

fantastic

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B E A T R I C E

BY DEAN EVANS

One day, science-fiction writers tell us, we are to have a brave new world filled with gadgets to do our work, machines to solve our problems. But can technocracy free a man caught in the web of human deceit? As a case in point, Dean Evans tells you the tough-tender story of Mr. Fransic, a subdued little man with a cheating wife. In a way, machines solved Mr. Fransic's problem — solved it with a finality that brooked no argument.

HE WAS a little man, a very little man, and very frail. He was so frail, indeed, that if you held him up bodily to a strong light you might expect to see right through him, bones and all. His name was Willard A. Fransic. He was mild as cheesefood, and his

voice — when he spoke, that is — was so soft and so incredibly delicate that the sudden unbelievable sound of it was rather shocking. But gently shocking. Like the sight of a hummingbird flying backwards.

That particular night he reached

his home a bit earlier than usual. As was his secret ritual — if nobody was looking — he paused when he got to the beam of the photoelectric cell artfully concealed in little enclosures under the box hedge before the apartment entrance. He pushed out his chin and threw back his thin shoulders. Then he stepped forward into the beam and raised his eyes pleasurable as the great, cathedral-like ornamental bronze doors of the apartment, activated by the hidden mechanism, swung open very slowly. Very, very ponderously — and just for him alone. He smiled happily. He went through and into the lobby.

"Evening, Mr. Fransic, sir!" rasped out the ID Box over on the right wall. Mr. Fransic turned his head, nodded politely. The ID Box was so designed that, if its radar tentacles touched physical proportions not listed in its remarkable mechanical memory, it would immediately send a little warning over to the elevator doors. And the elevator doors, cooperating, would stubbornly refuse to open to anybody or anything, short of a blowtorch or a molybdenum chisel propelled by a ten-pound sledge in the hands of somebody with a lot of time and a lot of energy to burn. Moreover, if any unauthorized person attempted to meddle with the ID Box itself . . . Mr. Fransic shuddered, thinking about that. On the

whole, though, Mr. Fransic approved very highly of the ID Box. Because of the ID Box, no one not wanted could get upstairs into the residences of the tenants. No glib-talking door-to-door men, for instance. No thieves. A wonderful gadget, the ID Box, thought Mr. Fransic.

Mr. Fransic crossed the silent lobby. The elevator doors opened beautifully. Mr. Fransic got in. The doors slid closed.

"Fifth floor, if you please, Arthur," said Mr. Fransic. Of course, he wasn't talking to anybody, for the elevator was entirely supermatic and required no operator. Mr. Fransic was only giving orders to the control dingus on the wall. That was another thing Mr. Fransic liked. He even named it, he liked it so well, and when he uttered the name he always said it with a straight face, not smiling.

The elevator went up like smoke through a cool chimney. The doors went back. Mr. Fransic stepped out and walked down the cheerfully-lighted corridor. He stopped before a mahogany door with "3C" lettered on it in shiny solid gold.

"This is the lord and master," announced Mr. Fransic, playfully, into a small chromium-grilled unit on the door casing. The unit knew he wasn't a fake. The door went back like a mouse scurrying into its hole.

Mr. Fransic stepped into the living room. He took off his hat and aimed it at the tall porcelain figurine of a nude which stood upon the glass-topped coffee table. Then he sighed and shook his head and didn't throw it at all, but hung it up in the closet instead. After that, he rubbed his thin veined hands together, although the evening was pleasantly warm, and called out cheerfully: "Halooo!"

Nobody answered that. Mr. Fransic stepped across the thick nylo-wool carpet, went around a large easy chair that resembled an upholstered tablespoon; went on by a divan which wasn't quite as long as a pew in the rear of a church, and called out again: "Willard A. Fransic is home, dearest!"

Mr. Fransic blushed faintly, suddenly feeling a little ludicrous. He reached the door of his den, opened it, popped his head in and looked around. There wasn't anybody in the den. He closed the door again, went down a short hall to the kitchen.

