and a Benedict Arnold son? The Alderman and the sociology teacher were still locked up at fifty-fifty. He was barely holding his own after a full day of pumping Irish hands and ruining his own health by drinking so often to theirs. He wondered if it was too late to switch parties.

* * * * *

"Why didn't you report this sooner, Bertha?" Mr. Blue asked, looking around the ransacked room.

"Wilfred, you know good and well the last thing I want is a bunch of uniformed policemen running all over the place around here," she answered.

"Yes, I understand that," he said, rubbing his chin. "When did you say the room was ransacked?"

"The night after she disappeared."

"And nothing is missing?"

"Nothing I can account for, except the clothes she took with her when she left," she replied.

"Do you have any idea who might have done it?" the chief asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me," Bertha said sardonically.

"It could have been one of the girls," he said, "but this looks more like a professional job to me. It was rifled by someone looking for something. Look, all the drawers are pulled out and turned over; the mattress was cut; and the pillows were shaken out. If it was one of the girls, she did it for pure spite, if none of Carlotta's clothes are missing."

"That was what I was thinking," Bertha agreed.

"But that doesn't eliminate the possibility entirely," the chief said. "Women can be awfully spiteful, sometimes."

"Present company excepted," she smiled somewhat like a crocodile.

"Oh. Of course," he said, praying he would never find out differently.

"You haven't mentioned my hired help," Bertha offered.

"They don't really strike me as being the sort that would do something like this," he said. "If they had done it, something would be missing, and that girl would be wearing it."

"You think they are that dumb?" Bertha asked.

"Well, they don't exactly strike me as the brightest people on earth," Dillard said.

"I don't think they are dumb at all."

"Really?" he said.

"Wilfred, my love, those people have something you seldom ever see in your line of work," Bertha said.

"And what is that?" he asked, somewhat piqued.

"Innocence," she said. "I don't see much of it, either. It took me a while to catch on; but don't ever mistake innocence for stupidity."

"Do you think they are innocent of this caper?" he asked.

"Call it intuition, but I do."

He agreed, but didn't think it would be wise to bolster his point by revealing that he had conned her "innocents" into spying on funerals; so he dropped the subject.

"I'll get the fingerprint boys to dust the room in the morning. Then you can get this mess cleaned up," he said.

After they had retired from the room, Bertha relocked it, and he followed her into her office.

"I've got one more little item to show you," she said, taking a little black metal box from the safe. "Here, take a look at these." She handed him the two phony bills.

"Counterfeit," he said almost immediately, and thought of the green ink the lab found under the fingernails of the body fished out of the reservoir.

* * * * *

Darlene and Floyd met Elwood and Penny at Solly's for supper. It was conference time.

"There is something fishy going on around there, all right," Penny agreed, after hearing Darlene's tale.

"That isn't all," Darlene said. "I haven't told anyone this, yet, because it might just be my imagination, but do you know why I think they dropped that coffin?"

The other three listened intently.

"I have the strongest impression that one of those guys saw me and thought he recognized me, and it startled him. Then I heard the crash when the coffin hit the pavement, and all that stuff came pouring out."

Floyd rubbed his chin. "If he thought he recognized you, it could mean he thought you were Charlene."

"That thought did cross my mind," Darlene said dryly.

"What do you think we ought to do?" Penny asked.

"I think we need to get inside there and see what is going on," Elwood said. "Floyd and I will sneak in there the first time we get a chance, and see what we can find out."

"You and Floyd, bee-loney," Darlene said. "What are Penny and I supposed to do while you're in there maybe getting yourselves killed?"

Penny nodded emphatic agreement, "That's right," she said. "We should all go, or nobody goes. I want to find out what old Moneybags is doing over there, besides burying his mistakes."

"It could be dangerous," Floyd said.

"That's why they pay you the Big Money, and all the more reason you might need a nurse," Penny said. "By the way, how much do they pay you?" she asked Elwood.

"Nothing, so far," he answered. "The chief never said."

"In that case, I have as much right as anyone else," Penny said. "You may definitely count me in."

"Okay," Elwood said. "We need to check the obituaries and find out when they are going to have a funeral over there. If there is a crowd, maybe we can get in without being noticed."

At that moment, Solly arrived with a large tray. "Food fit for kings," he smiled as he set the heaping plates in front of his customers, "or queens."

"Or just hungry country folks that like Kosher cooking," Floyd said, digging in. "Where is Kosher, anyway?"

15

More Discoveries

THE NEXT DAY, two men from the Crime Lab came, dusted the room for fingerprints, and after a couple of hours, left. They asked no questions, nor answered any; simply did their job, packed their equipment and quietly departed.

Darlene helped Bertha collect Carlotta's things and store them in a trunk. A mink coat with the lining slit and removed was among the things put away. When the last blouse had been carefully folded and packed, Bertha, arms akimbo, studied the room with a decorator's eye.

"Now would be a good time to redo this room," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, it would," Darlene agreed.

"I want to get rid of this horrible wallpaper," Bertha commented. "Carlotta was so anxious to redecorate her room, and I let her because she did the work herself—she and that ratty little boyfriend of hers, that is. I never liked it. Do you think the boys could redo it?"

"They can, if you'll tell them what you want," Darlene assured her. "If they can paint, polish, clean windows, and mow lawns, there's no reason they can't hang wallpaper."

"I can get the girls to handle the curtains. I think Natasha can sew," Bertha said. "Get Floyd to come see me, if you can find him."

* * * * *

Patrolman Norby Finch lay a file folder on the chief's desk. "Here's that report from the fingerprint boys, Chief."

"Thank you Finch," Chief Dillard said. Finch didn't leave.

"It's the one from the White Peacock," he stated.

"I know, Finch; thank you," the chief said. Finch stayed. "Is there something else, Finch?"

"Yessir," Finch hesitated. "That is—er, I was wondering . . ."

"Wondering what, Finch," the chief prompted.

"I was wondering what I would have to do to get assigned duty at the White Peacock," Finch blurted all in one breath.

Dillard looked mildly incredulous. "Assigned duty?"

"Yessir. Secret agent duty, sir, like C-38 and W-24."

"Are you trying to be funny, Finch?" the chief eyed him unsmilingly over the top of his reading glasses.

"Yessir—er, no sir. I mean, like, I understand, sir. It's secret stuff, and you don't want to talk about it. I understand, sir," Finch said, backing away.

You bet I don't, the chief thought, but apparently everyone else does. Aloud, he said, "Finch, this is top secret stuff, you understand?"

"Yessir, I understand, sir."

"Very sensitive. We shouldn't even be talking about it now. You understand?"

"Yessir, I know, sir."

"You aren't even supposed to know about it," the chief said. "One slip of the tongue could endanger those agents' lives. Do you want to have their blood on your hands?"

"Yessir. I mean, no sir—I mean, don't worry, sir, I won't say one word," Finch stammered. "My lips are sealed, sir. Mum's the word, you can count on me, sir."

"Okay. That will be all, Finch," Dillard dismissed him.

"Yessir. I mean, thank you, sir," Finch said. "There is just one more thing, sir, if you don't mind . . ." he said tentatively.

"What is it?" the chief asked, gritting his teeth.

"How *do* you get duty over at the White Peacock?"

"Get out of here, Finch!" Dillard roared.

"Yessir. I just thought I would offer, sir," Finch said, backing toward the door.

"Out!"

"I'm gone sir."

"And stay mum!"

This time Finch left, and the chief returned to the business at hand. The report showed fingerprints of Carlotta, Bertha, and most of the girls. There

were also a few leading citizens—who were above reproach—and one of the chief's own. None of Floyd, Elwood or Darlene. None of any known criminals. There was nothing in the report that isolated any one person as the perpetrator. Dillard's conclusion was that absence of fingerprints confirmed his original suspicion that it was a pro job. Pros would not have left fingerprints.

The question that nagged at him was what could a pro have been looking for at the White Peacock? It had to be something specific, because nothing was missing. He hoped it was just one of the girls on a spite jag, but he was afraid it wasn't. In fact, he was almost sure of that.

In the meantime, no need to complicate things. Just let the sleeping dog lie. He filed the report in the drawer marked, "CONFIDENTIAL," and locked the cabinet. Missing Persons could look for Carlotta. This was their affair, so far. Bertha had not lodged a formal complaint about a break-in, and he was pretty sure she wouldn't. He didn't think anyone wanted to disturb any "leading citizens" over a small disturbance in which clothes were wrinkled and an expensive coat was damaged, but nothing was lost or stolen. Even so, Dillard had some nagging doubts and the feeling that he would be dragging that file back out soon.

* * * * *

The Clean Government Party Chairman, Arthur Sudds; and Martha Fritts, the able Vice-Chairperson, bent over the map of the city spread before them. (NOTE: A Chairman may be of either gender; but the office of Chairperson is usually occupied by a female, who is often addressed as "Madam Chair" evoking an image of a piece of furniture of the feminine persuasion, and raising the question of whether or not it would be more consistent for the proper designation for the female of the species to be "woperson" rather than "woman." Very confusing to grammatical purists, but politicians seem to understand it). Present with the two-member executive committee was that dedicated reformer, reliable volunteer field worker, and disillusioned former follower of Congressman Reuben C. Finchert—none other than Durward P. Hicks, late Private First Class, USA, veteran of WW I, the Big One.

Marsha was instructing Durward as to the route of the spontaneous torchlight parade they had arranged to erupt following the rousing speeches of the Big Rally. This parade was to be led by the intrepid Hicks along the random route that was now being carefully planned.

Hicks listened intently as Marsha, flicking the ashes of her Camel onto the floor, issued her directions in a gravelly voice not unlike that of his old Master Sergeant. Hicks' jaw tightened and became set, and his rheumy eyes held a grim spark—whether of determination or desperation was difficult to tell. Hicks had been held in conference far longer than his alcohol-ridden kidneys were accustomed to waiting. Then, too, perhaps Marsha's orders evoked memories of “going over the top,” and the fire of battle was being rekindled. If that were the case, he certainly was holding sufficient water to extinguish the blaze.

The Rally was to be held in a park not three blocks from the White Peacock. The spontaneous torchlight parade was to proceed upon a circuitous route that would terminate ultimately on the steps of “City Haul.”

Following a few more *ex tempore* speeches, a list of Clean Government Party demands was to be ceremoniously nailed to the door of the building. Actually, to refer to it as a “list” might be an exaggeration. Originally the list had contained only slightly fewer demands than that which Martin Luther had nailed to the door of the Cathedral; however, after much wrangling and recrimination in committee, the list was pared to one item, which simplified matters considerably and seemed to please all. That demand was: “. . . the immediate resignation en masse of the entire City Government.” A motion to demand immediate self-immolation had been voted down in favor of the more moderate request.

No one could fault the Grand Old CGP for lack of ambition.

The route Marsha indicated came within a half block of the White Peacock and its neighbor, the Heavenly Rest Funeral Parlor. To Arthur's mild protest that the route chosen might be a little long and arduous for most people, Marsha directed a withering blast, “It's not too long for anybody but wimps.”

“I'm sorry. I just meant that . . .” Arthur's response trailed off. Marsha's manner could be a little intimidating at times. Perhaps it was the width of her beam, which was but a few inches less than that of the USS Missouri, that made her so formidable in debate. Calves a Green Bay linebacker would be proud to possess did nothing to soften her appearance.

“A dreadnought in sneakers,” Arthur thought.

“Don't you remember the story of Gideon's little Army and how he annihilated the Philadelphians!” Marsha exclaimed.

“I think that was Philistines, Marsha,” he said to her in a deferential manner; to himself he said, And they don't vote in this election.

"Well, whatever. It's not important," she said airily. "The point is, we don't want any wimps in this organization, and if they can't stand a little hike, we don't need 'em. Right, Deadwood?"

"That's Durward, but you can just call me Hicks," he said, "and yes," he nodded in agreement. "By the way, don't this army get a little somethin' to wet its whistle?"

Ignoring the question, Marsha pressed on. "This is the way to separate the men from the boys; the sheep from the goats; the wheat from the—the, er . . ." she faltered.

"The voters from the candidates?" Arthur asked timidly.

"What?" Marsha asked.

"The Bold from the Can-nots," Arthur said, thinking quickly, thereby averting a storm he doubted he could weather.

"Now you're coming, Art," she said.

Arthur adjusted his horn-rims and smiled deprecatingly.

"I was thinkin' some good double-run Georgia Moon in the lemonade would be just about right," Hicks was saying to no one in particular, which was just as well, as no one was listening. "Guess I'd better go make room for it," he said, and disappeared in search of the men's room.

* * * * *

"El, there's something about that wall that just don't look right," Floyd said, backing away to view his handiwork. He had just hung the first strip of new wallpaper over the old wallpaper.

"What do you think is wrong with it?" Elwood asked.

"I'm not sure. I think it's kind of out of square or something."

"Out of square?"

"Yeah. Look. It makes the wallpaper have some funny little wrinkles when you try to smooth it out."

Elwood looked closely and saw where some tiny wrinkles had gathered up in one corner. "I think it's slipped kind of whonker-jawed," he said. "You think anybody will notice that?"

"Mrs. Vanderwort will," said Floyd. At that moment, the new strip he had just hung broke loose and dropped to the floor.

Elwood made a face. "I'm pretty sure she would notice that." He gathered the paper from the floor.

"I guess we'll have to scrape that old paper off and maybe sand the wall before we hang the new stuff," Floyd said.

"There must be a trick to hangin' this stuff," Elwood said. "I'd just as soon paint it."

"Did I hear someone say 'trick'?" said a voice from the hall. Roxanne stuck her head in the door.

"Come on up to my room, Elwood, and I'll show you a couple of tricks you won't forget," Claudette said, joining her colleague in the doorway. Floyd and Elwood exchanged looks.

"You know," Elwood said, "we've been wondering what kind of tricks you ladies do."

"Well, come on down and we'll show you," Roxanne said.

"I guess we had better put up this wallpaper, right now," Floyd said.

"Mrs. Vanderwort is kind of anxious to get this done. We would sure like to learn some of those tricks, though," Elwood said, politely.

"Anytime you want, Lil Abner," Claudette said, and laughing, the girls went on down the hall.

"Elwood," Floyd said, after the sound of their laughter had faded.

"What's that?" Elwood asked.

"Have you ever noticed how far back on their shoulders those girls' arms start?"

"Floyd, with those skimpy little short skirts they wear, I just about ain't never looked that high."

"Well, we'd better get to hangin' this wallpaper, or Mrs. Vanderwort is goin' to hang us," Floyd said.

* * * * *

"That dame has got those negatives hidden somewhere over there, Boss. I know it," Augie said. She left too soon to have had them with her, and I know she planned to come back because she left all her clothes."

"You think so?" Money said.

"No dame goes off and leaves her mink coat," Augie said. "She'd leave the negatives before she would leave something like that."

"Yes, but where?" Money asked.

"I don't know. I tore that room up so bad a cockroach couldn't have hidden in it, and there was nothing there," Augie said.

"It's too bad you let her get away from us," Money said, "or we would have them by now."

"And the couple hundred G's of funny money she swiped," Angel added.

"No sign of that, either," Augie said. "And I couldn't help she got away, Boss. The Possum must have somehow tipped her off that we were on to them, 'cause she left in a hurry."

"How could he have tipped her off?" Angel asked. "He didn't even know it himself until just before you stuck your gun through the window and shot at him."

"All right," Money said firmly, holding up his hand. "We've been lucky, but I don't want to rely on luck anymore. I want results."

"But—" Angel began to protest.

Money cut him off. "No 'buts'. If you can't get the job done, I'll get someone who can."

"But—" Money stopped Augie's protest with just a look.

"Is that understood?" he said. The pair nodded. "I'm going to give you one more chance, got it?"

"Just tell us what to do, Boss," Angel said, patting the bulge at his shoulder.

"You won't need that this time," Money said. Angel looked disappointed.

"You want me to shake down that room again?" Augie asked.

"No. I want you to burn the place down."

"Burn it down!" Augie exclaimed.

A slow smile that matched his wit began to spread across Angel's face. "Yeah," he said, "let's burn it, Augie."

"Why, Boss?" Augie inquired.

"Because those negatives are in that house somewhere, and if we can't find them, we'll burn them—house and all," Money said.

"I like that, Boss," Angel said.

"When?" Augie asked.

"Tonight," Money said.

* * * * *

"Well, where do we start?" Floyd asked.

"I guess at the starting place," Elwood replied. "This looks like a good place right here." He had noticed a small place where the wallpaper had peeled back slightly from the chair railing near the window sill. Upon closer inspection it appeared that someone had slit the paper with a razor blade in a strip about two inches wide, peeled it back and then replaced it. The two by six-inch strip was slightly raised as if something was under it. He peeled it back a little, revealing a piece of waxed paper folded around several strips of dark celluloid.

"Floyd, look at this," he said.

Floyd examined it closely. "What do you reckon that is?"

"Let's see," Elwood said, peeling the strip of wallpaper off completely. Unfolding the waxed paper, he removed the dark celluloid strips and discovered they were actually strips of film negatives.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" he asked Floyd, holding the negatives up to the light.

"That must have come out of a mighty small camera," Floyd said.

"Like one of those leetle bitty spy cameras."

"Yeah. Like in that Alan Ladd picture show we went to in Luthersville before you left."

"What do you reckon it was doin' stuck behind that wallpaper?" Elwood mused.

"Whatever the reason, it didn't get there by no accident," Floyd commented. "Somebody wanted to hide it."

"You think it might have somethin' to do with Carlotta disappearin'?"

Floyd considered that for a moment, then said, "Could be. The ladies said she left in a hurry."

"What's in those pictures?" Elwood said. "I can't tell much."

"I can't either. It's too little," Floyd said after squinting through the strip toward the light.

"What are you two whispering about?" came a voice from the doorway.

The boys jumped as if each of them had been zapped by a hornet. They had been so engrossed in their find that neither had heard approaching footsteps.

"Darlene!" Floyd exclaimed. "Why don't you let us know when you're coming?"

"Some spies you are; I wasn't even trying to sneak up on you. What are you hiding?" she asked, holding out her hand. "Let me see."

"Close that door," Elwood said. "We don't need anyone else sneaking in on us."

Floyd handed her the negatives, which she examined curiously. "What is it?"

"It's little bitty strips of film like they have in those spy cameras," Elwood enlightened her.

"I'll be darned. They sure are!" she said. "Where did they come from?"

"They were stuck behind the wallpaper," Elwood said.

"What are we going to do with them?" Darlene asked.

"We ought to give the whole shebang to the chief, but he's so hard to get up with, maybe we should get them developed and see what's in it," Floyd said.

"We can't do that," Darlene protested, "it might be some secret spy stuff, and someone else would see it if we got it done at a drugstore."

"I bet Penny can do it," Elwood said. "They develop X-ray pictures right there at the hospital. Maybe she can use their developing stuff."

"Can she develop this kind of film there?" Floyd asked.

"We can find out tonight. We're going to meet her at Solly's," Elwood said.

"I've got to get supper started," Darlene said. "By the way, if you want that old wallpaper to come off easy, wet it good with warm water."

Darlene left; Floyd and Elwood stared at each other and shrugged.

"How do you reckon she knew that?" Floyd asked.

Elwood shrugged and said, "I'll go get a bucket."

A few minutes later, their eyes once again bugged out when a whole section of wallpaper slid off revealing a fortune in bogus money adhered to the backside, with some still clinging to the wall.

"You want to count it?" Floyd asked softly.

Just as quietly, Elwood replied, "Later. I don't think I can take much more today."

Dividing it into neat stacks of tens, twenties, fifties, and hundreds, they packed it into four of Carlotta's shoe boxes, which could barely contain it all. To keep them from popping open, they tied the boxes securely with stout cord.

"Darlene won't believe this," Floyd said. "I don't think I believe it, either."

"Let's don't tell the girls just yet," Elwood suggested. "They might get a little edgy if they knew what was in here."

"I'm getting a tad edgy, myself," Floyd said, and they agreed.

* * * * *

A pot of grease in which Darlene had been frying shrimp blazed up when she had been called away for a moment by Mrs. Vanderwort. When she got back and saw what was happening, she coolly doused the flames with baking soda and a damp towel. Then, using the damp towel as a potholder, she carried the smoldering pan to the back door and threw its contents out. A piercing scream rang out, followed by another almost immediately, and then a mad

scramble of footsteps could be heard rapidly disappearing up the driveway. The commotion brought Bertha running to the smoke-filled kitchen.

"What on earth was that!" she exclaimed. "Is the house on fire?"

"I don't think so," Darlene replied, "but I might have just French fried another burglar."

* * * * *

"This time you pay for the pickles," Solly said, as he set four steaming cups of coffee in front of the girls seated at the table. The boys were standing at the counter waiting to talk with Solly in private. "You haven't been in for a week, and I am sad because you have deserted me."

"We didn't desert you, Solly," Elwood said. "We've been awful busy, and it's a long time between paydays."

"In that case, you're breaking my heart," Solly said, "and the water's free."

"How about a beer?" Floyd asked.

"Okay. One round. Then you pay," Solly said.

"We'll even pay for the beer, if we can get you to keep something safe for us," Elwood said.

"What's that?" Solly asked.

"This," Floyd said, placing on the counter a large shopping bag, which contained Carlotta's four shoe boxes.

"Shoes?" Solly asked, puzzled.

"Would you just keep them and not let anybody look in the boxes until we tell you?" Elwood requested.

"What's in them?"

Bending his head toward Solly and cutting his eyes toward the girls, Elwood whispered, "About a million dollars, but we don't want the girls to know we're rich."

"Oh, I get it," Solly winked. "A surprise. Don't worry, it's safe with me, and nothing will happen to it."

"What did you have in those boxes," Penny asked Elwood when the boys had returned to their seats. "You're being very mysterious."

"Honest, we can't tell you now, but we will later," Elwood said.

