

Draft. 'Thoughts' of sorts.  
Written in Portaria Local  
Prison, while on trial.  
1963/64.

... nervously paws the  
 ... at the arena entrance;  
 ... voice exquisite, her riding  
 ... fit superbly cut and  
 ... moulded to a figure that is  
 ... the epitome of imperious  
 ... womanhood. She wears the  
 ... slightly absurd shiny "top-  
 ... per" with the natural ease  
 ... of a noblewoman accustomed  
 ... to a tiara.

● The partnership between  
 master and herd boy as they  
 brush the gleaming brick-red  
 and white flanks of the Here-  
 ford bull.

## VISITOR'S IMPRESSIONS

... points because events such as the Rand Easter Show  
 ... the attitudes of mind of the communities within which

The stranger at the Rand  
 Easter Show can merely visit  
 that Government stand, see the  
 statuary, observe the sombre  
 stained glass emphasising the  
 religious overtones, and let  
 instinct give the verdict as to  
 the meaning of South Africa.

Those rough-hewn statues  
 stress the family and the  
 Bible, and the gaunt figure  
 is looking into the distant  
 veld at a country which is  
 his, his, undeniably his.

And then you leave this  
 silent, but so eloquent, testi-  
 mony to South Africa's purpose  
 for the enduring solidity of the  
 Chamber of Mines pavilion. It  
 is also lofty, spacious and cool,  
 and so very permanent.

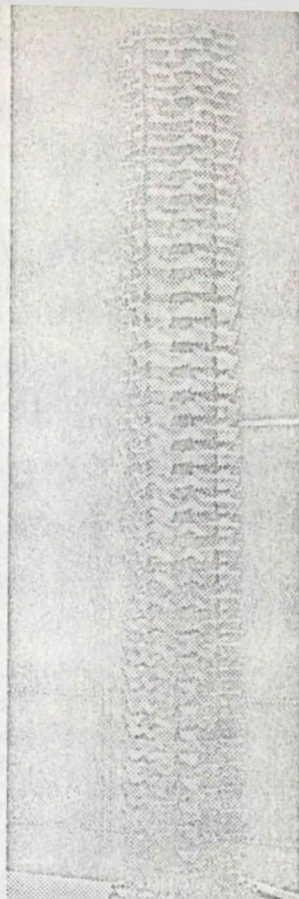
Fittingly the Mines' focal point  
 is the column of shiny yellow  
 metal, 216 bars in all, which  
 represents the daily *raison d'être*  
 of the thousands who toil under

and above the ground at the  
 seven goldfields of the Transvaal  
 and the Orange Free State.

Ludicrous, it might be thought,  
 that so much effort should be  
 put into producing 86,400 ounces  
 of gold, but the insistent voice  
 of the commentator reminds you  
 that this pile of yellow bricks  
 is worth R2,160,000 and repre-  
 sents two-thirds of all the gold  
 produced daily in the Free  
 World.

The Mines' pavilion is austere,  
 perhaps functional, until the  
 visitor happens upon the magni-  
 ficently interwoven colours and  
 imagination of design of the  
 Ullmann tapestries.

Commissioned by the Chamber  
 of Mines for eventual perman-  
 ence in the South African Paris  
 Embassy, the tapestries of Jo  
 and Ernest Ullmann have the  
 shock impact in their present  
 setting of a da Vinci in the



The impressive pile of  
 gold bricks.

home of a Yorkshire millowner,  
 or a Picasso in a Texas cattle  
 baron's ranchhouse.

## FLOWERS

AND then the profusion of  
 blooms in the Hall of  
 Flowers. How many patient,  
 loving man-hours must have  
 gone into the nurturing of the  
 myriad of flowers on display?

But they fit the pattern re-  
 vealed to the stranger at the  
 Rand Easter Show. First, the in-  
 domitable, unyielding perma-  
 nence of the Government display  
 then the casual revelation of  
 very great wealth of the Mine:  
 and now the flowers.

Flowers are a long-term in

of the Week

## CHAPTER ONE.

The telephone began ringing just as I banged out the last few words of my report on the typewriter, and rolled it out of the machine. I decided to let it ring, not because the copy-boy was drumming his fingers impatiently on my desk, but just because I had had enough for one day. If I let it ring long enough, perhaps the telephonist would decide I had gone home, and put it through to someone else.

The copy boy glanced at the report, took the end of his nose delicately between thumb and ink-soiled finger, said 'Pooh!', and drifted off. He had been with us all of four months, and already the news-room mannerisms had taken over.

The telephone continued to ring. I lit a cigarette, but it didn't stop. At that time of night it was sure to be trouble, and trouble was just what I didn't want. When I could stand it no longer I answered it, barking as ill-temperedly into the mouthpiece as I could.

It was trouble. Hennessy trouble. "Chris?" he said, speaking fast and low, in a breathless style I suppose he imagined was the regulation tip-off style. "Got something for you mate. A guy fell and looks like he broke his neck."

I made sympathetic noises. I wasn't in any mood for any of Hennessy's troubles, which always seemed to crop up late and full of blood. I waited for him to say something else, but he just hung on the phone, breathing heavily waiting for me. He won.