"The lord and master, Beatrice," he said, recalling his little witticism into the chrome grill-work on the door. Nobody answered that either.

"Beatrice?" He frowned. Except for automatic appliances which glinted with a merciless white glare, the kitchen was unoccupied.



He turned around, went back down the hall to his wife's bedroom. He opened the door, popped his head through. Empty. He didn't have to pop his head into the adjoining bathroom, for that door yawned widely. He tried the door to his own bedroom. She wasn't there either.

"Probably downtown shopping," he said to himself, half-aloud. "Hasn't gotten home yet."

That thought made Mr. Fransic sad. He closed his bedroom door and went back to the den. He didn't like an empty apartment; empty apartments were the loneliest things in the world. He went across the den to the built-in bar in the corner. It was a good little bar, all mahogany and solid gold trim. Beatrice had given him that on their first anniversary. It was a wonderful little bar complete with its own supply of soda water, automatic freezer for the ice cubes, and everything that a bar should have. It was a good little bar, and only once had it caused any trouble, and that was about a month ago when the little thing-a-ma-bob on the beer tap had stuck and it wouldn't shut off and half a keg of foaming brew had gone down the drain. But the superintendent of the apartment house, a big, outdoorsy-looking man named Rick Mason, had come up and fixed it right away.

Mr. Fransic smiled at the little

bar. He looked at a half-dozen bottles lined up in a neat row. He reached out for the gin bottle. He picked it up.

Something made a sleepy little scratching noise when he did that. And a moment later something inside the bar cabinet said in a cool, feminine voice: "*Uhh-uhh, Willard, that's the gin. Remember what the doctor said about your heart. Better take port wine instead.*"

Beatrice's voice on tape. Mr. Fransic chuckled. A sly little look came into his eyes and he clutched the gin bottle tight up against his tummy like a naughty boy not wanting to give up Mother's precious Wedgwood doodad. Then he cocked his head on one side and stared brightly at the bar cabinet.

"*Uhh-uhh, Willard,*" repeated the cool feminine drawl. "*Remember what the doctor said about your heart. Better take port wine instead.*"

Mr. Fransic chuckled again. "Heck with my heart," he said devilishly. "I crave gin!"

There was a little moment of silence from the bar cabinet while the tape unreeled a blank spot. And then the same voice said, but sounding a little bored this time: "*Very well, Willard, have the gin. Have lots of gin.*"

Mr. Fransic laughed happily. But he didn't take any gin after all, for he really didn't want any to begin with. He put the bottle back in its place on the bar.

But the fun was over. He sighed, feeling suddenly lonely again. He went across the room to his desk and sat down at it. He could kill a few idle minutes by lining up tomorrow's schedule at the office, he thought. He nodded to himself and pressed a button on the side of his desk marked "Future". Something made a humming noise. From a very narrow slot in the top of the desk a little strip of white paper, much like adding-machine paper, began to come out and come toward his reaching fingers. He waited until a little snapping click sounded, then tore the paper off and looked at the typing on it.

He read: *June 23, 1999. Nine-fifteen a.m. Your presence needed board meeting Great Far Western Trust. Urgent.*

Mr. Fransic nodded thoughtfully and stuffed the paper into his breast pocket. The machine inside the desk began to hum once more.

One-thirty p.m. R. D. Rexland, vice-pres. International Metals requests appoint. your office re Argentinian antimony. Advise do.

Mr. Fransic shrugged and stuffed that slip in his pocket with the other. Details. He waited to see if there was anything else. There was.

Personal. Important. Your wife birthday, June 25, 1999.

Mr. Fransic started and ripped out the paper tape. Good heavens!