"When is 'later'?" Darlene asked.

"As soon as we see the chief," Floyd promised.

"I showed Penny the film," Darlene said.

"I can get Benny—he's our x-ray technician—to let me use his private darkroom tomorrow," Penny said. "It's in the basement of the hospital. He showed me how to use it a long time ago, and it has an enlarger and everything."

"You can give the pictures to me tomorrow at work," Elwood said.

"Have you seen the paper today?" Penny asked.

"We've been too busy," Darlene said. "Why?"

"There will be three wakes at the Heavenly Rest tomorrow night," Penny said. "Old Moneybags must have been working overtime lately. Two of them were his patients. There'll be lots of people there."

"That's our chance," Floyd said.

"When?" Elwood asked.

"As soon as it's dark," Darlene suggested.

"As soon as it's dark," the others echoed in agreement.

16

Out Of The Frying Pan

AUNT MIN had been a prisoner for going on four days. She wasn't too sure how long she had been unconscious, but she didn't think it had been more than a day. She hadn't talked with a soul during the time she had been captive; nor had she heard a human sound, except the footsteps outside the door when they brought her food. She had no idea why she was being held, but was pretty certain they wouldn't just hold her forever. Other than isolation and anxiety, she had not suffered at all—unless a steady diet of sardines and crackers constituted suffering.

Judging from sunlight that came through cracks in the roof, it was late afternoon. Soon it would be dark again; another day of captivity would be over. She still had not found a way to escape. As she sat contemplating her plight, she heard a faint, faraway noise, a disturbance of some kind. The distinct rattle of guinea hens mingled with the high-pitched cackle of a bantam rooster.

"That's Eli's guineas and that seabright rooster. Shorty's after them." She thought she saw a ray of hope.

* * * * *

June, for her part, had suffered greatly. In her heart, she knew Min was in trouble; but where, and why, and what kind of trouble? There was no clue. She was just gone.

Of course, there was the note. It was in Min's hand. June was sure of that. Eli Watts had said Min had left it on his door, and he gave it to the "perfesser."

who sent it on to June by way of Tommy Ledbetter. And Eli was milking Min's cow and feeding the stock.

Maybe that's what made June suspicious. Being that neighborly was out of character for Deacon Watts. Then, there was the note again. Everything added up, all right, but it gave the wrong answer. There was still something fishy about the note and the whole business. And Min would not have left her hat; nobody had a satisfactory explanation for that.

She had spent a whole day stewing and fretting. There was no one she could really turn to in times of indecision except Min, and Min's being among the missing was the problem. Loney Adams would know what to do, but Loney was in Columbia at a meeting. She could easily get word to Sam Hundley, but what would she tell him—that Min forgot her hat?

No, she would have to work this out herself. She took out the note and studied it again. After a bit, she got up and fished through her sewing things for a ruler and the magnifying glass she sometimes used for reading small print, or threading pesky needles.

* * * * *

Min collected all the empty sardine cans she had accumulated and drained the small amount of residual oil in each of them into one of the empty tins. In all, it amounted to a couple of small spoonfuls. Into that she crumbled some of the crackers that were now growing stale. Then she set the can in front of the door about six inches from the crack into which her captors pushed the food when they brought it. Hungry as she was, she hoped they would be late this time.

Removing the chain from around her neck, she blew the whistle, waited a bit and then blew it again. The noise at the hen house died down. She blew the whistle again and waited. While she waited, she tore the lace collar from her dress. After what seemed like hours, but was actually only a few minutes, she heard a soft pad outside.

"Please don't be a perfesser," she prayed. A snuffling at the crack under the door told her the prayer had been answered. Shorty smelled sardines.

Reaching through the crack, she slipped the lace collar around Shorty's neck and tied it as best she could while Shorty was busy licking the sardine can. Then she fastened around his neck the gold chain from which she had removed the whistle and the screwdriver. She wished she had figured out a way to send a note, but there was nothing to write with, and she hadn't worked

out a way to fasten a note to his neck in a way she thought would hold until someone found it.

Now then; if Shorty resumed his wandering ways, someone would see him and wonder what he was doing wearing a lace collar. Some of the women might even recognize it as hers—June certainly would. June had tatted the lace. If they didn't recognize the collar, they would remember the medal she had won in school. It had her name engraved on the back. She hoped the sight of the collar would trigger a hunt, and she was pretty sure she had figured out a way to get Shortoff to lead them to her.

"Hey!" There was a shout in the hallway of the barn. *"Get out of here!"* Shorty scampered. A shot rang out, and Min's heart leaped to her throat. Two more shots, a yip, and tears welled up in her eyes. If they killed Shorty, her hope was gone.

"Did you get him?" a voice asked.

"Missed," another voice answered. "Mangy mutt."

"Might have winged him that last shot," the first voice said. "He yipped."

There was hope; maybe slim hope, but hope. Shorty was a hunting dog. He had heard shots before. He had even been shot at and probably hit with birdshot while stealing chickens. That wouldn't keep him away, it would only make him more wary—if that last shot hadn't been fatal.

Aunt Min was praying again when they slipped another can under the door. This time it was Vienna sausages and a small wedge of cheese. "Well, they won't kill me tonight, anyway," she said to herself.

* * * * *

June unfolded the note and pressed it against the window pane. With the sunlight behind it, and with the aid of the reading glass, she could detect the uneven pressures of a pen having moved slowly across the paper. She could also discern small wavers of direction in the lines.

Writing a few words in the margin of the paper, she held it against the pane again and studied her own writing. Pressure was even, and the lines did not have those little wavers in them. She then took the ruler and after lining it up carefully so that it was barely touching the bottom of the letters of one line in Min's note, she drew a light line under each separate word with a sharp pencil. Extending the lines about a half inch beyond each word, each extended line either crossed or fell away from its neighbor. The lines were neither parallel nor even on the same plane.

Putting the note down, June removed her glasses and thought about this for a minute. "This note was traced," she concluded. Any lingering doubts as to Min's safety vanished.

Eli Watts and the professor they called Scarpelli had gone out of their way to deceive her; undoubtedly they were linked with Min's disappearance somehow. Who else might be involved? She didn't know who she could trust; best not trust anybody.

She had to get word to Sam Hundley.

* * * * *

Min didn't know where Shortoff might wander. She knew it wouldn't be far from a known source of food—but that could be anywhere in the Valley. He had a way of showing up where he was least expected.

Min knew her chances of rescue and survival were slender, indeed. It depended on someone spotting Shortoff and recognizing her collar, if Shorty didn't manage to get rid of it somehow. She thought she had tied it securely enough that it wouldn't come loose easily. Then it depended on Shortoff leading them back to her before her captors decided to do away with her.

She was pretty certain old Shorty wouldn't just go up to someone and bark at them to follow him back to the barn, like they did in the picture shows sometimes. Whatever else he was, Shorty was no Rin Tin Tin or Lassie. He didn't think like that, nor was he made from a heroic mold.

Shorty was a practical pooch. His requirements were simple. He went where there was food, warmth, and preferably a female in season. Above all, he would maintain his independence. If there was one thing you could say about old Shortoff, it was that he was beholden to no one.

Even at that, Min was pretty sure she could get him to come back to the barn. He would remember the rich sardine juice, and he would associate it with the whistle. The question was whether or not someone would follow him. For now, she could do little but bide her time and pray for a better tomorrow.

* * * * *

June went to Chico's and called Sam Hundley. Sam wasn't there, but Chief Deputy Raleigh Gates took the message for Sam to come see her as soon as possible. Raleigh didn't know when that would be, but he would give him the message as soon as he could contact him by radio. He was off the air at that time, and as it was late, it would probably be in the morning before he

could get there. Could anyone else help? June decided very little could be done at night anyway. Morning would be fine.

Night had fallen before she got away from Chico's. As she rounded the bend near Watts' farm, her headlight beam fell on a large object in the road. Two pinpoints of reflected light showed it to be an animal. It was Elwood's old hound, Shortoff. She braked to a stop and called him, but he turned and trotted with a decided limp into the woods and disappeared. She called again, but Shorty didn't come back.

That was strange, she thought. It looked as if he had a bandage tied around his neck, and he was limping.

June went home and went to bed. She didn't sleep well. She was too worried and felt helpless. Min was in trouble—maybe lying out there dead, somewhere—and June couldn't help her.

Shortoff wallowed himself out a place in a sheltered spot beneath a rock overhang, but he didn't sleep too well, either. His front leg and shoulder hurt where the bullet had grazed him. It had bled some, and he'd licked it clean, but it was getting stiff and the muscles were sore.

Once in the night he bristled and growled when he caught the powerful scent of an intruder. There was an answering gruff and Shorty bared his long canines and gave a throaty, menacing growl. The boar, sensing a challenge not worth the risk, turned and trotted off. Shorty remained alert testing the air until his nose told him the threat had gone. He licked his wound again and finally curled up to sleep.

Min fell into a sound sleep, completely fatigued by the constant anxiety of trying to stay alive, and confident she had done all she could to stay that way. Tomorrow, perhaps, would bring deliverance. At least now there was hope.

Sam was at June's by seven o'clock sitting at the table drinking steaming hot black coffee. He examined the note and followed June's reasoning as to why it was a forgery, and he accepted her reasoning as to the significance of the hat.

"You say the note came to you by way of Eli Watts, the college professor and finally Tommy Ledbetter," Sam said.

"Tommy is the only one I talked to, but that is the way I understand it."

"There is a chance she might have gone to Vulcan City," Sam said. "I want to check that out first, before we organize a search party. And I will check out those 'professors', too."

"I suppose I could be doing a lot of worrying about nothing, Sheriff, but I don't think so," June said.

"I don't think so, either," Sam told her, "but we should check out these other things first. In the meantime, I am going to make some inquiries in the Valley. Someone may have seen her."

"Are you going to the Deacon?" she asked.

"Not until I get a better feel of what's going on," Sam said. "I don't want to spook them. That's why I'm not organizing a search party right away. I don't have a search warrant, and if I faced Old Eli, all he would do is stick to his story and deny everything else."

"I suppose you are right, Sheriff, but I am worried frantic about Min."

"I know you are, Mrs. Bates. We'll get things moving pronto."

June was relieved that Sam believed her. She had a feeling things were in good hands.

"Now, don't tell anyone what I'm up here for, yet," Sam said through his car window. "Let's just keep this quiet until I can sniff around a little bit. I think there may be a lot more here than meets the eye. I'll be back as soon as I can, and if Min is alive, we'll find her."

"I won't tell anyone, Sheriff," June assured him. "I'm not at all sure I know who to trust right now. If anyone asks what you were doing up here, I'll tell them you brought a message from Floyd."

"That's a good idea. I will be back in touch with you this afternoon," Sam said. "And don't worry, now. We're going to find her."

"I just hope she's alive when we do," June said.

Sam stopped at Chico's on his way back to Luthersville. Not only would it have been bad politics for him not to have stopped, Chico's was the place to pick up news without asking suspicious questions. He was not disappointed. He learned first of the "new strain of tobacco" that was being experimented with. Next, he heard that Ugly Red Wilkins was not only toeing the line, he was courting Bobby Sue Foster, although she was pregnant with his cousin's child. The Daggetts were worried about their daughters. The boar had made another raid and run off with two of Earnest Copely's sows.

Sam made a mental note of all of these items, especially the "new strain of tobacco" being introduced by the "perfessers." As he was leaving, he motioned Chico aside and asked him if he had picked up any more counterfeit money.

"Not since that dude left with Charlene," Chico said.

"Anything else going on around here I should know about?" Sam asked.

"You bustin' stills?" Chico asked.

"I'm tryin' not to," Sam said. "You sellin' to minors?"

"I'm tryin' not to," Chico smiled. "You checkin' out that new 'tobacco'?"

"Since you mention it, I think I will," Sam said. "What do you know about it?"

"Sam, you know I don't know anything," Chico looked bland, "but I'd sell rotgut to a minor before I would sell him any of that 'tobacco' those birds are growin'. Does that tell you anything?"

"All I need to know," Sam replied.

Later that morning, the professor known as O'Kelly came in for supplies consisting mostly of sardines and soda crackers, which he paid for with a counterfeit ten. Chico took it without a flicker of an eyelid. "Sam's goin' to owe me for this," he said to himself as he counted out the change.

* * * * *

June didn't go inside after Sam left. She stayed outside and worked in her flower garden. She was busy weeding the hollyhocks when she felt she was being watched. It made her spine tingle, and she fought to control the sudden rush of panic that seized her. Without moving her head, she cut her eyes to the right, and she could see the shadow of a form standing not two feet behind her back!

Making herself turn, she stared straight into Shortoff's yellowish brown eyes, which were gazing at her without either fear or overweening friendliness. He was just a little ashamed for having to ask a human for help. June's heart was racing so, she didn't notice Min's collar around his neck at first.

"Shortoff!" she exclaimed in relief.

Shorty wagged his tail slightly as if to say, "You were expecting Bess Truman, maybe?"

June reached out to pat his head and saw the lacy white, bloodstained, cloth around his neck. "What is this?" she asked rhetorically; then she screamed as she recognized Min's collar and realized it was all bloody in the same instant.

"Oh, my God! Min's been killed!" she sobbed.

Shorty stuck out his wounded and swollen paw, which at first she ignored, then examined more closely when he persisted. "Calm down, lady, and cast your eyes on this," was the message he seemed to be communicating.

June took one look and gasped. Then she ran into the house for medical supplies. She cleaned the wound with some of Charlie Foster's best, then applied some evil-looking purple salve that felt good, and finally bound it up with a fresh, clean rag. Shorty didn't protest. He adapted well to TLC as long as it was understood that his independence wasn't for sale. June understood.

After attending to the patient, June examined Min's bloody collar that she had removed from Shortoff's neck. It was difficult to tell for sure if the blood had come from Shorty's wound, or from somewhere else, and June didn't care to contemplate the latter. It did seem logical that it had come from Shorty's wound. The gold chain and medal could tell her little, except she knew Min also had worn the funny little whistle that didn't work and the lucky charm screwdriver on the same chain. What had happened to them?

"Oh, Shortoff, if only you could talk," she said. "Where is Min?" she asked the dog, but he only snapped at a fly that was buzzing around his bandage.

"Take me to her, Shorty," she ordered. Shorty put his head on his paws and closed his eyes. "Leave me alone, lady. I've had a hard night," was the message he sent.

June sat on her front steps watching Shortoff catch up on his sleep, and wishing there was some way she could find out where and how he had gotten that collar. She knew Min was trying to send a message, if only she knew what it was. While she was deep in these thoughts, Shorty's head shot up and his tail wagged almost imperceptibly. It caught June's attention; she watched closely as Shortoff struggled to his feet and, without warning or preamble, started out in the purposeful manner of a dog with a definite place to go. June followed. Even though he was limping, she had a tough time keeping up with him.

Ever so often, he would stop and cock his head, then continue on his way. June struggled to keep him in sight. His path led over fences, which June had to climb, and across ditches, which June had to jump. Had Shorty not been hampered by his wound, June could not possibly have stayed in the chase. At last, she watched him disappear into a little copse of trees on a ridge.

When June got to the top of the ridge, she could see Shortoff limp-trotting along the edge of the woods straight toward Deacon Watts' old barn. He was being very careful not to expose himself to view from anyone at the barn. June followed and did likewise.

* * * * *

Min could tell the sun was high overhead, because it was shining straight down through the cracks between the roof shingles. She was sitting at the table, apparently talking to herself.

*"Such was the Wreck of the Hesperus,
In the midnight and the snow!
Christ save us all from death like this,
On the reef of the Norman's Woe!"*

Upon completion of this recital, Min blew a silent blast on the whistle. Then took up the cadence again at the beginning.

*"It was the schooner Hesperus,
That sailed the wintry sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughter,
To bear him company,"*

At the end of each verse, she gave the whistle a blast before setting out again on the stormy sea. She had nearly lost count of the times she had crossed that sea, when she heard a familiar snuffling at the door. In only one lesson, Shorty had learned to associate whatever sound a silent whistle makes with food!

"I hope you brought help, Shorty," she said, shoving the Vienna sausages to the crack where he could get at them. He inhaled two and Min shoved him a cracker to slow him down a little.

"I thought they had killed you last night, boy," Min said. When she reached out a hand to pat him, she felt the bandage June had applied, and there was no sign of her collar or chain. "Well, you found someone to fix you up," she said to the dog. "I hope you brought them with you."

"Min," came a tentative whisper, "is that you?"

Min couldn't believe her ears. "June!"

June rushed for the door, no longer tentative.

"Let me out," Min said. "I thought you would never come! I don't know how many more times I could have recited 'The Wreck of the Hesperus' before I became a wreck, myself."

"Is that all you could find to do?" June asked.

"It was better than doin' nothing," Min said. "Come on, get me out of here!"

"I can't. There's a heavy lock and I can't get it open," June responded.

"Find something and knock it off before somebody comes back and finds you," Min said urgently.

"Who put you in here?" June asked while she searched for something to break the lock.

"I don't know for sure, but I think it's those perfessers."

"I knew they were up to no good."

"You thought they were pretty good when you rented them that field,"

Min reminded her.

"Aha! Here's an axe," June said. "Stand back." She whacked the lock with the axe, but it held for several hard blows before it came off the door, hasp and all.

Min flew out the door and into the arms of her sister. Shorty went in to get the rest of the sausages—he wasn't big on reunions.

"Let's get out of here before someone comes," Min said.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," June said, leaning the axe against the wall.

"Going somewhere, Ladies?" Eli Watts was blocking the entrance to the barn. A double-barreled shotgun was leveled at their waists.

* * * * *

When Sam returned to the Valley with results of his morning's investigation, he found that he had not one, but two missing women. He knew there was no time to waste.

17

Inside The Heavenly Rest

PENNY PLACED THE SHEETS of photographic paper in the small tanks of developing solution and watched the prints emerge. As the images grew clearer, Penny's eyes widened. There were thirty-six prints altogether, most of them amazingly clear and, without doubt, incriminating.

After the prints had dried, she sorted them into two categories and tucked the prints and corresponding negatives into two separate envelopes; one she would turn over to Elwood, the other she would keep for the time being. Those shots had nothing to do with activities at the Heavenly Rest, anyway.

Penny met Elwood in the cafeteria for lunch. She steered him to a table in a back corner where they could examine the results of her early morning work without being interrupted. Handing him the envelope, she watched his face as he took in the significance of the photographs. The first picture showed an open coffin filled with small plastic bags containing a white substance.

"Is this what Darlene saw when they dropped that coffin?" Elwood asked.

"Probably," said Penny.

"What's in the bags?" he asked.

"Heroin, I imagine," Penny replied. "And those are bricks of marijuana."

"Bricks?"

"That's what they call them," Penny said, pointing to the dark bags. "It looks like all these bags are done up ready for sale and distribution."

"And the way they smuggle them around is in coffins?" Elwood guessed.

"What better way? No one would be suspicious of a funeral home transporting coffins, and no one would look inside a coffin just on a whim," Penny reasoned.

"Wow," Elwood said softly.

"You haven't seen anything, yet," Penny stated emphatically. "Look at the next picture."

Elwood flipped to the next photo and examined it; the picture was of a man apparently removing the bags. Elwood did a double take. "That's—"

"Dr. Moneybags, himself," Penny interjected.

"Oh, boy," Elwood breathed, "no wonder the chief wanted us to keep an eye on the Heavenly Rest."

"Elwood, I doubt if the chief really knew—oh, never mind," Penny sighed.

Elwood looked puzzled. "You don't think . . . ?"

"I think that Chief Dillard will be very glad to get these pictures," Penny said. "But that isn't all. Keep looking."

In the next one, Dr. Money was examining a small mechanical device under a bright light. "What is this?" Elwood asked.

"Probably a printing press for counterfeit money," Penny answered. "Look at the next shot."

Elwood looked at the next photo, which was a close-up shot of the open press with the impressing plate in sharp focus. The following picture was another close-up shot that had been taken over Dr. Money's shoulder showing him looking at what appeared to be a twenty-dollar bill. Next, there were two shots of people gathered around apparently watching a wizened little man with bushy hair wearing wire-rimmed glasses, who was operating the press. In the background, not observing the operation, but looking squarely into the camera, was the somewhat shaded figure of a woman.

"That's Carlotta!" Elwood exclaimed.

"I thought so," Penny said. "Now, look at the next shot."

It was taken from a different angle and showed the same group, with the addition of another man, gathered around the press.

"Who is it?" Elwood wondered.

"It's hard to tell," Penny said, "but it made me think of the man they fished out of the City Reservoir a while back. His picture was in the paper."

"Hey, here's something else," Elwood said. "Look where Carlotta is standing in this picture."

Penny looked at the photo. "Okay, what about it?"

"Now, then; if you look closely at the next picture, wouldn't it have been taken from about where Carlotta was standing?"

"I believe it would have," Penny said, after examining the two photographs carefully.

"Well, the guy next to Money that you say may have been the man they fished out of the lake . . . ?"

"What about him?"

"Do you think he might have been the one who took the first picture, then he slipped the camera to Carlotta, who took the second one and happened to catch him in it? Either that, or they each had a camera," Elwood said.

"No, there was only one camera," Penny said. "Both of these shots came from the same strip of negatives."

"Then they must have been working together, if that is the way it happened," Elwood said.

"Well, they have at least one thing in common," Penny said.

"What is that?"

"They are both missing," she stated flatly, "and at least one of them is dead."

* * * * *

When Sam got back to the Valley and found June, as well as Min, among the missing, he was deeply concerned. He knew he was dealing with a well-organized outside gang, and that it involved both counterfeiting and drug trafficking. He didn't know what other crimes might be added, but that was enough. He was convinced they were dangerous professional criminals. If those two sweet little old ladies had stumbled onto something, as seemed likely, and if they had fallen into the hands of the gang, which also seemed likely, they would be in great danger.