"Who's the guy?" I asked.

"Dunnoyet" he whispered back. I could feel the floor begin to shake as the presses in the basement started up. "He's lying here dead as a dodo."

"Where's here?"

"Bleridge Towers" he whispered. "Do you know it?"

I said I'd find it.

"Okay" he said. "I'm calling the cops now before I move him. So shake a leg. Seeya."

He rang off before I could thank him. Which was perhaps just

as well. I didn't feel in any mood to thank him. It had been a gruelling day, and I was ready to wrap myself round a large whisky and fall into bed. I didn't want any part of Hennessy's corpse, not that night. He did this sort of thing to me two or three times a year. Occasionally they were stories worth getting the first news of. But usually not. He seemed to think he owed it to me. Years before I had driven him through the night in a break-neck dash through the Gazala gap before Rommel sealed it off. He wasn't part of my crew; just a walking straggler we picked up on the way. And now he seemed to feel he owed his life to me, and that the best payment he could make would be a tip-off on a corpse.

Corpses aren't strictly my idea of news. But for Hennessy, now driving an ambulance, they were in the way of business. As I pulled my coat on, I began to feel that perhaps it had been a mistake to pick him up that night on the road to Gazala. As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I regretted it. I made a note on my desk diary to send him a bottle of the PRO's brandy the next day by way of pay-off for his tip, and sweetener for my conscience. Then I turned out the lights in my office, and headed down the corridor to dump the corpse in Mac's editorial lap.

That was my worst mistake in a day of mistakes. If I hadn't been so tired I would have been smart enough to go straight on out and home, and then phone the tip in to whoever was still on duty.

Mac was sitting in a fug of stale-smelling smoke, with his cold pipe clamped between his teeth. In the newsroom they claimed that it was made as part of his dentures, and only came out of his mouth when he parked the whole lot in a glass by his bedside at night. There were damp galleys festooned over his desk and dripping down into heaps on the floor. He was hacking away at one with a fat black pencil, his jaws working furiously at the pipe-stem, as though he was trying to bite through it.

"What now?" he snapped, without even looking up.

I told him about Hennessy's call. He looked at me then, glaring almost, in silence, waiting to see if he could stare me into dashing off on the trail. Not that night, he couldn't. I stood blowing smoke, waiting for it. I won.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he barked at last. "For

the body to decompose? Or for the Clarion to beat you to it?"

I kept my temper under control. I always seemed to lose the bout with him when I didn't. I told him that it was too late for our paper anyway, the presses were already running; and that if it was a story at all, someone could cover it later, since the Clarion would in any case break it first the next afternoon.

"It's after hours. And I've had a pretty rough day" I finished off. Another mistake.

"Rough day, have you?" he barked. "Well some fresh air and some fresh blood will do you good. On your way!" He turned back to the galleys as though I had already left.

I had worked there too long to imagine there was any point in arguing with him. All that would happen would be a terrifying silence, another long glare, and then another bark: "Okay! You've convinced me. I was right the first time! Now beat it." And the following day he would cement the victory by finding some gruelling chore on which I could do penance - the annual congress of the Temperance Union, or a Kensington beetle-drive in aid of 'Our Feathered Friends' home.

So I went. It was raining outside, and my car was parked three blocks away. By the time I reached it, water was trickling down inside my collar, and my trouser legs were wet almost to the knees. The black, deserted streets added to my gloom. The cinemas and cafes were closed, there were no pedestrians and very few motorists about. The only signs of Johannesburg life were the night watchmen, black and silent, huddled up in doorways, wrapped in great khaki army-style overcoats, with heavy suspicion in their eyes, and heavy knob-kieries close at hand. It was inevitable that on a night like that, all the traffic lights should be against me, ~~that~~ though I had the streets virtually to myself. In ten minutes I was over the Hillbrow ridge, and dropping down between the blank cliff faces of blocks of flats to the more open Northern suburbs where the pavements were lined with plane trees, and houses stood far back behind black hedges, dark, burglar barred and dripping.

~~Killarney~~

I passed the black void of parkland synthetically designed to look like veld and bush, and dropped down to the dark opulence of Killarney. Blueridge Towers was a new soaring glass-and-concrete

tower set back against the highest edge of the ridge. A winding serpentine driveway led up to a covered entrance porch where lights blazed. It didn't look my style, so I parked at the bottom in the public roadway, and splashed up through the rain.

There was a white porter in a glass and aluminium cage just inside the door. That was a special Johannesburg status symbol, which must have put pounds on the rent, - no porters for the great unwashed, black porters for the rich, white porters for the very rich, and very expensive. He came over and pulled the entrance door open while I stamped my feet on the marble steps, trying to shed some of the wet. He was grave, deferent, with enough gold braid on his blue uniform to make him an admiral in the Killarney navy. He treated me like the First Lord of the Admiralty until I flashed my press card at him. He let the swing door go negligently, almost taking my foot off at the ankle, and his voice got gritty.

"Press, huh?" he grunted. "Over there, in the courtyard." He jerked a thumb vaguely, and retired to his glass cage. "And don't make no noise!" he added to my back. The only sound in the place were my shoes squelching on the soft rubber floor.