He hadn't picked out a present for her yet. How could he have forgotten? Usually he began thinking about it at least a week ahead of time, but here it was, and only three days off! He blinked very rapidly and tried to think. What could he give her this time? He'd given her everything already, and each year found the job getting harder and harder. Clothes? That one he didn't even consider, Beatrice had more clothes than there were hours in the year to wear them. What then? Jewelry? Same objection there, and besides, her skin was so creamy perfect she needed little jewelry, actually. Well then, what?

He concentrated on it for a long time. And then he had a happy inspiration. Once, a few years back, he had given her some perfume. Not just any perfume, of course; there were but eight other women in the whole world who used this particular perfume. The stuff was hand-compounded by an old Swiss expert in Paris. It had a nice haunting scent to it, but the most intriguing part of it was that it couldn't be copied for it defied chemical analysis. Well, Mr. Fransic reflected, at seven thousand dollars a dram, it should. At seven thousand dollars a dram the stuff should defy a hurricane.

At the time, he had given her a full two ounces, and she had been delighted. He thought about

it, smiling quietly to himself. Delighted? Ah, she had even put her arms around him and kissed him.

He wondered if she needed some more. He got up from the desk, went around it, went quickly across the room and out into the hall and across to his wife's bedroom. He opened the door and sneaked in.

To Mr. Fransic, his wife's bedroom was like a sanctuary where angels trod, perhaps, but surely never mortal man. He looked around it now: it was a hallowed shrine, a place of sacred silence. There against the middle of the left wall — and taking up more than three-quarters of the entire room — was a bed four elephants could have got lonesome in. The headboard was a soft gleam of rich pink satin. A lot of satin went into that headboard — enough satin, almost, to make a rug for the floor, and the floor itself was big enough for nine holes of golf. Across this wide expanse of satin, hand-painted undressed maidens gamboled with indelicate abandon.

Mr. Fransic averted his eyes. He padded noiselessly down the room along one side of the bed. He went on past the open bathroom door. He went around the foot of the bed, his small shoes touching the rug like dust settling in a museum. He came, finally, to a low, crystal-topped vanity that he knew was the holy of holies.

He stared down at expensive

jars of cream; weird cut-glass bottles of astringent; boxes of powder so very fine they must have been sifted through the pores of somebody's skin.

Staring nakedly down at them this way, he felt a little guilty. He jerked his eyes here and there trying to pick out from among them the one little two-ounce bottle of perfume for which he was searching. He would recognize the bottle if he saw it, for it was a distinctive bottle if ever there was one. As he remembered it, the bottle was blown in the shape of a calla lily, the perfume being cleverly contained in the broad leaves and gracefully flaring spathe, with a spadix of twenty-two carat gold for a stopper. Mr. Fransic's eyes roved through this lovely enchanted forest of a woman's magic.

Until they came upon the butt of a half-smoked cigar.

For a long long time he didn't breathe. His eyes were wide on the sacrilegious thing as though it were some monstrosity found only in the wildest adumbrations of a disordered dream. He blinked. He carefully lowered his head over it. It was indeed a cigar; even though he didn't smoke himself he knew that much. It had a paper band around it as cigars usually do. He could even read the lettering on the band: *Corona del Lobo*.

Mr. Fransic suddenly felt a little faint. He didn't touch it, he

didn't even look at it again. He slowly turned away and retraced his steps around the bed and over to the door and out to the hall and thence to the living room. He got his hat from the closet. He left the apartment, went down in the elevator. He started to walk across the lobby.

"Oho, Mr. Fransic!" rasped the ID Box. "Going out this evening, sir? I have a good time!"

Mr. Fransic didn't hear. He went outside, out on the sidewalk. There were two things about that cigar that fed the part of his brain that hadn't gone numb; two things, one of them negative and the other positive. Whoever had been smoking the cigar was not one of his own friends, for none of them smoked cigars. Also, of course, it could not have been a stranger, for obviously such a person wouldn't have gotten by the ID Box. So much for the negative. And the positive: logically, the interloper must have been a resident of the apartment house.