The college had been quite positive in confirming that they had no one experimenting with a new strain of tobacco in Sugar Valley. So much for the "perfessers." Who were they? He didn't know, but the FBI was working on that from the descriptions he had sent them along with the phony bill he'd gotten from Chico. It would be a few days before the Bureau got back with him, and it was unlikely they could come up with a positive I.D. without fingerprints, but they might learn something.

To make certain Aunt Min had not actually taken a trip to Vulcan City, he had to get in touch with Elwood or Floyd. A call to the hospital netted the information that Elwood was off, but he got the phone number of the White Peacock. Elwood wasn't there, either, but the lady who answered the phone was quite positive that Elwood's Aunt Minnie Larkin had not arrived for a visit; nor was Elwood expecting her. This was what Sam had expected to learn, and he didn't pursue it. Time was wasting, and he knew he had to find

her quickly, if he were going to find her at all. Now he found he was looking for two missing women, and it was even more urgent.

Sam knew the lines of this network had to extend far beyond the confines of Keowee County, but where? He wanted to net the whole gang, if he could, but if he tipped his hand with an all-out search and alarm, he would be lucky to nab the small potatoes in the Valley. In any case, top priority had to be finding those two missing women. He couldn't jeopardize their safety in hopes of making a larger bust.

All these thoughts ran through his mind as he sat in his car in front of the Bates cabin. He had an idea how he would begin a thorough search without spooking his quarry: he would go coon hunting with the boys tonight. In the meantime, he thought, if he hustled he might come up with something on the gang before the FBI analyzed the information he'd sent them. Hustling was a thing Sam did very well. Starting the engine, he headed back to Luthersville.

When he got to the office, he called for Gates to bring him the files and all current information he had on places in which counterfeit bills had been showing up lately. An hour and a half later, he placed his third call to Vulcan City that day, and found that Chief Wilfred Dillard was not in the office at that time.

* * * * *

"The chief ain't here," said acting Sergeant Norby Finch. "Can I help?"

"I think I better just wait for the chief," Elwood said.

"He's gone over to the Bug Hou—er, uh, the Mental Treatment Center to a retirement party for Sergeant Wiggins," Finch said. "I'm taking his place—temporarily; the sergeant's, that is, not the chief's."

"When will he be back?"

"He won't be back. He's retiring. That's why I'm taking his place," Finch said.

"I mean the chief," Elwood said. "I've got some important stuff here about the Heavenly Res—Operation Boarding House Reach."

"Hey! Really? I tried to get in on that," Finch exclaimed. "How do you get duty like that in a place with all those good looking women? Are all of 'em hot to trot?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to talk about it," Elwood said. The truth was, he wouldn't have known how to answer the question, anyway.

"I guess you're right," Finch said, clearly envious of anyone who was paid to live in a whorehouse. "Are you W-24?"

"No, I'm H-36," Elwood said. "Floyd's W-24, but I don't think I'm supposed to talk about that, either."

Elwood was unsure of what was secret, and who he should be talking to about it; however, he knew he didn't like being asked questions he didn't know how to answer, and wasn't sure he should, even if he did know how.

"Sergeant, if you would just show me the chief's office . . . ?"

"I'm not really a sergeant, yet," Norby Finch said, "but you can call me sergeant, if you want."

"Okay, Sergeant," Elwood said. Norby Finch swelled just a little. "Can I just leave this on the chief's desk where he'll be sure to see it?" Elwood asked.

"Sure," Finch said. "His office is up on the top floor to the right as you get off the elevator. Sign on the door; you can't miss it. Just tell Lieutenant Cain who you are, he'll show you."

"Thanks." Elwood followed the directions Finch had given, and found the chief's office with the door open. A very large man with extremely broad shoulders was in the corner of the room where he had just placed a file in a file drawer. He looked up as Elwood entered.

"Can I help you," he asked Elwood.

"I just want to leave this for the chief," Elwood said, placing the envelope on the desk and turning to leave in hopes of avoiding any more questions.

"Anything you want me to tell him? I'm Lieutenant Cain of Homicide."

"I don't guess so," said Elwood. "Penny left him a note in there that will explain about the pictures and the guy in the lake. He'll understand. I will have to tell him about the money later."

With that, Elwood departed. He had to get back to the White Peacock and get ready for the business they had planned for that evening. There was one thing Elwood had noticed in Chief Dillard's office that bothered him somewhat. On the chief's desk had been one of those little pink "While You Were Out" message slips that said, "Hundley, Sheriff Keowee County called. Return ASAP."

Why was Sam Hundley calling the Chief?

* * * * *

The four secret agents were well hidden inside the garage, waiting for the little red sports car to pull in. Floyd and Elwood wore black knit caps, and had blackened their faces in order to make themselves harder to detect in the dark. Darlene flatly refused to blacken her face, preferring to take her chances

with detection rather than ruin her complexion. She did, however, wear low-top tennis shoes and a knit cap, like the boys. Penny, on the other hand, unaware of these preparations, came dressed as if she were going to attend a wake.

They didn't have long to wait. The sports car slid into the garage, the door came down, and the driver stepped out. As they'd expected, it was the doctor, and if he had any idea he was being observed, he gave no sign. Not pausing to look around, he ran up the steps and went into the private entrance from the garage.

After a brief delay to allow their quarry ample time to get inside, Elwood took the lead; they crept softly up the stairs and listened. Hearing nothing, Elwood tried the door. It wouldn't budge. Locked!

"What do we do now?" Darlene asked.

"Go in the front door," Floyd suggested. "With the size of this crowd, maybe they'll think we're plumbers and no one will notice us."

Floyd had a point; the parking lot was full. Business was booming at the Heavenly Rest.

"Mort has been real busy in surgery, lately," Penny observed, "and he only operates on the wealthy or well-insured."

"We've got to get in there some way," Elwood said.

"Okay, let's go," Darlene said. "Maybe we can get away with it. We do look like plumbers."

"No. Wait a minute. There's a chance someone will recognize us," Elwood said. "After all, we're just right across the street."

The other nodded assent.

"I'll go around and open the door," Penny said. "At least I'm dressed for the part."

"Are you crazy?" Elwood protested. "Money would recognize you right off the bat."

"He would more than likely dodge me," Penny disagreed. "The last thing he wants is to be seen here by someone from the hospital. Besides, if he does see me, I'll just say that one of the deceased was a patient of mine. As a matter of fact, that is true."

"That makes sense," Darlene said; Floyd nodded agreement.

"Okay," Elwood said reluctantly. "We've got to get in somehow. Penny, do you think you will be all right going in the front door alone?"

"Sure," she said confidently. "I've been going in and out of front doors all my life."

"Then get on around there. We'll wait ten minutes, and if you haven't opened the door by then, we'll come in and get you—Money or no Money. Don't forget; these guys are dangerous," Elwood said seriously.

"I have known Money was dangerous from the first time I saw him operate," Penny said.

"You know what I mean," Elwood said.

"Yes, I know," Penny said quietly. "I'm just trying to give myself courage."

"Just be careful," Floyd said.

"Okay, hang on. See you in a jiff." She left the garage by a side exit.

The others waited anxiously while the second hand of Elwood's watch ate up the allotted time. Floyd's Atlanta bargain watch only ran in fits and starts, so they wisely used Elwood's. Just as time was running out, the door rattled and Penny stuck her head out motioning them in.

"What took so long?" Elwood demanded.

"Did Money see you?" Floyd asked.

"Nope," Penny answered Floyd's question. "He was nowhere to be seen."

"Then what kept you?" Elwood insisted.

"Had to potty," Penny said.

"Me, too, now that you mention it," Elwood said. "Where is it?"

Penny pointed up the hallway toward the front. "About three doors on your left," she said.

"Be right back," Elwood said. "Wait here."

"Diabetics get sudden urges," Penny explained, "and when you gotta go, you gotta . . ."

They waited nervously. Rich strains of carpet-muted organ music floated down the hall from a room toward the front. While the dirge occupied their minds, it did little to ease their tension. In a few minutes, Elwood was back and he, at least, did look less strained than before.

"Where to?" Darlene whispered.

"This way," Floyd said. "I want to see what's in that back room where the light burns late at night."

They moved stealthily down the hall, Floyd in the lead followed by Darlene and Penny, and Elwood bringing up the rear. As they were passing the stairway, a door opened at the head of the stairs and a man emerged. From the room, Dr. Money's voice called, "I want them there in ten minutes! Get Rodin, too."

"Okay, Boss," the man answered, and hurried down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, he turned toward the front of the building and failed to see the quartet of spies lurking frozen in the shadows behind the stairwell. Perhaps the blackface was effective after all.

Peeking out to see if the coast was clear, Floyd again led the expedition down the hall. Elwood was rear guard. Floyd paused at the intersection of the back hallway, and cautiously peered around the corner to make sure no one was coming from that direction. It was at that moment Elwood became aware of the figure standing behind him. He stiffened and froze when he felt the jab of a hard object in his ribs. He slowly raised his hands and turned around.

* * * * *

A few blocks away in a neighborhood park, the Clean Government party was preparing for its big rally. While the candidates mingled with the crowd—shaking hands, kissing babies and making promises—a red hot band, led by a one-eyed dangerous-looking Cajun, was whipping up enthusiasm and attracting more people.

Blazes from a dozen bonfires created dancing reflections on campaign signs, most of which proclaimed unbounded ardent support for "SONNY: THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE." The most imaginative of the posters showed a smiling blow-up of Sonny swinging into the mayor's office with one hand on a grapevine, and the other gripping a paper titled, REFORMS. A beetle-browed cartoon figure of a fat rat ran for cover. The red, white and blue caption read, "Get In The Swing With SONNY."

The Association of the Mothers of the Unknown Soldiers gave unqualified backing, and were circulating through the throng soliciting fiscal evidence of support from the better-heeled.

Mischa and several other members of Madame Zarelda's band were circulating through the crowd, also, collecting donations from people who had no idea they were donating.

Sonny Dorf wasn't the only Clean Government candidate present, but he was the most prominent. All were to be given opportunity to present their cases to the public, and to flail their opponents unmercifully. A great deal of Viewing with Alarm was anticipated, following which a torchlight parade was to wander through the streets terminating at "City Haul," where more speeches, enumerating the virtues of the CGP candidates and the shortcomings of the incumbents, would be given.

A Manifesto demanding the resignation of the entire City Government would be nailed to the door of the Hall. However, those most likely to be affected by the demands would not be present. "City Haul" would be empty, its occupants attending rallies of their own; but one may always hope.

The band ended its program with a rousing rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In," during which the banjo player crashed the instrument over his own head creating a simulated halo. Following that crescendic finale, the speakers mounted the platform to a thunderous ovation. The Speaker rapped his gavel, and after several more minutes of gavel-rapping, the crowd gradually grew quiet.

The water pitcher on the speaker's stand was filled with pure, double-run, aged-over-the-weekend, Georgia Moon. Ex-PFC Durward P. Hicks, USA, had taken certain matters into his own hands.

The speeches tonight promised to be rousers.

* * * * *

Chief Wilfred Dillard was fagged out by the time he was able to return to his office. The afternoon had been a shambles. It was the first time he had ever had to preside over the retirement of an officer with such fragile and questionable compos mentis. Sergeant Wiggins was still given to crying jags interspersed with fits of uncontrollable laughter. This had a tendency to spoil the timing of the chief's jokes, and generated some serious problems during his presentation speech. It was a real pain in the neck when the guest of honor laughed during a serious moment and broke out in a torrent of weeping at his best story. Consequently, he had spent most of the afternoon alternately comforting the Sergeant as they relived the good times, and laughing with him through the tragedies.

The doctor assured Dillard that, although the case wasn't hopeless, a cure would take time. When he last saw Wiggins, the sergeant was guffawing at a patient in a wheelchair. There was something about a broken leg that just set him off.

The chief didn't spend much time at the office. When he returned, it was nearly five o'clock. He rifled through the pictures Elwood had left, but didn't read the note explaining them. He stuck the whole batch in his briefcase. He would check by the White Peacock to see if they had seen any more burglars, and if he felt like it, he would look at the folder of photos tonight; if not, he would look at them tomorrow morning after he returned that sheriff's call.

He might have spared himself a few surprises had he read the note and examined the pictures a little more closely at the time, and if he had returned Sam Hundley's call then.

* * * * *

Elwood's hands were still in the air when the little man with gold-rimmed glasses apologized for having stuck his finger in Elwood's ribs. "Oh, pardon me," the man said, "I was just wondering if the restroom is in order."

"Restroom?" Elwood asked, hands still in the air.

"Yes, the men's room. You are plumbers, aren't you?" the man asked. "I've got to go real bad, and I didn't want to go if it was out of order."

"Oh, no," Elwood said, "it works fine; I was just there."

"Thank you very much," he said. "Uh, where is it?"

"Around the corner, third door on your right."

"Oh, thank you. You will pardon me if I hurry, won't you?"

"Sure," Elwood said.

The little man paused uncertainly. "Uh, Sir?"

"Yes," Elwood replied.

"Er, you can put your arms down now, if you want to," he said, before turning and hurrying down the hall.

"You sent him to the ladies' room, Elwood," Penny said.

"He shouldn't have scared me," Elwood said.

"Come on, you two," Darlene whispered. "We haven't got all night!"

"I think this is the room right here," Floyd said softly.

There was a very dim light showing under the door. They listened intently, but heard no sound. Floyd peeked through the keyhole and saw no one, so he turned the knob slowly and cracked the door very slightly. On closer inspection, the room proved to be empty. There were two coffins on rolling stands placed against the near wall. Against the far wall was a row of lockers of the type found in dressing rooms at bath houses. A long bench sat in front of the lockers. There was a marble slab in the center of the room, and several chairs scattered at random. A pharmacist's scale was on the table.

"I'll bet this is where they unload and weigh out the dope," Penny said.

"Let's take a peek in those caskets," Elwood suggested.

"Ech, do we really have to?" Penny asked. Then she answered her own question, "Yes, I guess we do."

Lifting the lid of the nearest one, he found it empty. Floyd looked in the other; it, too, was empty.

"I bet this is what today's batch came in," Darlene said.

"We've seen about all there is to see here; let's see what's in some of the other rooms," Penny proposed.

"Sounds like a good idea," Darlene said.

Penny peeped out the door to see if the coast was clear, quickly jerked her head back in, and closed the door. "Hide quick!" she hissed. "There's some men coming!"

What followed was the fastest game of hide-and-seek ever played. Floyd and Elwood each ended up in a coffin; the girls found empty lockers and closed their doors just as the men entered the room and switched on the overhead fluorescent, flooding the room with light.

In the mad scramble, Penny had lost a shoe, which was lying just in front of the locker bench. She prayed it wouldn't be seen.

Money entered the room followed by the man who had come down the stairs while they hid under them. A moment later, three or four others filed in. Darlene and Penny could see through the vent louvers of the lockers, as Money sat on the marble table and the rest pulled up chairs, or stood. A tall, cadaverous man with bandages on his hands sat on the locker bench directly in front of Penny. If he looked down, he might discover her shoe!

When Darlene noticed the bandages on the big man, and also on a smaller, flat-faced man who sat on a chair facing Dr. Money, she knew where the grease from the smoking pot had landed last night.

The withering stare with which Money greeted his audience might have peeled the paint right off the plaster. He was not happy. The men stirred uncomfortably and looked down. The big man spotted the shoe and picked it up. Penny groaned inwardly. He didn't say anything, or do anything. He just tapped it lightly in his hand, then placed it on the bench beside him. Money spoke.

"You people call yourselves pros!" Each man received a hard look; each one of them dropped his eyes in turn. Money went on, "I send two of you to rub out a cockroach—a cornered cockroach, at that—and he nearly got away."

The little man with the bandaged hands cleared his throat as if to speak, thought better of it and remained silent.

"If Baldy hadn't happened along and winged him when he went over the fence, he would have made it, and we all might be talking to the cops tonight. I tell you to put him in concrete and dump him in the lake, and three days later, he floats to the top. The cops are on the case, and we'll be lucky if they don't trace him here."

The flat-faced man spoke up this time, "It would have been fine if Angel hadn't forgot to put mortar in with the sand."

"You got me in a hurry, Augie," the big man said. "You know I don't do good in a hurry."

A look from Money halted the exchange. He continued, "I tell you to go grab a dame whose business is getting grabbed by men, and she gives you the slip. I send you to rifle a room, and you come back empty."

"Boss, I—" Augie started.

Money cut him off. "I send you to torch the place, and you get toasted. You can't even do a simple thing like unloading a couple of coffins without dropping one and showing the whole world what was in it. Why didn't you just call the newspaper and let them take a picture?"

"Boss, I thought that dame across the street was the broad upstairs. It made me jump," Angel said.

"I'll make you jump, if you pull any more dumb stunts," Money threatened him.

"You can't kill a rat. You can't pick up a whore. You can't strike a match. You can't mix a dab of concrete," he gave them all his most menacing glare. "I want to know what I am paying you for!"

The man with the bristly mustache quailed as Money's gaze turned toward him. "I'm not letting you off, either, Rodin," Money admonished, "you are up there running the press, and you let him take pictures of the whole stinking operation. I'm surprised we aren't on the front pages of every newspaper in the country!"

"I didn't know he was taking them, Dr. Money," the older man said with some dignity. Because he engraved the plates and ran the press, Rodin was considered a specialist in his field, and was granted a certain amount of latitude.

Before Money could reply—and much to the relief of the men being raked over the coals—there was a rap on the door.

"What do you want?" Money yelled.

"Just came to get those two stiffs, Boss," a voice said.

"Come on in," Money said.

The door opened and four men came in. "I guess Albert got them in the coffins, all right," one of the men said.

"Where is Albert?" Money inquired.

"I haven't seen him," the man answered, "but he was supposed to have them ready. Folks are gathering and we need to get them out there. Should have been an hour ago. I'll check the coffins," he said.

Floyd lay perfectly still, held his breath and prayed as the lid was cracked, and an eye peeped in briefly; then the lid was closed once more. "They're in there, all right," said the attendant, not bothering to check Elwood's temporary haven. The attendant can't be blamed too much for failing to spot trouble. He had no acquaintance with the deceased, or the living, for that matter. He was looking for a body, and he saw one.

"Okay, get them on out of here," Money said irritably, motioning toward the two coffins against the wall.

Darlene and Penny watched through the vents as Floyd and Elwood were trundled out. What now?

Money spoke again when the door had closed. "All right. I've got to go check on the other project before things get screwed up there, too. Do you think you can manage until I get back?"

"What about the dame upstairs, Boss?" Augie asked.

"Don't do anything until I get back, you understand? We may need her, yet," Money said.

"What about the White Peacock?" Angel asked.

"If you can figure out how to strike a match without getting yourself killed, go ahead and torch the place. On second thought, torch it anyway," Money said. "Just don't burn this place down in the bargain."

"Yes, Boss," Augie said. "Where are you going?"

"To Luthersville," Money said. "They've got a couple of problems there, and I've got to decide how to get rid of them. I don't know why I've got any of you people, when I have to do everything myself."

Turning to Baldy, he said, "I want you to drive for me. It's a long trip."

"Okay, Boss," Baldy agreed. "Who'll be in charge while we're gone?"

"Nobody. We'll only be gone a couple of days," Money said. "If they will just sleep that long, everything will be fine."

"You guys heard him," Baldy said. "Stay quiet. Stay low, and stay out of trouble."

"No problem," Augie said.

"Right," Angel agreed.

There was an audible sigh of relief when Money and Baldy left the room. A few minutes later, they heard the car engine start. Then the car drove out and the garage door closed.

18

Cause And Effect

ONE THING ABOUT SQUIRRELS is that they gnaw. Like their cousins the chipmunks, beavers, porcupines, and mice and rats of all descriptions, they gnaw. It is not only habitual and instinctive, it is necessary to their well-being. Their front teeth grow like fingernails, and if they didn't keep them trimmed by constant gnawing, their teeth might eventually grow right through the top of their heads. As far as is known, no one has ever seen a squirrel with teeth growing through the top of its head. But that is the theory.

Any way you look at it, no one would contest the fact that squirrels rank high on the list of world champion gnawers. They gnaw everything: wood, leather, hickory nuts, pine cones, and sometimes the insulation off old wiring. Squirrels don't usually do that, especially if plenty of acorns are available, but in a puckish or inquisitive mood, nothing may be considered beyond them. Squirrels, not being a malicious breed, might well gnaw insulation as a means of satisfying the curiosity of one of Nature's most active creatures. At least that is the feeling shared by certain animal lovers. Harassed homeowners are more apt to view them as "pesky limb-rats," and let loose a charge of birdshot, often to their own disadvantage, if the squirrel happens to be inside the attic at the time.

Such a squirrel with an inquiring mind lived in the attic of the White Peacock. This particular squirrel was a real Nosy Parker, until he discovered firsthand the live wire inside the insulation he gnawed and, while it didn't roast him, it did knock him a double loop, cure his appetite for electrical insulation, and satisfy his curiosity about wiring in general. Not enough wire had been exposed to cause a short circuit in a thirty amp fuse, but there was

enough to generate a rather warm spot beneath a long-abandoned pigeon's nest just inside the attic's louver.

Several days had passed since the squirrel had done his thing. As the warm spot grew warmer, the pigeon's nest grew drier, until it was only a matter of time before the flashpoint was reached.

On the night in question, it grew from warm to hot. The age-old principle of cause and effect was, once again, about to be demonstrated in spectacular fashion. A wisp of smoke curled upward from the pigeon's nest.

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At the CGP Rally in the Park, it was being demonstrated that the temperature of the speeches rose in direct proportion to the fall of the level of liquid in the water pitcher. There, too, the flashpoint was rapidly being approached.

