

## CONTENTS

## COMPLETE NOVEL

- THE DEATH-RAY GUN *by Evan Hunter*..... 100

## NOVELETTES

- THE KILLER *by John D. MacDonald*..... 1  
 THE FLOATER *by Jonathan Craig*..... 47

## SHORT STORIES

- EPITAPH *by Erskine Caldwell*..... 83  
 GREEN EYES *by Hal Ellson*..... 63  
 YOU CAN'T TRUST A MAN *by Helen Nielsen*..... 14  
 THE BLOOD OATH, A Manville Moon Story *by Richard Deming* 31  
 MAY I COME IN? *by Fletcher Flora*..... 25  
 KISS ME, DUDLEY *by Hunt Collins*..... 139  
 PANIC *by Grant Colby*..... 43  
 MORNING MOVIE *by Muriel Berns*..... 77  
 THE DRIFTER *by Robert S. Swenson*..... 91

## FEATURES

- YOU, DETECTIVE *by Wilson Harman*..... 89  
 CRIME CAVALCADE *by Vincent H. Gaddis*..... 73  
 WHAT'S YOUR VERDICT? *by Sam Ross*..... 81  
 PORTRAIT OF A KILLER *by Dan Sontup*..... 96  
 MUGGED AND PRINTED..... 144

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# The Drifter

*The truck was late, so Pete and Joe had nothing to do but sit around and wait. That was why the trouble started.*

**BY ROBERT S. SWENSON**

**J**OE MORELLI and Pete Lane sat on the steps of the general store. It was hot, the way New England can get in late September. The men had taken off their jackets and piled them on the two battered suitcases that were set behind them on the porch of the store. They both

wore white shirts, open at the collar, with the sleeves rolled up.

They were drifters, both about thirty-five, and, having worked the summer as dairy hands on one of the neighboring farms, they were on their way now to spend the winter in Florida. They had been prom-

ised a ride to New York in a truck, and their ride was over an hour late. It was a fact that irritated Pete Lane a great deal and Joe Morelli not at all.

Occasionally a car came drifting through the town on the narrow, twisting highway, and until a broad, low, mongrel beagle trotted around the corner of the building, it was the only movement in the town.

When the dog saw the two men he changed his course abruptly and came over to sniff the end of Pete Lane's shoe. Pete watched the dog for about three seconds and then he shot his foot out and kicked the dog in the face. The dog gave a sharp yelp and pulled back quickly. He stared at Pete in a much bewildered way, and then he trotted off, licking the end of his nose.

"What a dull, rotten, filthy town this is," Pete said. He took out a soiled handkerchief and mopped his face with it, and then he resettled himself against the square supporting post of the porch. He lit up a cigarette and blew out a thin cloud of smoke and, as he did, he looked up the highway, listening and watching for the long overdue transportation. At that moment a man came into sight around the bend of the road.

Pete began to smile. "Well, look who's coming," he said.

Joe Morelli squinted up the road at the approaching figure. "Who's that? That Manny?"

"Yeah. Little orphan Annie. For

the first time since I've been here I'm glad to see him. Anything to break up this filthy monotony."

Manny had a slow, awkward manner about him. He walked like a little boy, dragging his feet and deliberately scuffing the ground to stir up an eddy of thin dust spirals. A tall, heavy man, with tremendous hips and thick legs, he was somewhere in his thirties. His head, chest and shoulders were smaller than the rest of him and it made him look out of proportion, as if he was made up of parts from two different men. He was considerably overweight.

He came up and stood in front of the two men with a faint, pleased smile on his face. Pete flicked his cigarette at him and it bounced off the side of his arm. "Hello, Annie," he said.

"I'm not Annie."

Pete screwed up his face and cocked his head toward Manny. "What? What did you say, Annie?"

"My name's Manny."

"Well now, ain't that funny. I thought your name was Annie. I thought you were a girl."

"I'm not a girl," Manny said. He was pouting.

"So you don't think you're a girl. Is that right, Annie? Well do you know what I think, Annie? I think the next chance you get you'd better take a good look at yourself. You got bigger brannigans than a lot of girls I know." He looked over at Joe Morelli and laughed.

Joe was looking at Manny's hands.

“Hey, what you got in your hands?” he asked.

Manny was holding his hands cupped together and, when Joe asked this, he brought his hands up close to his face. He opened them up a bit and peeked in. “Toad,” he said. He held his hands softly against his cheek.

“A toad? No kidding?” Pete said. “Let me see.”

Manny opened his hands and showed it to him. It was a fat, blinking creature covered with thick warts. Manny began caressing the back of the toad with his big clumsy forefinger, and he was smiling at the toad.

“Put it down so we can get a better look at it,” Pete said.

He stopped patting the toad and he stared at Pete, vacant and uncomprehending.

“Come on, come on, put it on the step so we can get a look at it.” It was a harsh command and Manny moved to obey. He put the toad carefully on the step in front of Pete.