I passed out of the heated warmth of the entrance hall, out of the concealed pink lighting into the dark behind the lifts, through a door to the back yard. It was cold, cavernous against the hill and impenetrably dark. In one corner, a single light bulb cast a small pool of light around the foot of the concrete escape stair. Hennessy and his mate sat on the bottom step, smoking, out of the rain. Behind them, an African night-watchman in blue military-style uniform stood silently in the shadows.

There wasn't much to see. Just outside the shelter of the stair, a body of a man lay face downward in the dark. I stepped across puddles to look at him. His head lay at an odd angle to his body, and blood seeped away from under him into the wet. The rain made plopping noises against his khaki raincoat. I couldn't see his face.

"What happened?" I asked Hennessy.

"Damn if I know" he said. "The watchman stumbled across

him an hour ago. That's all anyone seems to know." He looked back up the towering concrete escape stair, waved a vague hand above his head, and added: "Guess he fell from up there somewhere."

"Who is he, any idea?"

"No one knows" Hennessy said. "The watchman doesn't know him, and neither does the porter."

I sat down with them on the steps, smoking and waiting for the police to arrive. My wet feet gradually froze, and the cold began to creep up my legs. I was beginning to wonder if I would ever be able to stand up again when the police arrived, in the person of Captain Claasens, and a uniformed sergeant I hadn't seen before.

Claasens didn't seem much interested in the corpse. He stood there for several seconds, with a hard, unwinking stare passing from one to the other of us in complete silence. I was expecting the usual Claasens bellow; he was one of those bull-necked, red-faced characters running slightly to fat, who never spoke when he could just as well bellow. But when it finally came, it came out quietly, almost sotto voce.

"You again, huh?" he said to me.

I didn't have any illusion that the quiet restraint was a compliment to me. He was just the kind of man who would be impressed, awed almost, by the phoney plushiness and the obvious opulence of Blueridge Towers - even if he hadn't been cautioned by the admiral. His question didn't seem to call for an answer. I just looked back at him, smoking, till he got tired of it.

He turned to Hennessy and his assistant, and asked the same questions I had asked, and got the same answers. He tried them on the nightwatchmen, using a pidgin language he imagined was Zula, and got the same answers again. While that was going on the rest of the circus arrived, medical examiners, photographers, fingerprint men, uniformed constables. They all trod softly, spoke quietly. No one seemed anxious to wake the sleeping inhabitants of Blueridge Towers. No one seemed anxious to go out in the rain. Flashbulbs popped twice, and a photographer ducked back under cover. Finally the medics went to work, while some of the constables played their torches on the body. One of them rolled the

body over on to its back. It rolled sickeningly, like a mutilated rag doll, head and arms seeming to stay behind as though unfirmly attached. I choked down my slight nausea, and walked out into the rain to have a look.

"Good God!" I said, involuntarily, talking more to myself than anyone else. "Its Rod Steele." The pulpy face had a great gash down one side, and yet it was, unmistakably Steele.

"What's that you said?" Claasens asked heavily, grasping me by the elbow.

I shook his hand off, feeling stunned sick.

"Rod Steele" I said. "Used to work for the Clarion." We moved back out of the rain. Claasens asked the questions, all obvious, all routine, and the sergeant took the answers down in a pocket note-book. There wasn't much I could tell him - Steele's name, address, occupation. I hadn't seen him for over a year, and even before that I didn't know much about his personal life.

The police had rolled the body on to a stretcher, and carried it out of the rain. Someone had gone through the pockets and listed all the contents, sealing them down into brown manila envelopes - all routine stuff, and what one would expect to find - matches, handkerchief, money, papers.

"You stick around" Claasens said to me. "I might want you some more."

I had no desire to stick around. I just wanted to go away from there fast, and get myself a long hard drink and try to forget I had ever been there. Or perhaps be sick. Or both. I didn't want to see any more of the battered lifeless doll with the broken joints, or any more of the police prodding and probing and pushing around like butchers with a slab of beef.

But I knew Claasens of old. There was no point in arguing. Argument would just make him more obstinate, worse tempered, more determined to twist my arms and rub my face in it - metaphorically. So I stayed.

I could hear heavy police boots climbing the escape stair, flight by flight, pausing at every landing. The soft sounds of their voices died away by the time they reached the sixth floor; after that I could just hear the ringing and stopping of their boots, striking strange echoes from the hard blank walls of the



stair tower. For a while silence. And then the sergeant came down in the lift to call the photographer and finger-print men, standing huddled in silence just far enough from me to keep out any possibility of conversation. No one invited me, but I tagged along anyway to see what they had found. No one made any move to stop me.

We rode up in the lift in silence. It was large enough to take a Cadillac, fish-tail fins and all, close-carpeted, and with pink concealed lighting. Piped music oozed out very soft and blue from a grille in the ceiling. It smelled vaguely of perfume and stale cigar smoke, and travelled silent as a whisper.