Whatever he might have been and wasn't, whatever it was he lacked in his thin frame, at least this much was true: he had the power of reasoning. Someone not personally known to him, but certainly known to the alert electronic brain in the lobby, had been in his wife's bedroom. Had been smoking a cigar in his wife's bedroom. Beyond that point Mr. Fransic did not allow his thoughts to go.

He walked for a long time. Night fell around him like a heavy dark blanket. Traffic went by — the supermatic taxis that required no driver — but Mr. Fransic was oblivious to his surroundings. He walked as a sleepwalker: without volition or purpose, two snoring feet on the concrete of stunned unreality.

When he finally went home, Beatrice was there.

She was stretched out languorously on the big divan, a long-limbed, curve-hipped sort of a woman with full, rounded breasts and a thinly-veiled look of hunger in dark half-closed eyes. When Mr. Fransic came in, she reached out lazily and crushed a cigarette in a tray next to the tall figurine of the nude on the coffee table. She watched him hang up his hat.

"Large day at the office?" she asked casually. There was something wrong with her voice, something akin to the thing that was wrong with her eyes.

"Hello, my dear," said Mr. Fransic, a little tightly.

"You're late."

"Ah . . . yes. I guess I am," he admitted. He forced himself to smile and walked past her and went to the hall and to his bedroom. Once there he took off his suit coat and went to the bathroom which served both his bedroom and hers. He washed his hands. Leaving the water running,

he went through the open door on her side and tiptoed over to the vanity. He looked down. The cigar wasn't there any more. He sucked in a small breath and went back, turned off the water and returned to the living room.

"Had supper?" the woman asked, in a voice that didn't give a damn whether he had or not.

Mr. Fransic lowered himself into the tablespoon chair. "I guess I just wasn't very hungry," he lied.

She grunted. She yawned. Mr. Fransic watched her for a moment and then said — and very, very softly: "You look a little tired, dear."

"Do I?"

"A little." He smiled, lifted his shoulders. "Been shopping?"

"Uhh-uhh."

"Oh," said Mr. Fransic. He watched as his wife's arm reached over for the cigarettes on the coffee table. He watched her poke at her full red lips, light the cigarette, then droop the arm back on the cushions.

She blew smoke at the ceiling. "It's a bored look, probably," she finally offered. "Not tired. Haven't been out of the apartment all day. Time's been dragging."

Mr. Fransic's eyes widened. "Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. Yes, time does go by slowly sometimes. When you're all alone."

"Doesn't it, though?" she agreed. She turned her head side-

ways and looked at him. Almost a grin.

"Nobody drop in?" he said after a moment.

"I just said, didn't I?"

"Ah," said Mr. Fransic.

A little quiet began to creep out from the remote corners of the room. Mr. Fransic dropped his eyes to his thin hands folded in his lap. His wife puffed smoke curlingly at the ceiling. Somewhere in the apartment a wall cracked uneasily, sounding very loud in the silence of the room.

At last the woman said, staring at him with half-closed eyes: "Mother called long-distance today. She's very ill again."

Mr. Fransic looked up. "Your mother?" he said. "Sorry to hear that, dear. What seems to be the trouble?"

"Same thing," said the woman. "Diabetes. It's a bad attack this time; she was unconscious for seven hours."

"That's a shame!" said Mr. Fransic sincerely. "A shame. She has to be very careful, at her age."

The woman nodded. "She wants me to come up for a few days. She needs me."

Mr. Fransic blinked.

"I told her I could fly up day after tomorrow. I'll stay there a few days and look after her."

"But . . ." said Mr. Fransic. "That will mean you'll be away on your birthday. Couldn't she

wait? I mean, couldn't . . ."

"Now there's a nice unselfish attitude, Willard," she said levelly.

Mr. Fransic made small flutterings with his hands. "I didn't mean that," he apologized. "I mean, the way it sounded. All I meant was that it is too bad. We have always celebrated your birthday together, you know."