The catalyst that pushed it over the top was a tub-thumping rouser by Julius Caesar "Sonny" Dorf, Jr., CGP candidate for mayor, and last speaker on the program. Sonny's ardent oration might have evoked comparison to William Jennings Bryan's famous "Cross of Gold" speech, had he not switched over to paraphrase a speech by an earlier, more famous orator.

"And in conclusion," he prepared to hurl his final lightning bolt, "I say, uh, give me, ah, er, (he momentarily lost his train of thought) Oh, yes (he responded to Marsha's prompting) Give me a library, or give me wealth!" (Not exactly, Marsha thought, but close enough). So saying, he brought his fist down hard on the rostrum, catapulting the now-empty pitcher into the audience, bringing a cheer from the crowd.

Even the most talented performer will tell you that ten percent talent, and ninety percent showmanship will win the crowd every time. Sonny's performance confirmed the rule. The banging of the fist was the cue for the trusty Durward Hicks to "go over the top" as it were, and trigger the previously planned impromptu and spontaneous parade. While Marsha stood on the platform calling for a march on "City Haul" to "throw the bums out," Hicks was passing out torches to his well-primed torchbearers.

Grabbing the last one for himself, he ran to what appeared to be the head of the milling mob and led it off. apparently Hicks' people had dipped into the Georgia Moon as deeply as had Hicks, himself, for the parade took off in the wrong direction. Marsha followed, frantically flailing her arms and yelling. "Not that way, you nincompoops!" Her shouting was to no avail, and it took three blocks to catch the leaders, turn the parade around and head it in

the right direction. By the time it returned to its original starting place, it had lost several contingents. Some had simply become discouraged and gone home; others were enthusiastically marching off toward parts unknown, and were never heard from again.

However, a faithful coterie of die-hards remained to storm City Hall, if they could find someone to lead them to it, or at least point the way. Once again, lighted by torches and lit by Georgia Moon, the redoubtable ex-PFC Durward P. Hicks stepped out, with Marsha making sure he didn't stray. The determined group marched away to the strains of "Happy Days Are Here Again" as rendered by the One-eyed Cajun's band over speakers attached to the back, sides and top—rear and front—of the much-traveled green van.

CGP Chairman Arthur Sudds, accompanied by the media, was supposed to be waiting for them at their destination.

He'd better be, Marsha thought grimly.

Gideon's Army sallied forth to oust the Philadelphians.

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Floyd and Elwood heard the voices clearly, and experienced a helpless feeling while being trundled away. Perhaps, if they could avoid detection themselves, they would get a chance to come back for the girls, later, provided the girls weren't discovered in the meantime. For their part, the girls lay low like Brer Rabbit in the Briar Patch.

Separately, Floyd and Elwood each concluded that their best chance would be to pray that: (A) They were involved in closed casket proceedings; or (B) Barring that, no one would recognize them, if they remained perfectly still; or (C) At least let them lie in state in the same room.

Prayer "C" was answered. They were each placed in an alcove on opposite sides of a large room. Apparently, the Heavenly Rest was a bit crowded that evening, and did not have enough private viewing rooms available.

Petition "A" was flatly denied. The lids were lifted, and the boys in blackface make-up were on view. While the attendants adjusted the veils, each lay perfectly still, and prayed that a kind Providence might yet decree that "B" above might be granted. It seemed for a few moments, at least, that this prayer might, indeed, be answered. Certainly the attendants gave no sign of recognition, and the mourners began to file past the biers.

About a dozen or so had viewed Floyd when he overheard a male voice saying, "I thought your Aunt Myrtle's husband was a white man."

"He was," came a female whisper.

"Then who is that in the coffin, Al Jolson?" came the rejoinder.

"What!" said the female voice.

"Well, go take a closer look."

Floyd prepared to bail out.

Elwood was having similar luck.

"We must be in the wrong place," said a hoarse whisper. "That's sure not old Max."

"That's what the card on the flowers say," someone protested. "That must be Max."

"Max is Jewish," came the hoarse rejoinder.

"What are you tryin' to tell me—this guy ain't circumcised? How can you tell? You got x-ray vision, Superman?"

"It don't take x-ray vision to see this guy ain't Jewish, dummy."

"Then who the hell is he?" croaked the first voice.

"How would I know? I ain't a Rabbi," said the other.

Elwood didn't follow that whole conversation, because his attention was being drawn toward the strains of a band playing "Happy Days Are Here Again" coming closer and beginning to challenge the dirge being played on the organ. The tune was not exactly in keeping with the somber occasion inside. Elwood's attention was brought back to the moment at hand, however, when a rather hefty, near-sighted woman wearing inch-thick glasses lifted the veil. Squinting at him almost nose to nose, her wheezingly labored breathing, heavy perfume, and lavender-scented face powder proved to be too much. Elwood cracked one eye and loosed a sneeze that sent the woman reeling halfway across the room.

She screamed, "Max is Alive!" and fainted dead away, almost crushing a skinny little man in horn-rims who was standing behind her.

Elwood, deeming the time ripe for vacating the premises, leaped from the casket to join Floyd, who had about a half-step on him as they raced for the door, just one jump ahead of a mob of people who wanted to be elsewhere on Judgment Day.

In the meantime, back in the lockers, Penny and Darlene were sweating out their own problem. Angel, Rodin and Augie continued to sit around the room talking.

"What are you going to do while the Boss is gone, Augie," Angel asked, tapping Penny's shoe on the bench.

"Nothin', that's what," Augie said. "Absolutely nothin'."

"What about you, Rodin?" Angel asked.

"I'm going to keep my eye on you two. In case he asks, I'm going to know every move you make," Rodin said.

"Well, that won't be a problem as far as I'm concerned," Angel said, "because I'm not goin' to make many moves." He tapped at the head of a nail, which had worked out of the bench, with the heel of Penny's shoe.

Penny, from her hiding place in the locker, hoped he wouldn't ruin the shoe before he got through playing with it. Rodin, on the other hand, was annoyed by the constant nervous tapping.

"Angel, if you're going to do nothing, I wish you would start by not tapping that shoe on everything in sight," Rodin said irritably. "You are driving me to the bonkers."

"Driving you to the bonkers? That's a funny thing to say," Angel laughed his ponderous ha ha.

"Where'd you get that shoe, Angel?" Augie asked. "It's driving me nuts, too."

"It was here on the floor," Angel said.

Uh oh, here it comes, Penny thought, get ready, Darlene.

"Let me see that," Augie said, taking the shoe and looking around.

"You think something's wrong?" Rodin asked, polishing his glasses and reaching for the shoe.

"There ain't been no dames in here," Augie said. "What's goin' on here?"

Augie's manner had affected both Angel and Rodin, who began to look around suspiciously.

Pointing to the lockers, Augie said, "Look in there, Angel."

Penny and Darlene braced. Angel approached the lockers, but just as he reached for the door to Darlene's locker, he was frozen for a moment by the sound of pandemonium coming from the front of the building.

Looking at Augie, he said, "What is tha—" **Bam!** He got no further. Darlene flung open the locker door in his face, breaking his nose for probably the eleventh time, and blood splattered.

Penny was not slow off the mark. She shot out of her locker, snatched her shoe off the bench where Angel had left it, and raced Augie for the door. Augie got there first and blocked her path.

"Ha!" he said.

"Ha! Yourself," Penny yelled, and delivered a kick that caught him squarely in the crotch. Augie doubled over. He was out of the game, but she cracked him over the eye with the spike heel she held in her hand, anyway.

Darlene was having a little rougher time. Angel was slow and dumb and wounded, but as the door was blocked by Augie and Penny, she couldn't

maneuver quite fast enough to stay out of his grasp. He grabbed her and was going for her throat, when she pulled a surprise that was almost certain to make him lose his grip. She threw up on him. That sent him into the corner gagging. Then, with Penny, she bolted for the doorway that was now clear. A plaintive voice stopped them.

"What about me, ladies?" It was Rodin.

"What about you?" Darlene asked.

"Look," he said, "I was hired to engrave the plates and run the press. I don't do violence; but they will do violence on me, if they think I help you. Please tie me up."

Angel and Augie were showing signs of recovery. "No time—run for it!" Penny yelled as Angel came toward them and made a lunge. Rodin ran with the girls into the hall and toward the front. Hearing the clamor in that direction, Darlene bolted for the stairs, pulling Penny after her. Rodin followed just as Angel and Augie emerged into the hallway, pistols drawn, and blood in their eyes—and in Angel's case, on his nose. They snapped off a couple of unsilenced shots at the fugitives.

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Across the street, the pigeon's nest blossomed into flame, which quickly spread to timbers seasoned by ninety years of attic heat in the southern sun.

Up the street marched the Clean Government Party's well-planned, spontaneous torchlight parade, led by the redoubtable Durward P. Hicks, who was being chased by a broad-hipped woman in tennis shoes shouting, "You turned one block too soon, you limp-brained dodo!"

The spontaneous torchlight parade spontaneously ground to a temporary halt and milled around in the street in front of the White Peacock on one side, and Heavenly Rest on the other. The paraders marveled at the spectacular sight of flames shooting skyward from the roof of the big white house. By the time someone suggested calling the Fire Department, they had already arrived—too late. The White Peacock was mortally stricken.

During the conference that ensued, the ranks of the parade were considerably swelled by the arrival of panic-stricken mourners seeking escape from Judgment Day, and scantily clad denizens of the White Peacock, seeking escape from smoke, fire and water from the fire hoses of the recently arrived firefighters. While its leaders got their bearings, Mischa and some other members of Madame Zarelda's band circulated through the demoralized crowd streaming from the Heavenly Rest, collecting more "donations."

Chief Dillard, who had dropped by the White Peacock for a moment or two of relaxation, had escaped with his briefcase, wearing only his shoes, one of Bertha's old robes, and a towel looped turban-style around his head. He appeared a little dazed.

Bertha was wearing his trousers and tunic and an old pair of bedroom slippers. Her upswept red-dyed hairdo had been mashed around, but was essentially intact. She joined the mob and stoically watched the White Peacock go up in smoke. It helped to know that a store of valuables was inside her fireproof safe.

Even above the din and confusion of the crowd inside the Heavenly Rest, Floyd and Elwood heard the sound of shots coming from the direction of the rear of the building. They knew instantly it must be Darlene and Penny in trouble, but there was little they could do. Fighting their way through the tide of struggling humanity shoving through the exits was beyond the capability of mere mortals. Might as well be a salmon trying to make it up Niagara Falls. They were swept out into the street where they became welded into the mass of paraders from the park, mourners from the Heavenly Rest, and celebrants from the White Peacock.

Apparently Durward and Marsha resolved their differences, because the band struck up "There'll Be A Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight," and the sea of souls, volunteers and protesters alike, began moving toward town, sweeping all before it, and carrying it all with it.

* * * * *

Darlene and Penny shot up the stairs with Rodin hard on their heels. The shots loosed by Augie and Angel went wide, splintering plaster but having no other effect except to increase the speed of their quarry.

At the top of the stairs, they paused for a frightening moment, not knowing which way to go.

"Follow me, ladies," Rodin urged. "This way." He led them quickly up some narrow back stairs to the garret, while Augie and Angel ran around peering into rooms and slamming doors on the second floor. Producing some keys, Rodin unlocked a door at the end of the hallway. "In here, quick!" he said, closing and locking the door behind them.

It was a long, narrow, dark room, illuminated only by dim twilight seeping through a small window at the end of the room. Furniture was sparse, but seated on the one straight-backed chair was a figure, bound, gagged, and eyes wide with surprise.

"Charlene!" Darlene cried.

"Quickly!" Rodin said, cutting Charlene's bonds. "Get out of here, all of you!"

It was too late to go back the way they came. Augie and Angel were already climbing the stairs to the garret.

"How?" Penny asked.

"Out the window," Rodin pointed. "It's our only chance."

Charlene was rubbing her wrists to restore circulation, a thousand unasked questions crowding her throat. Darlene was firing questions a mile a minute. No one was getting answers. Charlene still had the gag in her mouth, but it didn't matter, there wasn't time for talk, anyway.

"Let's go, ladies. Talk later," Rodin urged.

Penny was the first one out. She crawled out onto the roof and turned to assist Charlene, followed by Darlene, then Rodin. They were just in time. Augie and Angel reached the door and loosed a few shots through it into the room just as Rodin pulled himself out onto the roof.

Where to now? Darlene needed no prompting. Spotting the big oak at the rear of the house, she led the way along the same route the unfortunate Peter Possum had taken several days earlier. Not pausing to ask questions, she jumped for the overhanging limb, made it to the trunk, and slid to the ground in near record time. The others followed suit, and were already on the ground winging up the drive toward the mob in front by the time Angel had burst the door down and discovered the quarry had flown. Augie ran to the window and spotted them disappearing into the throng.

"There they go, Angel! After them!" Augie shouted.

"I ain't jumpin' out that window, Augie," Angel protested.

"Down the stairs, you idiot!" Augie shouted over his shoulder, already halfway down the stairs, himself.

By the time Angel and Augie arrived, the four escapees had disappeared into the seething mass of celebrants and mourners, who were rapidly becoming celebrants, themselves. Several of them had become convinced it was indeed the Judgment Day, and they had somehow become part of the Chosen Happy Band on its way to the Promised Land. They became even more convinced when the band once more broke into, "Saints Go Marching In."

No longer resisting the flow, the chief, in Bertha's old silk robe and towel turban, briefcase under his arm, resembled a Mogul of an extremely impoverished Third World nation. Bertha was at this side as they marched along with the rest of the revelers.

Bertha wiped away a tear. "You know, I shall miss the old place, Wilfred. Do you think they might have saved it?"

Dillard didn't really think there was a prayer it might have been saved, but he was reluctant to say as much to Bertha. "We shall see tomorrow, my dear," he said. He was wondering what the newspapers would have to say about a whorehouse burning down around the ears of the Chief of Police. It was not a prospect he relished.

"I'm not worried about myself so much," she said. "I've got a little nest egg. It's the girls I'm concerned about. They'll be out on the street."

The chief had to admit he didn't see anything too unusual about a lady of the evening being on the street, but he certainly didn't encourage the practice. The girls at the White Peacock weren't exactly nuns, but they had been more or less sheltered by Bertha, and the clientele wasn't made up of road bums. He hoped some satisfactory arrangements could be made for them; but right now he was thinking of his own plight.

"Bertha, you do carry insurance, don't you?" he asked.

"Oh, sure. It was insured to the hilt," she said.

"I don't mean fire insurance," he said. "I meant insurance of a more, uh, personal nature. The kind that insures, er, influence."

"Oh, I see what you mean," she said. "If you are referring to our newspaper publisher, I could probably persuade him to be discreet—if my safe is as fireproof as they said it was."

"I was hoping you'd say that," he said.

* * * * *

When they disappeared into the crowd, Darlene and Penny managed to hang onto each other, but they became separated from Charlene and Rodin, who became separated from each other. Augie and Angel dove into the crowd, searching desperately for the eavesdroppers. They were not looking forward to a confrontation with Money, if they let them get away. Those women overheard too much, and Rodin could give the whole operation away.

Augie could see nothing but the back of the person in front of him, and feet; lots of feet. Angel, who stood well over six feet, was able to look out over the crowd, but he could see no sign of the girls or Rodin. For all appearances, they had been swallowed by the crowd.

Floyd and Elwood had been swallowed up, too, but they had managed to stay together. Floyd had caught a glimpse of the girls running toward the mob, with Augie and Angel too close behind for comfort. They were lost in

the milling throng before he could get their attention. It was such a fleeting glimpse, he didn't notice Charlene and Rodin. At least the boys knew the girls had gotten away from the Heavenly Rest, but they had to get to them before those killers did.

In the meantime, the seething mass of people followed the band—much as the rats followed the Pied Piper—and pressed on toward “City Haul.”

* * * * *

Charlene lost Darlene and Penny as soon as they got into the crowd; but knowing Augie and Angel were right behind her, she kept going. If there is one thing a good cocktail waitress knows how to do, it is maneuver through a crowd. Spurred by fear, Charlene soon had a lot of people between herself and her pursuers. Perhaps subconsciously drawn toward the sound of the music blaring from the green van, she kept going until she reached it. The one-eyed Cajun leader of the Swamp Buzzards recognized her immediately. The side door slid open; eager hands reached out to pull her aboard, and she fell safely into the arms of the CGP's Favorite—the mayoral candidate, himself, Julius Caesar Dorf, Jr.

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Rodin wormed his way through the crowd with nearly as much skill as Charlene. He, too, was goaded by fear bordering on panic. He had witnessed firsthand Dr. Money's retribution to the disloyal.

Rodin was a seedy character, but one of the real professionals of the underworld. He was an engraver; a maker of plates for printing counterfeit money. He was good; one of the best in the business. Being both indispensable and discreet was what had kept him alive, so far. He was not a violent person. Perhaps it was the artist in him that prevented that. In any case, he was afraid of Money. He didn't like the world he was in. He wanted out—and he wanted to live.

Feeling a jostle that was a little out of kilter with the movement of the crowd, in a move much like that of a cobra striking, he grabbed the hand that was in his pocket and held the lad to whom it belonged in a steel tight grip. Bringing his face close to the boy's, he said, “Never try to dip an old dip, son. Take me to your leader.”

* * * * *

By the time the caravan reached City Hall, the mob had attained rather outlandish proportions, picking up parade followers along the route. Certainly it was far beyond Marsha's wildest dreams. Arthur had managed to round up two sleepy reporters, one of whom was a pimply faced cub who had received the assignment because of his juniority in the department. The other was a society reporter hoping to pick up a juicy tidbit about the CGP mayoral candidate. However, she had fled at the sight of the unruly mob bearing down upon them.

The cub reporter, future City Editor and man of great influence, licked his pencil in eager anticipation of the scoop he was about to make.

When the caravan disgorged from the street into the City Square, it spread into a looser formation and covered the entire square before City Hall and the Courthouse.

Floyd and Elwood, taking advantage of the added elbow room, looked high and low for the girls, but went in the wrong direction and failed to see them. Penny, however, spotted them from halfway across the square. Waving her arms and shouting frantically, she managed only to attract the attention of Angel and Augie, who were much closer than Floyd and Elwood.

Darlene spotted Augie at the same time. Grabbing Penny, they fled toward a nearby building. Augie yelled for Angel to block their path. The girls, much swifter, made it to the alley well ahead of the hulking hood. But the alley proved to be a dead end—they were trapped!

Searching for a way out, they spotted the fire escape landing overhead, too far out of reach to jump for. Making a stirrup out of her hands, Darlene called for Penny to climb on. Penny, standing on Darlene's shoulders, barely made it to the landing. Reaching down, she was able to grasp Darlene's hand and pull her up, just as Augie and Angel gained the alleyway.

As quietly as possible, and hugging the wall, they stole up the fire escape, while Augie and Angel searched through boxes and trash cans in vain. They might have gotten away undetected had they not startled a sleeping cat on one of the landings, which dislodged a flower pot when it fled. Worse luck, the pot barely missed Augie when it landed with a crash.

Throwing caution to the wind, the girls flew to the roof in a hail of bullets that attracted no attention whatsoever from the crowd in the square. If anyone heard the shots, they were ignored as firecrackers touched off in celebration of the anticipated victory on the morrow's election.

It was a long climb to the roof, and they arrived winded, but safe—at least for the moment. Looking around, Darlene and Penny searched for a haven where they might not be found. There was none. The roof was another

dead end, but covered with a layer of rocks and pebbles that might give them some means of fighting back, feeble though it would be. Pebbles don't score too heavily against guns.

Snatching off her knitted hat, Darlene began filling it with suitably sized rocks. It would be like hunting polar bears with a flyswatter, but she wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Penny, in the meantime, had spotted the only place that might serve as a fortress, however frail. One of the marvels of the Vulcan City skyline was the billboard on the roof of the building whereupon Darlene and Penny now found themselves; the same rooftop being approached by two thugs with deadly intent.

This billboard advertised a brand of Indian tea. The feature that caught the eye and made the sign such a marvel was that it depicted a smiling housewife enjoying a cup of tea, which actually moved to her lips, as her doting hubby peered over her shoulder. Not only did the cup move to her lips, it actually spouted steam to show that the tea was hot. The cup would move to the lips and back down, then steam would pour forth from a steam pipe inside the cup. The visual effect from the ground was that of a steaming cup of tea being enjoyed by a lovely young wife. Centered above the charming domestic scene, the ad copy, in blazing light, proclaimed:

**FINE DARJEELING BRAND TEA
ONLY PENNIES FOR A
CUP OF CHEER
HELP YOURSELF**

Augie's head appeared over the edge of the roof, and Darlene let fly a good-sized pebble that nearly removed his hat.

"Quick, Darlene, in the cup!" Penny yelled, grabbing Darlene, and dragging them both into the cup, just as it began its ascent.

Augie vaulted onto the roof, followed by a puffing, wheezing Angel, who fell over the top railing and collapsed in a heap, panting and gasping for breath.

The cup had made several cycles before Angel was up to mounting an assault. Darlene and Penny made use of the time by exploring the resources at hand. They found that the steam was fed to the nozzle by a flexible hose, and that the nozzle could be removed from a bracket, and aimed. They thought it might be useful, but didn't have time to make any adjustments before Augie and Angel made their first move. Remembering the rock that almost took his head off, Augie was too wary to expect to be able to simply walk up to them.

"Okay, we've got you cornered," Augie called. "Might as well come on out and save trouble. We don't want to hurt you."

"Is that why you're shooting at us?" Darlene asked sweetly.

"We just want to talk to you," Augie said in what he thought was a reasonably persuasive tone.

"Then get out of here and call us tomorrow," Penny yelled.

"Now, look," Angel said. "Come on out and maybe you won't get hurt."

"Go fish, turkey," Penny said. "We aren't coming out!"

"All right, you asked for it. Go get 'em, Angel," Augie demanded. "I'll cover you."