The ninth floor corridor was glass encased against the night. Soft rubber floor tiles killed the noise of our feet. A glass door framed in aluminium gave out on to the fire-escape stair. It stood wide open, and a pool of rainwater blown in from outside glistened blackly on the rubber. Through the wet there was a sharp black streak, starting in the corridor and trailing out through the door on to the staircase landing. Just above the point where it ended a similar streak began on the three-foot high parapet wall, getting wider as it ran until it reached the top of the wall.

The flash bulbs began to pop, and constables took measurements with a tape. I went out into the rain, leaned over the wall where the streak showed, and looked down nine floors to the courtyard where the body had been lying. The fingerprint man dusted, cursing monotonously to himself as he worked: 'Too bloody wet. Too bloody wet.'

"Okay" Claasens said. "That's the lot."

Everyone collected up their bits of equipment and moved off towards the lift. If any of the tenants heard anything, they didn't show it. No windows opened, no heads popped out. Not even the corner of a curtain moved.

"What's the verdict?" I asked Claasens, as we rode down in the lift. "Did he fall or was he pushed?"

He stared coldly.

"Your guess is as good as mine!" he said crossly. And then after a minute:

"Or did he jump? And was it from that floor or somewhere

else? And were those marks his? Or just some clumsy bastard with a ~~hazy~~ dirty broom?"

He seemed to be working himself up into a fury about something. It could have been the hour, or just his digestion. Or it could have been me. He didn't like the Herald very much - which probably meant he didn't like me. He seemed to think we did not give him the treatment he deserved in our columns. Mac was the sort of editor who managed to bring out the worst side of the police. Not that there was anything personal in his attitude to them. It was just his old, starched Victorian refusal to do any glamourising of anyone, cop or citizen, who wasn't doing anything more than his job. No matter how a report was written up, Mac's blue pencil would cut it down to the straight news, shorn of all the 'crack-murder-squad-detective--working-through-the-night-on-the-slenderest-of-clues' stuff that other papers used partly because they liked the style, but also because it paid off in police co-operation with their reporters.

Claas ens knew he didn't have to be polite to me. The story would appear in just the same way, friendly, surly or downright rude.

He crowded me into a corner of the entrance lobby, the sergeant took out his pocket book, and he began firing questions. All routine stuff, very uninspired. Steele's address. Where did he work? When I had seen him last?

I was tired, and I kept it short. There wasn't much to tell anyway. I had known him, on and off, for four years, since the time he came to work for the opposition Clarion. We would meet the way reporters do, at the same court-cases and politickings, and sometimes at the same corpses. We would drink in gangs in the same pubs, and exchange complaints about editors. On the surface all very friendly, full of leg-pulls and banter. Underneath, the wolf-pack struggle to glean a pearl of information from each ~~un~~ unguarded word, to pick the locks behind which some news-behind-the-news, some scoop might lie concealed in the other's mind. Relations were maintained in the way of wolf-packs, calm on the surface, seething with fear and envy, even hate beneath.

And in the way of wolf packs, sometimes the hate erupted.

It had only erupted once between Steele and I. It was two years back. It didn't seem to be any of Claasens' business, and I didn't mention it. It wasn't long after that that he had left the Clarion, and gone into selling insurance. We no longer used the same pubs or covered the same beats. I couldn't recall seeing him after that.

It also didn't seem to be any of Claasens business that Meg and I had been one of those couples that everyone who knew us assumed was permanent, as good as settled for life. I suppose we did too until I introduced her to Steele at one of those endless pub sessions. Perhaps we had been together for too long, and I was getting to take Meg too much for granted, not watching her closely enough to know what was going on in her and with her. I was almost as surprised as everyone else when they married suddenly about a month later.

After that I saw very little of them. In a way it was my own fault. I went into a rather juvenile fit of sulks, and kept away from Meg deliberately. She, perhaps feeling guilty about me, made no effort to get in touch. And there it probably would have ended if Steele hadn't been the kind of character he was.

I suspect he sought me out deliberately one evening soon after their marriage. He came into the pub waving a glad hand at everybody, made straight for my table and asked me to have a drink with him. "By way of a celebration" he added, in case I hadn't seen the purpose of the gesture. It was a typical Steele gesture, just the thing that had always made me think of him as 'the grade A heel'. It fitted his character and rhymed with his name, so I could make up doggerel hate-poems about him when he became too obnoxious. But that night there were no hate poems; just pure hate. I'd lost control of myself completely, and created a memorable bar-room scene in a way I do not like to think about even now.

But it was none of Claasens' business. He wasn't awake enough or bright enough to catch any hint of anything from my answers to his questions. I didn't have to lie. Just keep to myself what I thought was my own.

As we talked, several well-dressed, well perfumed couples crossed from the entrance porch to the lifts, the admiral dancing

attendance on them, opening and closing doors, and cooing 'Good evening sir' and 'Good night madam' like the admirable Crichton. Once he came over and suggested we move out of the foyer. If he thought we were polluting the refined atmosphere of Blueridge Towers he was probably right. Claasens didn't even answer him. He just gave him a hard, stony glare, and went on with his questioning as though he hadn't heard. The admiral seemed to shrink to commodore. Claasens dropped his cigarette end on the floor, deliberately, crushing it to a messy pulp with his heel. The admiral retreated to his cage.