"It can wait," she said. "It will have to."

"Very well, Beatrice."

She yawned again and snaked herself lazily to a sitting position. Her feet touched the floor and a part of her dress caught under her and bunched, exposing the cream of her long graceful thighs. A moment later she stood up. "Maybe I am a little tired at that," she said. "I think I'll go to bed."

Mr. Fransic nodded.

The woman started to sway on by the tablespoon chair. Mr. Fransic tilted his head, said in a mildly reproving tone: "Got a little kiss for me tonight?"

But she didn't stop. "At our ages?" she said over her shoulder. She almost said *your age*. A moment later sounds came from the bathroom, running-water sounds. A little later the bathroom door opened, closed again. A little snicking click of the bolt on her side. After that there were no sounds whatever. Mr. Fransic sat there for a long long while. His eyes were opened but seeing nothing, the eyes of a thin, under-

privileged little Buddha winking glassily out at all the combined misery of the ages past; of the day that is now; and the writhing interminable years yet to come. It was quite late when he finally got up and went softly out to the kitchen.

He took the waste can first. He pawed through it right to the bottom. In it were the usual assorted leavings of packaged foods with their discarded wrappers. There was no cigar. He stood there looking down at the pawed-over can.

There was one other place, of course, the chemical reducer gadget on the left side of the sink. But if she had touched the little lever that controlled the chemicals, it would be gone already. However, it was worth a look. He dropped the lid on the waste can and went over to the sink.

The reducer device had a swinging, mono-metal door rather much like a miniature safe. He spun the screw-dial that sealed the door against leakage. Then he grabbed the handle and pulled outward. Nothing happened, the door was stuck. He braced his feet solidly and heaved once more — hard. The door flew open, leaped away from his unprepared fingers and went back with a loud crash against the sink cabinet.

Mr. Fransic held his breath. Then he pulled the door to again and spun the screw dial tight.

When his wife's pajama-clad form showed in the doorway he was bending over the open door of the food locker.

"What was that noise?" the woman demanded.

Mr. Fransic's head swivelled, looking as though he were startled. "Noise?" he said. "Oh. Yes. I'm sorry, dear, did it disturb you? I accidentally kicked over the waste can. Made a terrific racket."

"The waste can?" Her voice dripped with suspicion.

Mr. Fransic still smiled. "I — I'm very sorry, Beatrice. Clumsy of me. I wasn't looking where I was going, I guess."

"You look guilty as all hell about something," she said flatly.

"Beatrice!" His eyes went shock-wide.

"Oh, all right. But be quiet, will you? I'm trying to sleep."

"I said I was sorry, dear," Mr. Fransic said humbly. "Just getting a snack to eat. I felt a bit hungry after all."

After a while, after she had gone back to her bedroom, he went back to the chemical reducer gadget. This time he was very careful, but when he looked into it he saw nothing. If she had thrown it in, there would be no way of telling now. Or ever.

The next night, on his way home from the office, Mr. Fransic bought his first box of cigars. They were the *Corona del Lobo*

brand and they were extraordinarily cheap, which shocked him strangely.

This time he didn't go through the bronze portals, but instead went around the side of the apartment building. He followed the blank face of the brick wall until he came to a brown painted metal door. He tried it. It was open and he went in.

The hall was long, gray, filled with smells of disinfectant, paint and steam coming up from hot laundry. It was lighted by regularly spaced electric globes that glinted mistily like big wet heads of cabbage growing upside down. At the end of the hall was a door marked "Superintendent". Mr. Fransic knocked first, then went in.

Rick Mason looked up at him, looked up from behind a tiny desk that wasn't meant for a man his size. He waved with a careless movement of a tanned muscular hand. "Hi, Fransic," he said, omitting the "Mr."

He was a big man. Big broad shoulders. Big strong chest and tapering hips. In a business suit he looked good. In trunks he looked better. Compared to him, Mr. Fransic, with his box of cigars bulking largely under his thin arm, looked child-like and helpless.