Angel timed his charge with the descent of the cup, leaping for the rim just as it arrived at the bottom. Darlene was waiting with her knitted cap full of rocks, which she brought down on his head with all her might.

Chunk! Angel fell in a heap. Darlene would have jumped out and finished him off if the smiling lady hadn't wanted another sip of Fine Darjeeling Tea at that moment. Before the cup came back down, Angel had recovered enough to crawl back to Augie's position.

"I thought you were going to cover me," he complained.

"Shaddup! I might have hit you, stupid," Augie retorted.

"Well, you go after them, then, Einstein," Angel suggested.

"All right, watch," Augie said. "Piece of cake."

Augie decided to give it a go, and he was waiting when the cup came back down. Leaping on the rim, he pointed his pistol straight at Penny and yelled, "All right, Miss Smart—"

That was as far as he got before being met full in the face with a jet of hot steam from the nozzle Penny had removed from the bracket and shoved right in his face. Blinded, he would have stumbled over the edge if Angel hadn't grabbed him.

While Augie and Angel licked their wounds, and cursed their luck, Penny and Darlene took full advantage of the lull in order to take a well-earned breather. They had won the first two rounds, but neither of the girls kidded themselves that the battle was over. This couldn't last indefinitely. Sooner or later, it would be over.

Right now, however, they still had a lot of fight left. Maybe it would be a good time to try a bluff. Penny and Darlene talked it over and decided to try.

"Hey, you guys!" Penny called.

"What do you want?" Augie called back.

"Do you want to surrender?" Penny yelled.

"Surrender! Are you nuts?" Augie yelled back. "We've got guns."

"We just thought we'd give you one more chance," Penny called. "Haven't you had enough?"

"We'll show you who's had enough!" Augie yelled. "Wait 'til that thing comes back down."

While Penny was holding that short dialog with Augie, Darlene was wrestling with the steam nozzle. "We've got to get some help," Darlene said, looking around.

"And quick," Penny agreed. "We can't hold them off forever."

Darlene brightened. "I've got an idea. Take off your bra."

"What!" Penny whooped.

"Take off your bra," Darlene repeated, removing her own. "We need help and I think I know how to get it."

The cup had begun its descent.

"Can it wait a sec?" Penny asked, bracing herself. "I think the Light Brigade is about to charge at us again."

"Prepare to repel the boarders!" Darlene cried as the cup reached bottom.

Firing as they came, the Light Brigade charged.

19

Cops And Robbers

ALDERMAN JULIUS CAESAR DORF'S office window in the Dorf Office Building looked out upon the City Square now teeming with supporters of the Clean Government Party, primed for a clean sweep in the morrow's election. The office was dark. The only light, coming through the large picture window facing the square, softly illumined the two faces peering out at the scene. One face, lined and craggy; the other, fine-featured and fair.

They had been watching the evening news, and had just learned of the fire that completely destroyed the White Peacock. The man spoke. "Well, my dear, it looks as if you have no home to go to, and after tomorrow, I may be out of a job."

"I am sorry for you," Carlotta said. "I can find another 'situation', but this is your life."

"Oh, I don't know if it's all that bad," he said. "I won't starve, and I think it would be good to take it easy for awhile. I've been wanting to travel for a long time. Besides, I might win."

Gazing out at the mob that filled the square, she said, "Maybe, but I wouldn't bet on it." She paused for a moment, then asked, "If you lose, you won't have to vacate your office right away, will you?"

"No. It will be a few weeks before the winner takes office."

"I'm so relieved," she said. "I feel safe here."

"You may stay as long as you wish, my dear," he said, without acknowledging that he owned the building. "Money will never find you here. Besides, if he knows the evidence was destroyed in the fire at the White Peacock, he may no longer be after you," he said.

"Perhaps, but I wouldn't bet my life on it," she said. "I am still a dangerous witness, you know."

"Maybe you should think about traveling, too."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got a couple of tickets on the *Arctic Tern*, sailing from Charleston next week. Visits Greenland, and New Zealand, with layovers in Tahiti and Singapore. We could be married somewhere along the—"

"Marry me first, and you've got a deal!" she cried, jumping at the chance.

"Marry you fir—you drive a hard bargain, my dear." He sighed, then squared his shoulders. "Well, why not? I've been a widower for seven years, and that's seven years too long," he smiled.

"It won't take me long to pack. I've only got a toothbrush," she said.

"We'll take care of that tomorrow," he said.

"You are a dear," she whispered, and the future mayor's future step-mother gave his father and her future husband a most unmotherly kiss.

"But what if you win?" she said apprehensively.

"Don't worry, I won't," he said. "If there is one thing I know how to do, it's stuff a ballot box. The sociology teacher is going to have to learn to be a politician, whether he likes it or not; while you and I are sailing the Seven Seas."

"It will probably serve him right," she said, kissing him once more. The curtain closed, shutting out the scene below.

In the meantime, they remained blissfully unaware of the desperate struggle taking place above, on the roof of the Dorf Building—the very building they occupied.

* * * * *

The sociology teacher was winding up a speech from the steps of City Haul, which might, were it not for the well-spiked lemonade doled out by Hick's helpers, have dampened the ardor of a Teddy Roosevelt primed for the charge up San Juan Hill. In what might be termed a plethora of obfuscation, he obfuscated:

"... in extolling the virtues of our noble endeavor, I implore the exorcising of the blasphemous miscreants, the authors of abominations, through popular exercization and utilization of the franchise in the balloting process bequeathed to the succeeding generations of the enfranchised population by our enshrined antecedents . . ."

A frizzy-haired ex-mourner, turned CGP supporter, leaned to her somewhat glassy-eyed mate and asked, "What the heck is he talkin' about, Harry; all that 'exercisin' stuff?"

"I think he wants us to do sit ups before we go vote tomorrow," Harry answered.

"Seems like a crazy thing to do," she said.

"Who cares, as long as they don't raise taxes?" Harry said, taking another sip of his lemonade. "Why don't you make lemonade like this, Naomi?"

"Because I spend all my time tending to six ungrateful brats, and trying to look like a sex goddess when you get home, Harry," she replied sweetly.

A cheer when up when someone pulled the plug on the sound system, and the droning voice ceased. However, when Marsha mounted the stand, the power mysteriously returned.

"And now, the moment we've all been waiting for—a few words from the next mayor of Vulcan City—*The Honorable Julius Caesar Dorf, Junior!*"

There was a delay due to the candidate's reluctance to leave the comforts of the van. He finally emerged, adjusting tie, buttons and zipper; and smoothing his shirt, coat and hair. The fact that he was sporting a hickey the size of an elephant's goiter was partially concealed by his upturned collar.

He was greeted by a rousing cheer as he mounted the steps and took the mike. Sonny was clearly the darling of the CGP. It was his moment.

"Four nights and seven weeks ago . . ." he began.

* * * * *

Floyd and Elwood had split up and combed the crowd in vain for some sign of the girls. They were nowhere to be found. Even more ominous was the fact that there was no sign of the two thugs that had trailed the girls into the crowd, either.

Meeting Elwood at the Confederate Monument in the center of the square, as planned, Floyd shook his head.

"Any luck?" he asked, although he knew the answer already from the look on Elwood's face.

"I saw the chief over near that big elm tree with Mrs. Vanderwort, but he was in some kind of disguise. I figured he was doing some more undercover work, so I didn't say anything to him, and I guess he didn't recognize me." Elwood rubbed his black face.

"El, we've got to find the girls. They are in trouble, I know, and there's no telling what those people will do to them, if they've got up with them."

"Let's go see if we can talk to the chief, anyway," Elwood said. "This is an emergency. Maybe he knows something."

Keeping close to the shadows and creeping as close as possible to the oddly dressed couple sitting on the grass, the two agents tried to get the attention of their chief without attracting the notice of bystanders— or bysitters, as a goodly number of people had made themselves comfortable on the grass. A large clump of shrubbery about ten feet away was as close as they could get without being seen. No amount of hissing seemed to catch the chief's attention, although another couple who did seem to be bothered by a hissing bush got up and moved away, and were seen to be whispering to each other and pointing at the bush.

Floyd finally broke off a large dead limb and tossed it at the chief. Dillard's first reaction was, understandably, one of annoyance, until he realized that the bush, or someone in the bush, was seeking his attention.

Getting up and walking over to the bush, he said, "What do you want?"

Two couples discreetly edges away from the man in a woman's robe and a towel around his head, who was talking to a bush. One of the men went to look for a patrolman, while the other, keeping a wary eye on the oddly turbaned figure talking to the shrubbery, stood guard over the two women. He had heard of the strange practices of some Eastern religions, but he had never heard of any that talked to bushes.

Maybe the guy thinks he's Moses, he thought. If that bush catches fire, I'm leaving; women or no women, he vowed to himself.

* * * * *

"Here they come, Darlene," Penny cried. "Get ready!"

"I'm ready," Darlene said grimly, aiming the steam nozzle at the onrushing pair. "If it works . . ."

As the thugs closed in, steam pressure was rapidly building behind the rocks and other debris she had stuffed into the nozzle. Augie and Angel were about twenty feet away and coming fast when the dam broke. **Bow!** The makeshift shrapnel cut loose, shredding the air and stopping the charge in mid-stride. In fact, it flattened it, and sent it scurrying for cover with more wounds to lick.

"Wow! That really worked," Penny said, as the cup began its ascent.

"That ought to hold them for awhile," Darlene said.

"Here's my bra," Penny said. "What do you want with it?"

"Make a slingshot," Darlene instructed. "Use it to hold off those guys while I get us some help."

"How?" Penny asked.

"Watch," Darlene said, taking aim and drawing back with her own slingshot. "I'm going to send a message."

Penny thought she was going to write a note on a piece of paper, tie it to a rock, and shoot it off the roof. Instead, she shot the letter **J** out of the sign above, while Penny stared at her as if she had suddenly lost it. The **B** and **R** followed in rapid order before the descent of the cup made her miss the **T**. Augie and Angel were still taking a breather and didn't make any moves.

Penny was beginning to think she was trapped on a roof with a lunatic and two thugs.

"What are you doing!" she exclaimed.

"I told you, I'm sending a message to Floyd and Elwood," Darlene said.

In short order, the **E** and the **A** in **TEA** disappeared along with the **T**, and Penny suddenly caught on. Darlene was sending a message the whole town could read.

"I'll take the **ONLY**," she cried. "You get the rest."

"Okay. Don't knock out any wrong letters," Darlene said. "We can't put them back up."

"My daddy made me a slingshot when I was eight," Penny said. "I was pretty good with it, but he didn't make it out of a bra. Can you really use it like a double-barrel?"

"What are those dumb broads doing, Augie?" Angel asked.

"I can't tell," Augie said. "They shot out one of my eyes, and I can't see too good."

"You want I should stop them?" Angel asked.

"No. Let's just rest a minute," Augie said. "I want to think about it."

"Suits me," Angel said with a deep sigh of relief.

* * * * *

On the ground, Floyd and Elwood were having a tough time making the chief understand the situation; he couldn't keep up with the flow of killers, bodies, dope, film, wallpaper, counterfeit money, blackmail, delicatessens and funeral homes they were parading across the scene. Dillard was a perfect example of one who had not hit the panic button, because he didn't understand the situation.

"Didn't you look at the pictures and read the note Penny wrote?" Elwood asked from behind the bush.

"Well, er, I—that is, I didn't really study them," the chief said, "and I didn't see the note. I must have overlooked it—but I will check it right away."

Floyd suddenly grabbed Elwood's arm, and pointing, he said excitedly in a hoarse whisper, "I know where the girls are!"

Elwood looked in the direction Floyd was pointing.

"Come on," Floyd said; but Elwood was already three fast paces in front of him, heading toward the building with the sign.

Dillard, unaware of the precipitate departure of his star agents, was still explaining to the bush why he hadn't had time to fully examine the report and pictures when the man who had gone in search of a patrolman arrived with Officer (Acting Sergeant) Norby Finch in tow.

"See what I mean?" he whispered, pointing at the turbaned figure conversing with the azalea bush. "I don't think he should be allowed to run loose."

"I'll take care of it," Finch said, tapping his billy club in the palm of his hand.

Strolling up to the strange figure, he tapped him on the turban with his club. "What's the matter, Sabu, lose your elephant?" he asked politely, but with a touch of sarcasm.

"What are you babbling about, you idiot?" the chief said indignantly.

"Chief!" Finch exclaimed. "I thought—"

"Finch, you get in trouble every time you think. Of course I haven't lost an elephant. I'm talking to these men here," he said, pointing at the bush.

"Uh, what men, sir?"

"The men in the bush. W-24 and H-36."

Finch peered into the azalea and saw nothing. "Sure, Chief," he said dubiously. "I guess those secret agents really know how to use camouflage."

"Camouflage? What camouflage? It's W-24 and H-36, I tell you! Get out here, you men, and show this idiot—they're gone!" he said. "They were right here."

"If you say so, Chief," Finch said.

"Say so!" the chief roared. "I said so, didn't I?"

"Yessir! You said so, sir; so it's so, sir. Yessir!" Norby was getting a little carried away with his esses.

Chief Dillard threw up his hands and cast his eyes Heavenward, as if to implore a merciful deity to spare him the company of idiots. So doing, his attention was arrested by the sign adorning the roof of the Dorf Building and

the contented, ideal couple sipping **DAR EELIN** . . . he stiffened, and the deluge of information Floyd and Elwood had given him began to make sense; at least enough sense that he understood where they were headed.

"Get to a call box and get the helicopter over here!" he roared, and Finch felt the chief had flipped for sure, this time.

"Helicopter, sir?" Finch hesitated.

"*Now!* Finch. There's not a moment to lose!" Dillard shouted, scurrying in the direction Floyd and Elwood had taken.

"What do I tell them to do, sir?"

"Tell them to pick me up in the park!" the departing chief bellowed. "And get all the black and whites you can find."

Finch looked at the roof of the building the chief had pointed out, and did a double-take when he saw what had gotten the chief so excited.

The Main Attraction of the Vulcan City Great White Way had suffered alteration. There, above the contented, ideal domestic couple, the sign now read:

**FINE DAR EELIN AND
PENNI
UP HEER
HELP U S**

"Wow," Finch breathed. "Those secret agents sure are smart, and the chief must be the smartest one of all. What a cop!"

* * * * *

Floyd and Elwood arrived at the front entrance to the Dorf Building and found the doors locked. Mischa, who was still soliciting "donations" nearby, heard them rattling the doors. Recognizing Floyd and Elwood, he came over to offer his assistance.

"Do you have a key?" Floyd asked.

"Perhaps," Mischa said, fishing in his pocket and coming out with a metal object similar to an ice pick.

"Is that the key?" Elwood asked.

"Not exactly, but it weel open the door," he said. He flicked it a few times and the door opened.

Floyd and Elwood ran toward the stairs, not bothering to wait for the elevator. Before they reached the top floor, twenty-three flights up, they were thinking maybe they should have waited. Mischa was there waiting for them.

* * * * *

The quartet on the roof heard the sirens wailing.

"Okay, do you want to give up, now?" Penny called.

"Surrender to a couple of broads in a teacup! Are you kidding?" Augie called back.

"Wait a minute, Augie," Angel whispered. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea."

"What are you talkin' about, you dumb ass," Augie snarled.

There had been a lack of fire in Augie's voice. The girls decided to press their advantage. "You might as well," Darlene yelled. "The cops will be here in a few minutes."

It was true. The sirens were getting closer, and added to that was the whirring approach of the police helicopter. The spotlight was already illuminating the dark corners of the rooftop.

"I don't care what you say, Augie, I'm givin' up," Angel said. "Those dames have fried us in hot grease, kicked us in the crotch, puked on me, bashed in my head, and shot out your eye. On top of that, I think my ankle is busted. The cops are goin' to be here in a minute. I can't crawl back down that fire escape with a busted ankle, and you can't do it because you can't see. To hell with it! I'm quittin'," Angel said.

"You do, and I'll kill ya," Augie said.

"How, Augie? You're outta bullets. I counted your shots."

"How about it?" Penny called. "We're loading this cannon again. If you don't want another broadside, throw your guns out."

A few second later, a pistol landed on the roof below their teacup. Then they heard the click of a hammer snapping on an empty chamber.

"Ah, nuts!" Augie yelled at Angel. "I didn't think you could count that high." A second later, another gun landed near the first.

* * * * *

On the floor below, Floyd and Elwood brushed by Mischa, desperately seeking the way up to the roof. Mischa ran after them. "Wait! Wait! Eet ees thees way," he called.

"Where?" Floyd demanded.

"Follow me," Mischa said, leading them to a dark alcove that held a short flight of stairs. At the top was a metal door with a sign in red paint that read:

**EXIT TO ROOF
NO ADMITTANCE
KEEP DOOR LOCKED**

They paused at the door, getting ready to crash it in.

"There ees no need for that," Mischa said. "Eet ees not locked. I 'ave already unlocked eet."

Without hesitation, Elwood flung open the door, and they dashed out onto the roof, just as the police helicopter hovered overhead with the spotlight covering the full scene. What they saw was the two girls standing over two prostrate figures who were cringing under the threat of the pistol Penny held, and the fully loaded and cocked slingshot that Darlene had trained on them.

Overhead a turbaned and robed Chief hung out of the 'copter with a bullhorn. "This is the chief speaking!" he blared. "I order you to throw down your weapons and surrender!"

The girls obliged: surrendering to the arms of Floyd and Elwood.

Hisssst! The steam blew in the teacup as the ideal, contented housewife took another sip of **DAR EELIN** tea, and it only cost a **PENNI**.

On the ground, Ex-PFC Durward P. Hicks' moment in the political history of Vulcan City had arrived. Sonny had just completed his speech, and Hicks had mounted the steps, prepared to nail the Manifesto to the door of City Haul.

"There ain't no place to nail it," he called. "Everything up here is either brass, glass, or granite!"

"Just slide it under the door, then," Marsha called back.

He did. It lacked the drama that nailing it to the door would have had, but it was the best he could do without a jackhammer.

The janitor picked it up later on his nightly rounds. If history bothered to record such things, it would show that he was the only employee of City Haul to have read it, and he had no intention of resigning. After all, he cleaned up City Haul every day.

20

The Morning After

CHIEF DILLARD ARRIVED at his office early the next morning, in spite of the fact that he had been up nearly all night. He was properly uniformed, having retrieved his tunic and cap from Bertha and attired her in some of his late wife's clothes, which fit her reasonably well.

Bertha and the girls had gotten situated in a local motel until other arrangements could be made.

Augie and Angel had been booked and were now in the hospital under heavy guard. Both required surgery.

A squad of patrol cars had been dispatched to the Heavenly Rest, where a large haul of marijuana and heroin had been confiscated, along with a printing press and plates for printing counterfeit twenty-dollar bills. Plates for ten-dollar bills were missing. Surprisingly, no bills had been found, but several minor functionaries had been brought in for questioning.

The news media had agreed to withhold any stories about the pandemonium at the Heavenly Rest last night in return for the promise of an even bigger story soon. Most of the news in the morning papers had to do with the giant rally in the Town Square.

It was Election Day. The People were about to speak.

Rock Top Radley and the Swamp Buzzards had packed up and headed back for the hills as soon as the rally ended. Red had not been with them. Judge Friday had thought it best that he not leave the county. Besides, somebody had to look after Cy.

Floyd and Elwood spent the night in Hicks' old digs, while Darlene slept on Penny's couch. Hicks never showed up. He was last seen downing the

remains of the lemonade. O'Doul let him sleep it off in his old cell in the City Jail.

In the Valley, Sam and Judge Friday met with the coon hunters, swore them to secrecy, and hunted for Min and June most of the night without success. Red was there with Prucilla, but Shortoff was missing.

They agreed to meet the next evening to renew the search. In the meantime, they would keep an eye out, but not do anything to alarm the "perfessers." Sam collected some samples of the new "tobacco" and confirmed his suspicions.

June and Min huddled in the old barn and wondered if they would live to see another sundown. In the distance, they could hear the hounds baying. Min tried the whistle several times, but Shortoff never showed up. He was at the other end of the Valley where a female blue-tick had just come into season. The other dogs were not conditioned to respond to the whistle. Eventually the two sisters gave up and dropped into a fitful slumber.

Outside their door, Scarpelli and O'Kelly took turns guarding and sleeping. With Money on his way, they were taking no more chances on an escape.

Deacon Watts retired early and slept on a feather mattress.

Money and Baldy spent the night in an Atlanta motel. They would complete the journey tomorrow. Neither of them heard the old van without a muffler go roaring by. The Swamp Buzzards couldn't stop until they got to the Valley. They might not be able to get the engine started again.

Sonny Dorf slept the sleep of the exhausted. Charlene slept without disturbing him.

It had been quite a night for everyone.

* * * * *

When Chief Dillard looked the second time at the pictures Elwood had left, it was with new knowledge. There was Dr. Mortimer Maxwell Money inspecting some new counterfeit bills. There was the press confiscated at the Heavenly Rest. There, in one picture, looking over his shoulder was Peter Possum, a.k.a. Slick Rick. There, too, were Augie and Angel, another unidentified thug with a bald head, and a beetle-browed unkempt character he knew from old mug shots to be Rodin.

In the background of one picture was a shadowy image he recognized as Carlotta. What had become of her?

Penny's note called attention to that picture and stated that the film had been found by Floyd and Elwood, cleverly hidden in Carlotta's room. That explained the burglary, and might explain the fire, if it proved to be arson.

One other item of interest he had learned during the brief question and answer session with Darlene and Penny was that Money and Baldy were on their way to Sugar Valley located in Sheriff Sam Hundley's bailiwick. He needed to return Sheriff Hundley's urgent call of yesterday right away.

After brief introductions, they got down to business.

"My poop sheets show you all have been a hot spot for bogus bills, lately, Chief Dillard," Sam said. "We've been getting some over here, too."