Finally he ran out of questions.

"Well, that's about all" he said heavily. The sergeant closed his book and slipped it into his pocket. "Now to break the good news to the widow."

I had been thinking about that all the time, even through the questioning, ever since I saw the face and recognised it as Steele. The thought of it had made me sick, hollow-sick inside. The thought of the news being broken by this crude, bull-voiced, surly character almost made me sick outside, on the admiral's foyer floor.

"If you like, I'll do that for you" I said, keeping it as light as possible, not pushing him. I had an idea of how Claasens mind would work.

It did.

"Going to get yourself a tear-jerker for the morning paper huh?" It wasn't taunting or even jocular. Just hostile, crude. I kept my temper.

"Look Captain" I told him. "This isn't my story. It's the Clarion's. First he was one of their boys, so they're entitled to it. Second, my paper has gone to bed, and by the time the Clarion has run it in the afternoon, it won't make an inch on the back page in our next edition."

"So what's in it for you?"

I said nothing.

"You got an eye on the lady yourself maybe?" Again I let it go. He seemed disappointed I hadn't got mad. "Perhaps I ought to do myself a good turn and just go along and hold her hand, huh?"

The sergeant snickered. It didn't sound as though his heart was in it. Just polishing his apple for future promotion.

"Suit yourself" I said. I had had enough of his cop-shop manners. I walked to the door, watched by the admiral. He made no move to pull the door open for me. I flicked some ash from my cigarette on his floor. Claasens manners seemed to be contagious.

"Okay" Claasens barked when I was already halfway out of the door. "You do it. But do it good, see? And if there's a word in your rag about the hard-hearted coppers who didn't tell the widow sorry, I'll come down there personally and beat your teeth in."

"That's damn decent of you Captain" I told him without looking back, and went on out into the rain.

It was getting on for three a.m. as I drove back over the Hillbrow ridge. A dead world, without movement. No cars, no people, but the traffic lights still going through their stolid routine. What I needed more than anything was a long stiff drink. My feet were as cold as ice, but inside me was even colder, and the closer I got to my destination the more my hands began to shake.

There was only one light showing in the building where the Steeles lived, a dim pilot light above the lift. It was one of the older Hillbrow blocks, spacious, rather dark and not very luxurious. The lift shook and grated its way up to their floor, and I shook and my stomach churned in sympathy.

It took me a long time just standing outside the door before I could work up the courage to ring. When at last I did, I could hear the bell shrill inside. Nothing happened. I waited for a while and rang again, praying there was no one home. That must have done it. A light came on somewhere inside, and a moment later a vague grey shape appeared in silhouette behind the pebbly glass panel in the door.

"Who is it?" Meg's voice sounded shrill with alarm, as well it might at that hour in this burglar-barred and double-locked city.

"It's Chris" I called.

She seemed to hesitate a moment before opening up.

"Chris! Good God! At this hour!"

The light was behind her, so I couldn't see her face. But her voice

had a shrill edge of fear.

"Chris, what is it?"

"I think I'd better come in Meg. I must talk to you."

"Now?" she asked.

I nodded. She stared at me, I suppose unsure whether I was sober or not. Then she stood aside to let me in, and closed the door behind me.

"Is it Rod?" she asked sharply, standing rigid, her back against the door.

I put a hand on her arm, and moved her down the hallway towards the light. She shivered as I touched her, but came without resistance, like a doll.

"Chris, please! Is it Rod?" she asked again.

I nodded. In an alcove below the hanging light there was a small dining table with two chairs. I guided her to a chair, and she sat down stiffly, eyes wide and staring at me, her hands gripping the table edge. Her hair was ruffled still from sleep, hanging loose down to her shoulders. She had on a long grey dressing gown, thick and velvety.

"Oh God!" she said. "What's he done now?"

I was standing behind her. I put both hands on her shoulder. They were stiff, taut, unresponding.

"He's had an accident, Meg."

She brought a hand up sharply to her mouth as though to smother a cry, but there was no sound. She was waiting for the rest of it. I couldn't find the right words.

"I'm sorry Meg" I said. "They found him dead."

"Oh no!" she cried sharply. Her head dropped forward and she covered her eyes with her hand. I could feel her shoulders shaking, not with sobbing but as though she were shivering. For a long time we stayed like that frozen, until I began to feel the shivering leak away to stillness. Without thinking, my mind trying desperately to ~~think~~<sup>fashion</sup> of words that might help, my hand moved across to the back of her head, and I began to stroke her hair slowly. It was not a deliberate act of any sort, just one of those old warm gestures that had once been a habit between us when comfort was called for.

A few minutes later she responded with another old, habitual gesture, reaching up one hand to mine, and stroking my fingers as I stroked her hair.

"Oh God! Poor Rod" she said at last. "Poor Rod." And then:  
"You'd better tell me about it Chris."

There was a bottle of brandy on a nearby shelf. I poured her a drink. She took it without a word, but didn't drink it, just holding it there in her hands as though warming it, gazing into its golden glow while I told her about it as best I could.

She didn't say anything, or ask any questions. Her face looked white and drawn, and a lot older than I remembered it. When I finished telling it, she patted my hand, and sat silent, gazing into her glass.