"How are you, Mason?" Mr. Fransic asked politely.

Mason shrugged. "Still twitch-



ing." And then he almost snickered. "What's the matter, something wrong with your trick bar?"

"It's fine," said Mr. Fransic. "On my way home tonight I just happened to remember that the hot tap in the shower seems to turn off and on a little stiffly. I was just wondering if you'd looked at it lately?"

Mason shrugged again. "Didn't know about it."

"Oh." Mr. Fransic sighed quietly. "I see. Well, it isn't serious, of course. Sometime if you get the chance . . ."

"Yeah." Mason's eyes went to the package under Mr. Fransic's arm. "Taking up smoking now?" It wasn't quite a sneer the way he said it.

Mr. Fransic smiled very carefully, very tightly. "Oh, no. But I have a customer who evidently thinks so. He gave them to me. I was thinking that since I can't use them, it would be a shame to let them dry out. Perhaps you know of one of the tenants here in the building who smokes cigars, Mason? I mean . . ."

Mason laughed. "I'll look in a mirror and give 'em to the first man I see. That okay? Happens I smoke cigars myself." He reached over for the box, took it. He looked at it. His jaw went down. "*Corona del Lobo's*, huh? Be darned. By a strange coincidence, that's my own brand."

For an instant Mr. Fransic al-

most swayed. He leaned over, gripped the edge of the desk with his thin fingers.

"Something wrong?" said Mason. "You got a complexion looks like it came out of a buck bag."

Mr. Fransic shook his head. "No. J-just a little overtired, I guess. Working hard lately." He turned to go, and added: "Glad you can use them, Mason."

"Much obliged. About that shower . . . I'll sneak up there next week sometime. Happens I've got a large bundle of last-minute stuff to attend to as it is, and it's all got to get done before tomorrow night. Leaving on vacation then, see?"

He didn't notice the look in Mr. Fransic's eyes when he said that. Perhaps he wouldn't have recognized it if he had. There are people to whom a certain kind of sickness is something they never heard about. Or if they did they only laugh at it. Mr. Fransic closed the door quietly behind him.

Upstairs his wife picked up an airline ticket from the coffee table, made a little fillip with it in the air, and then dropped it. "Leaving at ten tomorrow night," she said tersely.

Mr. Fransic didn't answer that. He sat down.

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said. He looked up at her. There was hurt in his

eyes, but it showed for a brief instant only. After a moment he said: "One of these days I must call the building superintendent, Beatrice. The big front door downstairs seems to stick a little. Doesn't respond to the photo-electric cell the way it should. Had you noticed it?"

But she was turning away. She said no. She was hardly listening.

"I wonder what his telephone number is," he pursued gently.

"Four three seven," she said, bored. "Inside line."

Mr. Fransic's eyes tightened. "Oh, I see."

There are lies and there are lies, the world is full of them; Mr. Fransic would have been the last to deny it. He listened patiently to his wife's smooth explanation: "I remember from the time I looked it up a month or so ago. When the beer tap on your bar came unstuck."

"Yes, of course," he said.

The following day Mr. Fransic called Seattle long-distance from his office. Beatrice's mother told him she felt fine, hadn't had any dizzy spells or anything lately, and thanked him for calling. When he put down the phone, Mr. Fransic's teeth looked as bright and as sharp as a tong man's hatchet.

That afternoon he paid a visit to one of his plants. Wandering around among the tall skyscrapers of the big machines and furnaces,

his thin form was unnoticed. Once again, later on, he left his office, and when he returned he had with him a package wrapped and tied with colored string. He waited until the four-thirty whistles blew, until the office employees had all gone. Then he took the package over to his desk and untied it and took off the paper wrapper. It was a big box of candy. He examined the cellophane sealing on the package very carefully. After that he opened the center drawer of his desk twice — once to take out a narrow pearl-handled knife. It was dark when he finally went home.