"In that case, you may be glad to know we busted their headquarters last night, and got their press and plates," Dillard said.

"Hallelujah!" Sam exclaimed. "Did you get the gang?"

"Not all of them," the chief said. "That was what I wanted to tell you. We have it from a reliable source the Big Cheese is headed your way right now in a little red foreign sports car, convertible, license MMM-1, this state."

"Got a name?" Sam was writing all this down.

"Mortimer Maxwell Money, M. D. Six feet, blue eyes, medium build, hundred ninety pounds, accompanied by a gorilla named Baldy, real name unknown. We're checking that out right now. We know they're armed, and we know they're dangerous. We want to talk to them about a body that showed up in the reservoir over here, and we'd like to know something about a lady who has disappeared, too."

"Sounds like we got disappearin' women all over the place," Sam said. "There's been a couple missin' up in Sugar Valley, too. In fact, I've been tryin' to get in touch with a couple of their kinfolks who are in Vulcan City right now. Maybe you can run 'em down for me."

"Glad to," Dillard said.

"Two boys, young men, Elwood Larkin and Floyd Bates. Last known address, the White Pea—"

"Larkin and Bates!" the chief exclaimed.

"You know them?" Sam asked.

"They helped crack the case," the chief explained.

"Better get 'em notified. It might not be true, but I got reason to believe those two old ladies may have fallen into the hands of this gang," Sam said. "We are doin' all we can to find them, but haven't had any luck, so far."

"Holy mackerel," Dillard said. "What are your plans?"

"Right now, we're keepin' an eye on those two goons up here growin' pot, hopin' they'll lead us to them; but so far, nothing. Last night I had every

coon hunter in the Valley out lookin', but nothing showed up. That makes me think they may still be alive, and the gang is holding them somewhere."

"I hope that's it," the chief said.

"I won't go into everything we've got on this bunch," Sam said, "but if we're lucky we might bag the whole shebang tonight. If we spot Money, we'll tail him and hope he'll lead us to the women. We'll try to grab them all at one time. I just hope we'll be able to get those women back alive."

"It will be touchy," Dillard said. "Those goons are cold-blooded killers, and they've got a lot at stake. Money doesn't know we grabbed his place last night. We kept it out of the news; so I don't think he will be expecting any trouble from you."

"That's good," Sam said. "We don't need any more trouble."

"Will you need any help?" Dillard asked.

"All we can get," Sam told him.

"I'll bring the choppers," the chief said, then hung up.

Dillard thought he had enough evidence to present a pretty strong case to a Grand Jury, but he was worried by the fact that they didn't pick up any phony bills at the Heavenly Rest. There could be a whole blizzard of counterfeit money out there waiting to fall on the community. Also, if he could get his hands on that phony money right now, it would add weight to the evidence he already had.

The next step was to get in touch with his agents; but where? The problem was solved when his phone rang, and Elwood invited him over to Solly's for a late breakfast. Fifteen minutes later, he joined them at their usual table in the rear. They were drinking coffee and reading the morning paper. Floyd was dipping a bagel in his coffee.

"These Jewish doughnuts are pretty good," he said, "but they aren't very sweet."

The chief sat down and ordered a bagel with cream cheese and coffee. "You ladies look mighty fresh for someone who spent the evening in a tea cup fighting off hoods," he said. He was smiling, but dreaded the news he had to impart to Floyd and Elwood.

"We just discovered my sister is safe," Darlene said. "I was worried sick. We got her away from the Heavenly Rest, and right away we got separated again in the crowd. Look," she said, showing him the paper.

There on the front page was a picture of Sonny Dorf taken at the rally. Sonny was smiling wanly, but in the background there was a happy face that could have belonged to Darlene.

"That looks like you," Dillard said.

"She's my twin," Darlene said. "When this picture was taken, Penny and I were entertaining a couple of gentlemen at tea."

"Some tea party," the chief said. "We had to take them to the hospital. They were a mess; they won't be coming to tea again for quite a while."

"Serves them right," Penny said. "They were trying to kill us."

"Well, at least we won't have to worry about Charlene anymore," Floyd said.

"Of course, we might have to worry about Sonny," Elwood put in.

"You boys are awful," Darlene said. "That is my sister you're talking about, you know."

"Oh, we know, all right," Floyd said, "and we still love her."

"Well, I can let Papa know she is all right," Darlene said. "They have been so worried. I didn't even have a chance to find out where all she's been, or how she got tied up in that room at the Heavenly Rest. I would like to know what happened to that two-bit Texas four-flusher that ran off with her. I wish I could see her, and I wish I could go home."

Chief Dillard had been dreading breaking the news he had for them. He decided he had better do it now, rather than wait. It wasn't going to get any easier. "You may be going home sooner than you think, my dear," he said. "But first, I'm afraid I have some disturbing news for you all." Turning to Floyd and Elwood, he continued, "Mrs. Bates and Miss Larkin are missing."

"Missing? What do you mean 'missing'?" Elwood demanded.

"Sheriff Hundley called, and he thinks they may have stumbled on to this gang's activities in Sugar Valley. They were growing marijuana there."

"I knew there was something fishy about the 'new tobacco' those city dudes were growin'," Floyd said. "They didn't look like no college professors to me."

"They weren't," the chief confirmed. "Sheriff Hundley checked it out, and he's definitely identified the plant as marijuana."

"Let's get goin'," Elwood said. "It's a long way to the Valley."

"Hold it," the chief said. "I've got two police helicopters being readied for the trip, now. We can make it in two or three hours."

"When can we leave?" Floyd asked.

"Two hours," the chief said, getting up to go.

"We'll be ready," Penny said.

"I nearly forgot," Elwood said. "We've got a present for you, Chief."

"A present?"

"Do you still have that present for the chief, Solly?" Floyd asked.

"Got it right here, and gift-wrapped, too," Solly said, setting four shoe boxes on the counter, each neatly tied with red ribbon and a bow on top. He shoved them across the counter at the chief.

"What is it?" Dillard asked.

"That's what we've been wondering," Penny said.

"It's a million dollars, like we said," Elwood declared, winking at Floyd.

"For crying out loud, open it!" Darlene cried.

Carefully, the chief untied the bow on the top box and removed the lid. His eyes grew wide and his jaw dropped as he viewed the contents. "Just like you said . . . a million dollars," he said in wonder. "But where . . . ?"

"Plastered to the wall behind the wallpaper in Carlotta's room," Floyd answered his question.

"Right where we found the negatives," Elwood added. "Those boys at the Heavenly Rest had a real money-maker goin'."

"It looks almost real," the chief said.

"Will it help you any?" Penny asked.

"It may ice the cake," he responded, pleased. "Well, let's get going," he said gathering up the boxes. "We've got a plane to catch. See you all in two hours."

"Make that an hour and forty-five minutes by Elwood's watch," Floyd said. "Mine don't run too good."

* * * * *

"Wait a minute! Am I hearing you right? Are you telling me to make sure that pip-squeak so-cee-ollygist wins this precinct?" the voice at the other end of the line was incredulous.

"You heard right, Stanley," Alderman Dorf said.

"I've never heard of stuffin' the ballot box for the opposition," Stanley said. "May I ask why we are doing this?"

"Because they don't know how to stuff one for themselves," was Dorf's logical reply.

"Would you mind putting all this in writing?" Stanley asked.

"Yes, I would mind!" Dorf responded firmly. "But I don't mind shouting it! Do what I tell you, now."

"Boss, we've got a lot of people down here looking to you," Stanley protested. "Ever since that stupid teacher started 'wowing' them with his speeches, you've been gaining ground. You can't lose, now, and you can't let these people down."

"I haven't forgotten them," Dorf said. "The sociologist will take care of them, if they get in a jam. That's what sociologists do. Let him know how he got elected. I'm sure he will be grateful."

"Maybe so, Boss, but it won't be the same without you," Stanley said.

"A lot of people are hoping that will be the case," Dorf said. "But we'll be back in a couple of years, and maybe things will have changed by then."

"We?" Stanley repeated. "Who is 'we', and what do you mean 'be back'? Where are 'we' going?"

"My bride and I are probably going to Pago Pago, if we can't find a place farther away than that," Dorf said. "Thanks, Stan. I knew you would see it my way," he said, and hung up.

Carlotta overheard the entire conversation. She smiled at him as he hung up the phone, and continued to pack her brand new wardrobe. She could easily become accustomed to this, and two years should be about right.

* * * * *

Sonny Dorf was confused. Sonny Dorf was often confused; but this time he had a reason. This beautiful girl who he had met at the White Peacock, who sent him into spasms of ecstasy, who had fallen into his arms in the back of Radley's green van, and who did the fabulous "grapevine" trick, didn't seem to recall meeting him before. After he had gotten himself thrown into jail and nearly disgraced, she, pleading ignorance, remembered nothing at all of the incident. In fact, she knew nothing of the White Peacock; she insisted she had spent the past several weeks locked up in a room in a big house where people "made" money and forced her to write dumb letters to her folks back home. However, other than having a fantastic imagination, she seemed normal and was a load of fun.

Sonny Dorf was deeply and irrevocably in love.

"How would you like to become the First Lady?" he asked her.

"Don't be silly," Charlene giggled. "My name isn't 'Eve', it's 'Charlene'. I couldn't possibly be the first lady."

Sonny looked puzzled. "I thought it was 'Darlene'," he said.

"No, silly. That's my sister; and she couldn't be the first lady, either."

"You mean you're twins?" he asked.

"Is there something wrong with that?" she inquired.

"No . . . oh! No, not at all," he said, the light beginning to dawn. "That explains a lot of things. Except . . . I wonder—"

"Wonder what?" she prompted.

"Oh, nothing important, I guess. I suppose now I'll never know what the famous 'Grapevine Trick' is," he said.

"Oh, that's easy," Charlene said. "I can do it."

"You can!" he said excitedly. "Let's do it!"

"Can't do it here," she said, "not enough room."

"Wow! It must be something," he said.

"Oh, it's a lot of fun," she assured him. "I'll show you sometime if you will take me back to the Valley. Down on Spangler's Branch is the best place."

"I will take you as soon as I'm elected mayor, and you promise to become my First Lady," he said.

"In that case, I promise," she said. At that, Sonny sailed off into another paroxysm of ecstasy.

Sonny Dorf was a very confused young mayor-to-be. He seemed happier that way.

* * * * *

"Mischa, hand your Mama what you were trying to remove from my pocket when I caught you last night," Rodin demanded.

Mischa handed Madame Zarelda a heavy metal object the size and thickness of a paperback book. Madame took it and hefted it without unwrapping it to see what it was.

"What ces eet?" Mischa asked.

"Eet makes 'donations'," she said.

"How long may I stay with you?" Rodin asked.

"As long as you like," Madame Zarelda assured him.

"Stay forever," Mischa said, looking up at Rodin with admiring eyes. Rodin was the only person who had ever detected Mischa's light touch.

Rodin returned Mischa's smile. "When do we leave this city?" he asked Madame Zarelda.

"Before the new crowd takes office," she said. "Politicians have short memories, and someone may weesh to make name for heemself."

"In that case, we had better go take care of the stock," he said to Mischa. "I want to be able to go a long way."

* * * * *

Two helicopters took off and flew away from the sun, which was getting lower in the afternoon sky. Very quickly, the Warrior River passed under them, glittering for a moment like a spangled serpent headed for the Gulf.

Floyd and Elwood dozed off and on. The girls were glued to the windows, not wanting to miss an instant of their first helicopter flight.

"It's like riding in a bubble," Darlene said.

The fascination didn't wear off, but fatigue from the previous night overtook them before the skyline of Atlanta came into view and the Chattahoochee disappeared behind them.

Floyd was still dozing when Elwood nudged him and motioned out the window to their left. "Rabun Bald," he said. Floyd nodded.

The Tugaloo River loomed ahead, its path traced by a line of trees along the watercourse. A few minutes later, the spire of the Lutheran Church became visible.

"Gettin' close," Elwood said.

21

Valley Round-up

THEY JUST CROSSED the county line—over,” Raleigh Gates spoke into his mike. He was in street clothes, sitting in an unmarked car at the County Line Bar-B-Q.

“Okay, don’t spook ’em,” Sam said. “Just keep ’em in sight—over.”

“Roger.”

Gates pulled out onto the highway and stayed about a quarter mile behind the red sports car until he was pretty sure they were heading into Luthersville, as expected. Then he gradually gained speed and passed the red car a couple of miles outside of town. He was several minutes ahead of them when he pulled into a parking space on the square in a position to see whether they continued east toward Greenville, or made a left turn toward the mountains.

About five minutes later, the little red car drove into the square and turned in the direction the Confederate Soldier on the monument was looking, toward the mountains.

“I’ve got ’em, Sheriff,” Raleigh reported. “They’re headed north—over.”

“Just like we expected,” Sam said. “Billy’ll pick him up at Mule Trough Springs and make sure he does go to the Valley. I want to be certain that is where he is before we move in. You can come on any time. Assemble behind Chico’s, at seventeen forty-five—over.”

Sam knew that once Money turned off the highway at Chico’s, he was bottled in. He had to make another left turn at a T- intersection about a half mile from Chico’s, on the Loop Road that made a complete circuit through the whole Valley before returning to the starting point. If he didn’t make the turn onto the Loop Road, he would continue straight on to Hungry Squaw

Ford on the Chattooga; and he sure couldn't cross the ford now. It was closed due to high water. The river was raging with spring melt and recent rains.

"Roger, out," Raleigh said, cradling the mike. He checked his equipment to make sure he had everything in order before starting the engine and heading toward the rendezvous at Chico's.

* * * * *

Red Wilkins, perched atop Molly's Nose, peered through a pair of powerful field glasses. He didn't really need the glasses to spot the red car getting nearer as it traveled down the narrow gravel road; a plume of dust plainly marked its progress. He watched the car take the left for at the Big Tree, and proceed to Deacon Watts' front gate.

In a few moments, the Deacon came scuttling out. Red could see him gesturing as he talked, obviously giving directions. He was pointing toward the old barn in his back pasture. Directions completed, the Deacon ran over and opened the gate to let the little car drive through. The ancient wagon track was a rough route for a city-bred car, but it managed to negotiate its way to the old barn, where it disappeared inside. A few minutes later, Red watched the Deacon's pickup following the same bumpy path.

Sliding down the rock, Red restored the glasses to the leather case, and called Prucilla. "Come on, Pru. Let's go see if we can find out what's goin' on inside the Deacon's barn."

* * * * *

Two helicopters landed in the pasture behind Chico's establishment. The coon hunting coterie, gathered for the occasion, welcomed their old members, hugged Darlene, and paid the greatest deference to Penny.

Chico opened the dance hall and Sam motioned them all inside. Everyone took seats, and Sam, standing, addressed the assembly. "Since our search last night, we have learned a few more things. We know these men are armed and dangerous criminals. They won't hesitate to shoot, and I don't want anybody to get hurt.

"We also know now that the head of the gang is here in the Valley. He arrived from Vulcan City about an hour ago. We are pretty sure that this gang is probably responsible for the disappearance of your neighbors, Mrs. Bates and Miss Larkin.

"Because this valley was combed pretty well last night by the best coon hunters in the country, without finding anything, we hope the ladies may be alive and are being held captive. If they are, we want to get them back alive and safe." Sam paused.

"Any questions so far?"

"Is Eli Watts involved in this thing? I notice he ain't amongst us," Charley Foster asked.

"We don't have any hard evidence, yet, that he is; and I don't want to accuse an honest citizen of anything, but I will say he is keeping some pretty bad company," Sam said, then added, "I haven't confided in him much, either." That brought a little laugh from the crowd.

"What's that stuff them fellers are growin' on our land?" Mitch Harris wanted to know.

"Pot . . . marijuana," Sam answered. "I had it checked out today over at the college."

"I thought there was something bad fishy about that stuff," Mitch said. "I didn't much think they looked like college professors, either; but you can't ever really tell about things like that. Why ain't the FBI in on this thing? Does Harry Truman have 'em all too busy tryin' to catch spies in Washington?"

"They would be here, if we'd called them," Sam said, "but there wasn't time. If those crooks have got those two women, we've got to get them out."

The assembled men nodded approval. "We'll handle it," someone said.

"What's the plan, then, Sam?" Aaron Ledbetter called out.

"First of all, I'm deputisin' every man here that wants to be deputized," Sam said. "Judge Friday, over there, has issued all the warrants we need."

"Next, Chief Dillard of the Vulcan City Police Department has brought these two helicopters and a squad of specially trained people, in case we have to drop in on them from the air."

The chief nodded and acknowledged the looks of approval from the coon hunters. "Those choppers are equipped with spotlights that will probably be a lot of help, if we need some light," Dillard said.

"We'll move in and surround the place after dark," Sam continued. "I've got a man over there watchin' the place now. I'm hoping he will know something about the lay of the land when we get there."

"What then?" Aaron asked.

"Me and my regular deputies will go in after them before they know what's hit 'em," Sam said. "We don't want any shooting if we can help it—especially if those women are in there with them."

"The rest of you men lie low and try to stop them if they make a break. With luck, we'll grab the whole bunch."

Turning to Ossie Knowles, who hadn't spoken to this point, he said, "Preacher, you can do a little praying, if you don't mind. We need all the help we can get."

"I've already been doing that, Sheriff," Ossie said. "I don't think it would hurt to do a little more right now," he said, removing his hat.

* * * * *

Red followed the rocky path down the face of the escarpment and through the laurel thicket at the base into the woods. Prucilla stayed a little way in front of him, sniffing scent. Once she started a rabbit, but he called her back. Another time she went after a squirrel that quickly scurried up a large white oak, then turned and chattered squirrelish imprecations at the intruder.

"Why don't you come on up and get me?" the squirrel seemed to be chattering.

"Why don't you come down and play?" the dog wagged back. It was a standoff, and Prucilla got tired of it after a while.

They got all the way to the Deacon's pasture without leaving the shelter of the woods, but the barn sat out in the open, about thirty-five yards from the nearest stand of trees. Red worked himself to that thicket, but there was no way he could get to the barn without being seen.

Prucilla, nearby, was hot on the trail of a mole, when she suddenly cocked her head to one side and stood stock still. What was that new sound? An instant later, she was out of the thicket and trotting across the meadow straight for the barn. Red didn't dare call her back for fear of alerting those inside.

* * * * *

Min and June, inside their all-too-familiar cell, could hear the voices of the men coming from the potting shed built onto the side of the barn. They seemed to be discussing their fate. The major question apparently was whether or not they would have any value in future as hostages.

Once, they heard Eli's familiar voice, "You promised there wouldn't be any killin'," he whined.

"You got any better ideas?" a deep voice asked.

"We could hold 'em for ransom," he suggested.

"They don't have any money, stupid," a voice said.

"I've always wanted that Bates place," he said. "That would be a dandy ransom."

"Old Eli is all heart," June said, trying to keep up her courage.

"If we don't get help soon, it will be too late," Min said. "It's about time for the coon hunters to be out. I'll start blowin' the whistle, while you pray."

The voices from the potting shed rumbled on.

"I think one of the old ladies had flipped." That sounded like the red-nosed one—the one they called O'Kelly. "All she does is recite poetry. I bet I listened to 'The Wreck of the Hesperus' a hundred times last night."

"I think he's right," June said. "It does get a little tiresome."

"Well, it's the best way I can think of to make the whistle toots be evenly spaced," Min said, "and the chances are better a dog going by will hear it. Besides, it's something to do, and I don't know any other poems."

"It worked pretty well with old Shortoff. Maybe it will work again. Do you have that note and your locket ready? Shorty won't hang around long, if he comes at all. They shot him last time, you know."

With that, she sounded another silent blast. The droning voices discussing their fate continued from the potting shed. She blew the whistle again before beginning, "It was the schooner, Hesperus . . ." She never finished the first verse. There was a snuffling at the crack under the door, and Prucilla pushed her nose underneath.

"It's Prucilla!" Min said. "Red can't be far away. He doesn't let Prucilla run around by herself. Quick, tie that locket around her neck!"

"I'm tryin'," June said. "She's wigglin' so much, it's hard to tie it. Give her some of that tuna fish."

Min did, and June secured the locket while the nearly grown puppy consumed the treat.

"Now get on out of here before they shoot you, too," Min said to Prucilla; but Prucilla didn't want to leave. She was too excited about finding the pair of them and getting an unexpected tidbit for her trouble.

The drone of voices stopped for a moment. Min and June held their breath. Prucilla continued to snuffle at the door. They heard a whistle, not loud, but very high-pitched and shrill, that came from the direction of the woods nearest the barn. It might easily have been a bird. Prucilla alerted and stopped snuffling. The droning conversation continued once more; they heard the seemingly far-away call again, and Prucilla scampered away. Min and June sighed with relief.

"Well, I guess someone will know about us soon," Min said.

"I hope they get here in time," June said.

"I don't think there is much time left," Min said. "Not for us."

* * * * *

Some bootleggers have been known to negotiate winding mountain roads without headlights well after midnight. For many, it was a way of life. For Charley Foster, leading the unlighted caravan down the Valley Road was no problem.

"You haven't forgotten how, Charley," Sam said.

"Sam, I can't tell you the number of times I avoided meeting you, just like this," Charley grinned. "But not lately," he added. "I'm gettin' too old for that stuff."

"We both are, Charley," Sam said. "Hey, slow down! What's that in the road?"

It proved to be Ugly Red Wilkins, who had been waiting for them at the Big Oak near the fork in the road. "They're all up at the Deacon's old barn," Red said.

"How many?" Sam asked.

"Five," Red replied. "There's Deacon Watts, the two perfessers, and the two guys that drove up in that fancy little car. But that ain't all! I'm real sure that's where they're holdin' Miss June and Aunt Min, too. Look," he said, holding out the locket.

"Where did you get that?" Sam asked in amazement.