It was cold and comfortless in the hard circle of light falling on the hard teak table. I desperately wanted a drink, but the thought of drinking it alone, there, turned my stomach. I went through into the living room, fumbled about until I found the light switch, and went across to a mahogany bookcase fitting and turned on the inset electric radiator.

"Come and warm yourself, Meg" I said, holding my freezing hands out to the red glow. She came across like a sleepwalker, her eyes seeming to look through the room and out to somewhere far away. I guided her to the big settee. She sat with her arms folded tight across her chest, gazing sightlessly at the red glow.

At last when I thought she was in a state of shock, she said suddenly in a small pleading voice:

"Come and sit here Chris." And as I sat down,  
"Oh Cris! Hold me please!"

I put an arm around her shoulders, drawing her close to my chest. For a while she cried, almost silently, sniffing against my shirt front. I don't think my clutch did anything for her, except that it was a reminder that she wasn't quite alone. I was just a person, another human being. And that I think was all she wanted of me then. I could feel the heat of the fire creeping through the soles of my shoes before she stopped sobbing, gradually relaxed, and leaned back against me, comfortable but no longer desperately clinging.

When she did speak finally, it was in a flat voice, toneless

and without any discernible expression.

"We were washed up, Chris, Rod and me. Did you know that?"

I hadn't known. If I had, perhaps I would have handled it all differently. But her question wasn't really a question, and it didn't seem to need an answer. On the rare occasions I had seen them together they had seemed to get along well enough, much as most married couples I knew. But perhaps that was the public face. We had not been on visiting terms since my scene with Steele.

"I haven't seen him now for almost a week" she said. "I don't even know where he's been. It's like that."

I suppose if I had pressed her then, things might have been different afterwards. But I didn't. I did not want to know the story of Meg and Steele, neither then nor afterwards. I did not want to hear about it, neither the good nor the bad. It was her life, not mine, and I was not going to mix in it. We had had a lot of years, Meg and I, which were ours. I could still draw warmth and pleasure from their memory, even after she ran off with Steele. With Meg I had had a special closeness which I have never had with any other person before or since. I had known - or until she went off with Steele I thought I had known and even felt everything that went on inside her, and had understood it. And I think she had in me. What we had shared we didn't have to discuss or explain to each other; we just understood somehow.

But her life with Steele was not a part of that. It did not belong between us. I didn't want to open the lid and look inside that life that was theirs. For her own reasons, she had locked me out of it. It was theirs, not mine. Let them keep it.

So instead of asking, I just listened. She wanted to talk, seemed to need the release of it, and I just sat and listened. It wasn't anything I couldn't have foretold. Steele had won her with a show, with a challenge if you like. He was going places, He knew it, his manner spoke of it. He had drive, ambition, the fever of success. I suppose, though she didn't say it, in him she had found all the things she had failed to find in me. Perhaps the newness of it had swept her off her balance. Perhaps when she came to know him deeper, under the skin, after their marriage, she began

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to see it differently, more as I had seen and known him. Some where the drive began to show itself as push, and the ambition as greed. I don't know if she ever came to think of him quite as I did - as a Sammy Glick character driven by some inner urge to run faster, climb higher, grow richer, a Sammy Glick without ideals, and only a superficial charm to cover the unprincipled essence of him.

But somehow, over the first year of their marriage, the glamour which had won her had worn away. She told me of a dozen incidents, each trivial, but all of a pattern. Steele was on the way up. He was pushing, elbowing and kneeling in the groin all those who stood in his way. In a sense, I suppose, he began to trample on Meg too in his climbing. From arguing they had passed to disillusion. In less than two years they had become strangers to each other, living together but without warmth, like guests at the same hotel, complying with the daily courtesies but each going their own way. The final break must have been very close. Steele had been staying away from home with no real explanation - "always facile lies I don't think he really expected me to believe" she said. "A conference, a business trip, a deal" And about a week before he had gone, talking of a big deal, "really big, the pot of gold this time" was how she told it. And had not come back.

Through all the recollection I sat there silent; it was none of my business. And the tone of her voice made me feel that she was talking more to herself, persuading herself, than to me. The tale came out jerkily, in sudden bursts of recollection or reverie, followed by long silences. Only once in the whole recital did she even seem conscious that I was there, and that was towards the end when she cried out suddenly: "Oh God, Chris! If you'd only been stronger."

It was something I had said to myself often enough in those past two years.

The first grey of morning was leaking into the flat when I finally went out to the kitchen and made some coffee. When I brought a cup in to her in the living room she said, at something of a tangent:

"I think it was Brendan more than anything. Brendan did something to him, Chris, that turned everything sour." I knew

Brendan casually in the way that every reporter in the country must have known him -- as a sport, a play-boy and a name on the social pages.

"Smooth" she said. "And a big, rich operator. When Rod first went to work for him, I thought he was just another boss. But there was something else to it too. I suppose Rod envied him his fame, or perhaps his women or his money, I don't know what. Perhaps he flattered Rod, or was flattered by him. But bit by bit he seemed to be taking Rod over, out of our life and into his. Nightclubs, week-ends at country houses, that sort of thing. Rod loved it."