Her bags were packed and on the floor near the coffee table. After supper she went to her bedroom. When she came out, finally, at nine-fifteen, she was dressed, ready to go.

"I can drive you to the airport, Beatrice," he offered courteously.

"Don't bother, I'll catch a cab."

He nodded. "Here's something," he said, and went to the closet and got the big box of candy. "A little something for your mother. It isn't much, I didn't have much time today."

"What? What is it?"

"A little remembrance," he said softly. "Nothing much, just a box of candy."

Her dark eyes went very, very wide. "Candy? Candy, did you say?"

He nodded.

Her lips curled. "You *are* raw when you want to be, aren't you? Mother has diabetes, and you know she can't have candy."

Mr. Fransic's hand flew to his mouth. "Oh, say!" he exclaimed quickly. "Oh, I didn't think . . . I'm terribly sorry, Beatrice. I . . . here, give it to me."

"Uhh-uhh, Willard." She tucked it under her arm. "I think I just will offer it to her at that. I'll tell her you send it with love." She grinned pityingly.

Weaver was a human guy, you can be a Detective Lieutenant working out of Homicide and still be human if you try. Weaver said softly: "There's something phony about this, Mr. Fransic, and we're not going to just stuff it away in a file cabinet somewhere. I want you to know that." He stared sympathetically at Mr. Fransic. Mr. Fransic looked ill, he thought. He said — and still more softly: "You want to see the bare rocks on the bottom?"

Mr. Fransic nodded slowly.

Weaver took a breath. "All right then. It was in a small apartment down at Malibu. One of the tenants heard your wife scream. It was too late. Both of them died, your wife and this man Richard Mason. You know Mason?"

"I — I think I have heard that name," Mr. Fransic said hesitatingly. "I'm not quite certain."

Weaver nodded. "Probably you

did. He was the super in the building where you live. They both ate some candy, it seems." Weaver's eyebrows raised a little. "Poisoned candy," he added.

"P-poisoned?"

"That's the phony part. That's the part that makes me say we're investigating this right down to the last alley. Our Lab reports that, as far as they can determine, the box had been opened for the first time in that apartment. And yet it was poisoned. The whole top layer was poisoned. Each piece had had the bottom scooped out and this poison put in and the bottom replaced again. It was a compound of cyanogen."

Mr. Fransic looked dumbfounded.

"Cyanogen," said Weaver grimly, "is commercial potassium cyanide. They use it for treating steel. Whoever did it wasn't very kind. But then murderers never are."

Mr. Fransic didn't say a word. Staring at him, Weaver felt a little wave of pity for him. He might have all the money there was, but you had to feel sorry for him just the same. He looked like a lonesome, abandoned dog, somehow; and the trouble with lonesome, abandoned dogs is that they're part human and part animal but not quite enough of either one. And so you pity them. If you have the decency that God planted in your heart, you have to.

"Didn't you even have a suspicion what was going on?" he asked very gently.

But Mr. Fransic didn't need pity now. His eyes took on a grave dignity as real as the pain in a broken arm. "I was happily married for more than ten years," he said simply. "Last night at nine-thirty I kissed my wife good-bye. She was on her way to Seattle to visit her mother."

Weaver nodded and looked away from Mr. Fransic's eyes. *That checked solid, if nothing else did.* The woman had an airline ticket in her bag. And she was dead because she hadn't used it.

Mr. Fransic went home. The massive ornamental bronze doors swung open for him noiselessly. He went into the lobby.

"Good morning, Mr. Fransic!" rasped out the ID Box. *"You're certainly looking fit today, sir!"*

Mr. Fransic went to the elevator. He went upstairs. He murmured into the chromium grill at the door and went inside.

He walked deliberately over to the figurine of the nude on the coffee table. He looked at it distastefully. He picked it up, raised it high above his head and flung it down. It shattered in many pieces that winked up at him brightly like the facets on a big diamond.