Pete leaned over and looked down at the toad. “Now ain’t that something,” he said. “Ain’t that really something. A toad. Can you beat that.” He put his heavy shoe on top of the toad, and immediately Manny reached down to retrieve his animal. Pete pushed him away.

“Leave him alone. I ain’t hurting him. I just don’t want him to hop away. You don’t want to lose him, do you?” He looked up slyly at

Manny and then he winked at Joe. Slowly he began increasing the pressure of his foot, pushing the toad down. In a moment the toad was squashed flat on the wooden step.

“You dirty louse,” Joe said. He had to push Manny away while he covered the toad with dirt. Great tears were rolling down Manny’s bewildered face.

Joe gave Pete a look of disgust and then he grabbed Manny by his fat arms. “Manny, look. Forget about it. It’s just a toad. You can get another one. It’s . . .”

But he could see that it was useless to talk to him. He went back and sat down beside Pete again on the steps.

Manny squatted down on the ground. He was blinking away his tears, and he began poking his finger in the dust, trying to uncover the dead toad. They both watched him.

“Jesus Christ, you hate everything, don’t you?” Joe said.

“Well, what makes you think you’re so pure all of a sudden?”

“You didn’t have to kill the thing.”

“Oh, for Chrissake, Joe. Manny’s just a half-wit. He’s feeble minded. He don’t know anything and he don’t feel anything.” He looked at Manny again. “Ain’t that so, little orphan Annie? You haven’t got any brains, have you?”

Manny stood up and pouted at Pete. “My name’s Manny.”

“No it ain’t. It’s Annie. Little orphan Annie. You’re a girl.”

His eyes were brimming with tears. "I ain't no girl," he protested.

"No Annie, you're wrong. You're a girl. You're a girl and you haven't got a brain in your head. Is that right, Annie?"

"I'm not Annie."

Pete pulled himself off the steps and walked over to the dim-witted giant. He stood directly in front of him and looked up into his face. He was about six inches shorter than Manny was.

"Annie, I just got an idea," Pete said. "A beautiful idea. They tell me you've never done a useful thing in your life. Well, I'm going to give you a chance to do the first useful thing you ever did." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a jackknife. He held the knife in front of Manny's face and pressed the button on the handle. A four-inch blade snapped out, brushing Manny's nose.

"How old are you, Annie? Twenty? Twenty-five?"

"My name ain't Annie."

"Annie, they tell me that for all your life somebody has had to take care of you. They tell me you're not good for anything. Somebody has to dress you, somebody has to feed you, somebody has to tell you what to do. You're just like a baby, only you're worse than a baby because a baby's got brains.

"You're no good for anybody, little orphan Annie. No good for yourself, no good for me, no good for Joe here, no good for anybody."

Joe came over and tried to push Pete away. "For Chrissake, leave him alone, will you, Pete? What did he ever do to you?"

He shrugged Joe off. "Annie, they tell me you'll do anything anybody tells you." He put the knife into Manny's hand, closed Manny's fingers around the handle, and brought his hand up so that the knife was a few inches from Manny's throat.

He stared into Manny's dull blue eyes. "Annie," he ordered. "Cut your throat."

"Pete, for Chrissake, what are you trying to do?"

"Well, Jesus, Joe. I'm only trying to give little orphan Annie here the chance to do the first useful thing he ever did. You're not trying to stop me, are you?"

They stared at each other for a moment and then Joe shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the porch.

Pete laughed and pushed the blade closer to Manny's throat. Then he stood with his hands on his hips, looking up into the frightened, stupid face. "Annie," he commanded. "Do as I say. Cut your throat. Go on! Cut it!"

Manny's lower lip was trembling and his mouth hung open as he stared down at Pete. He was beginning to drool out of the corner of his mouth, and the knife was shaking in his hand. Then he began to lower his hand slowly.

It made Pete laugh. "Now can you beat that," he said. "They told

me you'd do anything anybody ever told you." He laughed again. "And they told me you never did a useful thing in your life, and they were right. You never did and you never will. Little orphan Annie. Big, fat, stupid, little girl . . . "

For just the barest fraction of a second there was the glint of sunlight on the blade of the knife. With one short, quick motion, and with his tremendous strength, Manny drove the knife into Pete's belly.

It was an underhanded motion, and he ripped upward and sideways with the knife so that he made a long, curved cut. It made a hole in Pete's shirt only slightly larger than the width of the knifeblade. The hole in Pete's belly was nearly a foot long.

He did not speak again. He made only a strange gurgling sound deep in his throat. He covered the wound with both hands, and he stared down

at the wound watching the blood flow like a river through his fingers.

He began sagging to the ground almost at once and his white shirt and pants were already red with blood. When he had sagged almost to the ground, he dropped suddenly into a sitting position, it was only a foot or so, but he dropped with enough force so that his intestines spilled out into his shirt, and he sat holding his insides and staring at his hands. He was like a man stealing sausage.

In a moment he fell forward and over to one side a little and he was dead.

The whole thing took not more than ten seconds.

Manny turned and began to walk away. The road was bare. For a second Joe watched Manny walking away.

Then he thought to himself, "Now where in hell is that truck?"