Rod would. He was just the type to love evrything about Brendan and his phoney country-club crowd.

"And you, Meg?" I asked.

"At first I went along, just once or twice. But it wasn't for me Chris. It seemed to give Rod such a boost that at first I couldn't say no. But it wasn't for me.

"And then, after a time I began to duck out. I don't think Rod really minded, and I'm sure Brendan didn't. I was never his type. We just seemed to freeze each other when we met."

Gradually after that, they stopped inviting her. And Steele began to see more and more of Brendan, and less and less of Meg. They were drifting, and they both knew it. At first Steele would explain his absences, with off-hand apologies she thought were false - "Sorry you can't join us. But this is strictly stag." - which she didn't believe; but she no longer cared enough to argue. And finally, no excuses, no apologies. "He would just go out; and sometimes he would come back the same night, and sometimes he would ~~xxx~~ not. And after a while it didn't matter to me any more, Chris. I had lost him somewhere. He was going up, up some ladder of his that was taking him to some life of paradise he imagined was at the top. God only knows what it was, money perhaps, the big time in which Brendan moved?

"And the faster he climbed, the more certain I was that there was nothing there for me Chris. Nothing I wanted or could ever want. Until finally I knew that when he got to the top, it would be alone. I wouldn't go with him, and he wouldn't want me around any more."

So that was where they had reached before he walked out, for

ever as it turned out, even if they hadn't then known it. No violent scenes, no clean break. Just a drifting apart to the point of no return.

"Didn't he say where he was going, Meg?"

"Not really" she said, getting to her feet, and stretching herself, as though now it were told she could return to life again. "Not in any way that makes sense. All he said was: 'This is it! This is the real thing Meg! If I pull this deal off, I'll have the world at my feet - go anywhere! Do anything! For the rest of my life!' He sounded mad, Chris, excited mad, so mad I didn't even think about it again after he went."

"Didn't you even ask what he was driving at?"

"Don't you see Chris. It was all 'it, 'my feet' my life! Never 'ours'. It didn't do anything to me except turn me even more stony against him than before. I wasn't interested any longer in his life. I'd had enough, Chris."

No doubt she had. So he had gone out in silence, and that was that. I listened to the first early-morning trucks grinding up the hill outside, their engines clear and rough in the still of morning. I went over and pulled the curtains open, and let some pink dawn light come in to clear away the gloom.

"All I thought of after he had gone" Meg went on, talking to herself again, "was of packing up and leaving. But it didn't seem to be the way to finish. I wanted to end it off clean, without any doubts, without any more waiting and wondering and regrets. So I stayed here waiting for him to come back, so I could have it out face to face.

"And here I am. Still waiting Chris."

In the light her face was haggard, and her eyes dark-ringed with fatigue.

"There's nothing more to wait for now" I told her softly. It was a mistake, one of several I made that night. I should have been harsh, brutal about it, and tried to shock her out of it. I should have told her what needed to be said, that Steele was a louse from way back, and any minute spent waiting for him, now or earlier, was a minute wasted. If I had done so, everything afterwards might have been different.

But as she said, things would only have been different if I

~~had been~~ a fighter. So instead I ~~said~~ suggested that she go and pack a bag and move over to her Aunt Lil's for a time.

"Go and dress, Meg, and I'll drive you over."

She went like a puppet, as though not yet fully awake. When she emerged dressed in a dark suit and carrying a small case she said: "Do you think I'll have to go and see..." She broke off, undecided how to finish. Finally she sttled for: "Identify him?" I said I didn't think so. But I promised to phone the police later in the day, and find out about it.

We went out into the early morning, and drove down the hill through Orange Grove. Africans on bicycles were toiling up the hill on the way to work, and the first green buses full of factory hands from Alexandra were beginning to spread the days pall of blue haze over everything.

In the car she said suddenly: "What about the rest of it? Funeral and so on."

"You go in and get a sleep" I told her. "I'll see what I can do about it, and let you know later."

"Oh Chris!" she said sadly. "To keep you up all night listening to my miseries, and now to do this to you as well. You ~~my~~ must be utterly exhausted."

"Don't worry about me" I told her, though in truth my eyelids felt as though they were lined with sandpaper, and I was about ready to keel over. "I'm a night-shift worker, remember. I can sleep all day."

She patted my arm, thank you. The rest of the drive was silent.

When I stopped the car at Aunt Lil's she said again in a voice full of sorrow, "Chris, I am sorry to do this to you after all the rest I've done."

I suppose she was referring to ~~turning~~ turning me up for Roderick Steele. But it wasn't the time to talk about it. Instead I asked if she wanted me to come in with her, but she said no. She'd rather do it alone.

She ~~leant~~ across, patted my stubble-rough cheek, said "Thank you, my dear" and got out.

"You will call me, Chris?"

"After you've slept."

She turned and walked up the garden path without looking back, her

back very straight, as always.

I made it back to my flat without falling asleep at the wheel, or even weeping for her. But only just.