"I didn't," Red said, then explained. "Prucilla went up to the barn before I could stop her, and came back wearin' it."

Sam opened the locket and showed it to Floyd under the beam of his flashlight. "That's Ma's, all right," Floyd said. "She always wore it. There's Pa's picture, and that's me," he said.

"How long ago was this, Red?" Sam asked.

"'Bout an hour," Red said.

The note, written on a tiny scrap of paper in very small printed letters, was hard to make out. Sam couldn't read it. "Let me try," Penny said. Studying it a moment, she read:

EW's barn. HURRY
no time. will kill.
ML and JB

Gathering the posse around him, Sam explained the present circumstances in a few words. "They've got those two women up there in Watts' old barn, and they were alive an hour ago. We got two choices. We can go in there fast and try to nab them before they know we're there; or we can surround the place and call on them to surrender."

"What do you think our best chance is, Sheriff?" Elwood asked.

"I think our best shot is to move fast," Sam said.

"I agree," Floyd said. "The quicker, the better."

"Okay," Sam addressed the posse again, "we leave our vehicles here and move through the woods to the edge of the pasture. Surround the barn, and when those helicopters come over with the floodlights on, me and my regular deputies will rush the barn. The rest of you all cover us."

"Be careful. I don't want anybody to make a sound. If they hear us, it may be all over for those women."

"I'm in touch with the choppers by walkie-talkie. When we get in position, I'll give the signal with my flashlight when it's time to move in. When you see it, move fast."

"Does everyone understand?"

A round of nods. Everyone was as ready as they were ever going to be.

"Get your vehicles off the road, and let's go," Sam directed.

Five minutes later, the posse of coon hunters and regular deputies was moving quietly through the woods. Back at Chico's, the 'copter pilots were warming their engines.

At the barn, the discussion had nearly ended. Money was about to announce his decision.

* * * * *

From the primordial ooze, when life on earth first stirred in the chemical soup that filled the crevices of the planet, no force had ever more affected that life than had the moon. The moon controls the tides that shape continents and stir the forces in every living thing. The forces penetrate everywhere, from the highest layers of ozone to the deepest seas; from the North Pole to the South; and even unto the big Laurel, wherein dwells the Rooshin Boar.

He first felt the stirring in the mid-afternoon; long before the moon came up. Rising from the dank mud-wallow he had rooted out under the laurels, he plodded over to his favorite low-hanging limb and scratched his upper right ham. This activity satisfied for a little while before he tired of it and moved back and settled once again into the black mud-wallow.

A sow with five pigs came into view and paused uncertainly when she spotted the boar. One of her pigs, a bold one, not at all uncertain, walked up to the boar and stared him in the gimlet eye. Unlike his mother, the pig was a half-breed and had the courage of his sire. Courage was replaced by discretion when the boar rose to his feet. The pig ran back to its mother, who faced the boar ready to defend her young. She was afraid, but unmoving. Mothers are like that.

The boar was not seeking a domestic squabble. She could have the mud-wallow. He had another itch he just couldn't get scratched. The moon, still unseen, was getting nearer the horizon. This time he moved away with a little more purpose in his stride. He headed for the Valley.

* * * * *

Shortoff, too, felt an itch. It was in his wounded leg where an angry red was bordered by the healthy pink of healing flesh. It itched and he licked it; he kept licking it until the itch was replaced by a more compelling force. The moon was no doubt stirring Shorty, too; but the strongest force was that of hunger. He hadn't eaten since the day he was shot.

Deeply etched in his one-track canine mind was a vision of the fat hens in Deacon Watts' henhouse. To Shortoff, it was a cafeteria where he had a choice of entrees—all of them chicken.

Shorty rose and tested his leg. It would do. He yawned and stretched, then walked over to a nearby tree, where he sniffed until he found the right spot, and lifted his leg.

He trotted a beeline straight for his favorite restaurant. Arriving at a ridge that afforded a view of the Watts farm, he ignored all the various human scents in the air. He would check with them later. He paused a brief moment to check the layout. Ah, the lights were out. It was dark all around. That meant they were open for business.

Lowering his head, he trotted toward the hidden hole under the chicken wire, where he usually made his entrance unannounced.

* * * * *

Even a fractious, unattended, one-eyed goat won't starve if he is left free to roam. It was against the principles espoused by the Swamp Buzzards to prevent anything from roaming, provided it wishes to roam. Cyclops was not confined. He could roam anywhere he pleased. That night, perhaps compelled

by the same tidal forces that had moved the boar, Cyclops sought to widen his horizons.

Crossing the ridge, he dropped down toward the Valley and discovered the widest horizon of all could be viewed from the rocks that formed the distinctive natural feature known to the Valley's human denizens as Molly's Nose.

No one remembered the Molly for whom it was named, but viewing it from profile, one could easily believe that Molly never won a beauty contest.

That was from a human standpoint. In the judgment of a fractious, one-eyed goat, whose horns had been decorated with barber pole stripes of a luminous chartreuse paint, Molly's Nose was beautiful.

The circle of luminous paint surrounding his missing eye did nothing to improve his vision. However, it didn't take stereovision to convince Cyclops that this place was his. One eye was sufficient for the task.

Cyclops stood upon the rock and gazed about, surveying his domain as if to announce to all in goat terms, the immortal phrase: Dis ist der blace.

He claimed it for his own.

* * * * *

The posse reached the edge of the woods at the barn. Sam motioned with hand signals for the group to spread out and surround the place. He didn't have to caution silence. In a few minutes everything would be ready.

The full moon had cleared the ridge and the crisp mountain spring air was bathed in a blue-silver wash. Sam stood at about the spot Red had occupied earlier. Red had guided him there. From this vantage point, Sam could see movement along the edge of the field as his troops moved into position. They would be set by the time the 'copters arrived.

Keying the mike, Sam spoke softly, "Bring 'em on, Chief."

Chief Dillard clicked his key twice in acknowledgment. He did not speak.

* * * * *

Shortoff nosed along the chicken wire until he found his usual entrance under the wire. The doorman wasn't on duty; so he let himself in. Being familiar with the place, and being very hungry, he lost no time in placing his order.

This caused quite a stir.

* * * * *

"I want them out of the way with no trace."

So saying, Money had sealed the fate of the two women in the tack room. There was no expression on the grim faces of the men in the room. Deacon Watts' may have been a little more sour than usual, but he did not demur. He was too deeply committed, now, to risk losing everything. The venture had already paid well, and was about to pay even more. One crop was all they said they wanted; then they would be gone, and he would be richer. The Valley would never know. It would be worth the sacrifice of a couple of nosy old biddies who had no business meddling anyway.

"When?" O'Kelley asked.

"Not until I'm out of here," Money said. "Make sure there is no trace, and make sure no one connects them with me. Understand?" Money instructed. They nodded.

"When are you leaving?" Scarpelli asked.

"Tonight," Money answered.

Min and June heard the words and squeezed each other's hands tightly. If something good was going to happen, it had better happen quickly.

At that moment, they heard the racket in the henhouse.

"Shorty," Min said.

The Deacon heard it, too. "Blasted, suck-egg, chicken thief!" he roared. Grabbing his shotgun that was leaning against the wall, he raced for the door.

* * * * *

Mitch Harris was raised in the woods. He knew the sights, the sounds, and the smells. His nose twitched a couple of times just before he started to make his way through a thick copse of sweetgum. It should have alerted him.

Something's dead around here, was the fleeting thought that crossed his mind just before he stumbled over the boar that had taken refuge in the copse when the human smells became overpowering.

Few of us can relate firsthand with the event Mitch had just experienced; but those who have say it would compare favorably with that of tripping over a speeding freight train. This being true, perhaps it is little to be wondered at that Mitch found himself unable to stifle an expression of surprise.

The Deacon was about twenty feet outside the barn door when Mitch's, "*Heeeyiiii!*" rent the air and stopped him dead in his tracks.

Thoroughly spooked, the boar charged blindly (not having been blessed with good eyesight, boars often charge blindly, if they charge at all) down the corridor of least human scent. This corridor led directly toward the barn.

It took the Deacon, also not blessed with good eyesight, a moment or two in the moonlit darkness to focus on the source of the commotion. When he did get focused, he found himself precisely in the unerring path of the oncoming freight.

Splat! The irresistible force met the extremely movable object, knocking him a double somersault, discharging both barrels of the ten gauge harmlessly into the air, before he landed on the pasture grass in a dazed heap.

The boar, in the meantime, continued his way until, colliding with the barn wall, he too fell back on his heels, more than a little dazed by the abrupt nature of his halt.

If there was anything, human or otherwise, in the vicinity that was not yet alerted by the commotion, it had to have been dead. Certainly the hoods inside the potting shed were fully aware of the disturbance.

Sam was aghast at the premature triggering of action. His men had not yet completely surrounded the barn, but he could wait no longer without losing the element of surprise, which was what he was counting on to prevent bloodshed. They would have to proceed without the initial advantage of the helicopters.

"Let's go!" he shouted, and the line closed in.

22

Wind-up In The Valley

LIVING CLOSE TO THE EDGE creates a supersensitivity to threats; or anything appearing to be a threat. The discharge of a ten gauge double-barrel shotgun outside the door is generally perceived as a double-barreled threat. There was no time for an investigation. It was time to move. If they needed further inspiration, Sam's yell provided it.

Baldy and Money sprang for the little red car parked in the hallway of the barn. Unfortunately for Money, the passenger-side door was locked, and Baldy had the key. Baldy cranked the engine and tore out of the barn without bothering to consider, much less accommodate, his boss.

His age and weight notwithstanding, Sam was pretty agile; otherwise Baldy would have nailed him. When he sped out the barn door, Sam was making a charge straight for it. They nearly collided; but Sam dived for a small ditch, and only got brushed with the rear fender. The red car careened down the rutted track and crashed through the pasture gate onto the gravel Valley road. the choppers were nearly overhead when Sam keyed his mike.

"Suspect leaving the scene in red sports car," he said.

"We've got him in sight. No problem," Chief Dillard responded.

Sam saw one of the choppers peel off and follow above the car as it disappeared down the road, clawing to get out of the Valley. Baldy obviously was unconcerned about leaving his boss behind.

Scarpelli and O'Kelley first thought was to use Min and June as hostages; but they were locked in that room and Watts had to keys. They abandoned the idea immediately; the door was too stout to break down in the short time they had. Diversion was the next best thing.

Scarpelli fired a few shots out the door to keep the deputies at bay while O'Kelley dashed a kerosene lantern against the wall. the ancient logs flamed up immediately. Within moments, the flames had spread to the shingles at the eaves.

Min and June smelled the smoke, and knew time was indeed running out for them. There was nothing to do but yell, and yell they did. Two strong mountain women who had called hogs all their lives had no trouble being heard on the outside.

"They're alive!" Floyd shouted. "Come on, we've got to get them out of there!" Ignoring the shots coming from the potting shed, he raced toward the barn, Darlene at his heels.

Elwood was close to Sam on the other side of the clearing, and apparently he was the only one to observe Money sneak out of the back of the barn and run straight toward the edge of the woods where Penny was huddled, in a spot that was supposed to have been safe and sheltered. Elwood took off as fast as he could run to head him off before he reached Penny's hiding place.

He hadn't covered a dozen strides before Money saw him and redoubled his speed. Calculating the angle and the distance, Elwood could see he would lose the race; Money would beat him to the woods. He could see something else, too. Penny had smelled the smoke and had just stood up to get a better view. Money had seen her, too, and was trying to get to her before she saw him and had a chance to dodge.

Everything in front of Penny was backlit by the flames and by the hovering helicopter's spotlights. She could see only silhouettes, and recognized no one. Money was on her with a gun to her head before she knew what was happening.

Elwood saw nothing but Money trying to shield himself with Penny's body, and the gun, and Penny's face. Her eyes were wide with terror and surprise. Elwood didn't hesitate by so much as a whisker; he lowered his forehead slightly and crashed headlong into Money's face. There was a deafening explosion right in Elwood's ear as the gun went off; his cheek burned.

Money went reeling backward with Elwood on top of him. Blood splattered the new foliage. Some of it was Elwood's, but most of it was from Money's broken nose. Penny lay inert; blond hair singed just over her right ear from the muzzle flash. A rivulet of blood trickled behind her ear and down her neck. She didn't move.

* * * * *

When Floyd and Darlene reached the barn, the flames had reached the loft. Min and June were banging on the door.

"We're comin', Ma!" Floyd called.

"Get us out!" Min yelled.

"Hurry!" June urged.

After Min's attempted escape, the Deacon had reinforced the hasps and had added another lock for good measure. There was no way Floyd could have found the strength to force the locks. Spotting the ax where June had left it leaning against the wall, he attacked the locks with it to no avail. It was getting warm in the hallway, and there wasn't enough room to get a full swing at the locks because the Deacon's pickup was parked in the hallway close to the door.

Darlene, searching in the truck bed for something to use, found an old logging chain. Tossing it to Floyd, she yelled, "Hook it to the locks!"

Floyd did so quickly, with the speed of an old logger who knew how to handle a logging chain. In the meantime, Darlene had looped her end around the trailer hitch, and quickly jumped into the cab of the pickup.

She found the ignition switch, but the key was missing!

* * * * *

Baldy crashed through the gate and turned onto the gravel road that looped through the Valley. Had he turned left, he would have gone out the way they had entered. However, in his haste and excitement—or perhaps because of darkness, confusion, and an underdeveloped sense of direction—he turned right, which led him on the long circuit all the way around the Valley. The chopper tailed him overhead. When he reached the T-intersection, he was exactly 180 degrees confused.

The old green van that turned onto the Hungry Squaw Ford Road at Chico's had a couple of good reasons to be there. One, the people riding in it were looking for their lost goat; and two, the police band radio they were listening to had indicated some excitement in the Valley, and they didn't want to miss it. They saw the headlights rapidly approaching the road they were traveling from the left, or from the Valley, and made note of the fact that a helicopter seemed to be tailing it overhead. The car should have turned right at the intersection. It didn't.

In a shower of gravel and a squealing of tires, it slid into a left turn and raced down the road toward the Hungry Squaw Ford across the swollen and raging Chattooga.

"Allah! He's flying," said Abdul Rothchild, bassist of the Swamp Buzzards.

"He better know how to swim," was the comment from Nightrider Robinson, the rhythm guitar player.

By the time the helicopter landed in a meadow above the river, the Swamp Buzzards were lined up at the edge of the flood watching two pinpoints of light disappearing in the middle of the river at a bend just a quarter mile away. Every once in a while, the lights would show again, briefly. Then they disappeared for good.

"Couldn't fly far enough, and couldn't swim a'tall," said the one-eyed Cajun.

* * * * *

A burning brand landed on the hood. The heat was becoming unbearable when Darlene ducked under the dash, searching for the ignition wires. In a moment she had them crossed. The engine turned over and died. She tried again. No luck. Cracking the throttle a little, she tried one more time, and the four cylinders fired up. Dropping it into low, she gunned it, let out the clutch, and prayed the bumper would hold when the slack jerked out of the chain.

They made trucks well in the thirties. The bumper held, and she burst out into fresh air. Floyd grabbed June and Aunt Min, and followed the truck to safety.

Close on their heels came Scarpelli and O'Kelley, who were pounced on by Gates and another deputy. There was no fight left in the "perfessers."

Elwood picked himself up and saw Penny lying there unmoving. He turned toward Money who was scrambling for the weapon that had been sent flying when Elwood crashed into him. He found it, but too late. By the time Mitch, Aaron and Charley arrived and pulled Elwood off, Money's face was pulp. They no doubt saved Money for the State to deal with. Elwood was exhausted and on the verge of passing out when they finally brought Penny around.

The bullet had just grazed her scalp, but the concussion had knocked her out. Her ears were still ringing. Seeing Elwood covered with Money's blood, she nearly passed out again, and probably would have had she not been a nurse viewing her patient.

Elwood was pale and trembling.

"Get him something to eat, quick," she directed.

Mitch pulled a Butterfinger out of a shirt pocket. "This is all I got," he said.

"I'll take it," Elwood said, demolishing it in two bites. Turning to Penny, he said, "I thought you were . . . I thought—"

"You thought what?" Penny said.

"I think I love you," he said.

"I thought that's what you thought," Penny said smiling.

* * * * *

Deacon Watts slowly rose on one elbow. His recovery time had about coincided with that of the boar, which was beginning to get its bearings, also.

As his vision cleared, the Deacon saw the flames beginning to flicker inside the barn. He noticed, too, that he seemed to have been overlooked in all the excitement. At that moment, everyone's attention was claimed by the red car flying out of the barn and making a getaway.

The next thing he saw was the boar, his somewhat reddish gimlet eyes trained directly on him. Without pausing to think, the Deacon lit out in whatever direction would remove him from the scene. Amazingly, he was hardly noticed. There were lots of people running in several directions at that time. However, he was the only one being trailed by a good-sized Russian boar with one tusk knocked slightly askew by his encounter with the barn.

What the Deacon could not know was that the boar was not charging him; he was merely seeking the quickest route to the Big Laurel, his tidal urges now at an ebb. Had the Deacon known, he could have just stepped aside and allowed the boar to proceed on his way; but he did not know this. So, he ran, staying just ahead of the freight train that had flattened him once already.

Neither did the Deacon take notice of the fact that the boar's course bore slightly more toward the east than his own. That didn't matter; the Deacon was inspired to run, and run he did until the recent scene faded behind him.

No one noticed, except Prucilla, who took off after the pair and trailed them both until their paths began to diverge.

Red saw Prucilla trailing toward the woods, and thought he caught a glimpse of a figure disappearing in the direction of the ridge. He started after them and caught up to Prucilla as she was circling trying to decide which of the two trails to follow. Shining his flashlight around, Red spotted a fresh bootprint in the soft earth. He thought he recognized the no-slip tread as matching the Deacon's.

"Come on, Pru. Let's take this one," he said. Prucilla obeyed.

* * * * *

Eli Watts ran on, in a panic. In a sweat. He didn't realize he was on a trail. He merely ran where there was the least resistance. It was the trail worn by generations of coon hunters, bootleggers, and before them, Indians. It led to Molly's Nose, the finest lookout point west of Caesar's Head.

Molly's Nose topped an escarpment with a sheer drop of three hundred feet to the first shelf, then another hundred and fifty feet to where the cliff grew less steep as it sloped off into the Valley.

The path followed a gentle upgrade most of the way, so that the hiker would gain altitude gradually. The last few hundred feet, however, are steeper and rougher. By the time the Deacon made it to the top, he was exhausted, and had gathered his wits enough to know he was no longer being pursued. No snorting freight train, no whirling rotors, no shouts, no shots, no confusion. Pausing to rest and take stock, he sat on a rock that had an excellent view of his barn burning.

"I guess the old busybodies are charcoal by now," he chuckled to himself. "Serves 'em right, shouldn't have interfered."

After a few minutes of deep breathing, he took out a bandanna, wiped his brow, and stood to view the scene once more. He was unaware at first of the presence behind him, but became so when the gentle wind shifted slightly. Turning to look over his shoulder, he beheld a strange apparition. There, not twenty feet away, and seeming to float on air, was a slender pair of luminous chartreuse barber poles hovering over a single chartreuse circle with a blazing coal in the center where a single eye reflected light from the burning barn in the distance. While he gaped, trying to determine what he was seeing, the barber poles dipped and started toward him at a rapid pace.

Red arrived at the point where the path made a sharp turn, affording an unobstructed view of the entire prominence of the formation. Eli Watts was standing silhouetted against the full moon. Suddenly he pitched forward and the agonizing scream of his descent seemed to go on forever. It was still echoing among the rocks when Red heard the sickening crunch that marked the end of his fall.

Looking back at Molly's Nose, Red saw that the Deacon's silhouette had been replaced by that of Cyclops.

23

Headlines

CLEAN GOVERNMENT SWEEPS IN

In an election political pundits could only classify as "remarkable," Julius Caesar (Sonny) Dorf, Jr. swung into office. Aided and abetted by ardent backers known as the "Grapevine Gang."

ALDERMAN DORF OUSTED IN SQUEAKER

Experts called it "The third safest bet in the World," rating only death and taxes higher. They referred, of course, to the Fifth Precinct, known heretofore as "Dorf's Domain." However, proving both pundits and polls can be mistaken, long-time Alderman Julius Caesar Dorf, the incumbent, was soundly defeated on home turf by CGP candidate . . .

It was a close race in all other precincts, with Alderman Dorf running slightly ahead in most. The phenomena that has analysts stumped is the vote in his own precinct, which went 80% - 20% for the CGP candidate, and provided the miracle margin of victory for Dorf's opponent, an unknown former sociology teacher named . . .

"We gotta check our figures," said Gaylord Gumshoe, president of Gumshoe Polling Services, nationally known pollsters . . .

Alderman Dorf made no comment, other than, "I got a boat to catch," since his 4 p.m. concession speech, two hours before the polls closed. According to records, this is the earliest any candidate has ever conceded—particularly in a race he was winning.

CONGRESSMAN REUBEN FINCHERT TO RETIRE

Congressman Reuben C. Finchert announced today that he will retire at the end of his current term. Congressman Finchert denied an ongoing investigation by the House Ethics Committee into hanky panky in the Congressman's office had anything to do with his decision . . .

"She could type, if she wanted to," he said, pointing to the typewriter the alleged secretary allegedly could have used. Congressman Finchert, who has recently been under pressure from colleagues and constituents alike to resign, made the announcement following disclosure . . .

HISTORIC HOUSE BURNS

Built in the 1830s by Major Briley Farnsworth Musgrove, noted Indian fighter and inventor of Musgrove's Hairball Solvent for Constipated Cats, which earned the gratitude of thousands of cats and cat-fanciers, and was the basis of the Musgrove fortune . . . The house, known as the "White Peacock," was completely destroyed by the fire. Cause of the blaze is believed to have been a spark from a torch carried in the CGP torchlight parade, which passed in front of the house; although arson has not been completely ruled out . . .