He looked around at the table-spoon chair, at the long long divan. A corner of his mouth twisted up.

He took a deep breath and strode across the living room, down to the hall. He stopped at her bedroom door. He jerked it open, went in, went to the sprawling satin headboard with the naked women on it. Snarling, he clawed at it and ripped it to shreds. He turned around and stared at the crystal-topped vanity. He made his way over to it. He reached down with a hooked right arm and swept the bottles and jars and powder boxes to the floor with a savage motion, and then stood and glared at the wreckage.

The scent of an outrageously high-priced perfume reached out into the room and embraced him. It swirled around him like a snake coiling, full of sinuous grace, and deadly. Mr. Fransic snorted it out of his nostrils. He went back to the living room. He went to the drapes at the windows and tore them aside to let the sunshine in. He threw up the windows and breathed of the clean air of the day. He stood there for a long while. Inhaling. Exhaling. Inhaling. Exhaling.

But there are some things that won't be buried no matter how deep a hole you dig. Mr. Fransic knew it. He felt sick because he knew it. He tried to fight against it. He summoned all the little store of strength he possessed to fight it.

And it wasn't enough. It never would be.

Trembling, he turned at last from the windows and went to his den. He went in. Staring at the softly-gleaming thing over in the corner, he went to it, stood before it as though he were standing before her bier with the candles burning and the incense rising. He reached out a shaking right hand for the gin bottle. He lifted it. There was surrender in every fibre of him.

The cool drawling feminine voice said to him: *"I have changed the tape, Willard. This is to tell you I'm leaving. For good. The business about mother being ill, and the plane ticket, wasn't on the level of course, but that's the way it is. Good-bye. Probably you had better drink some of that gin you're holding."*

Mr. Fransic's face showed no expression.

"I have changed the tape, Willard. This is to tell you . . ."

He didn't hear. He dropped the bottle. He went out of the den. He went out of the apartment. He went downstairs in the elevator. He stood in the lobby and stared mutely at the ID Box over on the wall. He walked slowly toward it. He was approaching it from the wrong direction. He got to within ten feet of it.

And then something happened. Something inside its mechanism made three sharp, clicking sounds and an alarm bell began to sound far off and dimly. And a scratching sound came from the speaker built into it and a very stern, very official-sounding voice said to Mr.



Fransic: "This is Municipal Security speaking. You are approaching an Identity Box. This is a violation of Code Sixteen-Oh-Four-Five. Stop where you are. Stop."

Mr. Fransic looked as though he didn't hear. His steps kept on going. His lips were parted and there was absolutely nothing whatever in his mild blue eyes.

"Stop!" The voice was a hoarse command now. Something inside the machine made a whirring noise, and a small circular port in the middle of its casing slid back, revealing a tiny black hole from inside of which something glinted at Mr. Fransic. "Stop! In accordance with Municipal Protection Code, this is a last warning. Stop where you are and remain motionless!"

Mr. Fransic kept coming.

The shot hit him in the throat a little below his Adam's apple. A wisp of smoke curled up from the black hole and a little cordite odor filtered out thinly into the lobby. Mr. Fransic was aware of

neither. He swayed backward. His feet acted as if they were drunk. They stumbled a little, carried him back and to the left and out to the carpeted space between tall, fluted columns where people were supposed to walk in the lobby. His eyes were shut now and his hands were limp at his sides, but he was still on his feet.

He stayed that way for an incredible length of time. Over on the wall the alarm bell stopped ringing. Something made three sharp, clicking sounds inside the mechanism.

Mr. Fransic went down as slowly and as lightly as pollen drifting in a gentle breeze. He went down to his knees. He balanced precariously there for an instant and then pitched over backwards. His hat fell off, rolled a few inches. Mr. Fransic didn't move again.

The ID Box rasped suddenly: "Good morning, Mr. Fransic! You're certainly looking fit this morning, sir!"