\* \* \* \* \*

The African cleaner banging his broom about woke me at near twelve. I called the police, my head still thick even after a cold shower. They told me Meg wasn't needed. Two members of the Clarion staff had done the identification, for the record. The medical examiners had finished their part of the business, and we could arrange to collect the body from the police morgue at any time, and bury it. They wouldn't say what the medical examination had found, that would have to wait for the inquest. But I had been long enough in the ambulance-chasing game to know that if the body was being released that quick they hadn't found anything more than they had expected.

I arranged the funeral over the phone, and staggered downstairs to the barber shop for a shave and a hot towel. That improved my condition to near human, and lunch washed down with neat Cape brandy completed the cure. By three o'clock I was back at my desk feeling rather fragile but fit for work. All I was hoping was that Mac wouldn't vent any of his editorial sadism on me that day. I was strong enough for some things, but not for that.

The early edition of the Clarion was lying on my desk. The story was on the front page, not very big, but very full of Captain Claasens, whose name seemed to me to feature twice as often as Steele's. The heading read: "Reporter falls to his death", and you had to read to the last paragraph, carried over to page five, to learn that Steele was no longer a reporter. He had "left the Clarion to enter the insurance business a short while ago."

For once the gods were on my side. Mac was out at some management conference with the old man down in the financial district. The phone didn't ring. There wasn't anything needing any leg work, and not much needing much brainwork. I spent a peaceful afternoon sub-editing pieces coming in from our reporters in country towns, homely stuff about the opening of new bridges and the birth of two-headed cows. It was going to be one of those days when news-room ulcers were allowed to rest up, and the columns were filled with ~~pieces of non-news from the El Paso Herald and the Haiti Times.~~

scissors-and-paste stuff clipped from the Haiti Herald and the El Paso Times.

By 4.30 I had had enough. There weren't many perks that went with the title of 'chief reporter' - which was what it said on the door of the cage I occupied in one corner of the news room. All it really meant was that I had survived there longer than anyone else without my derelictions being discovered. But the one privilege it carried was the right to walk out on undefined business without any explanation to anyone except Mac - and that only if he asked.

Brendan's insurance business was run from the tenth floor of a new stainless-steel-and-glass curtain wall block, smooth faceless and undistinguishable from a dozen others which had sprouted in the financial district of ~~the~~<sup>down-</sup>town Johannesburg. There were fluorescent lights everywhere, probably including the water closets though I didn't inspect to make sure. Individual packaged air conditioners hummed in the windows of all offices.

By the time I got there, the offices were beginning to shut down for the night, and the corridors were filled with over-dressed stenographers clacking along on stiletto heels, weighed down with oversize handbags and oversize hair-dos. Here and there, a young business executive with fat bottom and charcoal-grey suit, smoothing down the collars of their Arrow shirts, eyeing the girls at the lift lobbies but not talking to them. Class distinction, Johannesburg stock-exchange version.

Brendan's door was enameled black, with a frosted glass pane neatly signwritten: 'Woodrow P. Brendan - Insurance Consultant'. Two phoney touches, just as I might have expected of Brendan, the courtesy title 'consultant' when plain salesman would have said it all; and that middle initial which was becoming so fashionable under the influence of Hollywood. The old established money -and for that matter such old established 'society' as the town boasted, declared its solid self confidence by simple 'James Jones' or even 'J.Jones.' Only the newly arrived phonies added a middle initial.

The door opened into a small reception office, with wall-to-wall carpeting and an interior decorator's ceiling looking like

an overgrown egg-crate, with concealed fluorescent lights above it. It had all the current fads - slatted bench seating with Dunlopillo cushions, a kidney-shaped black coffee table with chrome legs displaying copies of Time, Life and Tatler, and a potted plant in a white Wedgwood pot.

The receptionist looked about nineteen. She sat behind a black desk with boomerang-shaped top and more chrome trimmings. She was reading a green Penguin book with a picture of Erle Stanley Gardner on the back cover, and made no attempt to push it out of sight as she raised her head under a rather top-heavy golden beehive of hair and smiled at me.

"Business must be booming to keep you here so late" I said.

She grinned, a nice friendly grin.

"Just finishing the chapter." She nodded at the book. "It's getting to the exciting part, too exciting to leave at this stage."

"What's this one?" I asked. "The Case of the Piemaker's Popgun?"

She grinned again, and showed me the title page. I wasn't so far out at that.

"Anything I can do for you?" she asked.

I told her she could get me a job with Woodrow P. Brendan so that I could sit around and catch up with Perry Mason too.

"Are you a fan too?"

"Definitely" I said. "I'm all for Mason. And Della Street too. But I think its time he married her."

It wasn't strictly true, but it helped to break the ice.

"Is the boss at home?" I asked.

"What a question!" she said, grinning again. "Do you think I would sit here and read if he were in?" Brendan, it seemed, had been away for several days. He had not said definitely when he would be back, but not till after the weekend anyway. That meant Tuesday, since the weekend coming up was Easter.

"Any of his assistants in?"

He only had two "reps", she said, managing to give it a note of sarcasm. Both of them were away. Neither of them would be back till after the weekend either.

She obviously hadn't heard that one of them, Roderick Steele wasn't going to be back for a long time after Easter either. It

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