RAID ON HEAVENLY REST REAPS RICH REWARD GANG CAUGHT, PAIR RESCUED, HOSTAGE RELEASED PROMINENT DOCTOR ARRESTED CHIEF CITED FOR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT

"I had suspicions about Dr. Money and the Heavenly Rest operation all along. That is why I detailed a special watch to keep a surveillance on the place," Chief Dillard said in an interview in his office. "And as it turned out, that wasn't the last of it. We traced the operation all the way to a mountain valley in Keowee County, South Carolina. In cooperation with Sheriff Sam Hundley, of Keowee County, we nabbed the rest of the . . ."

Dr. Mortimer Maxwell Money, taken to Keowee Memorial Hospital for treatment prior to being lodged in the Keowee County Jail in Luthersville, had no comment. He is being held without bail pending further investigation . . .

REAL ESTATE

House and lot. Formerly the Heavenly Rest Funeral Parlor, purchased by Mrs. Gideon Vanderwort, from Vulcan City Gvt. . . .

GRAND OPENING

ANNOUNCING THE GRAND OPENING OF VANDERWORT AND ASSOCIATES: HOUSE OF INTERIOR DESIGN AND DECOR. Located in the completely refurbished and redecorated former Heavenly Rest Funeral Parlor.

Mrs. Vanderwort and her staff of highly trained professional ladies will be happy to serve you . . . hours by appointment. References may be required.

The following items appeared in the *Keowee Crier*, a weekly serving Upper South Carolina:

**SHERIFF HUNDLEY BAGS DOPE
SMUGGLERS IN SUGAR VALLEY**

Acting on information received from Mrs. June Bates and other concerned residents of Sugar Valley, Sheriff Hundley was able to break up and capture the entire dope ring that was using Sugar Valley as a source . . . assures us that no Valley residents were involved. "Quite the contrary," the Sheriff said. "When Valley residents caught on that they were being used by the gang, they were active participants in the capture of the gang . . ."

FALL FATAL TO VALLEY MAN

Eli Watts, prominent resident of Sugar Valley, was killed when he apparently slipped and plunged to his death while climbing Molly's Nose. Mr. Watts was an active member of the Valley Church, having served on the Board of Deacons for thirty-five years . . .

LONEY ADAMS TO RETIRE

When Miss Loney Adams hangs up her stethoscope for the last time, it will bring to an end a career of service to the Mountain Communities that began in 1913, interrupted only by two years

service in France with the Army Nurses Corps during World War I. Miss Adams will stay on the job until a replacement is found.

* * * * *

Sonny folded the paper so that it framed the story of the Heavenly Rest raid. "Darling, are these the crooks that were chasing you when you hid in the van?" he asked, showing his fiancée the pictures of Augie and Angel.

"It sure looks like them," she said. "I'm glad they got caught. They were mean."

"What were you doing in the Heavenly Rest in the first place?" he asked.

"That's where that rat of a Duke left me," she said.

"You came here with a duke?" he asked, visualizing the monacled English variety. "Where on earth did you meet a duke?"

"At Chico's," she said.

"Chico's?" he said wonderingly. "Is Chico a Spanish duke or something?"

"I don't think so," she said. "He just runs the trading post and tavern in the Valley."

"Oh, I see," he said, although he didn't. "Was this duke from England?"

"No. He said he was from Odessa. He was in oil," she explained.

"Oh, a Russian duke," Sonny brightened. "Were the Communists after him?"

"No, but the cops were—but I didn't know that when we left," she said. "I found out later, when we were supposed to be going to Odessa."

"He was taking you to Russia?" Sonny exclaimed.

"No, Texas. Is that farther than Russia?" Charlene asked.

"It is from some places," Sonny answered, still not sure where the conversation was headed. He decided to change tack a little. "What were you doing at the Heavenly Rest?" he asked.

"Duke said he had to go there and buy some more money," she said.

"Buy money?"

"Yeah, he said it was cheaper there," Charlene said. "I didn't know you could buy money."

"You can if it's counterfeit," Sonny said. "It was a counterfeit ring as well as a dope ring, and they think there was at least one killing. Here's the guy they think the gang killed." He showed her the photo of the luckless Slick Rick.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "I'm not surprised. You could tell they were rotten people. I know that guy, too; or I guess I should say 'knew' him."

"You knew him from the Heavenly Rest?" Sonny asked her.

"Sure. That's the little weasel who used to bring me dinner, and stand around gawking while I ate," she said. "I wondered why he stopped coming."

"You've got to tell that to the police. It could be important," he said. "But why did the duke leave you at the Heavenly Rest?"

"I don't know for sure," she told him. "There was some big row about him being a blabber mouth, and maybe the police would follow him there; and something about me being a hostage in case my folks wanted to raise a stink about what was going on in the Valley, but I didn't even know what was going on in the Valley—except that Bobby Sue was pregnant, and they wanted to make trouble for her, and—"

"Hold it! Hold it!" Sonny attempted to interrupt the flow, holding up his hand.

"—and he said he would gladly leave me with them and skip the country, if they would let him have five thousand dollars more, and—"

"Whoa, Babe," he said. "That's enough for now. Maybe we had better go tell this whole story to the police. They have more time to figure it out than I do."

"Well, that Duke is still a rat for dumping me," she said. "I hope they catch him, too. I want to give him a piece of my mind."

"I think a piece of it is about all he would get," muttered a less than fully enlightened Sonny. "Let's go out to dinner. Where would you like to go?"

"Luigi's," she responded. "I want spaghetti."

* * * * *

"Mmmm," the Secret Service Agent in Washington, D.C. was pondering the row of pins on a large map. The pins marked a trail of counterfeit money the FBI said came from the same set of plates. The row of pins followed roughly the course of the Mississippi River. "I'd say he was headed for Canada," he said.

Picking up the phone, he called his counterpart of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Winnipeg.

Three thousand miles away, the Chief Inspector, RCMP in Victoria, British Columbia, was studying a map with a similar row of pins running horizontally toward the east, roughly following the route of the Canadian

Pacific Railroad. Those pins also marked the trail of a notorious Canadian counterfeiter and con artist.

"He's going to get very near the border at International Falls, if he stays on this route," said the Chief Inspector. "He may try to bail out there. We had better alert the U. S. Border Patrol."

* * * * *

"Congratulations, Chief," Penny said. "And I never got to thank you for getting us out of the teacup."

"Thank you, Miss Parker," the chief said, motioning her to a seat. "You and your friends were a great help."

"Incidentally," he added, "I don't think we rescued you and Miss Daggett as much as we saved those two hoods. A little more, and I think you might have killed them. Without doubt, you all deserve the thanks of the community."

Penny smiled without comment, then asked, "Do you have enough evidence to be sure of a conviction?"

"I'm not sure you can ever have enough to be positive," the chief said. "We can always use more. Miss Charlene Daggett was in this morning to tell us her story, and she will be a most valuable witness."

"Charlene!" Penny exclaimed. "Where has she been? Darlene has been worried sick over her."

"I understand she, er, uh, found refuge with the mayor-elect," the chief told her. "She was with him when she came in."

"With Sonny Dorf! Wow!" Penny exclaimed again. "I'm not sure how Darlene will take that, but at least she will know where Charlene is."

"I don't want to be talking out of school," Chief Dillard said, "but they gave me to believe they have, er, uh, serious plans."

"Plans? You mean like wedding bells?" Penny asked.

The chief nodded. "That seemed to be the case."

"I think Darlene will be pleased to let someone else look after Charlene," Penny said. "It has worn her out. It was too bad about the 'boarding house' where Darlene and the boys lived, wasn't it?" Penny asked innocently.

"Boarding house? Oh, yes, the White Peacock," Dillard said, as if he preferred not to pursue that topic.

"Brilliant of you to use the White Peacock as an observation post for spying on the Heavenly Rest, Chief," Penny said.

"Uh, yes—excellent cover—"

"‘Undercover,’ one might say, mightn’t one?" Penny asked, watching a bead of sweat roll down the chief’s neck. To his relief, however, she seemed to change the subject. The sense of relief was short-lived.

"I almost forgot," she said, producing a brown envelope and handing it to him. "You may want to charge me with withholding evidence." He accepted the envelope from her with a puzzled expression, which changed to one of concern as he thumbed through the contents under Penny’s watchful eye.

"The boys and Darlene were wondering when they were going to be paid for their work as ‘Special Agents,’" Penny said.

"Paid?" the chief blanched.

"Yes, paid," Penny said. "Didn’t you appoint them as Special Agents?"

"I, er . . . uh, there must be some misunderstanding . . ." the chief stammered. "You see, I, uh . . . that is . . ."

"You mean they weren’t actually on the payroll?" Penny asked.

"That’s right," Dillard said. "You see, I, uh . . . I regret the misunderstanding. They will, of course, receive official thanks, and—"

Penny cut him off, "Oh, that’s all right. I’m sure they will appreciate the thanks."

"You mean there’s no problem?" the chief sighed. "Thank goodness."

"No, that’s very good, actually," Penny said. "If they weren’t on your payroll, that means they are eligible to receive the rewards for the capture of these crooks."

"Rewards?"

"Yes. As honest citizens doing their duty, they are entitled to these posted rewards," she said. "Here’s the list."

His jaw dropped as he read the list. "Young woman! Do you realize this amounts to six figures?"

"Oh, good. You can add as well as I did."

"But, but . . ." he sputtered.

"Just let us know when you have the money ready," she said, getting up to leave. "You can get in touch with us through Sheriff Hundley. We will all be in the Valley."

"You can’t expect me to . . . to . . ."

"Oh, yes," she said from the door, "I meant to tell you that I still have the negatives of those prints you just saw. I’ll bet the newspapers would love a copy—"

"No! No, this . . . this is unreasonable!" Dillard said.

"No, Chief," she smiled sweetly, "it’s blackmail."

* * * * *

Sergeant Gunther Wiggins, VCPD, Ret. was fishing off his front porch when the gypsy caravan went plodding by. Wiggins didn't really expect to catch anything. All he had was a pole, a line and a cork. He didn't even have a hook—or bait. That didn't matter. He didn't have any water, either. The line and cork were resting on the grass of his front lawn.

He was fishing because the doctor said when he was released it would be therapeutic. But, having grown more fond of crickets than fish, he turned the crickets loose. As it was, he was getting his therapy without having to bother with cleaning fish. Not a bad deal; and they thought he was crazy.

The small boy sitting on the wagon seat between a man and a woman waved to him, and he waved back. The boy put a shiny object to his lips and blew, and the ex-sergeant stiffened. There was something familiar about that whistle. He couldn't recall what it was right then. Liam O'Doul? Maybe. He would think about it later, when the fish started biting.

"Rodin, was this a good town?" Mischa asked.

"A very good town," Rodin assured him.

"Then why do we leave it?" Mischa wanted to know.

"To see if we can find a better one," his mother answered.

"Let's hurry," he said, blowing his whistle again.

But the mare kept the same pace.

* * * * *

The young man sitting next to him at the I-Falls Tavern Bar and Fish Boil seemed to have lots of money; at least he was running up a pretty hefty tab. Things like that always caught the Duke's eye. Duke had a nose for opportunity, and he sensed one here—a young man with plenty of money, obviously very innocent. He was a Canadian. Duke established that early on in their conversation. He also was getting very drunk. Duke discerned that as the evening progressed and the man's tab grew longer.

"Will they take Canadian money here, you think?" the young man asked.

"I 'spect they do, bein' so near the border and all," Duke said. "I'll ask the beermaid."

"Beermaid"! Ha, I like that," the young man said. "I bet you're from Alabama. They say funny things down there."

"Nope, Texas," Duke corrected. "They say funny things there, too."

"Well, here she comes, ask her," the young man said. "Hey," he said to the girl, "he said you were a 'beermaid.'"

"I guess that's close enough," she responded.

"He's from Texas. He's a real riot."

"Excuse me, I must have missed something," she said.

"Sugarplum," Duke said.

"Name's DruAnne," she said, "but 'Sugarplum' will do, as you're such a Texas riot."

"What my friend . . ." he began.

"Charles," the young man said, offering his hand. "Charles Depuy."

". . . Charles DePooey wants to know," Duke continued, "is if you take Canadian money?"

"Sure, we take it," she said. "But we charge a ten percent exchange fee. It's trading even right now, but we have to go trade it."

"Sounds fair enough," the young man said. "I've got it, an' then some." He withdrew a large wad of bills from his pocket.

"Hey! Don't do that in a place like this," Duke warned, shoving his hand under the counter.

"You think Jesse James saw me?" the young man said, looking around in mock alarm.

"Thanks, sugar—DruAnne," Duke said.

"Don't mention it, Tex," she said. "Go back to your riot."

"Hey, that guy over there looks like Humphrey Bogart," DePuy said.

"Just keep it down, will you?" Duke said. "I've got a deal for you, if you'll just listen."

"Okay, I'm listening," DePuy said. "As Bugs Bunny says, 'I'm all ears.'"

"Bugs says, 'What's up doc?', and I'm trying to tell you," Duke said. "Now, how much money do you have?"

"Seven dollars," DePuy said. "Ackshully, seven thousand counting those travelers' cheques."

"Look, DePooey, I'm going to Canada, and you are going to the United States. I'll swap you even, American for Canadian, and it will save you seven hundred dollars."

"You would do that for me?" DePuy asked. "A perfect stranger?"

"Call it a good neighbor gesture," Duke smiled.

"I'll do it, and to hell with the Queen, and long live Harry Truman!"

"For that, I'll throw in enough extra to cover my tab and yours."

"You are all heart, my friend." Burton thought DePuy was going to kiss him. Instead he just embraced him and wept on his shoulder.

An hour later, when DePuy paid the tab, Burton merely shrugged his shoulders at DePuy's imploring look when the man described as Humphrey Bogart, and another man who looked like James Cagney, each placed a hand on DePuy's shoulders and quietly escorted him away. Burton left the I-Falls Tavern, Bar and Fish Boil, and walked across the border to a Canadian motel, where he turned in and slept the sleep of one who has just closed a most satisfactory deal.

The next day, Burton met a Canadian Mountie in a red coat when he tried to pay his motel bill with a travelers' cheque drawn on "The Left Bank of the Yukon River."

24

Peace In The Valley

BOBBY SUE, Billy ain't never comin' back," Red said.
"I know, but it just ain't right, Red," she said, tears welling up.
"What ain't right?" Red asked. "You said you didn't love him, didn't you? And you do love me."
"I know, but it just ain't right for one man to have to raise another man's baby," she said.
"He ain't another man, he's my cousin," Red said, "and he ain't never goin' to come back. If he was, he'd done been here."
"I know, but I just can't . . ."
"And another thing; the baby, it'll be a Wilkins, won't it?"
"Half," she sobbed.
"That's good enough for me," he assured her, drying her tears.
"You sure you don't mind?" she asked.
"Mind? It ain't my loss—it's Billy's," he said.
"Red," she said.
"What?"
"Would you kiss me?"

* * * * *

"I don't know, Miss Adams. I'm not sure I could ever do it," Penny said.
"Loney, child. Loney. And I think you can do it, probably better than I ever thought of doing it," Loney said.

"All right . . . Loney. It's just that you have been here so long, and I'm an outsider—from the city, at that," Penny said. "I don't know if Valley folks will ever trust me."

"Do you think I was born in this Valley?" Loney asked. "Shoot, no! I wasn't even born in this County. I'm a flatlander from Monck's Corner. You can't get any flatter than that. As far as these people were concerned, I'd just as well been from Mars. We didn't even speak the same language. They spoke Mountain, and I spoke Geechee."

"Geechee?" Penny repeated uncertainly.

"It's a tidewater accent," Loney said. "Nobody around here ever heard of it. I had to learn to say 'mother' instead of 'muvver'. It's like learning to talk all over again."

"Loney, it's just so much to think about; and I don't know anything about midwifery."

"I'll stick around long enough to get you started," Loney said. "You can take some courses down at Greenville and be fully qualified before you know it."

"Loney, you're asking me to make a lifetime commitment here, and I don't know if I'm ready to do that, yet," Penny said.

"Is that lunkhead of an Elwood asked you to marry him, yet?" Loney inquired.

"Well, not exactly . . ."

"Then he's a bigger lunkhead than I thought," Loney declared. "Here he comes now. Let's find out if he's ever going to."

"No. Wait, Loney, I . . ." Penny began.

"Wait, nothing," Loney said. "I'm tryin' to retire, and I can't wait for that fool to see what the whole world sees."

"But, Loney, give him time. Don't rush him, please," Penny begged.

"He's had time," Loney said. "I don't have much left, and I've got to know something."

Elwood stepped up on the porch and entered the parlor where Loney and Penny were sitting. "Hi, Miss Loney," he greeted her, "Aunt Min around anywhere?" he asked Penny, who looked rather pale and apprehensive.

"Gone to June's— are you goin' to marry this girl?" Loney said in a single breath. "I want to know right now."

"Uh . . ." Elwood gulped.

"Now!" Loney demanded.

"If she'll have me," Elwood said simply.

"You want him?" Loney turned to Penny, and indicated Elwood, who sat down.

"Of course," Penny said.

"Then that's that," Loney said, satisfied. "We'll settle our other business tomorrow, and you can begin work Monday. That will give you a whole weekend to get married and have a honeymoon. In the meantime, I'm goin' to retire. You all can make your own plans."

She departed and left Penny and Elwood staring in open-mouthed disbelief until, each seeing the look on the other's face, they broke into whoops of joyous laughter and fell into each other's arms.

"I thought you would never ask," Penny gasped.

There wasn't much left to say, so he kissed her.

* * * * *

"Now I'm going to show you the famous 'grapevine trick' you've been waiting for," Charlene said.

"Darling, I couldn't think of anything more appropriate for our honeymoon, but do you think you should have invited other people to observe?" Sonny asked, looking around at Floyd and Darlene walking up the path behind them.

"Oh, don't worry about them," she said. "They've done it hundreds of times. They will probably join in."

"I didn't know it was a group thing," Sonny said with some misgivings.

"Oh, sure," Charlene assured him. "All the kids used to gather up here and do it after church on Sunday afternoons."

"All the kids?" he asked.

"Sure. There wasn't much else to do on Sunday, except catch crawdads, and we usually did both."

"Catch crawdads?" he asked.

"Yeah. Have you ever seen a crawdad fight?" she asked.

"Can't say as I have," he answered.

"Some of the boys had rather watch crawdads fight than do the grapevine thing," Charlene said.

They had reached the spot where the trail turned and climbed the bluff alongside Spangler's Branch. She took his hand and helped him up a steep place over some slick roots. His city shoes weren't made for hiking.

Sonny couldn't imagine a staging of the First Battle of Manassas with live ammo as being more exciting than the event he had been anticipating for

so long. However, he refrained from making any comment. He still had misgivings about all the witnesses, but when in Rome . . .

* * * * *

Floyd and Darlene paused where the path took its upward turn. Floyd checked a large rock for the presence of copperheads. Finding none, he brushed off a spot and they sat down to take a breather. Charlene and Sonny's conversations had a way of wearing them out.

"Darlene, what are your plans?" Floyd asked.

"What do you mean?" she responded.

"I mean, do you want to go back to the City?"

"No. Not to stay, I mean," she said.

"What do you want to do, then?" he asked again.

"I'd like to stay here and raise babies," she answered.

"How many?"

"Lots," she said. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to stay here and help you have them," he said, smiling.

"Do you think we could feed them all?" she asked.

"Well, me and El have been talking about if we invested some of that money the chief sent us in land, we could each have a pretty nice farm."

"What land?" Darlene asked.

"Deacon Watts' farm lies between our place and Aunt Min's. The Deacon's wife wants to sell out and go live with her sister at Jocassee Junction. If we bought that and divided it . . ."

"That's perfect," she sighed.

"Let's start having those babies," he suggested.

"Let's get married first," she said, laughing.

From up the creek they heard an excited, "*Wheeeee!*" as Charlene demonstrated the famous trick for Sonny and swung across Spangler's Branch on a grapevine. If the actual event fell a little short of his expectations, he never said.

Epilogue

Where have you all been?" Elwood asked his bride.
"Over at the Wilkins' delivering my first babies," Penny said proudly.
"Babies?" Elwood asked.
"Yep," Loney said, "and she did great on the first six. The last one was a little tougher."
"Seven babies!" Elwood exclaimed.
"That's right," Penny said. "Six of Prucilla's and one big boy for Bobby Sue and Red."
"A boy!" Elwood said.
"Percival Oswald Wilkins, Jr.," Penny said.
"Well, I'm leaving," Loney said. "You can handle it fine, Penny, and at last I'm goin' to take that vacation I never had."
"When will you be back?" Elwood asked.
"In plenty of time," Loney said as she went out the door.
"Wonder what she meant by that?" Elwood said curiously.
Penny glowed as she looked at him and said, "*Someone* is going to have to deliver our baby, Darling."

* * * * *

A full moon was rising over Molly's Nose. There was a decided nip in the air. Smoke curled up from the cabins in the valley below. Old Shortoff threw back his head and answered the age old call of his ancestors. The serenade was echoed up and down the Valley.
The coon hunters began to gather.

**Carroll
Gambrell**
*Spellbinding
Storyteller*



Photo by Cleere Portraits

Author Carroll Gambrell lives and writes today in the South Carolina mountains as he did as a young man. ***Sugar Valley Saga*** is his second novel based on his experiences there and across America. Service with the 82nd Airborne and two seasons smoke jumping with the U.S. Forest Service didn't rival the thrill of completing his first novel, ***The Kudzu Chronicles***, the author declares. This new novel brings the innocence and wonder of the country to the Big City, with entrancing humor and a gentle touch. Real characters and a surprising plot make ***Sugar Valley Saga*** a story as sweet as it sounds.



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